

<b>Title: OFFICIAL LEGENDS FOR THE CITY'S NAME</b>		<b>Number: 0002</b>
<b>Reference:</b>	<b>Adopted by City Council:</b> February 18, 1985	<b>Supersedes:</b>
<b>Prepared by:</b> FINANCE & ADMINISTRATION DEPARTMENT		

## STATEMENT

ALTHOUGH MANY STORIES/LEGENDS EXIST OF HOW MEDICINE HAT WAS NAMED, THE LEGEND OF SAAMIS, RECORDED BY JAMES F. SANDERSON (1848-1902), AND THE LEGEND OF THE DAY THE MEDICINE MAN LOST HIS HAT, SHALL BE ADOPTED AS THE OFFICIAL EXPLANATIONS OF THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME OF THE CITY.

## PURPOSE

To provide an official and uniform explanation of the two generally accepted alternatives for the origin of the name: MEDICINE HAT.

THE LEGEND OF THE SAAMIS  
by  
JAMES FRANCIS SANDERSON  
(incorporating minor editing changes)

There is a certain part of the South Saskatchewan River, (between what is now Police Point and Strathcona Park in Medicine Hat), on which, even during the most severe winters, no ice forms. This opening in the river is regarded with great interest by the Indians, as it is believed to be the breathing place of the Great Spirit who lives in the river and who, when he shows himself, assumes the form of a serpent.

Far back in Indian tradition, it is said that one of a hunting party of Blood Indians was sent forward to reconnoiter the country and see if buffalo were to be met with in any numbers. He was accompanied by his newly-married wife and a favourite dog, the latter bearing the travois - a crosspole arrangement to which the dog was harnessed - for the purpose of carrying some share of the traveling outfit.

One evening, the Indian camped by the river side and, as he was walking along near the opening in the river referred to, the serpent appeared to him and told him that if he would throw the dead body of his wife into the opening, he would become a great warrior and medicine man. The Indian returned to his tepee and repeated to his wife the words of the serpent. His wife at once expressed her willingness to die for the good of the tribe and in obedience to the call of the Great Spirit. Her husband, however, was reluctant and instead of his wife killed the dog. Carrying its carcass to the opening, he threw it in with the request that the Spirit might be pleased to accept from him his dog as a substitute for his wife. The Spirit refused to accept, and declared that, unless the Indian would sacrifice his wife, he could do nothing for him. The man returned and informed his wife accordingly, and she again expressed her willingness to comply with the demand.

Finally, she was sacrificed and her dead body given to the Spirit, who then directed the man to stay all night on the island near by, to rise early next morning, and, as the sun rose, to proceed towards the cutbanks lying to the east. At the base of one of the cutbanks he would find a bag containing medicines and a "Saamis" or "Holy Bohnet" which was a hat trimmed with ermine. He was instructed to bring back the medicine bag and the hat with him to the Spirit who would explain the purpose of the hat and the power and effectiveness of the medicines. The hat, he was told, was to be worn only in war, and would ensure victory to the wearer. The tradition has it that the Indian became famous as a medicine man and warrior.

And so, the first medicine hat, which through the centuries was to become a symbol of leadership, prowess and mysticism on the western plains, came into existence on the site of the city which was destined to perpetuate in its name this ancient Indian legend.

## THE DAY THE MEDICINE MAN LOST HIS HAT

Many years ago, so the story goes, there was a great battle between the Cree and Blackfoot on the bank of a southern Alberta river. The Cree fought valiantly until their medicine man deserted them . . . losing his headdress in mid-stream as he fled to the safety of the opposite shore.

Believing this to be a bad omen the Cree put down their weapons and were massacred by the Blackfoot. The site of this tragedy was called “SAAMIS”, an Indian word, meaning “medicine man’s hat”.

Years later, in 1882, when the Royal Northwest Mounted Police and the C.P.R. road builders settled the area, the Indian name was translated and shortened to Medicine Hat.