Just Too Much of an Indian

In memory of William *Bineshi* Baker Sr.,
mentor and friend,
who imparted so much of his rich traditional heritage.

His sound from the sky is still audible
to all fortunate enough to have heard him sing.

Just Too Much of an Indian

Bill Baker

Stalwart in a Fading Culture

Thomas Vennum

Just Too Much of an Indian Press • LaPointe, Wisconsin • 2008

On the cover: Bill Baker during filming of *The Drummaker,* July 1974. In the background are cameraman Peter Agoos and soundman Miles Herter.

All photos from the collection of the author or used by permission, as follows. Tom Iglehart photos: cover and pp. viii, 262, and 275; Clark Goebel photo: p. x; Tim Galaz photos: pp. xii, 286, and 333; p. xvi: courtesy of Nick Littlefield; courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society: pp. 26 and 38 (Monroe Killy photo); courtesy of Milwaukee Public Museum: pp. 41 (Robert E. Ritzenthaler photo), 103 and 115 (S. A. Barrett photos); James "Pipe" Mustache sketch: p. 43; Phyllis de Brodt photos: pp. 52 and 106; courtesy of University of Wisconsin-Madison: p. 135; courtesy of Suzanne Quaderer: p. 138: Thomas Vennum photos: pp. 162 (courtesy of Harvard University Music Department), 203 (courtesy of Office of Folklife Programs, Smithsonian Institution), 241, 294, and 317; Charles Brill photo (courtesy of Harvard University Music Department): p. 169; courtesy of Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission: p. 205: © John Teisberg 1969: p. 220; postcard in possession of author: p. 233; A. E. Jenks photo (courtesy of National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution): p. 300; Miles Herter photo: p. 307; courtesy of Office of Folklife Programs, Smithsonian Institution: p. 355; Frances Densmore photo (courtesy of National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution): p. 362.

© 2008 by Thomas Vennum.

All rights reserved.

Just Too Much of an Indian Press

LaPointe, Wisconsin

www.justtoomuchofanindian.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008932765

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

	Introduction	vii
1.	War-Dance Songs in the Dead of Winter	1
2.	Only the O-o-old Girls	18
3.	Go Home, White Man!	51
4.	Dancing around the Red Wooden Cross	91
5.	A Continually Heard Bird	121
6.	Giant Fish, Naked Missionaries, and the Return of a Drum	150
7.	World Record Muskies among Watery Graves	184
8.	Ojibwe Spoon Playing	218
9.	Wisconsin Northwoods Spotted Buffalo	250
10.	Big, Fat, Hairy Things	283
11.	Chief Sandhill Crane (aka Calvin Coolidge)	314
12.	Where's Beverly? Where's the Bread?	331
	Postscript: Giving Back a Drum	360
	Acknowledgments	381
	Ojibwe/English Glossary	382
	Index	384

Introduction

"Why would the Grateful Dead ask for 50 copies of your Bill Baker drum book? Should we ship them?" The phone call came to me in the summer of 1983 from the archivist in the office at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, where I worked as an ethnomusicologist. I was in northwestern Wisconsin to record songs of the Ojibwe Indians, especially those of William *Bineshi* Baker Sr., multitalented 64-year-old traditional singer living alone on the Lac Courte Oreilles (LOC) Reservation near Hayward. Baker's drum-building technology had been the focus of my book, *The Ojibwa Dance Drum: Its History and Construction* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982).

Flattered by this request from a famous rock band, I assented, "Sure, send them on." I was pleased that the six well-known musicians would receive copies, but the size of the order puzzled me. Not until several months later, when the band next played in Washington, did I learn the reason from drummer/percussionist Mickey Hart.

Taking advantage of his day off between Grateful Dead shows in Washington, Hart sought to meet me and learn more about Bill Baker and his drums. Given the depth of Hart's passion for world music of any sort, our discussions went beyond Bill and American Indian music over the course of the next few days. He visited my home to see a

drum Baker had made for me and to review selections from my field recordings of Bill.

I inquired about the 50 copies of my book sent to California that summer. In a spirit of social activism, Mickey explained, he and his cohorts had created a summer camp for underprivileged youth from the San Francisco Bay area. Following the American practice of dubbing summer camps with Indian-sounding names, they created Camp Winnarainbow.

"So, why so many copies of my book?"

"We needed more books for the counselors and campers," he replied. "Yeah, Vennum, we wanted to have a real, authentic Indian drum—not just one of those commercial bass drums for the kids to pound on."

This was the camp's inaugural season, and Mickey had decided it needed a project to bring everyone together. What could do it better

Baker cutting fat from the cowhide section to be used for a drumhead

than for campers, coached by a major percussionist, to construct and decorate a large American Indian drum?

"So you followed Bill Baker's technology?" I inquired. "Where did you get the skin for the drumheads?"

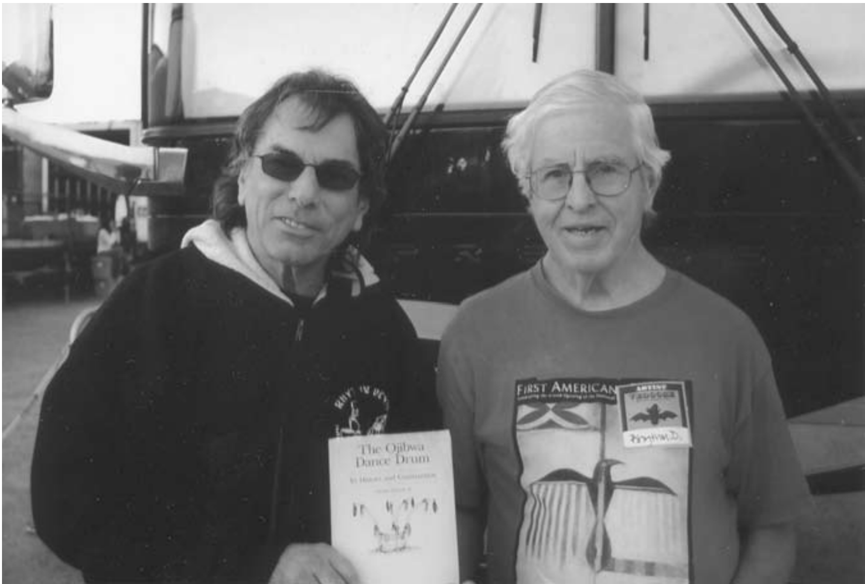
A stickler for exactitude, Mickey recounted how he had hired a local slaughterhouse to kill and skin a cow for them. I had trouble conjuring the image of African American teenagers from Oakland cutting fat from the hide and dehairing it to prepare drumheads, in the Indian manner. Bill would be amused, possibly even angry. He held many of the racial prejudices of his generation and generally disdained people from other cultures playing Indian. Moreover, building the Ojibwe drum has semi-sacred connotations among his people. Certainly the idea of black children copying Baker's traditional technology to make a drum would seem to him the epitome of desecration.

Mickey detailed the construction of the Winnerainbow camp drum: "I had to drive 70 miles just to get dry ice!"

That one threw me. Nowhere in my book had I indicated a need for dry ice. "Yeah, Vennum, for fog effect!" he explained.

It seems that once the drum was complete, Mickey felt the instrument needed a proper dedication, so he scripted a ceremony from his fertile imagination. During the event, while stilt-walkers waited in the wings, a camp counselor played the role of a shaman, suddenly appearing from the fog to consecrate the new drum.

This, then, was where my book had come in handy. Partly a historical study, *The Ojibwa Dance Drum* also details a step-by-step description of the craft as practiced by Bill Baker, the Ojibwe singer I had met and recorded a decade earlier. Although some Boy Scout handbooks show how to build ersatz Indian drums—usually "tom-toms" with rubber drumheads—Mickey preferred the authenticity of my publication. The whole camp project, according to him, was a great success, so he had included a photo of the completed drum and its decorations in his autobiography.



Grateful Dead percussionist Mickey Hart and Thomas Vennum hold a copy of The Ojibwa Dance Drum: Its History and Construction*, Las Vegas, October 2005.*

The Camp Winnerainbow drum was the beginning of my long and close friendship with Mickey Hart, as well as the Grateful Dead drummer's introduction to an obscure Indian craftsman living in the Wisconsin woodlands.

Mickey Hart never met Bill Baker, but my attention to Baker's drum technology sparked in Mickey an abiding interest in Ojibwe music, which eventually led him to Bill's reservation. In the summer of 1987 Hart briefly interrupted his Grateful Dead tour to join me in northern Wisconsin to record music and drumming at the annual powwow gathering held on the Lac Courte Oreilles dance grounds about a mile north of Bill's home. *Honor the Earth Powwow*—the CD Hart and I eventually coproduced—became a successful release on the Rykodisc label. Had Bill still been alive, surely he would have been among its singers. (Years later the powwow honored Bill posthu-

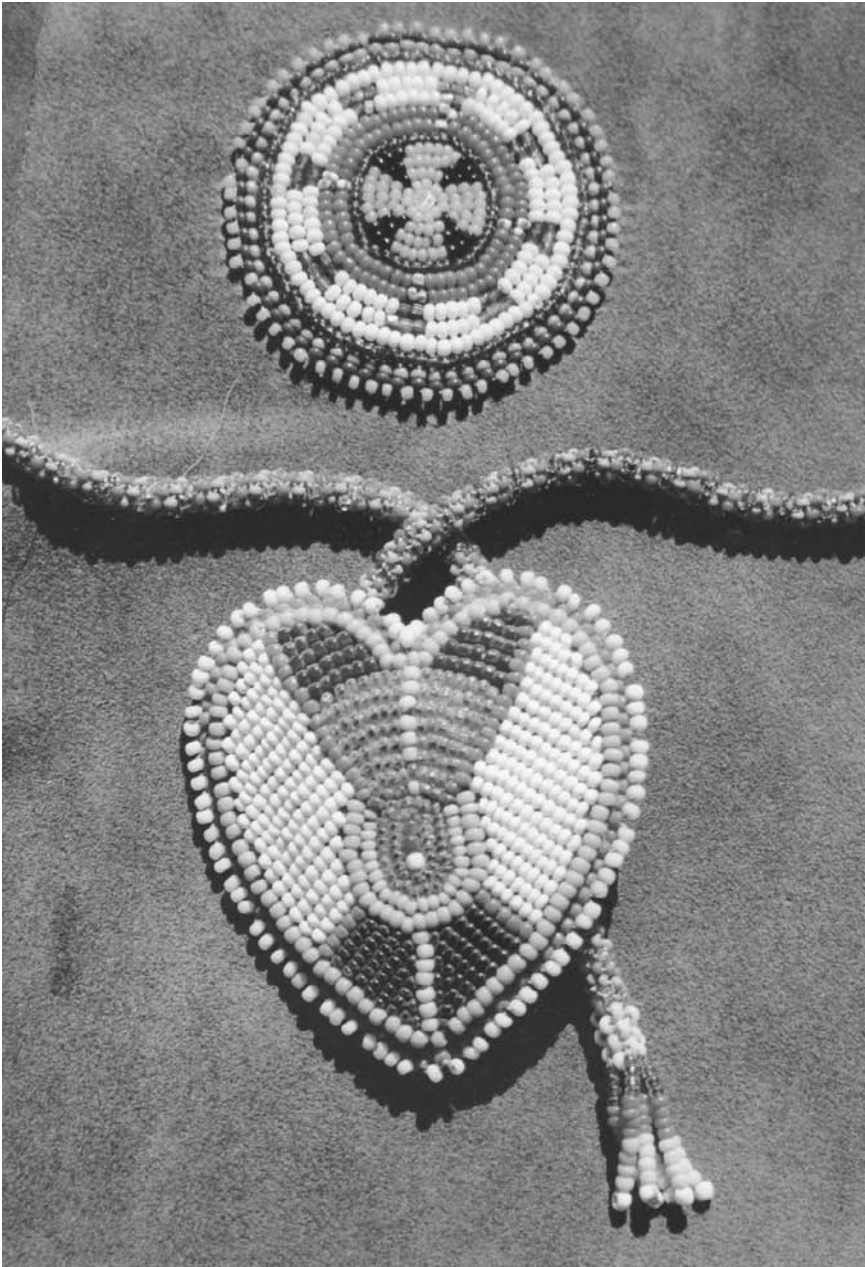
mously.) Ultimately, Mickey induced his colleague Carlos Santana to sample from a song on our CD for one of *his* albums.

The drum built by Hart's Winnarainbow campers was of the type used by Ojibwe singers in the western Great Lakes area for at least a century, for both ceremonial and secular occasions. My book had grown out of my close association with Baker, one of the last of his people to keep the tradition alive.

Over the 15 years before Baker died at age 81 in 1985, we carried on a regular correspondence and were frequently in touch by phone. Thanks to his vast store of traditional knowledge, I was privileged to enter the many-faceted Ojibwe world: its rich repertoire of song, wild rice and its harvest, the game of *baaga'adowe* (lacrosse), the craftsmanship of constructing drums and carving the distinctive Ojibwe "twisted" pipe stem, doing beadwork, making drum and lacrosse sticks, and weaving the porcupine-quill-and-deer-hair roach headpieces, worn by so many Indian dancers.

I learned how much Bill had hated Indian boarding school, how he learned to give children their Indian names, and how he functioned as lead singer in the ceremonial drum dance. For weeks at a time, Bill was my guest at boarding schools where I taught. He came to enjoy those stays, interacting with many of my students. He was their first exposure to a real, live American Indian, so they made him the center of attention, and he responded accordingly. In one instance he gave the nickname "Highpockets" to a tall, lanky 15-year-old—a name that endures to this day. Bill had taken a special liking to the boy, who lived in the dorm next to my apartment at Middlesex School in Concord, Massachusetts. Taking him into the woods behind the campus, Bill taught him how to carve a long pipe stem from sumac, stimulating in the student a passion for creating sculpture from natural materials.

During Bill's school visits, he and I lectured together on Indian music—once even before the music faculty at Harvard University, where I was enrolled in graduate studies. My dissertation advisor, Prof.



Examples of Bill's beadwork skills: a medallion and a beaded bolo necklace with butterfly design

John M. Ward, knew that Bill was visiting me. Ward was impressed with the recordings I'd made of Bill singing and proposed we give a joint presentation in Paine Hall, the principal performance auditorium in the Harvard Music Building. Open to faculty and students, the event took place in the late afternoon, when most classes were over.

My decision to focus my doctoral dissertation on Bill's repertoire had raised some eyebrows among the faculty. Knowing nothing of this musical tradition themselves, they had enlisted Harvard anthropologist Evon Vogt to join my doctoral examining committee as a check on my expertise.

As Bill and I sat together on the stage next to a concert-grand Steinway, I felt apprehensive. The plaster busts of the giants of European classical music—Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven, and others—lining the narrow shelf beneath the ceiling reminded me that Harvard's music students and faculty were devoted almost exclusively to the art music of Western Europe. These dead composers were about to get an earful from an American Indian singer, pounding on a "primitive" drum and singing at the top of his vocal register at a volume evolved over centuries for outdoor settings lacking artificial amplification.

Here I was—about to illustrate my presentation with live performances from a singer I knew from experience was unpredictable. In a similar performance lecture before an all-girl boarding school, he had deliberately performed an Ojibwe song whose off-color lyrics he delighted in translating into English to the amusement of the young girls and the horror of faculty members.

For the Harvard performance, a crowd of the curious had assembled when I took to the lectern. Before introducing the singer, I recounted a brief history of the study of Indian music, surveying what earlier researchers had written about Ojibwe music, trying to place Baker within that context. I gave some idea of the breadth of his repertoire and finally introduced him, never having rehearsed what he would say or sing.

Bill's appearance on the Harvard music stage was refreshing. Customarily reserved for concert pianists in black tie or symposium scholars in three-piece suits, the stage was now the platform for a disheveled, dark-skinned American Indian holding a buckskin-covered drumstick in his right hand. Bill's one bow to formality was the handsome buckskin vest his mother had made for him in his youth. Its bright meanderings of typical Ojibwe floral beadwork added a certain elegance to

Entertaining young ladies

During Bill's visit east we did a small tour of Boston-area schools together. We worked up a brief program on Indian music lasting about long enough to fill a school's daily assembly. Although the format was flexible, basically I talked about misperceptions and stereotypes of Indian music, and Bill provided live illustrations with a small hand drum.

The program was considerably more rare and esoteric than the usual travelogue slide shows that students were accustomed to at morning assemblies.

We gave the program in about half a dozen private schools, and the only trouble I had was wresting the presentation back from Bill once he got started. Clearly he adored the enthusiastic reception and applause he got with each performance from several hundred students and faculty members.

Mischievous wag that he could be, he pulled out a song I had never heard before an audience of young schoolgirls. Before performing it, he clearly anticipated one question from the audience: "What does the song mean? What words are you singing?"

Delighted to clarify, Bill responded: "Sure, there are words in there. They mean, 'I'd love to come over to sleep with you, but your bed is too small!'"

the singer, more than compensating for his unruly shocks of gray hair and stubble of beard.

During my introduction, Bill remained seated on a folding chair to one side of the Steinway, his hands on his knees. His right hand firmly grasped the long, thin drumstick that had belonged to his father. He bent slightly forward, surveying the crowd of (mostly) white faces, from time to time looking up at me, impatient with my commentary. With some apprehension I turned the program over to him, stepping aside from the rostrum, gesturing for him to approach the microphone.

"Well, my friend here doesn't have it quite right!" he said.

I blushed deeply as giggles spread through the audience. (I learned only later that he enjoyed embarrassing others, particularly when it meant challenging authority.) Having selected for his performance a small Haitian *conga* hand-drum from my collection, he gave it a few preliminary thumps with his drumstick, then sang two or three songs, preceding them with explanations of their use in Ojibwe culture. The presentation was well received. Professor Ward made a point of coming up to the stage to compliment Bill on his singing. Little could I have foreseen that my next appearance on this stage would be 15 years later, to accept the Society for Ethnomusicology's annual Klaus Wachsmann Award in organology for my book on Bill's drum-building technology.

Bill's appearance before Harvard's music department was the first of several lecture/demonstrations we presented on New England campuses. During the many times Bill visited me in schools, I tape-recorded interviews with him on subjects related to his culture as well as his performance of a vast repertoire of traditional Ojibwe music. The culmination of our friendship was his agreement in 1974 to be filmed making a traditional dance drum.

The resulting documentary, *The Drummaker,* also marked a turning point in my restive career. I had been raised in a musical household

The author with photographer Clark Goebel, videotaping Seri Indian singer Jesus Rojo Montana, Punta Chueca, Sonora, Mexico, 2004

and had a wide variety of musical experiences, from playing piano in a high-school jazz band to studying composition and theory in graduate school. I had earned masters' degrees in performance on organ and classical music history, but my experience with Bill Baker clarified the direction of further study. Focusing my dissertation on Ojibwe music, I departed my thoroughly Western musical training to embark on a career in ethnomusicology. American Indian music became my principal field of study and ultimately my expertise for 27 years at the Smithsonian.

The more familiar I became with Bill, the greater I realized his many talents. Not only was he a superlative traditional singer but also a master of manual craftsmanship in several areas, including creating decorative items for Indian dance regalia. By keeping these traditions alive in the face of a general cultural decline of his people, Baker struggled against a stream of drastic changes in the Ojibwe culture he had

grown up in. His dedication to these pursuits led to an isolated life; he found himself the sole practitioner of many of his people's crafts—some of which, like drum building, had formerly been communal activities. Living most of his later years alone in a small, wood-frame house in the middle of the reservation with few close neighbors, Bill had to rely increasingly on his friends and children for everything from transportation and food to health care. Such assistance usually came at a price. It was erratic, unreliable, and occasionally expensive—a ride to town, for example, might cost him gas money, which had to come from his Social Security check.

Towards the end of his life, frustration with the changes in the world around him generated a bitterness that flared up at a moment's notice. He was prone to angry outbursts, often exacerbated by drink, leading him to lash out at people, however undeserved the lashing. Even those closest to him came in for this treatment—once he chased a young friend off his property with a shotgun. Bill saw himself as ignored and unappreciated by his own people, whom he considered unperturbed by the rapid cultural changes; this simply intensified his embitterment and loneliness. As elders died off, there were increasingly few he could converse with in the language of his childhood. Younger singers on the reservation ignored the traditional Ojibwe repertoire and style, copying instead musical influences from the West. "That Sioux singing," he called it, likening it to that of the traditional enemy of the Ojibwe.

From my readings about Ojibwe culture and as our friendship developed and the pace of our correspondence increased, I came to appreciate just how out of touch with the current world Bill chose to remain. While the old culture faded around him, he resorted to expressing his frustration in bitter, cynical asides or outright verbal tirades. Some of the letters recording his daily struggle were downright depressing. He detailed having to chop wood to keep warm and battling illnesses with home remedies—herbs collected in the woods—because

he had given up on the treatment some white doctor had prescribed. One time when he was sick and shut in at home, he wrote, "I had a doctor come and see me. He didn't do anything, only stuck a needle in the cheek of my old touch hole, that's all he done, no medicine. So I got my own. Pills and whiskey."

During his lifetime Bill witnessed the encroachment of white culture on every aspect of reservation life, starting with forced enrollment in Indian boarding schools, where Indian children suffered the indignity of white teachers punishing them for speaking their native tongue. He had watched the LCO Reservation shrink piece by piece, as its choice lakeshore properties were sold to white resort owners. In a notorious breach of trust, a power company had flooded part of his reservation with a dam, which destroyed an old cemetery and forced the relocation of a traditional village.

Throughout his life, Bill also experienced the vicissitudes of reservation politics and infighting, which filled the void left by white destruction of the old social system. Further, casinos brought in ever more outside tourist traffic. Fortunately, he did not live to experience the arrival of illegal drugs on the reservation (in the 1990s) and the attendant problems of youth gangs and drive-by shootings, which induced many parents to remove their children from the reservation school and send them ten miles away to the mostly white Hayward High School.

Despite this onslaught, Bill managed somehow to present himself publicly as a cheerful, albeit quirky, elder of the tribe. Some of his people came to him for advice on occasion, especially about traditional matters. Nearly everyone recognized Bill for his great musical gifts; his sonorous, stentorian voice stood out when he sang with a group. And Bill could bring a deep, subtle humor to any situation; Bill Baker anecdotes abound today, not only in his Wisconsin Indian community but also wherever he traveled. Even the younger generation recounts Baker stories, possibly garnered from some brief encounter,

such as when he came to the school to teach crafts. Always a bit of a wag, Baker retained that quixotic Indian sense of humor and applied it frequently; he concluded even his outbursts of anger with uproarious laughter, clearing the air and defusing the tension he created.

Given his isolation, some of it self-imposed, Bill craved attention; when he received it, such as from students, he responded accordingly and was at his best. The irony of his isolation is that many loved and appreciated him, but his curmudgeonly side kept them at some distance. He was well known for angrily and publicly chewing out anyone who did something he considered incorrect. Long after he died, one Lac Courte Oreilles resident recalled, "When Bill Baker approached you, you didn't know whether to cry or to run!"

Bill's reservation acknowledged his great contributions as an elder by honoring him as "Man of the Year" at its annual Honor the Earth Powwow, the largest and most important community celebration—posthumously. When Bill died, arrangements for his wake were made—not locally but by long-distance phone—as were subsequent reminders to have the traditional Ojibwe "spirit-house" constructed over his plot in the pagan cemetery. To date there is neither headstone nor any traditional wooden marker bearing the inverted pictographic symbol of his totem (lynx), to indicate the deceased.

In the course of the filming of his crafting a traditional Ojibwe dance drum, Bill smoothed the top edge of an old washtub he would use for the drum's frame and launched into one of his tirades: "They're losing their tradition. These singers today, they wouldn't even begin to make one of these drums. They'd rather go into some white man's store and buy one for $100, and then they don't dress it," meaning decorate it. "They ain't anywheres *near* Indian," he sneered. "They don't dress it."

While he whittled with his penknife, he continued, "No, they won't even take the time or trouble to make a drum like they're supposed to."

Then he sat back with a smile and, patting the side of the drum frame lovingly, added, "No, this is mine. I won't do that. I'm just too much of an Indian, I guess." As usual, he followed the tirade with laughter.

Baker was already 64 when I first met him, and he died more than 20 years ago. In constructing this biographical sketch encompassing his lifetime, I have necessarily resorted to some fictional re-creations (as well as a few pseudonyms)—particularly for his early years. I have used the method judiciously to flesh out Bill's multifaceted character, to provide settings for anecdotes still circulating as well as to give voice to his insights. Most significant of these is the attempt to describe his stalwart interaction with traditional Ojibwe culture, even as it faded around him.

These re-creations are based on my nearly two decades of personal interaction with Bill, as well as continuous correspondence with him and hours of tape-recorded interviews. In these documents Baker addressed Ojibwe music and his role as a singer, recollected his early years during the annual wild-rice harvest, and aired his often bitter reminiscences of Indian boarding school. In addition, I generated correspondence and taped interviews with Bill's many friends and family members, even long after his death. (Citations from Bill's letters and transcriptions from his interviews of more than 100 words are dated and indented in the text; Ojibwe words have been converted to the Nichols-Nyholm spelling system; personal names remain as Bill or other individuals spelled them.)

My own understanding of the culture of Baker's people has been essential to the process of creating context for Bill's special role in maintaining traditional Ojibwe lifeways. My knowledge is based on more than 30 years of research and publication, culminating in two earlier studies. Specifically, material from my *Wild Rice and the Ojibway People* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988) has provided the setting for Bill's participation in the wild-rice harvest at age 13.

Details concerning his important role as lead singer in the summer drum dance on his reservation in 1944 are drawn from *The Ojibwa Dance Drum: Its History and Construction* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), which served Mickey Hart in building the Camp Winnarainbow drum the year after its publication. My re-creations of the traditional rice harvest and drum dance show Bill in his customary role as a tradition-bearer, before these opportunities vanished from the culture. Further, to better comprehend the extent of Bill's later bitterness, one needs a picture of him in happier surroundings—when his people still spoke the language, when their calendar was tied to the annual cycle of medicine dances and thanksgiving rituals, and when seasonal changes in nature dictated their movement to the rice fields in late summer and to the sugar bush in early spring.

Many Bill Bakers live in poverty on every Indian reservation in North America. These elders try to hold on to the cultures that have served their people for generations in the face of great external pressures—a process set in motion centuries ago in the face of what many Indian people aptly refer to as the "European invasion of North America." Bill's passing removed a voice for tradition—both spiritually and musically. Beyond honoring his memory, I try to paint a picture of his life in the old tradition and to characterize the disrupting forces and his frustrated attempts to compromise with a new order.