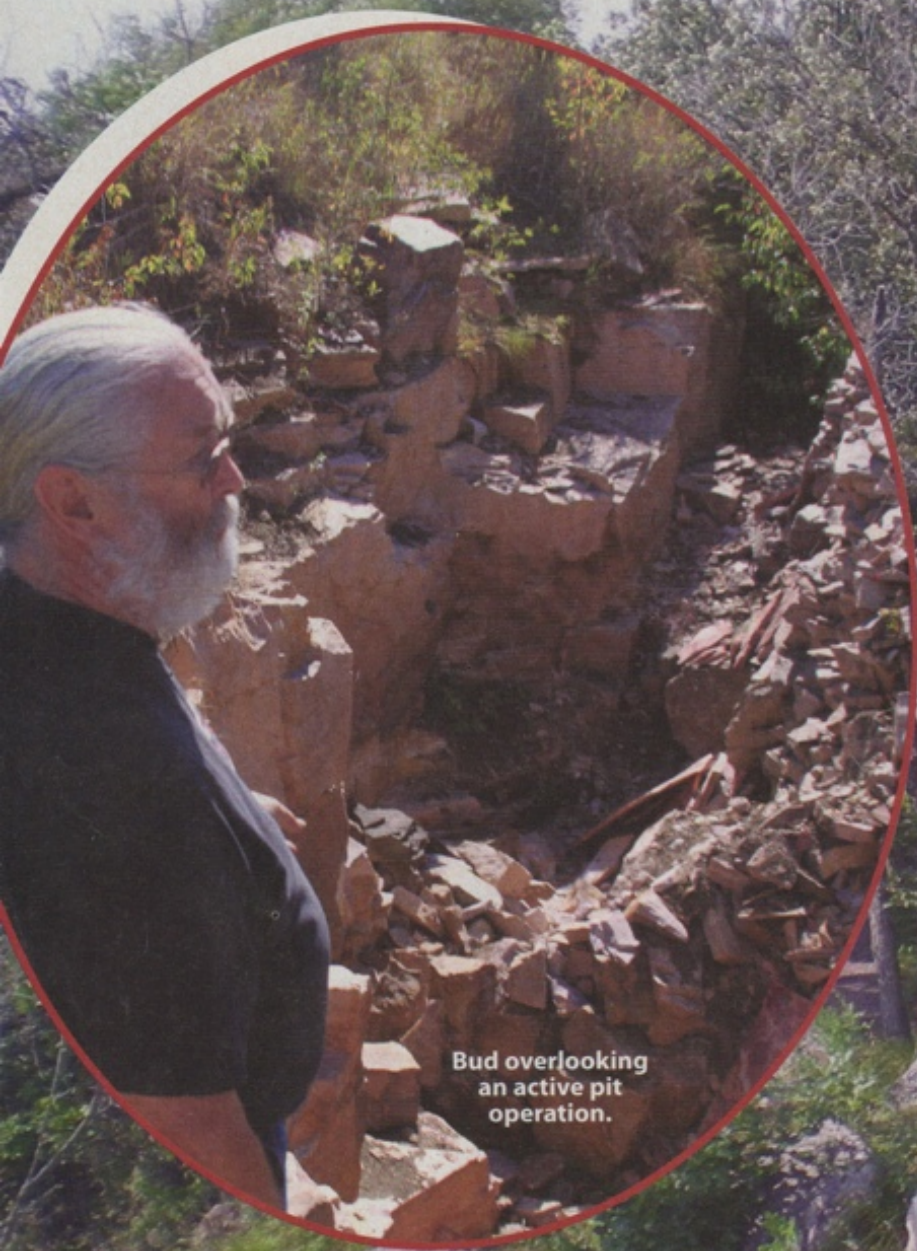


The Spirit of Pipestone

By Tom Watson | Outdoor Writer



**Bud overlooking
an active pit
operation.**



Picks, shovels, prybars – only hand tools can be used to extract the pipestone from the pit.

Thousands of years ago, countless hooves etched the prairie landscapes of western Minnesota with a network of migration and grazing routes that wore deep ruts into the grass-covered plains.

Eventually, one of these well-trodden furrows exposed a layer of soft, rust-red sandstone lying beneath the tiers of topsoil. To the Natives who lived off the land, the blood color came from those who died in the great flood.

This and legends of the White Buffalo Calf Woman, who brought the gift of the bloodstone pipe and sacred smoking herbs to a dire world so it could communicate with the great spirits, are part of the sacred foundations and spirituality for Native Americans of what is Pipestone National Monument.

Designated as Minnesota's first national park service area in 1937, Pipestone offers visitors a glimpse of unique geological/cultural features on the edge of the Great Plains of America. For many Native Americans, the area was called *IyanshaK'api*, literally "the place where one digs the red rock." It's the source of the stone from which a *Chanunpa* – a pipe used to send sacred smoke up to the spirit world – is formed. It's a means of communication that goes beyond that of merely being what the white settlers called a "peace pipe" used in treaty signing ceremonies.

You can get most of the background information on the geology/flora/fauna/ history/culture about Pipestone at the park service's modern visitor center: the layer of the fingernail-soft rock is called *Catlinite sandstone*; it lies deep within the harder *Sioux quartzite*. This became a sacred source that made it a gathering place for tribes all across America, even enemies who quarried side-by-side to dig the sacred stone.

But there is so much more to the story.

Bud Johnston, a member of the Bad River band of Lake Superior Chippewa, is the president/co-founder (along with active quarryman Travis Erickson) of the Keepers of the Sacred Traditions of Pipemakers. Walking with Bud along the gravel path that winds throughout the quarry pits and prairie vegetation is more than just a tour of the contemporary cultural history of a park, it's an introduction to a sacred place.

As you walk the loop, you pass among some of the 56 active quarry sites where sledge hammers, wedges and pry bars - hand tools that are permitted for excavating – are lying on narrow ledges of stone a dozen feet below ground level. The huge piles of rubble, the result of breaking apart tons and tons of over-layers, are a visual testament to the many weeks of work that goes into revealing and removing the sacred stone. Bud says it's important for visitors to "take the time to feel the place, to immerse yourself in the place that is there." Besides the quarries, Pipestone is also used among regional groups as a site for conducting sacred sweat lodge ceremonies.

Pipestone National Monument is more than a piece of geologic and human history. It's a living, sacred place where 3,000-year-old traditions continue with great spirituality. Bud says it's important to show respect for Pipestone, and don't just walk and look: "Find a spot that really talks to you – stop and feel it."

(To learn more about the Keeper of the Sacred Traditions of Pipemakers: www.pipekeepers.org.)