The Lakota Ghost Dance after 1890

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The demise of the Lakota Ghost Dance at Wounded Knee Creek has emerged as an enduring historical tradition. Royal Hassrick, in his classic work *The Sioux*, provided verification for this theme, even linking it to contemporary Lakota problems. He observed that “the dream” offered by the Ghost Dance “was destroyed by the massacre at Wounded Knee at the hands of United States Artillery. Since that disaster, the Sioux have never recovered.” Robert Utley concurred, concluding in his acclaimed treatise *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* that, among the Lakota, “the Ghost Dance Religion had been dealt a shattering blow.” In spite of these assessments, however, the Ghost Dance was not totally suppressed nor discredited, and evidence suggests that Pine Ridge and Rosebud tribesmen continued the Ghost Dance despite Wounded Knee, just as tribesmen from other reservations did. In the end, the Ghost Dance became a part of the enduring religious heritage of the Lakota.

The fact that the Ghost Dance continued among other tribes has long been acknowledged. James Mooney, while conducting research for his classic study of the Ghost Dance, interviewed participants and observed and photographed Southern Arapahoe and Southern Cheyenne Ghost Dances in 1892 and 1893. Frank White, a Pawnee from Indian Territory, danced with Comanche and Wichita believers and brought the Ghost Dance home in late summer of 1891. The

Pawnee then danced for over a decade, with adherents traveling to Walker Lake reservation in 1904 to receive additional instruction from Jack Wilson, or Wovoka, the Paiute prophet. Likewise, the Bannock and Shoshone populations of the Fort Hall and Lemhi reservations danced continuously until 1901.⁸

Even though they are inextricably bound by historical fate, the massacre at Wounded Knee and the Lakota Ghost Dance are distinct and separate entities. Wounded Knee was a senseless tragedy. The Ghost Dance was a philosophical expression of the Lakota world view that preceded and survived the events of 29 December 1890.⁴ Discovering traces of the ongoing Lakota Ghost Dance and associated rituals soon after Wounded Knee, however, is difficult. One immediate consequence of the event was a reduction in the number of visible dancers. The Lakota, exercising caution in their scheduling of Ghost Dance rituals, were less free with information, making it difficult to determine the extent and number of dancers. Army officers, briefly assigned as agency superintendents in the wake of military activity, watched Lakota activities carefully, hoping to prevent future troubles. As an extra precaution, Maj. Gen. Nelson A. Miles had ordered Ghost Dance leaders to federal prison "for at least six months" in order to "avoid their giving any trouble in the spring."⁵ Kicking Bear and Short Bull, along with over twenty others, were sent first to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and then to Europe with a Wild West show.⁶ In spite of the temporary loss of its strongest leaders, the Lakota Ghost Dance survived the fact that the millennium failed to come the following spring.

One of the fundamental elements of the Ghost Dance religion was the belief that the ghosts of dead tribesmen would be "driving


Following the conflict at Wounded Knee, government officials imprisoned Short Bull, left, and Kicking Bear, right, who had introduced the Ghost Dance to South Dakota's Indian reservations.

back with them as they return immense herds of buffalo.”7 The reviving of the bison epitomized the promise of the Ghost Dance faith, in which the prerreservation lifeways would be restored, the dead would rejoin the living, and the white race would be destroyed for its sins. Big Road, an Oglala from the Wounded Knee Creek area, had informed Special Agent A. T. Lea in November 1890 that the dancers were going on a spring hunt because the buffalo would soon return. The Lakota therefore had to collect arms and ammunition, demonstrating that they were prepared. Agent Lea, however, interpreted the arms collection another way. “They say they are going on a big hunt,” he reported to his superiors, “as soon as the grass comes next spring, and that means war path.”8

8. Lea to James Cooper, n. d., enclosed in James Cooper to Acting Commissioner R. V. Belt, 22 Nov. 1890, Letters Received, Special Case 188, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (this set of records is hereafter cited LR, SC 188, RG 75, NA).
The events at Wounded Knee did not deter believers from continuing to collect weapons as an act of faith in the return of the buffalo. Procuring arms became more difficult after December 1890, however, because the United States soldiers systematically disarmed reservation residents to prevent any further problems. For believers, this prohibition on firearms coincided with a Ghost Dance teaching that the Lakota should discard the things of the white man in preparation for the return of the old lifeways. In April 1891, Medicine Root District Farmer W. C. Smoot observed Oglalas manufacturing "war clubs and heavy bows and arrows." Special Agent Lea also witnessed several members of No Water's band at White Clay Creek, an important Ghost Dance location, making bows and arrows in April 1891. This group also kept their children from school and refused to wear "civilized" clothes. The ongoing arms manufacturing led Special Agent James Cooper to remark, "Many on this reservation, mixed bloods, squaw-men and others predict that when the grass comes in the spring more trouble may be looked for." As they had in the fall of 1890, nonbelievers again misinterpreted Lakota arms collection as an act of potential aggression.

In the fall of 1891, Pine Ridge Agent Charles Penny reported that Ghost Dancers requested passes to hunt in the western mountains to seek knowledge of the return of the buffalo and the Messiah. Along with arms collection, the requests for hunting passes provided additional clues that some Lakota continued to believe in the promises of the Ghost Dance religion at both Pine Ridge and Rosebud. Earlier that spring, army officers had also gained evidence of continued ritual activity when Louis Minard, an interpreter at Rosebud, purchased a letter for one hundred dollars. Bad Water in Rump (or Good Boy) from Pine Ridge wrote White Back (or Spike) at Rosebud in late March, informing him that some Pine Ridge people were dancing and receiving visions:

My brother, I will write you this day. Lately we received letter from Spaniard (Mexican) and Cheyenne (Indian) also. The Cheyenne (Indian) written to Red Cloud (Chief) saying that Spaniard
(Mexicans) will come to Black Hills this summer. They say all the Indian Nation will come to Black Hills and the Indians on Missouri River also, will come to Black Hills, and he told me, make plenty arrows. And now I will tell another thing; lately there is a man died and come to life again and he say he has been to Indian Nation of Ghosts (the ghosts of dead Indians) and tells us: dead Indian Nation (Ghosts) all coming home. The Indian Ghost tell him, come after his War Bonnet; the Indian (not Ghost Indian) gave him his War Bonnet and he died again. He tells us be prepared every day before he died again. This man is Ogalalla man—that is the one who makes the prediction.¹⁴

Prompted in part by this letter, Capt. Jesse M. Lee, Ninth United States Infantry and temporary agent at Rosebud, conducted an investigation. Lee, who had served as Rosebud agent during the troubled year of 1877, was an individual whom the Rosebud people trusted. In mid-April, having obtained information from tribal informants, he reported:

it is clearly established beyond all doubt that the making of Ghost Shirts and engaging in the ghost dance has begun on a small scale among some of the Brûles. These things have been conducted so secretly, that it required some time to get at all the facts. I have used the secret service Scouts, and other means, independently of each other, and their statements are so fully corroborative in all material facts that there is no longer any doubt: About a month ago, it was rumored that High Hawks sister (wife of “Our Butte”) was engaged in making Ghost Shirts or dresses for even women & children. This was denied by High Hawk but subsequent investigation and recent facts now convince me that: the report was true. This family lives in a small lodge camp about 5 miles west of agency. About three weeks ago it was also rumored that a young man, (not more than 20 years old) son of “Little Thunder,” had received a revelation to

¹⁴. Bad Water in Rump to White Back, 30 Mar. 1891 (copy of translation), enclosed in Capt. Jesse M. Lee to Asst. Adjutant General, 20 Apr. 1891, 7015 PRD 1891, filed with 5412 PRD 1890, RG 94, NA. Lee gave this description of how he came to possess the letter: “‘White Back or Spike’ sold it to Thomas Thompson for 25 cents. Louis Minard (my personal interpreter) gave Thompson $100 to get it. The Indian Agent, Mr. Wright, has the original to make another translation from it. My opinion is, if White Back (Spike) was a believer in this foolishness, he would not have sold the letter for 25 cents.”
renew the Ghost dance. He and his father were advised by “High Pipe” not to renew it, as the Indians had had enough trouble, and did not want any more—though the advice may have been heeded at first it was not adhered to. “Little Thunder” and family live at “Black Moons” place on Cut Meat Creek about 14 miles west of Agency. “Black Moons” is uncle to “Little Thunder” and is something of a medicine man himself. They and “High Hawks” people are said to be related and all in sympathy in the Ghost dance superstition. Last night I received information from reliable source, which I give substantially as related by the party: “On Monday (April 13) I went to Black Moons place—at night—saw nothing suspicious, went away several miles and saw other Indians. Heard them say that Indians at “Black Moons” had danced
Ghost dance on two days, about Friday and Saturday (10th & 11th April). Indian woman objected to “Little Thunder” getting wood on her husband’s intended claim, he said, it made no difference as they would not need the wood after this spring (meaning that something serious would happen).

Saw Indian who had a short time ago traded eagle feathers to “Black Moon” to trim Ghost shirts with—Black Moon said they had already made 19 Ghost shirts. I then went back to Black Moons house—saw the medicine pole outside—where they had been having Ghost dance—saw two bundles hanging up in house—must have been Ghost Shirts. “Little Thunder” and two young men came in—I talked with “Little Thunder” about getting Ghost Shirt for myself. He said there are two shirts—one was made for a woman and one has just been finished for myself. “Little Thunder” said also that his son had gone into trances thirty odd times: had seen Christ seven times—last three times Christ was reaching out towards him, and told him another world is coming soon. His son when in a trance could see “Short Bull” who was in prison far off. “Little Thunder” said when his son told them all these things they got their courage up and went out and had a Ghost dance. He told me to bring some muslin and get some paint (they were out of paint) and they would make a Ghost shirt for me.

I told “Little Thunder” he ought to be careful about this business. He said it made no difference, he was not afraid. He was prepared for whatever might happen. They trim the Ghost shirts with bits of eagle feathers and they believe that if they get killed these feathers become wings which take the spirit to a happy world.” . . . Another one of the Secret Service Scouts was out in these same places at same time and his statement corroborates much of the foregoing, and is as follows: “High Hawk said his sister was making Ghost shirts,—he had advised the young men not to enlist as soldiers to go off the reservation. He advised them all to get guns who could. He said the agent wanted them to scatter out and get to farming. Their ponies were so poor and so few they could not do anything—they needed help in building houses and making ground. If they got no assistance it would be all right. I went to “Black Moon” and “Little Thunders” place. I convinced them that I believed with them. They had a ghost dance there Monday night. I danced with them. Black Moon told me that American Horse had said that it was best not to have any Ghost dances here. That they should get settled down and carry out all the wishes of the Government. That the Ghost dance
feeling was strong at Pine Ridge, but those here ought to have nothing more to do with it."^15

Several days after Lee filed his report, Special Agent A. T. Lea forwarded confirmation that the Ghost Dance was being performed at Pine Ridge. Corroborating the information in Bad Water in Rump's letter, Lea reported that members of No Water's White Clay Creek band were dancing and making bows and arrows.^16 Superintendent of Indian Schools Daniel Dorchester also viewed several Pine Ridge Ghost Dances during his 1891 spring inspection. He disclosed that the Fourth of July 1891 was now set as the upper limit of the millennium and that some tribesmen were "watching from the tops of the hills in the expectation that when the Messiah comes the hills and mountains will move." He added, "If He does not come before that time, they will give up the idea altogether [sic]."^17

July fourth 1891 passed, and the dancers' faith remained, contrary to Dorchester's prediction. In the fall of that year, Pine Ridge agent Charles Penny announced that the "ultra-conservative" Oglalas (non-Christians) were building "sweat houses" for their Ghost Dances and were dancing "at night, in secluded and retired places." The dancers also requested off-reservation passes to hunt and to search for the Messiah.^18 Agent George LeRoy Brown, Penny's replacement, ordered his district farmer, F. S. Kingsbury, to watch for Ghost Dancing in February 1892. Kingsbury reported that Oglalas from White Clay Creek were conducting a dance. Instead of dancing outside, however, these Oglalas used large sweat houses (round, wooden Omaha dance houses) to conduct Ghost Dances.^19 These structures were probably the same ones Penny observed under construction in the fall of 1891. (Lakota use of dance houses for the Ghost Dance was not confined to Pine Ridge. Yellow Shield, a Wounded Knee survivor, recounted in 1976 that Cheyenne River dancers from the Eagle Butte area "did the dance over by Plum Creek where there was a large round wooden building in which they could dance.")^20 During the winter and spring, Kingsbury witnessed Lakota singing

^15. Capt. Jesse M. Lee to Asst. Adjutant General, 16 Apr. 1891, 11716 PRD 1891, filed with 5412 PRD 1890, RG 94, NA.
^16. A. T. Lea to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 20 Apr. 1891, LR, SC 188, RG 75, NA.
^17. Dorchester to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 23 May 1891, LR, SC 188, RG 75, NA.
^18. Penny to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 15 Oct. 1891, LR, SC 188, RG 75, NA.
^20. U.S., Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Wounded Knee Massacre: Hearings before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, on S. TH47 and S. 2900, 94th Cong., 2d sess., p. 450.
ghost songs, keeping ghost shirts, and dancing. He added, “That a number of them still believe in the coming of a Messiah and a general change of things there is no doubt.”^21 Forwarding the farmer’s report to Washington, Agent Brown claimed that “a considerable number of the Indians are still clinging to their old belief of the Messiah and general change of things when he comes.”^22

While it lacked the strength of the pre-Wounded Knee days, the Lakota Ghost Dance continued for years, with Pine Ridge adherents spreading it to other converts. In modified form the dance began among the Yanktonais on the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota the year after Wounded Knee.^23 In 1902, Kicking Bear and Short Bull, the same men who had brought the Ghost Dance to Pine Ridge earlier, traveled to the Fort Peck reservation in Montana. At Poplar, they taught the Ghost Dance to residents who later sent them “goods and money for their instructions and [for] different kinds

22. Brown to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 5 Mar. 1892, LR, SC 188, RG 75, NA.

Anticipating the return of the buffalo even after the tragedy at Wounded Knee, Ghost Dance believers continued to dance and to procure weapons.
of things that are used in these dances." Among the recipients of their teaching was Fred Robinson, an Assiniboine. From these Lakota roots, Robinson molded the Ghost Dance into "New Tidings," a version of the religion that instructed people to lead a "clean, honest life" and promised them that the souls of their relatives gathered to greet them after death. Taking this gospel to the Dakota of Canada, Robinson found believers on the Sioux Wahpeton Reserve on the Round Plain in Saskatchewan, where a Ghost Dance congregation existed as late as the 1960s.

Ten years before Kicking Bear and Short Bull spread the Ghost Dance to Montana and beyond, James Mooney had proclaimed that the Ghost Dance had "died a natural death, excepting in the case of the Sioux," where the death had been violent. Even as he wrote his fatalistic prediction, however, he observed tribesmen improvising, developing, and incorporating new features into the Ghost Dance, thereby insuring the ritual's lasting influence in many tribal communities. Like tribal peoples from other cultures, the Lakota reworked Ghost Dance practices so that they became a part of the tribe's evolving cultural activities. In mid-nineteenth century Lakota social dances and ceremonies, for example, men and women had been segregated. In the Ghost Dance, "men and women leave their tepees and crowd to the dance-ground. They form two or three circles . . . [and] begin to move around toward the left." The nonsegregated dancing introduced in the Ghost Dance also influenced tribal social dances, and by 1895 the Yankton Sioux had fused the men's (scalp and war) and women's dances into one social dance in which both sexes participated. Eventually, other Lakota communities also altered some of their dances, and the Ghost Dance had provided the important first step.

Likewise, the events at Wounded Knee did not stop the Lakota from adapting Ghost Dance rituals and beliefs to the changing needs of their lives and circumstances. Ghost Dance songs were sung and meanings reinterpreted. In 1972, John Lame Deer from

28. Pierre La Pointe and Robert Clarkson to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 5 Dec. 1895, LR, SC 188, RG 75, NA.
Pine Ridge explained an old Ghost Dance song’s reference to arrow production as a metaphor providing instruction to contemporary Lakota for living one’s life straight like an arrow. This reworking of the Ghost Dance arrow production into a symbol for a code of personal conduct contrasts with the beliefs of the first generation of dancers, who made arrows to hunt the returning buffalo. Similarly, the ghost shirts, which had been bulletproof in 1890, became “sin proof” by the time they reached the Canadian Sioux. Through these evolving interpretations, each Lakota generation adapted the Ghost Dance to fit its own world view and philosophical need. Simply stated, the Ghost Dance did not die on a cold day at Wounded Knee Creek but has remained as a vital “part of the religious history of the Lakota people.”

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