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Indian in a Bottle

Bonnie Lynn-Sherow
Kansas State University
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On August 5th 1931 in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, Chico Colon Meridas of Waterbury Connecticut was declared the Supreme Chief of all the Sioux Indians by a delegation of twenty-seven ancestral chiefs of the Lakota Nation. Scudder McKeel of the Anthropological division of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History was on hand to film the solemn occasion for posterity even though he had no clue as to the ceremony's significance. Neither did the scores of visitors to the Pine Ridge Rodeo that hot day in August as they observed a small dark man in a white hat shaking hands with the gaily head dressed chiefs before he was escorted from the parade grounds by his Italian-American chauffeur and whisked away.

In fact, the colorful display was a simple business transaction. Chico Meridas, AKA Two Moon Meridas cheerfully met his part of the bargain with blankets, food, medicine and \$1000.00 in cash. In return the Council pronounced him Honorary Chief of all the Lakota which gave him, in white society, unquestioned legitimacy as an Indian medicine man and therefore a legal naturopath. After years of harassment by the medical profession, Two Moon Meridas or 'Chief' as he preferred, hoped to finally silence his critics and expand his patent medicine empire. The two dozen Lakota elders that signed the notarized declaration of the Chief's status were equally pleased with the deal. After years of terrible hardship, they had secured needed supplies for the tribe, cash for themselves and their families and a promise of a month long vacation at a resort in Connecticut. Moreover these "old men" of the tribe had pulled off the

whole affair without the permission of the officially sanctioned BIA tribal council with whom they had been at odds for more than a decade. They had successfully traded on their traditional status for goods and money which would give them the means to be generous with other tribal members—the hallmark of a respected tribal leader.

The respect of one's peers was an elusive commodity in the late twenties. Americans were equally fascinated by feats of daring as in the Lindbergh flight as with the murder trial of Mrs. Frances Hall and its display of wealth and scandal.² To maintain a good reputation in business society required a rock solid alliance with an unquestioned 'public good.' In the case of Two Moon Meridas' patent medicine business, his rockbed value was in the relationship of Indians to 'Nature.' Two Moon was hardly the first or only patent medicine maker to exploit this accepted wisdom. Patent medicine manufacturers had invoked the healing powers of Nature's Children since the mid 19th century. But in the marketing circus of the 1920s, Meridas, dark skinned and unconnected, was struggling against other powerfully held stereotypes of race and class. His triumph in spite of his handicaps is a tangible measure of the power of the Indian-Nature mystique.

Indian people were enduring trials of a different kind but were hardly pawns in the scramble for public approval. As early as the mid 18th century when George Catlin induced a group of Blackfeet to dance for a foreign prince on his western tour, Indians had been engaged in cultural exhibitions, Wild West Shows and colorful ceremonies for 'honorary' chiefs, all of which were considered the means to a tribally defined end. On August 5, 1930, both 'Two

² In his coverage of the Hall murder trial, columnist Damon Runyon said, "[I] found the same interest in a murder trial that I find in any city on the eve of a big football game, or pugilistic encounter or baseball series." in Tom Clark, *The World of Damon Runyon* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 151.

Moon' Meridas and the inherited tribal council at Pine Ridge were trading on the mysterious and powerful connection between Indians and Nature.

In some ways, Chico Colon Meridas had no other choice than to become someone he was not. Not surprisingly, Meridas' birth and early life have been obscured by his active attempt to re-invent himself as an American Indian. The scanty evidence he left indicates he was born in New York City around 1888. No solid evidence of his parentage exists outside of his marriage certificate, the information for which Meridas himself supplied, but circumstances suggest that his mother was Hispanic and his father was black or of mixed race. Meridas himself was described by people who met him as 'dark' or 'copper colored' with nice features and a soft spoken manner. His autobiographical advertisements suggest that he may have been orphaned or abandoned at an early age. In his invented tales of his Blackfoot Indian birth inside a smoky tepee attended by a wild looking medicine man he was orphaned at an early age and raised by the Sioux who taught him how to survive with the aid of ancient herbal knowledge. Whether fiction was imitating fact in this case is impossible to determine. What is clear is that the adult businessman wanted his customers to believe that his training as an Indian medicine man had begun with his birth in the middle of the wilderness.

According to family accounts, Meridas met a young and pretty social worker, Helen Gertrude Nugent of New Jersey, in Philadelphia around 1912. The story was that Helen was attracted to the charismatic young man and in the process of trying to reform him, fell in love.³ Both in their early twenties, Chico and Helen were married in Philadelphia but soon moved to

³Edith Schonenberg, interview by Dorothy Cantor, April 22, 1987. Edith was the daughter of Sam Risik who owned a grocery store in the Waterbury neighborhood that the Chief and Helen first lived in when they moved to Waterbury in 1915.

New York City. According to one long time employee, Meridas had intimated to him that New Yorkers had not been very friendly to a dark skinned man married to a white woman. Within two years they moved again to the growing city of Waterbury Connecticut and took up residence in a rooming house on Griggs street, an area with a large population of newly arrived Italians, Poles and Portuguese. The rooming house was owned by an eccentric named Graf(t) who was rumored to have built his own airplane on the third story of the building. He allowed Chico, who had already semi-adopted an Indian persona, to sell some bags of herbs he was given by the local druggist out of a lean to on the back of the building. Hawking his 'Indian herbs' in a well used Indian costume to a gullible and superstitious audience, 'Two Moon' discovered his life's work.

The relationship of Indians to Nature, and therefore to nature's secret remedies, was, by the 1920s, already well established within the world of patent medicines. A good deal of what we know about advertising and business practice in this period comes from the remarkable collection of Isadore Warshaw, a New York book seller who began collecting business ephemera in 1928. His vast collection of business cards, trade papers, catalogues, advertisements and the like, is especially rich for the first two decades of the twentieth century and are now housed at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History Archives. The Warshaw provides a broad overview of the world of patent medicine in this period and a significant number of patent medicine companies adopted some Indian symbol in their advertising.

One of the largest of these patent medicine companies, the American Herb Company, whose premier product was simply "Indian Herbs" was constantly waging two advertising campaigns at once: for customers and potential salesmen. Their advertising followed a formula common to many patent medicine companies in operation at the same time. It consisted of a general history of company's founders or herbalists followed by a scientific explanation of how

the medicine improved health. This was supported through testimonials like the one from G.A. Doolittle of Frankfort Indiana who reported, “I was afflicted with Rheumatism for three months and went around on crutches but after taking your Indian Herbs for a short time, I was cured.”⁴

Other companies made more extensive use of their connection to Indians than the American Herb Company which did not pretend to employ any Indians on their staff. The Kickapoo Medicine Company took their connection to native peoples much further, providing their customers with a broad range of products like Indian Sagwa Blood, Liver Stomach Renovator, Indian Worm Killer, Genuine Kickapoo Cough Syrup and Kickapoo Indian Oil. Their advertising centered on the Indian roots and herbs used in their medicines allegedly supplied to the company by their Indian employees on the reservation.⁵ Customers were also given the Kickapoo Household Almanac with helpful hints or could take in the Kickapoo Medicine Company’s Vaudeville troupe which promised “One Continuous Round of Pleasure” featuring magicians, comedians and singers.

⁴Warshaw Collection, Record Group 74, Box 6. Smithsonian National Museum of American History Archives, Washington, DC.

⁵ Ibid. “The remedies now presented are simply the appliances and compounds taken from nature’s own drug store of these wonderful people, and adapted to the needs and most frequent diseases of the present day. They yet remain the treasured possessions of the surviving Kickapoo Indians, for whom Messrs. Healy and Bigelow are the sole agents. Members of the tribe even now find occupation in the compounding and preparation of these valuable medicines.”

One of the earliest of these patent medicine companies was founded and endorsed by the ‘North American College of Health’ on the corner of Fifth and Race streets in downtown Philadelphia. Selling Wright’s Indian Vegetable Pills, the North American College of Health guaranteed the effectiveness of their ‘Indian Purgative’ on such widely diverse complaints as inflammation of the brain, scurvy, scrofula, cancer, tetanus, Apoplexy, paralysis, lowness of spirits and delicate female problems. Besieged by counterfeiterers who peddled their own version of the popular pills to small town drug stores, the company relocated to New York City’s Pearl Street sometime in the late 1890s, just about the time that Meridas was (if speculation holds) left to his own devices. In an era before the creation of the Pure Food and Drug Administration in 1908, there were virtually no guidelines on the labeling of any drug indicating their contents or effective ingredients, nor was there any notion of physician prescribed drugs. Patent medicine was a world of opportunity for anyone with a knack for selling and projecting an image of trustworthiness, knowledge and unselfish caring. For Meridas, American Indians were the perfect symbolic vehicle for all of these qualities.

Two Moon Meridas took the lessons he had learned about the relationship of Indians to Nature on the streets of New York and Philadelphia and created his own version of their appeal by becoming, himself, “Chief Two Moon Meridas–America’s Greatest Herb Doctor.”⁶ This was a brilliant strategy from several different vantage points. In terms of personal charisma, Two Moon himself was widely acknowledged to be his own best advertisement. Quiet and refined with a penetrating gaze, Two Moon seemed the epitome of the wise and stoic, even sensual, American Indian of popular imagination. A native Indian identity was also a wonderful filter for

⁶This was the logo emblazoned on the Chief’s touring bus in 1930.

his dark skin. Two Moon was not unusual in this respect, as a number of other African American or mixed race individuals were at this same moment passing in upper class society as socially acceptable Natives.⁷ Most important, in taking on the persona of an Indian, Two Moon closed the credibility gap between the ‘genuine Indian medicine man’ and the con men who worked for drug companies. When customers came to Two Moon’s medical office in Waterbury for medical advice they received an examination, a diagnosis and a curative prescription directly from an ‘authentic’ Indian medicine man educated in Nature’s ways.

The result of Two Moon’s advertising and marketing strategy--that of posing as a real Indian-- was that within a very short period of time he became, by all standards, a very wealthy man. At age 33, Two Moon purchased a modest but tasteful home for himself and Helen on Wales Street just off East Main in Waterbury. They immediately filled it with antiques, tapestries, oriental rugs and vases. Two Moon’s guests and neighbors were universally impressed with the lavish and sophisticated decor of the house complete with brick walkways and a wrought iron gate. On the right side of the house a small french side door led downstairs to the ‘Chief’s’ consulting office. This was also lavishly appointed, but contained every conceivable reference to Two Moon’s Indian heritage. Indian costumes, artwork and artifacts covered the walls and floors. Even the desk blotter, paperweights, ashtrays, letter trays, business card holder and lamps bore Two Moon’s official Indian “Crest”: two Moon faces, one smiling the other frowning indicating sickness and health.

⁷The most famous of these Indian imposters was Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance from South Carolina who attended Carlisle Indian School and went on to have a fairly successful career as a journalist and silent movie actor (The Silent Enemy 1931 with Molly Spotted Elk and Chauncey Yellow Robe). He committed suicide in mid-career as rumors of his black ancestry began to circulate in Hollywood gossip columns.

It was as a naturopath that Two Moon built his reputation as a real Indian Medicine Man. While still a young man selling herbs on street corners and out of the back of the Griggs Street apartment, the 'Chief' had read palms and tarot cards to tell the future and then recommended some herbal remedy to his clients. At the Wales street house, the Chief would lead his patients to a back room where they sank down into deep red leather chairs. He would tell them not to speak but rather to let him discern their illness through his own special powers. After a few minutes close observation of the patient's hands and fingernails, the chief would diagnose the problem and select one of several different bags of herbal mixtures which were priced at \$5.00 per bag. The patient would then be instructed in how to consume the herbs, how many times a day or week to take them and when to return for another consultation. Local Waterbury residents and former patients, later suggested that Two Moon had earned a solid reputation as a medicine man during the flu epidemic of 1919. Though unsubstantiated, the city's residents believed that none of the people who were using the Chief's herbal remedies at the time died or even became ill. This reputation for miraculous healing power followed the Chief to his new place of business on Wales Street. Sundays were his busiest days as he received out of town patients, often hiring a policeman to direct traffic near the house to handle the stream of cars from New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

As his business prospered, the Chief became bolder in his enterprises. In 1926 he undertook an East Coast tour to advertise his products as far south as Florida. In his specially made car with a speaking platform and a small staff consisting of his wife, a manager and bus driver, the chief would advertise a 'medicine show' in advance of his arrival in each new town. Unlike the professional demeanor and street clothes he used in his individual consultations, on the road, the elaborately costumed Chief became a walking billboard for his most popular patent

medicine, Chief Two Moon Bitter Oil which was purported to cure stomach and liver ailments. The tour was a success for the most part except in Florida where rainy weather prevented the troupe from setting up outdoors. Ray Bergamo, a long time employee of the Chief's, years later said he believed that the Medicine Man got a cold reception in the South where it was rumored he was black.

Back in Waterbury at the end of March 1927, Meridas moved his mobile medicine show into a rented a two story building on East Main where he hired a chemist and a staff of workers to produce his bitter oil and other products. Once underway, the Chief largely withdrew from this part of the business, only coming by occasionally to check on things. He bought the first of a series of Grey Lincoln touring cars—he would eventually have three—and began to assemble a fleet of panel trucks to deliver his medicines to drug stores throughout the region. Business boomed and in 1929, he embarked on another ambitious project: the construction of a laboratory which would create and bottle his patented formulas for distribution in drug stores throughout the East. Located on a corner lot just a few blocks from his home, the red brick one story building was constructed to the Chief's precise instructions, including carved Indians in Headdresses set above the windows and carved symbols above the doors and on the outside stairs.

In 1929, the Chief hired his trusted habadasher, William Sorrentino, to direct his public relations campaign. The first task on Sorrentino's agenda was to solidify the Chief's legitimacy as a real Indian medicine man and it was likely Sorrentino who suggested that the Chief visit a real Indian community. They chose Pine Ridge South Dakota as their destination. Certainly the Lakota were the most visible Plains tribe having fought at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, Wounded Knee and having participated in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows. Their plan was simple: have a group of Lakota Indians sign affidavits as to the Chief's birth on Devil's lake

reservation (the affidavits were later recanted) and pay the Indians to make Two Moon ‘Chief of all the Sioux.’

Things did not initially go well. Sorrentino and the Chief quickly discovered that the Indians were not free agents with whom they could deal directly. The Chief discovered that he would need the permission of the Bureau of Indian Affairs superintendent at Pine Ridge to transact business, allow goods to be distributed on the reservation and to visit the reservation. Sorrentino persisted on the Chief’s behalf, sending letters to the BIA that the Chief’s only motive in wanting to visit the Indians was to help them in their distress. These were met with bureaucratic disdain until the Chief, through Sorrentino, somehow made an inside deal with a member of the traditional Tribal Council named William Spotted Crow. Spotted Crow put pressure on the Superintendent to allow the visit and it was granted. The contact with Spotted Crow was the key to the next phase of the Chief’s life as an Indian medicine man.

By 1930, Sorrentino’s stepped up his efforts to arrange a visit to the Pine Ridge agency in an attempt to end the rumors in Waterbury and elsewhere that Two Moon was not an Indian, but just another imposter selling medicine without a license. The medical profession was upping the pressure on the patent medicine industry to identify the contents of their concoctions and to verify their effectiveness and had targeted Two Moon for investigation. They were especially keen on shutting down the Chief’s operation because of his ‘consultations’ with patients which often let to their purchasing case loads of bitter oil from the downtown factory.⁸ In this sense, Two Moon was not simply selling patent medicine of questionable value; he was selling

⁸One 1924 letter to Chief Two Moon from a female ‘patient’ states that he had prescribed his bitter oil for a year. She was writing to ask him how many times a day she should take it gratefully acknowledged his help and promised to continue taking his medicine not just for the rest of the year, but for the rest of her life.

questionable medical advice through his regular practice. This was tantamount to practicing medicine without a license.

It probably did not help matters that Two Moon had taken to wearing expensive suits, fur coats, diamond rings and waving to people from the backseat of one of his chauffeur driven grey Lincoln touring cars. In social circles, Two Moon flaunted both the color barrier and the general awe reserved for 'Wild Indians' by eating in the best restaurants both in Connecticut and New York City where he counted Oscar Tschirky of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel and Eva Tanguay of Vaudeville among his customers and friends. He thoroughly enjoyed the movies where he had a box seat, attended Broadway plays and occasionally reserved the Silver Slipper Night Club for his exclusive use. One Waterbury resident recalled that he tipped lavishly—policemen, movie ticket takers, waiters—always projecting the image of the refined and wealthy entrepreneur. That an illiterate child of nature could so thoroughly appreciate haute couture did not look out of place in the society of the 1920s.

As much as the medical profession, the Bureau of Indian Affairs had its own reasons to be suspicious of the Chief. After Two Moon was made Honorary Chief of all the Sioux, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs C.J. Rhoades made it quite clear to Pine Ridge Superintendent James McGregor that Two Moon was not an Indian and that his motives were suspect, "He claims to be an Indian and has made desperate efforts to get this Office to issue a certificate to the effect that he is an Indian, but he has been unable to substantiate his claims. . . .it is probable that the proposed trip of the old chiefs is for the purpose of furthering in some way his claim of being an Indian. There is some material in the Office file of his case which indicates that he may

be of negro blood.”⁹ Rhoades may have been on the right track at least in terms of Two Moon’s urgent need to have himself declared Indian and not black. According to Ray Bergamo who worked for the Chief as a child cutting his lawn and later as his chauffeur, Two Moon tried to arrange a public appearance with President Calvin Coolidge on his 1927-28 tour of the Atlantic states. According to Bergamo, the Chief was turned down for his request to meet the president because Coolidge believed he was black.

If true, then the Chief’s increasing efforts to gain the favor of the Sioux after 1928 make a great deal of sense. So do his increasingly generous contributions to political campaigns and local charities. One constant in the memories of his former employees, their families and his neighbors was the Chief’s generosity. A hefty contributor to the local Catholic parish, Two Moon relied on the priests to provide him with the names of needy families located primarily in South Waterbury. As early as 1925, the Chief was instructing his sales manager, Michael Kidney, to fill a wicker basket with food and kitchen items at the local drug store and take it to a poor family. This was done on a regular basis throughout the year.¹⁰ At Christmas in 1930, however, the Chief made a large public display of his generosity by assembling a room full of holiday goods and toys, including two tons of coal, in his laboratory, a picture of which ran in the local Waterbury newspaper. This event and others coordinated by William Sorrentino were designed to counter any bad press the Chief might encounter as a result of rumors about his race or his status as an authentic Indian man legally sanctioned to dispense medical advice.

⁹C.J. Rhoads to James McGregor, 28 April, 1932. National Archives Record Group 75, Pine Ridge Agency Correspondence Files, Washington D.C.

¹⁰Virginia Devine (Michael Kidney’s daughter) to Thomas Filius, February 9, 1996.

The tightrope upon which the Chief lived was clear to one Torrington Connecticut journalist sent to set the record straight in November of 1929 when he told his readers that “the spirit of show me was strong within” but he was still amazed at “upon finding little Wales street, a short little thoroughfare jammed with automobiles parked on both sides of the street. The license plates shoed the cars to be from Maine, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Two New York taxicabs were in the line.” Most pointedly, the journalist acknowledged that the Chief, “hundreds of times has been called a charlatan, verbally and in writing. He preserves the newspaper clippings and smiles over them as he turns to letters from celebrities who go on record as believing in the curative properties of the chief’s medicines.” In the end, the Torrington correspondent could not dispel any myths about the “dapper coffee colored American Indian” who was now a modern miracle worker.

In the spring of 1930 Sorrentino made the final arrangements for the Chief to visit Pine Ridge. They traveled to the reservation in a touring car and met with the traditional tribal council whose spokesman at the time was William Spotted Crow. Spotted Crow was an ancestral Chief who had been active in Pine Ridge politics on behalf of the tribe for more than two decades when he began his own investigation into the disposition of monies promised to the Lakota after the condemnation of a portion of the reservation by the federal government in World War I. Since then, Spotted Crow and the other traditional chiefs, who owed their positions on the council to heredity and their experiences as warriors before the reservation era, had been fighting for recognition as the legitimate leaders of their people. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, however, had instituted a tribal council of twenty one members with three elected members from each of the seven districts that made up Pine Ridge Reservation. By and large, these elected representatives were younger and had received some formal education. The superintendent of the agency, James

McGregor was advised by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to work with the elected council. But knowing how deeply divided the faction was becoming between the traditional council and newly elected one, McGregor felt compelled to remain neutral in the controversy.

When Chief Two Moon entered the picture, Spotted Crow saw an opportunity to gain some influence through an outsider and possibly with the white political leadership by supporting the Republican Party. Frustrated by a lack of face to face communication between themselves and policy makers, which the elder chiefs were accustomed to as a consequence of treaty making, the tribal council listened politely to Two Moon's request to be made an honorary Indian—perhaps even the supreme leader of the Sioux. No doubt some on the council considered the request preposterous and beneath their dignity to consider. Certainly Two Moon's offer of \$500.00 and some free cases of medicine did not persuade anyone. The council turned down Two Moon's request, but Spotted Crow remained supportive and encouraged the Chief to try again later.

Sorrentino remained in correspondence with Spotted Crow and they eventually worked out a deal. The council would agree to make Two Moon the Honorary Chief of all the Lakota for a shipment of goods, \$1000.00 in cash and a trip for the entire council to visit Two Moon's laboratory in Connecticut. The day and time of the ceremony were set to coincide with the annual Pine Ridge Rodeo at the beginning of August 1930. Sorrentino then added another incentive for the Council to make Two Moon the Chief of all the Sioux. He had arranged a two month European tour for Two Moon to put any doubts about the Chief's credibility to rest. With a letter of introduction from the Pine Ridge council, Two Moon would become their official representative to all the European heads of state. The culmination of the trip was to be an audience with the Pope who would receive Chief Two Moon on behalf of the Indians. While on

tour, the Chief would demonstrate his wonderful knowledge of medicine to European doctors whose letters of support he would take back with him to Connecticut to counter any claims by the local medical profession that he was a quack. More than ever, Two Moon

realized his entire career rested on his ability to prove himself an Indian and therefore the possessor of medical knowledge beyond that of any regular physician.

Spotted Crow was also looking into the future. He convinced Two Moon to hire him as a representative of the Chief Two Moon Medicine Company at their planned expansion at the Boardwalk in Atlantic City following the European tour. The offer of a real Sioux chief to represent the company in one of the busiest commercial centers of the United States was simply too tempting to resist. The Chief agreed and Spotted Crow along with his wife Lucy and their daughter requested permission to leave Pine Ridge and relocate for a period of six months to work for the Two Moon company. In the meantime, Spotted Crow took care of all the arrangements for the visit of the twenty seven chiefs who had signed the declaration that made Two Moon the 'Chief of all the Sioux.'

In anticipation of the Sioux council's visit to Connecticut, which was set for the following fall of 1931, Two Moon had a special vehicle made to help transport them from the reservation. The Palace De-Luxe Touring Bus was reported to cost \$60,000 and contained everything anyone could want including a kitchen, bathroom, cots and dining area. In addition to this expense, the Chief purchased the old fair grounds in Naugatauk Connecticut known as Beacon Valley. The fairground was vacant, but the site contained several large old buildings and a race track. Meridas set to work to renovating the old buildings into a first class resort with dining facilities, dormitory rooms, a sick room, servant's quarters and the latest in kitchen facilities. The Naugatauk News reported that Meridas was planning a 200 room hotel, but that

seems to have been a bit of local boosterism. What Meridas expected to do with Beacon Valley after the council's visit is not known, but he certainly intended to take extensive advantage of the Indians' visit in terms of positive publicity for his business and in advertising his status as an Indian.

The years 1930 and 1931 were the height of Chief Two Moon's career. His wealth seemed unlimited, his reputation among his patients was secure, he had managed to be declared an Indian if not by the BIA then by an august body of authentic chiefs, and he had an audience with the Pope. But the events of 30-31 also contained the seeds of his undoing. In May of 1932, Two Moon was served with a warrant by the Connecticut state police to surrender evidence related to his medical practice. He was then charged by the state for practicing medicine without a license. The Chief immediately called in his attorney, John Cassidy of Waterbury who sought a demurrer, or delay of the trial which was set for May 16th. Cassidy successfully fought off a trial by jury for over a year by charging that the state statutes defined 'medicine' to mean internal medicine (surgical) and naturopathy as mechanical manipulation of the body.

In the meantime, William Sorrentino and Two Moon had a major fallout over the Papal Audience with Pius XI. According to newspaper accounts and interviews with Sorrentino's daughter in law, Two Moon had worn his full Indian regalia to the Vatican and had similarly dressed his wife Helen in an Indian costume. When asked by the Vatican officials why Mrs. Meridas was being introduced as an Indian 'Princess' when it was well known that there were no monarchical governments among native North American tribes, Two Moon allegedly said that was because they were "Eastern" Indians. At this point in the chicanery, Sorrentino, a good Catholic, said he could not bring himself to 'humbug the Pope' and left the tour. Then in 1932, Sorrentino filed a suit against Two Moon for breach of contract. According to Sorrentino, Two

Moon had promised him \$10,000 for securing the ceremony making Two Moon an Honorary Chief but he had not been paid. He also alleged that Two Moon had promised that he, Sorrentino, would be made an Honorary Chief of the Lakotas. This suit too dragged on through the courts with Two Moon's lawyer calling in witnesses to counter both the medical profession and Sorrentino's claims. At the height of the Sorrentino suit, Cassidy brought in four of the Sioux Council members who swore to the circuit judge that they had never even met William Sorrentino and that he had nothing whatsoever to do with their decision to make Two Moon the Chief of all the Sioux Indians.

The Pine Ridge traditional council chiefs arrived in the fall of 1932 to stay for a month out at Beacon Valley. In spite of the fact that the old men were lodged in the fully renovated hotel complex and cared for by a staff of black servants who cooked and cared for them hand and foot, Two Moon insisted on having several 'authentic' Indian tepees erected on the grounds near the old race track. He then had flyers placed around town and in the newspapers inviting the public out to Beacon Valley to observe the great council of the Sioux which had gathered in Connecticut that year at the invitation of their supreme leader, Two Moon Meridas.

In some ways the timing was perfect as the Chief was able to play down his legal troubles by parading his "Sioux brothers" in and around Waterbury, New York and Philadelphia. The Waterbury Democrat took the entire event in and covered it extensively in their daily columns. On October 20, 1932 the paper reported, "A band of Indians, including the most prominent chiefs of the Sioux nation, were expected to arrive in Waterbury this afternoon . . . after being welcomed by their Supreme leader Chief Two Moon Meridas of this city, they will proceed to the former Beacon Valley fair grounds . . . During their stay here as the guests of Chief Two Moon a tribal council will be held and plans relative to the welfare of the Sioux nation will be

discussed.” Two Moon made the most of the council’s presence and in a rare quotation told the Democrat, “I certainly am glad to be in a position to welcome my people to Waterbury. . . It’s nearly two years since I have seen them as I went to Europe last year as their ambassador.” The paper went on to say that “for years the local chief has paid a visit to the Pine Ridge reservation where he was enthusiastically greeted and a special barbeque was staged in his honor.”¹¹

The twenty six Lakota men together with Lucy Spotted Crow and her daughter made the rounds of Waterbury society events, attending a dinner with the mayor, greeting schoolchildren at local schools and attending mass on Sunday mornings. Out at the fairgrounds, hundreds of curious onlookers went to see the Chief of all the Sioux and his council members carry out the business of the tribe. In terms of spectacle, the visit of the Pine Ridge council to Connecticut was Two Moon’s finest moment.

¹¹*Waterbury Democrat*, October 20, 1931, page 1.

The end of Meridas' career came as a surprise to everyone, himself included. In 1930 during the European tour, the Chief had complained of stomach pain in his side. The pain worsened over the ensuing months to the point that in 1933 he had stopped seeing patients and had taken to his bed. For six months the chief lay in bed in acute pain. He refused to see a doctor, declaring that they had always been out to kill him anyway. At the end of his life, neighbors and the household staff said his cries of agony could be heard from outside the Wales Street house. Chico Colon Meridas, AKA Chief Two Moon died of liver failure on November 2, 1933 at the age of 45 and was buried in Philadelphia two days later.

Helen Meridas and Two Moon's loyal staff were now faced with trying to operate an Indian medicine business without an Indian. It was a dismal failure. The law suits against the Chief were dropped. Spotted Crow returned to Pine Ridge, the venture in Atlantic City being a loss from the start. Debts left over from the renovation of Beacon Valley were called in as were the debts on the laboratory, the cars and most of Two Moon's other assets. Tom Mix, the singing and acting cowboy star, purchased the Palace De-Luxe touring bus. Helen moved the ready stock of bitter oil and herbs from the laboratory to the house on Wales street where she and a family friend Tony Mourante tried to maintain the business through drug store orders. She managed to keep the house, most of their private possessions, including Two Moon's costumes and one grey Lincoln touring car for her own use. Everything else was sold to pay off the Chief's debts.

The story of Two Moons Meridas today reads like a bad novel set in a place we do not recognize. But to the average American living in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the story of his life and career, indeed even the notion of a real Indian living in Connecticut, did not seem at all fantastic. Americans were in love with themselves and their love of everything

American included Indians and Nature—both of which they believed had been fundamental to the development of the country and its culture. Two Moon Meridas, a poor mixed-race son of the streets of New York, was the most American of all. He had the chutzpah to take those two quintessential symbols of American life, Indians and Nature, and fuse them together with another essential element of American society—capitalism. Patent medicine, an entrepreneurial business from its inception, became the intersection between Indians and Nature that was most easily exploited by the new consumerism of the early twentieth century. Even more remarkable is the fact that Two Moon's ideas did not come from reading George Catlin or even Earnest Thompson Seton—Meridas was illiterate. Instead he took his cues from the popular culture of advertising and vaudeville, movies and minstrels. And that is where he remained for the rest of his life in spite of his ability to rub shoulders with society's leading citizens. For historians of the environmental movement of the later twentieth century this early commodification of nature was a wellspring for that movement's late 20th Century use of American Indians as symbols of Nature, environmental stewardship and living close to the land. It may be that the crying Indian, an Indian imposter himself, had roots in the colorful career of Chief Two Moon Meridas of Waterbury Connecticut, America's Greatest Indian in a Bottle.