

DISCUSSION GUIDE for

#NATIVE READS

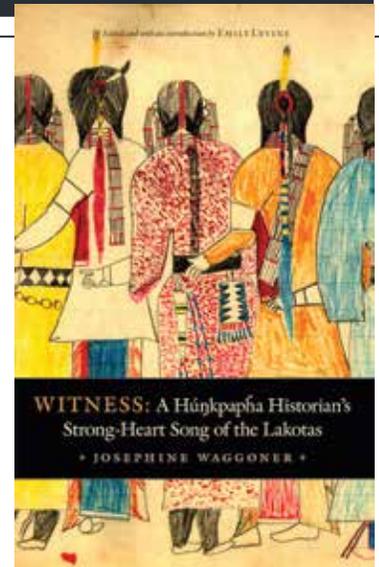
GREAT BOOKS from INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Witness: A Hunkpapha Historian's Strong-Heart Song of the Lakotas

by JOSEPHINE WAGGONER

Author Biography

Josephine Waggoner, citizen of the Hunkpapha band of Oceti Sakowin, was born in 1871 to full-blood Lakota woman Ithatewin, Wind Woman, and Irish immigrant Charles McCarthy. Waggoner and Susan Bordeaux Bettelyoun (Yanktonai Dakota) coauthored *With My Own Eyes* and were among the first of their tribes to attend Hampton Normal and Agricultural College in Virginia, now Hampton University. Upon returning home in 1888, Waggoner soon found employment at the Bishop Hare Episcopal Mission's Saint Elizabeth School and the Congregational School and Mission near Fort Yates. She put her fluency in English to work interpreting, performing clerical duties and nursing. She married Pvt. John Franklin Waggoner and raised a large family of 10 children. When the children were school age, she sent them to boarding school and began what is now referred to as classic ethnographic fieldwork. Using her meticulous research and bilingual skills, she began interviewing elders who had lived during the Powder River homeland days. She lived and wrote during the period before the creation of reservations. A copious notetaker, she interviewed Lakota elders and others who lived during that period.



Book Summary

It is a multigenerational miracle of will that Josephine Waggoner's book exists for us today. From its beginning, the manuscript moved through many hands as though it had a life of its own. Josephine sent parts of it out to be published, but was unsuccessful. It survived correspondence as it traveled within letters as editorial notes, stories and chapters to the readers and various editors. In those early years, the manuscript became misplaced and even taken away by one of the readers. All the while, Waggoner trusted and remained determined, never giving up hope that her book would be her gift to the People. Eventually, and only after her death, with the insistence and persistence of Waggoner's family, did independent scholar Emily Levine take up the arduous research to finally fulfill Waggoner's lifelong dream to publish the manuscript.

Writing the tribal history of changes in her lifetime so nothing would be lost for future generations of Lakota, Waggoner outlines what she deems as essential in "Part I Dakota/Lakota Ethnography, Culture and Society," which contains the history of her tribe from origin stories, legends, myths and geographical migration history. Waggoner answers perennial questions such as why there are different bands and

sub-bands among the Lakota, why divisions exist within them and why they are located where they are today. Finally, she explains how the various Lakota language dialects came into practice and other cultural information.

Part II is devoted to tribal history, including her own life and the lives of notable chiefs in the Upper Missouri region, including, Sitting Bull with whom Waggoner served as an interpreter and translator. She shines light on the critical points in history that changed the tribal political landscape, including the role of the federal government in shaping The Surrender.

The second manuscript, "Lives of the Chiefs and Other Biographies," is about 60 chiefs and other historians of that time, most of whom Josephine Waggoner interviewed herself. Each biography is rich with personal history, lending context and credibility as events and experiences interface with the lives of other chiefs. Each biography relates to various transformation accounts such as land divisions, wars and trading practices. In her quest for accuracy and inclusion in her manuscript, Waggoner traveled extensively to get firsthand accounts as well as to gain access to official documents. The book contains color plate illustrations by tribal members, numerous maps depicting land boundaries and changes, and photos, many belonging to the Waggoner family and from depositories such as the Smithsonian and the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

This discussion guide was created by Oak Lake Writers' Society member Lanniko Lee (*Miniconjou Lakota*).

Discussion Guide

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- 1 Discuss how **Witness** provides a basis for understanding the Lakota. Why is Waggoner's account of Lakota history important to that understanding?
- 2 Emily Levine, editor of **Witness**, states in her introduction that Waggoner's book was Lakota-generated. How does Levine substantiate this? Explain why this is important.
- 3 Who were Waggoner's Lakota and Dakota writer contemporaries and why are they important?
- 4 Why was a discussion of orthography and dialect deemed important to the body of the text?
- 5 What difficulties arose as a result of creating a tribal enrollment record? Does Waggoner adequately explain the origin of names? Discuss what is lost having one's name changed from Lakota to English. What were the future consequences?
- 6 Discuss how natural landmarks across the prairie landscape are an integral part of Lakota history.
- 7 Discuss Waggoner's childhood experiences and her years at Hampton Normal School. How did those experiences influence her desire to write her tribal history?
- 8 Compare and contrast Hampton Normal School, the Farm School and church mission schools of Waggoner's time.
- 9 As a mother of 10 children, how did Waggoner find time and opportunities to write **Witness**? Why do you think her work was not published in her lifetime?
- 10 Oral tradition keeps family and tribal stories alive. What has prevented this practice from continuing? Why is oral storytelling not valued in the same way as the printed word? How does Waggoner resolve some of these differences?