

# ON SLEEPING BUFFALO

What brings you to Banff is the spirit of a particular mountain. And then you leave.



By DON HILL

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### WHERE'S THE TUNNEL, DAD?

It is the late 1980s and my daughter, smart from primary school, wants to see what many visitors to Banff National Park ask of guides in the mountain playground—to point out Tunnel Mountain's *tunnel*.

A hundred years before my little girl popped the question, the Canadian Pacific Railway had plans to bore a hole through the mountain, but that expensive proposal was scotched when the CPR's general manager, Cornelius Van Horne, got wind of the engineering scheme.

Heinz Odenthal, a long-time Banff resident, fleshes out the mystery of the missing excavation. I'm sitting in the breakfast nook of his Bavarian-style home, a stone's throw from the mountain in question. "You can still see where the CPR cleared a right-of-way snug to the face of the rock," Odenthal says, his hand bumping up against a carafe of coffee for effect. "And they were all ready to go and blast," his son, Walter, continues, "but one of the construction guys went on a hike

and discovered a shorter route, bypassing the hill." That's also what James Hector, the Palliser Expedition trailblazer said of Banff's smallest peak when he came upon it in 1858. He referred to it as "The Hill."

While there's no tunnel to speak of on Tunnel Mountain, there is something more prominent and somewhat hard to miss if you're familiar with what you're looking at. To the nearby Stoney First Nation people, the mountain has always been a buffalo—a "sleeping buffalo." This might not be so obvious up close, but from a distance you can clearly see the stone effigy at rest among the taller peaks of the Bow Valley.

**It may not be obvious up close, but from a distance you can clearly see the stone effigy at rest among the peaks.**

"WHY DON'T THEY JUST CALL IT *Buffalo Mountain*?" my daughter wisely wondered, after I pointed out the likeness.

We were living in Canmore at the time, and there was talk of renaming Chinaman's Peak, a mountain which next to the Three Sisters stands as the most prominent landmark overlooking the former coal-mining town, and which had been named to honour a Chinese cook who long ago and on a

bet scampered up and down the mountain in record time. In 1997 maps would be officially altered to read Ha Ling Peak, a change that took over a century to accomplish. To this day, some locals still call the mountain's summit the shape it most closely resembles—the Beehive.

“These names tell stories, don't they,” says Peter Poole, a trustee of the Eleanor Luxton Historical Foundation in Banff and keen developer of architecture and business complementary to the mountain park's aesthetic. “A name tells us a lot about our frame of reference.”

The naming of mountains in the Bow Valley and place names such as Banff, for one, shortchange the spirit of the Rockies, more properly described by the Stoney people as “the shining mountains,” a characteristic which is plain to anyone who lives here. But when it comes to Tunnel Mountain, it is not just a case of correcting a mistaken identity. “To us—as Blackfoot—it's a pretty sacred place,” says Tom Crane Bear, an esteemed Siksika elder, spiritual guide and 2010 recipient of a National Aboriginal Achievement Award. He teaches at the Banff Centre, which is perched on the western flank of the “*iniskim*—the sitting buffalo, according to the old-timers,” which also translates as “big buffalo rock” in Blackfoot.

“And that's *b-i-i-i-g*,” says Janice Tanton, lowering her voice to emphasize how big *big* is. She is a visual artist and facilitator with Aboriginal Leadership at the Centre. “We had some folks here from Ktunaxa,” she begins, first identifying the traditional territory of a First Nation in the Columbia Valley and Kootenay range of mountains to the west of Banff (they refer to the big rock as the Eagle's Nest). “It means the home of the leaders. The place of the eagle, where you can actually see further, see more and understand more—a place of vision.”

Tunnel Mountain is the only spot near the Banff townsite where you can easily climb to the top and have an unobstructed vista in all directions. From the pyramid-shaped Cascade or Sulfur Mountain you don't get the same views. “It is a strategic location,” nods Tanton in a knowing way.

I don't think it's a coincidence that the Banff Centre, the renowned institute for the arts and the art of leadership, was built on this site. The story goes that local Senator Donald Cameron had in mind Salzburg's world-famous festival of the arts when he conceived his “campus in the clouds,” which grew out of a modest summer program during the Great Depression and became the Banff School of Fine Arts. The first building on the side of Tunnel Mountain went up in 1947. Today, the Banff Centre is an international gathering place for artists and people with high ideals.

This is completely in keeping with the prophesy of the great Stoney leader and medicine man Tatanga Mani. He was born on the Morley reserve a decade before the collapse of the great bison herds that still roamed the prairie in the 1880s. His name, translated from Stoney as “walking buffalo,” is symbolically representative of “things of the past moving into the future.” Travelling the world over as an emissary for peace, Tatanga Mani foresaw “a place on the banks of the Bow,

where all nations can gather.” With the river and mystical Bow Falls abutting the run up to the Banff Centre, I imagine the conference and arts centre might well be a manifestation of what he envisioned long ago.

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PETER POOLE DRAWS MY ATTENTION TO THE remains of ancient pit houses in the immediate vicinity of Tunnel Mountain. This is archaeological evidence of continuous settlement for thousands of years. Many peoples can lay claim on the auspicious nature of the place.

“Every Canadian knows two, maybe even three of the strong Aboriginal-inspired architectural forms in Canada: the igloo, the teepee and maybe the longhouse. But almost no one knows the term *ke'kuli*, or pit house,” he says.

The *ke'kuli* is one of the oldest shelter sites known to Canadian archaeology. The Bow Valley's pit houses might have been lost to posterity had the Banff Springs Hotel not

“It's a sacred place... where you can see further and understand more—a place of vision.”

surveyed their ruins. Archaeologist Harlan Smith noted “circular impressions of obvious human origin” on the hotel's property in 1913. The pit houses were soon thereafter filled in to expand the golf course. “We have cartoon-like explanations of the Duke of Connaught coming to Banff to play golf,” which necessitated the landscaping, Poole laughs sardonically. That's one story. Another, told by poet and historian Jon Whyte in his book *Indians in the Rockies*, says that in the 1950s or thereabouts, “golf course employees filled them in because they posed hazards to carts.”

All told, “we know there's a complex of 14 pit houses, maybe more, that were likely used up until a couple hundred years ago,” says Poole. The only other place *ke'kuli* structures have been found is in the BC interior. “What does that mean if we have 4,000 years of pit house dwellings in the Bow Valley?” Poole wonders aloud. “And the pit houses are more commonly associated with interior Shuswap culture than with either of the Algonquian cultures—the Blackfoot and the Cree—both of which have memory here.”

There's also evidence in the local rock art—ochre pictographs painted on canyon walls in the valley, a gallery of faces pointed toward the sky—that people from all over the continent have visited places nearby that were held sacred, perhaps Tunnel Mountain in particular. Michael Klassen, a specialist in Native American rock art, recorded a *kokopelli* near Canmore, a graphic image uniquely associated with the Navajo tradition

FEATURE



*Blackfoot elder and Banff Centre teacher Tom Crane Bear; Bow Valley kokopelli, or rock art; Sleeping Buffalo, a.k.a. Tunnel Mountain.*

PHOTOS: DON HILL, STEVE ARTHUR

of the American Southwest. “Is that the mark of a wanderer or an inhabitant?” Poole asks. The sign is perplexing as much as it is instructive. It adds weight to suggestions that Tunnel Mountain should be renamed.

“We didn’t claim we were the first ones,” Tom Crane Bear says of traditional Blackfoot territory now thought to encompass the “big buffalo rock.” It has long been understood that this is a special place for healing and foresight and that “many people have come here” he says, citing the teachings related to him by his grandmother.

“She would tell me there is a buffalo up where the sacred springs are,” Crane Bear says, motioning toward the lower hot spring across the river from where we sit on Tunnel Mountain. “This mountain is a buffalo—*inne*—that’s what it’s called.” He then tells the story that calls attention to the sacred nature of this place and of “the old lady” who once said, “In a spring make a dance for me. I will give you the powers, the songs, the way you should live.” Crane Bear continues, “Before that, we didn’t know anything.”

Crane Bear figures that’s how the secret “Buffalo Women’s Society” began. “They used to have sun dances—so I hear—in this valley. They’d gather and celebrate this mountain here—the buffalo.... The buffalo is the main staple food for the Indians—mountain people, plains people, bush people—they all go for the buffalo. So they praised this mountain with the songs that this mountain gave to these old ladies.” Festivities are said to have gone on for days and days. Then, after the concluding ceremony, just as quickly as everyone had gathered to praise the sacred mountain, they left.

Banff is a transient place to this day, and that may well be in keeping with its reputation as a creative spa to refresh and renew oneself. “That’s what I’ve learned from Aboriginal culture,” says Janice Tanton. “If you look at its long history, and even now, Banff has a very migratory community,” she says. “Not a lot of people have lived and remained here for generations.” While artists coming to the Banff Centre have a tendency to want to stay forever, they generally do return home. Over time the mountain persuades through vivid dreams and direct experience that “it’s never been meant to be that you could stay for a sustained period of time. It is a place you come to and then you leave.”

#### IS THIS IS A DREAMING MOUNTAIN?

Tom Crane Bear pauses thoughtfully before responding, “Maybe—in the olden days, people went up there on quests. I believe so. It’s got a flat top—that could have been used as a vision quest site.”

*The mountain doesn’t speak Blackfoot or English, but it does speak, doesn’t it?*

“The way it speaks to you,” Crane Bear pauses once more before gesturing with his hand toward the other magnificent peaks that encircle the Banff townsite, is “by the way of the contour of the mountain. Yes—some have different ridges, valleys, peaks. So these have a meaning.” He stops again for another moment, smiles and gently informs me: “It all has

meaning to the person *that wants to understand*.”

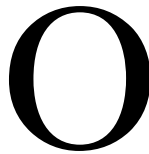
To my understanding, this place—this sacred buffalo mountain, which is what I’d prefer to call it—is a perpetual gift to the creative individual, creative in the broadest sense of the word. “This is a paradise for the artists, the painters,”

**They used to have sun dances here, for days and days. But as quickly as everyone gathered, they departed.**

Crane Bear enthusiastically agrees. “They have creative minds. But they should bring along the spiritualism to thank these trees out here. They’ve been standing now for many years. That’s how we are. We stand—as long as nobody cuts you down.”

In the decades that I’ve been working off and on with the Banff Centre (my first project dates back to 1982), it is the ongoing conversation and friendship with Tom Crane Bear that finally opened my eyes to Walking Buffalo’s vision and the numinous qualities of “the hill” that beckons the world. “What brings the people here is the spirit of this mountain,” Crane Bear declares. “That’s why you came today, because it’s calling you to come back here. I’m here because it wants me to be here. That’s all I can say. Otherwise, I’ll start BSing!”

Big laugh. That’s how it is with Crane Bear, a dash of humour drives home a profound teaching. The Blackfoot elder, as always, is generous with his time, but I’m conscious he is an older man and that many seek his counsel on campus.



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#### ONE LAST QUESTION: WHERE IS THE BEST SPOT TO photograph the buffalo?

“As you go out of town,” Crane Bear directs, “the last service station will be on your left. Stop there and take a picture of the mountain. Looking north, you’ll see it’s got its head turned around—it’s the outline of a bison.”

Hoping I might persuade him to pose for a quick snapshot at the location he just described, the Blackfoot elder feigns a yawn and offers with his self-deprecating laugh, “You can’t get nothing out of a rock.”

I settle for a few snaps of him on the grounds of the Banff Centre, the music building in the background. A string quartet is in rehearsal alongside another studio out of which wafts the sound of a solo vocalist accompanied by a piano.

This mountain never sleeps, I think. Perhaps you just awaken with it. ■

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*Don Hill is host of CKUA’s “Expressions.” His record label, Music Is Medicine, presents soundscapes of contemplative places in Canada.*

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