

## Coldwater: Sacred Site or Military Monument?

By Susu Jeffrey

The National Park Service (NPS) is imposing its vision of Coldwater Springs by recreating the landscape and the history of the place.

"Spring water is sacred," says Anishinabe teacher Dennis Jones. In 2006, the Lower Sioux of Morton declared Coldwater "and the land that surrounds it" to be a Traditional Cultural Property (TCP) and "sacred." NPS limits TCP designation to that one Dakota tribe, not all Dakota.

Collecting water at Coldwater is a humbling experience. You want to fill your jug at the precise place where the water exits out of bedrock. First, leave an offering, then bend over double, and just below your feet feel the water gushing out.

About three feet down, inside the springhouse, 70,000 gallons of spring water a day miraculously pour forth. Native people insist that the water be gathered from bedrock, not from a pipe. Coldwater Creek rushes down the Mississippi Gorge a quarter mile, tumbles over a waterfall and empties into the Mississippi where the bedrock is 451 million years old.

### White History Only

Local NPS staff does not want people inside the springhouse, does not want people to drink Coldwater, and does not recognize Coldwater as a sacred Native American site. "There is scant evidence that Coldwater Spring was a significant ceremonial site to the Dakota," declares one NPS website. Only one hand-held container at a time can be filled at Coldwater. "To protect the public's safety, the National Park Service has sealed off the springhouse interior," NPS announced foregoing a three-step stair to the spring water source, the last natural spring in Hennepin County. The NPS version of history at this 10,000-year-old spring begins in 1820 with U.S. soldiers' occupation of the area. Coldwater furnished water to Fort Snelling from 1820 to 1920. In the 1880s, with the post-Civil War economic recovery, a waterworks complex was built including the springhouse, reservoir-pond, pump house, fuel storage, water tanks and engineer's house. Nothing of the military-industrial waterworks is left except the ruins of the limestone springhouse and reservoir. From 1950 to 1991 the Bureau of Mines conducted mining research on the fenced campus in the expansive Post-World War II era that fueled the great middle class. (We haven't won a war since, so no peace dividends.)

### Before Soldiers Drank Coldwater

Coldwater was part of the Louisiana Purchase (1803), which France sold to pay for Napoleon's wars. NPS secured \$3 million to restore Coldwater to pre-contact

parkland as part of the Fort Snelling district, a National Historic Landmark. There is a contradiction in fixing up a military ruin in order to restore the land to a time before the military existed. NPS razed the old mining research campus; Coldwater supporters were thankful. However, NPS then clear-cut the area around the spring, de-vegetated and re-contoured the land with tons and tons of dirt fill, and planted 200 new trees in the fall of this drought year. The land isn't restored to a natural state. It is a manmade construction, a McPark, featuring vistas but without 9,000 years of Native American history. We don't know if Indian people were at Coldwater, "because they didn't write down their stories," John Anfinson, NPS chief of natural and cultural resources, told a Coldwater tour group in November 2011.



The springhouse at Coldwater with mallard ducks at the reservoir in the foreground. The crossed tree trunks in the background are of the "Spirit Tree," where offerings were left; it was cut down, as were all the original trees in the area.

Photo: Susu Jeffery

Yet evidence has been found of indigenous people going back thousands of years all over the region. A 14,000-year-old Paleo-Indian village site was found in Walker, Minnesota, near Leech Lake in a glacial gravel deposit. A 9,000-year-old burial with Clovis and Folsom spear points was uncovered at Browns Valley on the Continental Divide in western Minnesota between Lake Traverse and Big Stone Lake. The burial indicates a village population with ceremonial funeral rites. Nine thousand years ago a giant bison mired in the backwaters of the Mississippi-Minnesota confluence was brought down by Paleo-Indian spear-throwers. State archaeologist Robert Clouse identified a stone fragment uncovered in Mendota as part of a five-inch bison spear point.

The hard-stone spear point was mined upstream on the Minnesota River about 75 river miles near Mankato. Clouse thought the distance represented the people's annual migration, not trade. Bison then were twice the size of today's buffalo and Coldwater Springs had been flowing for more than a thousand years.

Between Paleo-Indian big game hunters in Minnesota and 17th century Dakota, Anishinabe, and Ho Chunk peoples who dealt with French traders, a series of increasingly sophisticated cultures resided here. We do not know the names they called themselves, but they left a trail of their civilizations—consider the development of corn. “The world's greatest farmers and pharmacists,” Jack Weatherford calls indigenous Americans.

Spring water is universally considered healing, “the first medicine.” It is considered sacred in traditional American cultures, and is especially associated with women in the Americas, Africa and pre-Christian Europe. The Minnesota State Historical Society supports the Dakota claim that Coldwater is a Traditional Cultural Property. Before the army came to the spring it was good water. With the U.S. occupation Coldwater became property.

A petition supporting Dakota rights at Coldwater, a slide show, and a half-hour radio documentary produced at KFAI-FM can be accessed at:  
[www.FriendsofColdwater.org](http://www.FriendsofColdwater.org).

Susu Jeffrey is a longtime WAMM member and has been involved since the Seneca antinuclear camp. She is the founder of Friends of Coldwater which, she says, "captured me by the heart" in 1995.