



Short Bull

Dakota Images

Short Bull (Tatanka Ptečila), a Brulé Sioux medicine man and Ghost Dance leader, was born in the mid-1840s near the Niobrara River in present-day Nebraska. He fought at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876 and three years later led fifty-seven Brulés in an unsuccessful attempt to join Sitting Bull and his followers in Canada.

Beginning in late 1889, Short Bull and ten other delegates chosen at a council on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation traveled throughout the western United States to investigate rumors of a new religion. The group returned to South Dakota the next spring after meeting in Nevada with the Paiute medicine man Wovoka, who prophesied the imminent coming of a Messiah who would restore Indian lands and ways. Short Bull and his brother-in-law, Kicking Bear, became dedicated disciples of the Ghost Dance religion, which quickly spread across western South Dakota's reservations and stimulated white fears of an uprising. With the arrival of increasing numbers of army troops in late 1890, Short Bull, along with Kicking Bear and Two Strike, led several hundred Ghost Dancers to the Stronghold, a natural fortress on Cuny Table in the Badlands. On 15 January 1891, two weeks after the massacre at Wounded Knee, the group formally surrendered at Pine Ridge Agency.

Short Bull served a brief prison term at Fort Sheridan, near Chicago, and was released along with a number of other Ghost Dancers to tour Europe and the United States with William F. ("Buffalo Bill") Cody's Wild West show. In 1894, he traveled with Cody and Annie Oakley to Thomas Alva Edison's laboratory in West Orange, New Jersey, where the inventor recorded them on film with his kinetograph, the prototype of the movie camera. In 1913, he appeared with Gen. Nelson Miles in a silent film that Cody produced on the Pine Ridge reservation to re-create the events surrounding Wounded Knee.

In his later years, Short Bull completed a winter count covering roughly the century before 1920. Through other paintings, drawings, and descriptions, he also provided ethnographers with detailed information concerning both the Ghost Dance and the Sun Dance. Short Bull died 6 July 1923 at Wanblee.

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