



*American Horse (1840-1908)*

## *Dakota Images*

American Horse, an Oglala chief, was born in the spring of 1840. He succeeded his father, Sitting Bear, as leader of the True Band of Oglalas and was an important chief in the councils of Red Cloud in the late 1860s and 1870s. After 1876, American Horse began to use his influence to calm tensions and help his people adjust to reservation life.

During the 1880s, American Horse's progressive attitudes led him to urge his followers to cooperate and avoid confrontation with reservation officials. As a result of his cooperation, so different from Red Cloud's more obstructionist policies, various officials tried to have American Horse appointed chief of all or a larger part of the Oglala. These attempts were unsuccessful. When American Horse's trust in government representatives resulted in his signing the agreement of 1889, the resulting broken promises and disaffection of the tribes lessened his influence among the Oglala for a time. After the tragedy of Wounded Knee and the continuing unresponsiveness of Washington officials, American Horse, long a friend of the whites, became disillusioned. On his 1891 and 1897 trips to Washington, D.C., the aging chief pleaded with officials to keep their promises.

American Horse is probably best known for his masterful oratory. He was a witty and eloquent speaker, who was not afraid to speak out even when threatened with violence by those who opposed him. His performance before the 1889 Crook Commission, when his mastery dominated the conference for three days, is legendary. During the troubled months before Wounded Knee, his ability to influence people through the strength and sincerity of his words enabled him to defuse a dangerous confrontation between Ghost Dancers and Sioux policeman. His speaking ability and his leadership position among the Oglala resulted in his accompanying or leading numerous delegations to Washington from 1875 to 1897.

American Horse died on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation on 16 December 1908.

(Another and older Oglala who died as a result of the Battle of Slim Buttes in 1876 also bore the name American Horse. He belonged to the Old Smoke Band and was apparently not related to American Horse of the True Band.)

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