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An Interview with Leland and Crystal Payton, authors of *Lover's Leap Legends: From Sappho of Lesbos to Wah-Wah-Tee of Waco*

Why did you write this book?

Our last two books were about rivers. Both of them had bluffs called Lover's Leap. The tragic legends of how each got its name were very similar and equally ridiculous. The basic legend is about a beautiful Indian maiden who, when her father the chief forbids her to marry a handsome brave of an enemy tribe, finds a steep bluff and jumps off it. Then we ran across Mark Twain's tale of a Lover's Leap that – to his point of view – had a happy ending. In his tale, Winona jumped from a bluff in Wisconsin and landed on her oppressive parents, killing them. She and her boyfriend from an enemy tribe went West and lived happily ever after. This early investigation revealed a lot of fake Indian legends all over the country and – no book was devoted to the topic.

What's your background? What makes you qualified to write such a book?

Actually, you could say we're spectacularly unqualified academically. We do have PhDs as flea market pickers however. The research material we used is not available in museums or libraries. Only recently have such institutions and academics shown interest in popular culture, especially 'fake-lore' like these manufactured tales. We knew how to find images and we're not condescending about American pop culture. One of our early, and very successful books was *Turned On*, about TV lamps of the 1950s. Altogether we've written three books about Branson, Missouri, a pop culture tourist mecca. Leland has photographed and written about nature extensively. Part of our thesis on Lover's Leaps involves the allure of the settings of these legends. The legends are fading from public memory, but the scenic bluffs overlooking rivers are still destinations for hikes all over the country—and the name lingers.

Are you claiming these are not in fact real Indian legends?

There has been some serious research on these examples of fake-lore recently. It's indisputable that Native Americans cannot be blamed for these maudlin weepies. Indeed, what is sadder than a beautiful Indian girl having her heart broken and jumping off a cliff "to be dashed into a thousand pieces?" All these Lover's Leap legends are derived from an equally specious legend that the great Greek poet, Sappho of Lesbos, jumped to her death when spurned by her boyfriend about 500 B.C. The playwright Meander enhanced one of his plays with this dramatic but undocumented event, hundreds of years after her death.

How did the legend get started in America?

The first involvement of Indians in the Lover's Leap scenario came when Capt. Zebulon Pike jotted down the story of Winona jumping off a bluff (now called Maiden Rock) on the upper Mississippi. He was on an expedition and claimed he heard it from a Scotch Indian trader. The story took off from there. The year after it was published in 1810, it was linked in a magazine article to the death of Sappho.

So – in other words, people were suspicious that these tales weren't true? They were more literary than historical?

Absolutely. One thing we learned, there were a lot of cynics in the newspaper trade who made fun of these stories. Other writers shared Mark Twain's skepticism about popular culture. Americans sentimental tendencies have long been countered by hard-nosed journalists and realist writers. Lover's Leap legends have provided an excellent target for cartoonists and satiric humorists.

You visited some of these sites while researching this book. Where would a person go to see some of these sites today?

Some of the most important ones are:

- Maiden Rock bluff in Wisconsin
- Winona, the town and statue, in Minnesota
- Alton, Illinois where the Piasa is
- Niagara Falls
- Gadsden, Alabama – nine foot statue of Noccalula
- Texas – three bluffs: Waco's Cameron Park, Mt. Bonnell in Austin, and Junction

There's a Lover's Leap at Niagara Falls?

Actually there is but it's hardly known. An early obscure poem tells of an Indian lady jumping off a bluff on the Niagara River. Much better known is the Legend of the White Canoe, which is included as it also ends in the death of a young maiden. It's a related manufactured legend.

The things that are important about the Legend of the White Canoe are:

- Like many Lover's Leap legends it was created to enhance the tourist experience.
- The legend was written around 1850.
- It took off when an artist painted a large picture of a woman in a canoe going over the falls. 1893.
- Our research revealed that it became associated with the boat line named "Maid of the Mist" that runs at the base of the falls. but the legend had

- Native Americans did object to the legend of the white canoe because the reason she was going over the falls was as a sacrifice to the gods and the NAs said they did not practice human sacrifice.
- The group that got it dropped didn't mind her going over the falls in a canoe if she were committing suicide – just didn't like the sacrifice theme.

Are there Lover's Leaps outside of America?

We have a chapter on World Lover's Leaps and showcased some samples from England, Spain, and island tourist destinations like Guam and Jamaica. I'm sure there are more. They are just as competitively corny as American Indian legends.

Example – Two Lovers' Point in Guam honors a legend with the familiar Romeo-and-Juliet premise and a Sappho conclusion. This tale has a unique twist: the two lovers twisted the long stand of their hair together into a rope-like knot before the last lingering kiss and their final leap.

A friend of Crystal's who was deployed to Saipan, visited Two Lover's Point to send us original photos and a souvenir from the famous tourist spot.

An "impressive beauty" is ordered to marry a "powerful, arrogant Spanish captain" by her "wealthy Spanish aristocrat" father. Alas! She loves a "young, gentle, strongly-built and handsome Chamorro man." They rendezvous on the cliff where they first met:

When the father discovered that his daughter was gone, he told the captain that his daughter had been kidnapped by the Chamorro boy. The father, the captain and all the Spanish soldiers pursued the lovers up to the high cliff above Tumon Bay. The couple stood at the very edge of the cliff. The boy and girl took the long strands of their hair and tied these together into a rope-like knot . . . They looked deeply into each other's eyes and kissed one last time. In that instant, the young couple leaped off the long, deep cliff into the roaring waves below.

Given the controversy over Indian sports mascots and wearing Indian apparel as Halloween costumes, do you think Lover's Leap legends will become politically incorrect?

Probably not - because they've never been really taken as authentic Indian myths. They've been fading from memory since the 1920s. Here and there, there is a resurrection like HILLSDALE where there is a new bronze statue of Winona. What will survive is the name for a scenic cliff. As we said earlier, people love to look out over the landscape from a prominence and there are many beautiful and scenic spots across the country named Lover's Leap. The legend is a historical curiosity and probably will not contaminate or ruin the pleasure people take in hiking, picnicking sightseeing these prominences. Many are preserved in parks – national and state.

We don't know what effect our book will have on the ongoing discussion on the effect of inaccurate popular culture images of Indians. It remains to be seen. It should be no secret that liberties have been taken with American history often for a good story. In our opinion, this is one of the more benign distortions of the image of Native Americans. Quite frankly our take-away is amazement at how widespread these legends once were. We think of ourselves as foot soldiers in Mark Twain's war

against excessive sentimentality. The dedication of the book says it all: "For Mark Twain who diagnosed America's vulnerability to romanticism. Alas, his does of realism was not a cure."

Throughout the book you discredited Lover's Leap Legends, sometimes humorously and other times pointing out their blatant historical inaccuracies. Don't they offend Indians? Is there a movement to eradicate them like various sports mascots?

These are recently raised issues. Sports mascots like Chief Wahoo of the Cleveland Indians or the Washington Redskins have raised the ire of Native groups, but in the past we've found no tradition of objections to Lover's Leap legends. We dug through 19th and 20th century newspapers. The one instance we found of offense taken to the commercialization of an "Indian" legend was the protest of some Iroquois against the Maid of the Mist festival in Niagara Falls.

In the past, some Indians went along with these legends and even included them as part of their heritage. To be sure, other Native Americans were suspicious of these fables, but except for the Maid of the Mist legend of Niagara, there is little evidence they ever indicated great displeasure.

A few non-Indian activists have found stories of suicidal Indian maidens distasteful but tribal members often seem more dismissive than angered by these inauthentic legends.