THE BEDFORD SERIES IN HISTORY AND CULTURE

Our Hearts Fell to the Ground

Plains Indian Views of How the West Was Lost

Edited with an Introduction by

Colin G. Calloway

Dartmouth College

BEDFORD BOOKS *of* ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

Boston New York

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Killing the Dream

Killing Sitting Bull did not stop trouble on the Sioux reservations; instead, it proved to be only a prelude to greater tragedy. Two weeks later, amid continuing tensions occasioned by the spread of the Ghost Dance religion, soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry slaughtered some two hundred Miniconjou people at Wounded Knee. The event marked the end of the armed conflict between Plains Indians and the United States Army and came to symbolize the end of a way of life.

Around 1889 a Paiute Indian named Wovoka, known to whites as Jack Wilson, had a visionary experience. He began to preach a new religion that promised a return to former times when buffalo were plenty and no whites existed in North America. In anticipation of the end of the present world, Wovoka taught his followers to live in harmony and to perform a ritual circle dance that would hasten the coming of the new age (Figure 27). Among some tribes the dance involved falling into a trance-like state. The Ghost Dance spread rapidly across the plains, taking hold among the Lakotas, the Cheyennes, and the Arapahos. "The people were hungry and in despair, and many believed in the good new world that was coming," said Black Elk.[1] The promise of a rejuvenated world had tremendous appeal to people who looked about them and saw poverty, chaos, and confusion. Believing that the buffalo had originated within the earth and had been driven back there by white men, many Indians believed that the buffalo could be induced to return by practicing the proper ceremonies. For the Lakotas, the Ghost Dance was a means of renewing their world through ritual and a spiritual response to their ills, but whites interpreted the Indians' "frenzied" dancing as a sign of impending war. As it had done with the Sun Dance and other religious ceremonies, the government moved to suppress the Ghost Dance. "The white people made war on the Lakotas to keep them from practicing their religion," said Short Bull, one of the Lakota religious leaders. Ultimately, a movement that began with a vision of a new world of peace and harmony ended in carnage at Wounded Knee.[2]

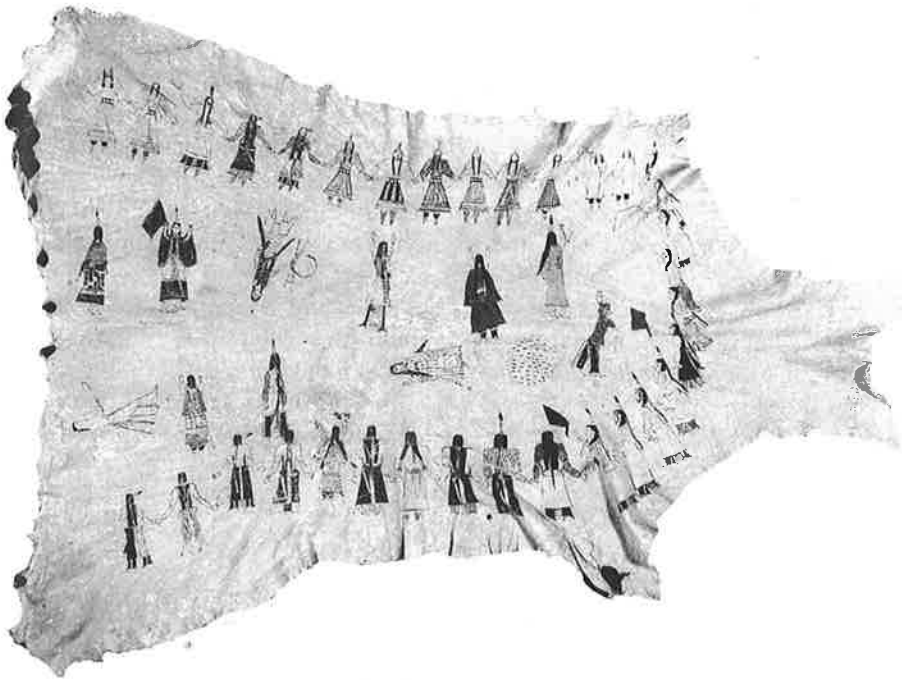

Figure 27. The Ghost Dance
Yellow Nose, a Ute artist living among the Cheyennes, produced the hide painting of the Ghost Dance for James Mooney in 1891. A circle of dancers surrounds a group of figures. Cheyenne women (with braided hair) and Arapaho women (with loose hair) participate; two women carry babies on their backs. Several dancers wear belts decorated with disks of German silver; others wave handkerchiefs, and some, lying on the ground at the center, have fallen into a trance. A woman at lower center holds a stuffed crow; a man at left holds a shinny stick; another holds a hoop. One woman at the upper right has raised her arms in trance and dropped her spotted shawl. A medicine man at the far right extends his arms, helping a dancer to achieve a trance.[3]

THE MESSIAH'S LETTER

As news of Wovoka's teachings spread in 1889–90, delegates from northern plains tribes traveled to see and hear the messiah. On their return, they related their experiences and conveyed the message they received to their own people.[4] The anthropologist James Mooney recorded some of these accounts in a report on the Ghost Dance religion that he prepared for the

government in 1891–92, but he also included what he described as "the genuine official statement of the Ghost-dance doctrine as given by the messiah himself to his disciples." What follows is a statement delivered by Wovoka to the Cheyenne and Arapaho delegates. The message was written down "in broken English" by Casper Edson, a young Arapaho who had attended the Carlisle Indian School. The daughter of Black Short Nose, one of the Cheyenne delegates, wrote out another version in somewhat better English and tried, unsuccessfully, to erase the clause about concealing the message from whites. Black Short Nose gave the message to Mooney in 1891 because "the Cheyenne and Arapaho were now convinced that I would tell the truth about their religion . . . and they were anxious to have the whites know it was all good and contained nothing bad or hostile." Mooney reproduced both the original Cheyenne and Arapaho versions and the following "translation for the benefit of those not accustomed to Carlisle English."[5]

WOVOKA

Message to the Cheyennes and Arapahos

ca. 1890

When you get home you must make a dance to continue five days. Dance four successive nights, and the last night keep up the dance until the morning of the fifth day, when all must bathe in the river and then disperse to their homes. You must all do in the same way.

I, Jack Wilson, love you all, and my heart is full of gladness for the gifts you have brought me. When you get home I shall give you a good cloud [rain?] which will make you feel good. I give you a good spirit and give you all good paint. I want you to come again in three months, some from each tribe there [the Indian Territory].

There will be a good deal of snow this year and some rain. In the fall there will be such a rain as I have never given you before.

James Mooney, "The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890," *14th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1892–93*, part 2 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1896), 781.

Grandfather [a universal title of reverence among Indians and here meaning the messiah] says, when your friends die you must not cry. You must not hurt anybody or do harm to anyone. You must not fight. Do right always. It will give you satisfaction in life. This young man has a good father and mother. [Possibly this refers to Casper Edson, the young Arapaho who wrote down this message of Wovoka for the delegation].

Do not tell the white people about this. Jesus is now upon the earth. He appears like a cloud. The dead are all alive again. I do not know when they will be here; maybe this fall or in the spring. When the time comes there will be no more sickness and everyone will be young again.

Do not refuse to work for the whites and do not make any trouble with them until you leave them. When the earth shakes [at the coming of the new world] do not be afraid. It will not hurt you.

I want you to dance every six weeks. Make a feast at the dance and have food that everybody may eat. Then bathe in the water. That is all. You will receive good words again from me some time. Do not tell lies.

"SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAPPENED."

As Wovoka's pacifist message reached the Sioux reservations it appeared to the whites to assume a militant twist: Dancers began to wear "ghost shirts," which they believed would render them invulnerable to the white man's bullets, and they expressed growing defiance of the authorities. The dancing unnerved Indian agents and Army officers. Lakotas on Pine Ridge ignored the orders to stop dancing issued by their agent, Daniel Royer. Black Elk recalled that "we got more lies than cattle, and we could not eat lies. When the agent told the people to quit dancing, their hearts were bad."[6] They ridiculed Royer as Young Man Afraid of Indians.[7] Taking steps to quell the uprising before it started, General Nelson Miles concentrated some five thousand troops in western South Dakota. The Seventh Cavalry went to round up Big Foot and some 350 Miniconjous who had left the Cheyenne River reservation. Sick with pneumonia, Big Foot offered no trouble when the cavalry found him and he agreed to accompany the soldiers to their camp in the valley of Wounded Knee Creek. There, on the morning of December 29, with soldiers and hotchkiss guns surrounding the Indian tepees, Colonel James Forsyth ordered Big Foot's band disarmed. Tempers flared, a shot rang out, and the soldiers opened fire. The mêlée degenerated into a massacre. Some two hundred people died, many freezing to death in a blizzard that hit the area that night.

Charles Eastman, who had been educated at Dartmouth College and Boston University, was working as a doctor on Pine Ridge at the time. He tended the wounded but "lost the greater part of them." "Fully three miles from the scene of the massacre we found the body of a woman completely covered with a blanket of snow," he wrote, "and from this point on we found them scattered along as they had been relentlessly hunted down and slaughtered while fleeing for their lives." Most of the dead were old men, women, and children. "It took all of my nerve to keep my composure in the face of this spectacle," said Eastman; it was "a severe ordeal for one who had so lately put all his faith in the Christian love and lofty ideals of the white man."[8] Others who had embraced "civilization" experienced similar revulsion and questioning when they saw dead babies clinging to their dead mothers' breasts: An Indian called American Horse told Mooney, "I stood very loyal to the government all through these troublesome days," but felt "a very great blame on my heart."[9]

The Oglala holy man Black Elk, a young man at the time, responded to the massacre with fury. In his old age he reflected on how much more had ended at Wounded Knee.

BLACK ELK

Massacre at Wounded Knee

1890

It was now near the end of the Moon of Popping Trees, and I was twenty-seven years old (December, 1890). We heard that Big Foot was coming down from the Badlands with nearly four hundred people. Some of these were from Sitting Bull's band. They had run away when Sitting Bull was killed, and joined Big Foot on Good River. There were only about a hundred warriors in this band, and all the others were women and children and some old men. They were all starving and freezing, and Big Foot was so sick that they had to bring him along in a pony drag. They had all run away to hide in the Badlands, and they were coming in now because they were starving and freezing. When they crossed Smoky

John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988 ed.), 253–62, 270.

Earth River, they followed up Medicine Root Creek to its head. Soldiers were over there looking for them. The soldiers had everything and were not freezing and starving. Near Porcupine Butte the soldiers came up to the Big Foots, and they surrendered and went along with the soldiers to Wounded Knee Creek where the Brenan store is now.

It was in the evening when we heard that the Big Foots were camped over there with the soldiers, about fifteen miles by the old road from where we were. It was the next morning (December 29, 1890) that something terrible happened.

That evening before it happened, I went in to Pine Ridge and heard these things, and while I was there, soldiers started for where the Big Foots were. These made about five hundred soldiers that were there next morning. When I saw them starting I felt that something terrible was going to happen. That night I could hardly sleep at all. I walked around most of the night.

In the morning I went out after my horses, and while I was out I heard shooting off toward the east, and I knew from the sound that it must be wagon-guns (cannon) going off. The sounds went right through my body, and I felt that something terrible would happen. . . .

[Black Elk and his companions rode toward the sound of the shooting.]

In a little while we had come to the top of the ridge where, looking to the east, you can see for the first time the monument and the burying ground on the little hill where the church is. That is where the terrible thing started. Just south of the burying ground on the little hill a deep dry gluch runs about east and west, very crooked, and it rises westward to nearly the top of the ridge where we were. It had no name, but the Wasichus sometimes call it Battle Creek now. We stopped on the ridge not far from the head of the dry gulch. Wagon guns were still going off over there on the little hill, and they were going off again where they hit along the gulch. There was much shooting down yonder, and there were many cries, and we could see cavalrymen scattered over the hills ahead of us. Cavalrymen were riding along the gulch and shooting into it, where the women and children were running away and trying to hide in the gullies and the stunted pines. . . .

By now many other Lakotas, who had heard the shooting, were coming up from Pine Ridge, and we all charged on the soldiers. They ran eastward toward where the trouble began. We followed down along the dry gulch, and what we saw was terrible. Dead and wounded women and children and little babies were scattered all along there where they had

been trying to run away. The soldiers had followed along the gulch, as they ran, and murdered them in there. Sometimes they were in heaps because they had huddled together, and some were scattered all along. Sometimes bunches of them had been killed and torn to pieces where the wagon guns hit them. I saw a little baby trying to suck its mother, but she was bloody and dead.

There were two little boys at one place in this gulch. They had guns and they had been killing soldiers all by themselves. We could see the soldiers they had killed. The boys were all alone there, and they were not hurt. These were very brave little boys.

When we drove the soldiers back, they dug themselves in, and we were not enough people to drive them out from there. In the evening they marched off up Wounded Knee Creek, and then we saw all that they had done there.

Men and women and children were heaped and scattered all over the flat at the bottom of the little hill where the soldiers had their wagon-guns, and westward up the dry gulch all the way to the high ridge, the dead women and children and babies were scattered.

When I saw this I wished that I had died too, but I was not sorry for the women and children. It was better for them to be happy in the other world, and I wanted to be there too. But before I went there I wanted to have revenge. I thought there might be a day, and we should have revenge.

After the soldiers marched away, I heard from my friend, Dog Chief, how the trouble started, and he was right there by Yellow Bird when it happened. This is the way it was:

In the morning the soldiers began to take all the guns away from the Big Foots, who were camped in the flat below the little hill where the monument and burying ground are now. The people had stacked most of their guns, and even their knives, by the tepee where Big Foot was lying sick. Soldiers were on the little hill and all around, and there were soldiers across the dry gulch to the south and over east along Wounded Knee Creek too. The people were nearly surrounded, and the wagon-guns were pointing at them.

Some had not yet given up their guns, and so the soldiers were searching all the tepees, throwing things around and poking into everything. There was a man called Yellow Bird, and he and another man were standing in front of the tepee where Big Foot was lying sick. They had white sheets around and over them, with eyeholes to look through, and they had guns under these. An officer came to search them. He took the other man's gun, and then started to take Yellow Bird's. But Yellow Bird would not let

go. He wrestled with the officer, and while they were wrestling, the gun went off and killed the officer. Wasichus and some others have said he meant to do this, but Dog Chief was standing right there, and he told me it was not so. As soon as the gun went off, Dog Chief told me, an officer shot and killed Big Foot who was lying sick inside the tepee.

Then suddenly nobody knew what was happening, except that the soldiers were all shooting and the wagon-guns began going off right in among the people.

Many were shot down right there. The women and children ran into the gulch and up west, dropping all the time, for the soldiers shot them as they ran. There were only about a hundred warriors and there were nearly five hundred soldiers. The warriors rushed to where they had piled their guns and knives. They fought soldiers with only their hands until they got their guns.

Dog Chief saw Yellow Bird run into a tepee with his gun, and from there he killed soldiers until the tepee caught fire. Then he died full of bullets.

It was a good winter day when all this happened. The sun was shining. But after the soldiers marched away from their dirty work, a heavy snow began to fall. The wind came up in the night. There was a big blizzard, and it grew very cold. The snow drifted deep in the crooked gulch, and it was one long grave of butchered women and children and babies, who had never done any harm and were only trying to run away. . . .

[Black Elk and other warriors wanted to fight the soldiers, but Red Cloud persuaded them to think of the women and children and submit.]

And so it was all over.

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.

And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth, — you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.

NOTES

[1] John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988 ed.), 249.

[2]The classic study of the movement, conducted immediately after the Wounded Knee massacre, is James Mooney, "The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890," *14th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1892–93*, part 2 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1896). See also Raymond J. DeMallie, "The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account," *Pacific Historical Review* 51 (1982), 385–405. Short Bull's quote is from James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 141.

[3]Evan M. Maurer, et al., *Visions of the People: A Pictorial History of Plains Indian Life* (Minneapolis: Institute of Arts, 1992), 168.

[4]See, for example, "Porcupine's Account of the Messiah," in Mooney, "The Ghost-Dance Religion," 793–96; One Bull's account in James McLaughlin, *My Friend the Indian* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 185–89.

[5]Mooney, "The Ghost-Dance Religion," 780.

[6]Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 249.

[7]Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846–1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 254.

[8]Charles Eastman, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization: Chapters in the Autobiography of an Indian* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977 ed.), 110–14.

[9]Mooney, "The Ghost-Dance Religion," 886.

Epilogue

The conquest of the American West left Indian people with a bitter legacy: searching for a place and a purpose in the new world. But some Indian people maintain that the West never really was lost. Pointing to their ancient presence in this country, they remind us that the history of the United States is relatively brief and suggest that Indian peoples can outlast the United States just as they outlasted other periods of hardship and misfortune.

Indian peoples survived the policies of forced acculturation that were supposed to eradicate Indian cultures and values. Ironically, in some ways forced assimilation brought Indian people closer together as boarding schools and compulsory education in the English language gave Indian students a common experience and a common means of communication. In the early twentieth century, a new generation of Indians, schooled in the white men's ways, took the first steps toward pan-Indian unity and founded the Society of American Indians in 1911. "Red Progressives" such as Charles Eastman, the Sioux writer Gertrude Bonin, Henry Standing Bear, and the Reverend Sherman Coolidge, an Arapaho Episcopalian who had been raised by an Army captain and lived many years in New York City, sometimes disagreed on strategy and on what was an acceptable measure of acculturation, but they worked to improve the conditions of all Indian people.

Plains Indians endured continuing acculturation policies in the twentieth century. Some benefited from John Collier's "Indian New Deal" in the 1930s, although the new styles of tribal government established under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 created problems and aggravated divisions on some reservations.[1] After World War II, in which Indians fought, the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s turned again to dismantling tribal governments and cultures in an effort to assimilate Indians into American society. Many tribes were targeted for termination. Individuals and families were encouraged to leave the reservations and move to the cities, where government policymakers hoped they would be swallowed up by mainstream America. However, city life produced