Dakota Resources:  
“A People without History Is Like Wind on the Buffalo Grass”: Lakota Winter Counts

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“Some there be,” the anonymous scribe of the ancient Book of Ecclesiasticus recorded, “which have no memorial, who are perished as though they had never been.”¹ This sentiment was shared by the people of the seven affiliated Lakota, or western Sioux, bands—Oglalas, Sicangus, Hunkpapas, Minneconjous, Itazipcos, Oohenonpas, and Sihasapas—who knowingly told one another, “A people without history is like wind on the buffalo grass.”²

Once, Lakotas confidently counted much of the Northern Great Plains as their domain. Moving tipi villages in response to the migration of buffalo herds, raiding neighboring tribes for horses, locked in deadly combat with enemies made cautious by their power or rendered foolish by hubris, Lakotas boldly seized a prominent place in the still-forming national mind as the symbolic embodiment of North America’s Plains Indians. The names of Lakota heroes like Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, and Crazy Horse echoed as much through the halls of power in Washington, D.C., as they reverberated in the minds of the general public. By the late-nineteenth century, however, all this changed. Lakota life took a bad turn, as these previously wide-ranging, fiercely independent people so accustomed to triumph found themselves utterly defeated. Confined to reservations in North and

¹ Ecclus. 44:9.
South Dakota, Lakotas could spend much time reflecting on their richly textured history, something about which they knew a good deal. The first hint European Americans got that Lakotas and their relatives the Nakotas possessed a keen sense of their own history came in 1877, when soldier-ethnologist Garrick Mallery's paper on the topic appeared. In a publication issued by the United States Geological and Geographical Survey, Mallery detailed the Nakota/Lakotas' method for recording the tribal saga. A United States Army infantry captain who spent time among the Lakotas, the author reported that even before reservation days some tribesmen took pains to preserve historical records. They did this by creating pictographic chronicles called winter counts. In a typical “winter count”—a literal translation of the Lakota waniyetu iyduwa—a tribal historian, probably a mature man noted for his memory and talented recitations of good stories, drew a pictographic chronology of memorable events. The drawings were traditionally done on buffalo hide, although other hides, pieces of paper, and strips of canvas or muslin might also suffice. Each picture represented an incident that designated a particular “winter,” or year as reckoned from the first snowfall of one winter to the first snowfall of the next.


Sam Kills Two, a Lakota Indian also known as Beads, puts the finishing touches on a hide winter count.

Generally, a single episode sufficed for the purpose of giving a name to each of the years listed in a winter count: “Horses arrived stampeding winter,” “They camped with the Mandans winter,” “One Horn broke his leg winter,” “Crazy Horse killed winter,” and so forth. These chronicles are often named for the keeper from whom they were originally obtained, and part of the sequence found in the Iron Hawk Winter Count is typical of the way years are named:

1821 – A noisy star passed by
1822 – Ghost Dog died
1823 – Standing in a field, they took corn [after joining Americans in attacking an Arikara village]
1824 – They used a whitened buffalo horn [for a ceremony]
1825 – Turgid water brought destruction [flood]6

A non-Indian corollary to a winter-count event might be the Big Die-Up when the Great Plains cattle industry was devastated during the winter of 1886-1887. Modern examples might include the deaths in 1942 of the five Sullivan brothers aboard the torpedoed U.S.S. Juneau during the naval battle of Guadacanal; John F. Kennedy’s assas-

sination in 1963; recent flooding of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers; or the cataclysmic destruction of New York’s World Trade Center.

How, exactly, the keeper of a winter count was chosen is not clear, but the famous Oglala religious figure Black Elk recalled during a 1944 interview, “Various people in each camp remember and are the ones who hand down the stories.” Black Elk further maintained, “Mostly the history tellers were medicine men.” Garrick Mallery learned that among the Lakotas’ Yanktonai (Nakota) relatives the “keeper of the count” was responsible for the perpetuation of history. “With the counsel of the old men of his tribe, he decided upon some event or circumstance which should distinguish each year as it passed, and marked what was considered to be its appropriate symbol or device upon a buffalo robe kept for the purpose,” Mallery recorded. “The robe was at convenient times exhibited to other Indians of the tribe, who were thus taught the meaning and use of the signs as designating the several years.”

Deciding which events should be included in a winter count may have been the keepers’ responsibility, but given the emphasis for consensus in Lakota society, it is likely that some sort of general agreement by a band’s elders, of the sort that Mallery suggests, often played an important role in the selection process. The merging, splitting, and reconstituting membership of Lakota groups guaranteed a marked homogeneity in the events contained in winter counts through a process akin to cross-pollination, as the memories from one group invariably merged with those of others. The Lakotas were, after all, not a nation of some 280 million individuals but a tribal people numbering something less than one tenthousandth that size. It should only be expected then that the counts of the closely aligned Oglalas and Sicangus, for example, often show numerous similarities; so, too, do those pertaining to the equally intertwined Minneconjou, Itazipco, Oohenonpa, Sihasapa, and Hunkpapa groups.

7. Raymond J. DeMallie, ed., The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk’s Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), pp. 333-34. Black Elk also had this to say about the ability to “read” pictographs: “There is a place in the Black Hills, also on the Little Big Horn, a bank of solid rock where there are inscriptions that only a medicine man can read. It is a mystery. There is one in the Black Hills that only a medicine man can read. ... We don’t know who wrote it, but a medicine man can decode it and get the meaning” (p. 376).

Lakota winter counts fall into that category of cultural artifacts known as “mnemonic devices.” A mnemonic device works as a triggering mechanism by calling forth specific information from the minds of knowledgeable persons. In the case of winter counts, pictures in the historical sequence animated the memories of the count keepers and others familiar with the Lakota saga. In this way, the singularly memorable occurrence that represented each winter aided in Lakotas' efforts to recall an entire year. More, knowledge about a string of such events, hooked up together and properly explained, could lend deeper meaning to a series of years. By extension, a broad array of episodes might be used to convey a strong sense of the rich texture and intimate context characterizing Lakotas' perception of their own historical experience.

Lakotas were not the only North American Indians who preserved sequential, mnemonic records of their past. On the northern plains alone, pictographic histories found a secure niche in the Lakota, Nakota, and Blackfoot cultures. On the southern plains, Kiowas maintained monthly chronicles as well as summer-and-winter counts. A written Mandan-Hidatsa count has been reported. Speculation has been offered about the possible former existence of a Ponca count. Different, but nevertheless related, practices existed elsewhere. For example, Arizona's Pimas and the closely affiliated Tohono O'odham maintained rather rudimentarily carved calendar sticks, while wampum belt histories existed in the northeastern United States. However, it is among the Lakotas that the pictographic scheme associated with winter counts truly flowered.

Although Lakotas maintained a chronology consisting of a series of annual events, their language contained no word directly corresponding to the English term “time.” Lakotas envisioned such con-


cepts as day (anpetu), night (banyetu), moon or lunar month (wiyavapi), season (makoncage), and year or winter (omaka and waniyetu), as well as divisions of night and day. They neither possessed nor required units of precise measurement comparable to seconds, minutes, or hours, let alone the 365.24220-day year. Lakotas' method of reckoning larger divisions of time with winter counts, forming chronologies based upon a number of years' most significant events, reflects a way of thinking that had long found favor in many other cultures. Ancient Babylonians and Egyptians maintained similar listings of events and so, for that matter, did more than a few medieval European chroniclers.

Looking to pictures as a way of preserving a record of past events is quite consistent with the ways of the Lakotas' prereservation culture. Consider the extensive use of pictographic images warriors used to display records of their battlefield accomplishments on clothing, buffalo robes, tipi liners, and ledger books. Within this cultural universe, nonverbal communication rested upon easily related, widely


understood gestures and images, such as Plains Indian sign language and the imagery of pictographic symbols. For Lakotas, drawings conveyed ideas—at the least, general ideas; sometimes, very specific ideas—about events in an abbreviated, shorthand form. In this art-as-communication world, certain symbols imparted precise, unambiguous messages. The tribal membership of some of the human figures appearing in combat scenes could be stated: a Crow might be recognized by his distinctive pompadour hairstyle; a Pawnee, by moccasins with flared cuffs; a European American, by a beard or comparatively exotic clothing. In a similar way, today we might recognize a reference to Abraham Lincoln by observing no more than the stylized silhouette of a tall, bearded figure wearing a stovepipe hat.

However ambiguous such messages may seem to us today, the tribal audience for which they were originally intended instantly grasped their meanings. Consider the following story derived from recollections of Arikara scouts who accompanied Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and the Seventh United States Cavalry on its ill-fated Little Bighorn campaign in the summer of 1876:

About nightfall [24 June] they came to an abandoned Dakota camp where there were signs of a sun dance circle. Here there was evidence of the Dakotas having made medicine, the sand had been arranged and smoothed, and pictures had been drawn. The Dakota scouts in Custer's army said that this meant the enemy knew the army was coming. In one of the sweat lodges was a long heap or ridge of sand. On this one Red Bear, Red Star, and Soldier [all Arikara scouts] saw figures drawn indicating by hoof prints Custer's men on one side and the Dakota on the other. Between them dead men were drawn lying with their heads toward the Dakotas. The Arikara scouts understood this to mean that the Dakota medicine was too strong for them and that they would be defeated by the Dakotas.

That drawing on the sand inside the Lakota sweat lodge represented the Hunkpapa chieftain Sitting Bull's vision of soldiers falling headfirst—that is, dead—into the tribal encampment. The Arikaras

comprehended the contours of that message without any difficulty. Similarly, while the particulars of a story associated with a drawing in a Lakota winter count might not be fully encapsulated within the drawing itself, its general characteristics could almost certainly be meaningfully conveyed to those familiar with the lexicon of Plains Indian pictographic communication. Small wonder, then, that the Plains Indian sign language gesture for the concept of “history” took the form of sketching on the palm of one’s hand. Or that the Lakota term for “draw” also means “write,” while that for “picture” can convey the idea of “book.”

Like life itself, the winter counts were by no means static. Over the years, Lakota winter counts underwent a three-phase process of development, one that was at once both evolutionary and revolutionary. The earliest known counts—and all those presently known are nineteenth- and twentieth-century creations, usually copies or composites of now-vanished, earlier chronicles—consist of pictographs on animal hide, typically a buffalo robe. There appears to have been no established rule for the arrangement of pictures in these counts (or in the seemingly inexhaustible supply of copies). Some count keepers painted the figures in outward-moving clockwise or counterclockwise spirals. Occasionally, a square or rectangular pattern replaced the spiral, with pictographs arrayed in an inward-to-outward or outward-to-inward progression. Other counts adhere to the ancient Greek boustrophedon arrangement, a serpentine scheme in which the drawings are meant to be read linearly from right-to-left (or left-to-right) on one line, then in the opposite direction on the next, and so on until the end. By at least the late 1870s, some Lakota count keepers put their drawings, now more often arranged in a right-to-left or left-to-right linear pattern, on surfaces of non-native manufacture such as linen cloth or the paper pages of notebooks. Sometimes these chronicles also include information about the depicted events in written English, romanized Lakota, or both languages.

The practice of providing written emendation foreshadowed the third phase in winter-count development, which emerged after the


18. Roger T. Grange, Jr., “The Garnier Oglala Winter Count,” *Plains Anthropologist* 8 (May 1963): 74. James H. Howard, in *British Museum Winter Count*, p. 6, suggests that the oldest type of winter count was one preserved solely in the memory of the count keeper. The only tribe from which such counts have been reported are the Blackfeet of Montana.
mid-1870s when some tribal historians abandoned pictographs altogether in favor of written descriptions. Among those who did so was White Bull, a Minneconjou nephew of the famed Hunkpapa leader Sitting Bull, who obtained a winter count from a fellow tribesman named Hairy Hand around 1879. According to White Bull, this count's pedigree stretched back from Hairy Hand to his brother-in-law, Steamboat. Upon coming into possession of the history, White Bull consulted a number of Lakota elders concerning the pictographs' accepted interpretation. Although White Bull now owned what we can assume to have been a perfectly good winter count painted on hide, he thereafter preserved the record in a radically different form. According to his biographer, "Having learned to write in his own language, White Bull saw no need to rely upon painted hides for his chronology, and transcribed the events of each year in a book purchased for that purpose."^19

In summing up the evolution of Lakota winter counts, we need only look at three different examples. The first is the pictographs originally painted on an antelope or deer hide by The Swan, a Minneconjou, in the 1860s. The illustration corresponding to the year 1814 shows a man with a hatchet buried in the top of his head. The interpreter of the count in 1868 said that this drawing represented the killing of a Kiowa enemy by a Brulé, or Sicangu.20 The Wounded Bear Winter Count, an Oglala chronology drawn during the reservation period on a United States Army desertion report form, represents the second stage of winter-count development. It shows a man's head in profile and a hatchet stuck in the top of his skull for the year 1815. Beside this pictograph is an inscription, "Wi ta paha tu ka r gap" (meaning the splitting open of a Kiowa's skull).21 White Bull completes the transitional process by presenting the third stage of development, in which he abandons pictographs altogether and is content to offer a written


Several count keepers marked the winter of 1814-1815 with pictographs similar to this one by Battiste Good showing the killing of a Kiowa Indian.

notation in romanized Lakota: “Witapahatu wan karurapi.”

Significantly, the stylistic changes in winter counts kept pace with, indeed they exactly mirrored, the rapidly accelerating, increasingly pervasive Western influence upon Lakotas as the nineteenth century drew to a close.

Since the traditional Lakota culture did not attach numbers to years, the year designations we see in connection with winter counts are reservation-period additions or the result of researchers' findings. The events shared by many Lakota counts, sometimes called "index years," often help in establishing a relative sequence of historical occurrences. Index years that record incidents known to have taken place at a specific point in time can serve as benchmarks, allowing researchers working in the established European-American mode to create a temporal sequence. An index year thus provides a kind of compass, making it possible to orient the history by counting backwards or forwards from the identified date and fixing the counts' other events in time. One of the most common index years records the Leonid meteor shower that lit up the night sky on 12-13 November 1833, a celestial display that is noted by virtually every Lakota winter count kept during that period. The Swift Bear Winter Count of the Sicangus commemorates this event with a pictograph of a tipi surrounded by stars. Since we know that this meteor shower took place during the winter of 1833, it follows that the drawing that appears before the meteor shower—a man wounded by an arrow, designating "Gray-Eagle-Tail-died Winter"—is intended to fill the slot

for an 1832 occurrence. Likewise, the picture designating the incident for the year after the meteor shower—a blanketed figure pierced by an arrow, connoting “Man-came-with-gray-cap-on-killed Winter”—represents the entry for 1834.24

Some winter count events can be attributed to the historical tradition of one of the seven Lakota bands, or a group of bands sharing a more or less common historical memory. Take the case of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, for instance. Rarely does a direct reference to this 1876 fight find a place in Lakota winter counts. This fact may seem odd, especially when we consider the crushing defeat that Lakota warriors inflicted upon the Seventh Cavalry along the river they called the Greasy Grass. However, that battle is not forgotten. Instead, winter-count keepers record it obliquely, referring to events associated with it. Typically, chronicles from northern Lakota groups, such as the Hunkpapas, commemorate the beginning of the Canadian exile of Sitting Bull and his followers, which was a direct result of the battle. Such accounts depict an Indian shaking hands with a white man dressed in red and refer to “Sitting Bull Shakes Hands With a Soldier” or “Year Sitting Bull Made Peace with the Englishman, the Red Coat.”25 Winter count keepers from the Oglalas and Sicangus to the south, more than a few of whom spent the Sioux War of 1876-1877 confined to reservations, characteristically recall some other unpleasant fallout emanating from the Battle of the Little Big Horn. For them, 1876 is frequently known as “Red Cloud’s horses were taken away,” a reference to the fact that the United States Army confiscated warrior's mounts to keep them from joining Sitting Bull’s forces.26

The Lakotas' method of reckoning years by snowfalls often causes those who associate conventional dates with the counts' pictographs to label years with a transitional form, such as 1789-1790 or 1875-1876. This practice accounts, at least in part, for the fact that chronicles frequently vary from the Gregorian calendar by a year or more either way. In other words, an event identified as occurring in 1804 may

actually have transpired anytime between the early fall of 1803 and a winter that began with a late snowfall in early 1805. For example, the illustration corresponding to the year 1840 in the Oglalas' Short Man Winter Count depicts two men facing one another with a pair of crossed arrows suspended above their heads. The name of the year is "Drunken fight." The Iron Crow Winter Count, another Oglala history, commemorates the same incident—"While drunk, they killed each other"—but here the date works out to 1841. The incident commemorated in both chronologies is a fracas, fueled by drink, which culminated in the shooting of an Oglala headman named Bull Bear.

A modern history book will tell us that this event took place in an Oglala camp along Wyoming's Chugwater Creek in November 1841. And here we begin to discern one of the major differences between the European-American and Lakota views of history. It is important within a Western context to pinpoint as exactly as possible the temporal placement of the event. For Lakotas, it made less difference whether Bull Bear was shot in 1840 or 1841 than that some knowledge of the death of this leader was preserved. It was the event, its inclusion in the Lakota saga, and its possible linkage to other occurrences in the overall story that was important; not the precise year, month, day, or hour when it transpired. For the Western mind, this historical focus might call the authenticity of an incident into question; for Lakotas, the act of remembering itself breathed the life of reality into that which was remembered. Naturally, idiosyncratic, localized events dominate this type of historical memory. Reports of Lakota deaths at the hands of enemies and the subsequent meting out of retributive justice figure prominently in these chronicles. Meteorological events also appear—a winter so cold that crows fell from the sky and landed dead outside tipis—as do treaty negotiations or the arrival of such luxuries as striped blankets woven by the Navajos.

One characteristic of Lakota winter counts that seldom receives the attention it merits involves the common practice of borrowing...
events, either by someone creating a chronicle or filling in missing years in an existing history. Widespread borrowing helps account for the numerous shared features of so many counts. In fact, many chronicles are either outright copies or slightly expanded or abbreviated versions of other histories. The story of the Bull Bear Winter Count provides an example. James R. Walker, the agency physician among the Pine Ridge Oglalas from 1896 to 1914, learned that the winter count kept by Bull Bear (the chief killed during the drunken fighting referred to earlier) originated with an unknown Oglala at an unspecified time. This information is not particularly helpful in ascertaining the actual age of the chronicle, although Walker was told that it was already "old in the year 'When they performed the ceremony with horse's tails,' A.D. 1805." Walker believed the record came into Bull Bear's possession as a bequest soon after 1805. Later, Bull Bear probably gave it to a friend whose son sold the history to a collector, but a copy was made, and eventually, the Bull Bear Winter Count became known as the No Ears Winter Count. Several versions of this count exist, and while they may be listed by such names as Flying Hawk Winter Count they remain copies or variants of a primary count. As a result, while dozens of Oglala counts may surface, Walker was probably on the right track in stating his belief that the band recognized only three counts, those of Red Cloud, American Horse,

30. Walker, *Lakota Society*, pp. 88, 112. The copy of the Bull Bear or No Ears Winter Count obtained by Walker while he lived at Pine Ridge is in the archives of the Colorado Historical Society, Denver, and has been published in *Lakota Society*, pp. 124-57. Walker learned that Bull Bear's original count was copied and continued by Walking Eagle, the father of his informant No Ears, who kept it in turn. No Ears told him that the pictographs ended in 1888, and presumably, after this date, the chronicle was converted to its present written form. Walker, *Lakota Society*, p. 115. Additional copies of this chronicle include one in the Boas Collection, American Philosophical Society Library, Philadelphia, Pa. (which includes a valuable translation by Ella Cara Deloria); William Powers, "A Winter Count of the
and Bull Bear. In a similar situation, the Swift Dog Winter Count of the Hunkpapas remains the Swift Dog Winter Count even though other names have become attached to it over the years. This practice recognizes the original keeper as the "author" of the account no matter how often it is amended or copied.

Today, we know virtually no more about the origin of winter counts than Garrick Mallery did when he broke the news of their existence in 1877. It is my sense, however, that they were at that time probably of comparatively recent vintage. This view receives support from a pair of factors. First, the oldest events for which comparisons can be made among the Lakota histories date to the late eighteenth century, that is, during the lifetimes of the grandfathers of the early reservation-period count keepers from whom westerners like Mallery and his collaborator, United States Army surgeon William H. Corbusier, first obtained these chronicles. According to American Horse, a noted Oglala born around 1840, the winter count Corbusier collected from him at Pine Ridge between 1879-1880—one that reports events that took place between 1775-1878—originated with his grandfather and passed to his father before reaching his hands. American Horse's father was born around 1805; therefore, the earliest event in his chronicle took place during the presumed lifetime of his grandfather, the man identified as the count's originator. Second, although the periods covered by Lakota winter counts vary, none of those presently known can be said to report incidents ante-dating the late eighteenth century. This statement remains true even


31. Walker, Lakota Society, p. 88. A ledger book containing the drawings of the American Horse Winter Count is located in the Garrick Mallery Papers, National Anthropological Archives, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and the chronicle is reproduced in Mallery, "Pictographs," pp. 129-46. The Red Cloud Winter Count has not been published under that name; it could still be in Lakota hands, have gone unreported, be known by another name, or be lost.

32. Praus, The Sioux, p. 5.


34. For a winter count from the Lakotas' Yanktonai (Nakota) relatives that allegedly covers the period 1682-1883, see Howard, "Yanktonai Ethnology," No pictographs accom-
in light of the fact that the pictographic chronicle maintained in a ledger book by Battiste Good, a Sicangu also known as Brown Hat, purportedly deals with events from as early as 1700.

Corbusier, who obtained Battiste Good's count in 1880 while stationed at Camp Sheridan, Nebraska, compared it to two other Lakota chronicles he collected around that time: American Horse's, which begins in 1775, and another belonging to Cloud Shield that commenced in 1777. Referring to Good's version of tribal history, Lakota informants told Corbusier that "his count formerly embraced about the same number of years as the other two, but that Good gathered the names of many years from the old people and placed them in chronological order as far back as he was able to learn them." Thus, it appears that at one time Good may well have maintained a winter count with an actual date of commencement at some point around the beginning of the last quarter of the eighteenth century. However, to this record he made numerous additions, thereby giving an impression that his version of Lakota history took in a greater period of time than it actually did.

Good, who was born around 1821 or 1822 and probably died in the 1880s, further muddied the waters by coming up with twelve drawings for Corbusier, each depicting a Lakota village with allegedly historical activity transpiring within the camp circle. Through these generational cycles—all but one drawing covered a period of seventy years, a traditional Lakota generation—Good claimed the ability to trace tribal history back to A.D. 901 or even to a point "six hundred years after the beginning." The material presented in these generational cycles is probably best viewed with an attitude of sympathy this count, however, which is written entirely in romanized Dakota, a form unknown to Yanktonais until the mid-nineteenth century. Howard's British Museum Winter Count, pp. 97-109, contains a listing of numerous winter counts; it must be used with caution, however, since inaccuracies abound.

35. Mallery, "Pictographs," p. 129. The version of Battiste Good's winter count inspected by Corbusier and Mallery is MS 2572, in Box 12, File 6, Mallery Papers.

36. Good's birth date is from Mallery, "Picture-Writing," p. 317. An uncatalogued manuscript at the American Museum of Natural History in New York contains a typewritten copy of a portion of his winter count in which it is anonymously speculated that he died around 1880, but William H. Corbusier, who originally discovered the count and passed it along to Garrick Mallery, wrote as late as 1884 that he had "heard of him [Good] indirectly and I think I can now reach him" (Corbusier to Mallery, 8 Sept. 1884, Mallery Papers).

pathy toward Good’s attempt to relate his people’s history from the murkiest of times, but sympathy that is well tempered by skepticism. Pioneering winter-count researcher Garrick Mallery observed in connection with these illustrations—which find no place in any Lakota winter-count tradition other than that of Good—that they are “interesting from the mythology and tradition referred to and suggested by them, and which must be garnered from the chaff of uncomprehended missionary teaching.”

Generational cycles and Battiste Good’s probable artificial lengthening of his chronology aside, Lakotas looked to winter counts as accurate representations of their history. By ticking off the number of pictures separating one incident from another, they calculated the number of years within a relevant period of time. Winter counts also helped them establish a generally accepted sequence for less-well-known events since each incident functioned as a snapshot from the past. The recorded incident was part of the core of shared memories around which a group oriented its recollections of whatever else transpired that year. As James R. Walker learned within a few years of coming to live among the Lakotas, many older people tied the year

of their birth to a winter-count event. Thus, the Oglala warrior Afraid of Bear told Walker: "I was born the year When They Brought In the Captives (1843). My father. . . . was born the year When the Good White Man Came (1802)."

Although winter counts met Lakotas’ needs, they pose difficult problems for historians who attempt to use them as sources of information. For example, it is unlikely that we will ever know anything at all about some of the people, places, and events appearing in the chronicles. Who was Charred Face? or Wears a Warbonnet? Where was that ash grove some Lakotas associated with a particularly fine winter camp and plenty of fresh buffalo meat back in 1845? What, exactly, happened when a warrior named Body was shot and left behind for dead, only to return home safely later? Matters like these must remain forever beyond our ken, but others reported in Lakota winter counts invite further inquiry. For instance, while we may never know the identity of the Good White Man mentioned above, it is not entirely unreasonable to hope that with a little help from European-American documentary sources we might actually be able to lift the veil of anonymity from another trader: the one Lakotas called Little Beaver, who lived in a log house on an island not unlike the animal for which he was named, and whose trading post on the Missouri River burned around 1809. Interesting work has already been done with Lakota winter-count notations about astronomical phenomena, as well as references to outbreaks of smallpox.

Certainly, there is plenty of material awaiting researchers’ attention. Consider the collections of the South Dakota State Historical Society, which, in addition to a copy of the widely reproduced Lone Dog Winter Count, also include six more. None of the society’s winter counts, aside from Lone Dog’s, have yet been subjected to exhaustive investigation. They are as follows:

**Lone Dog Winter Count** (museum catalogue, 1978.121) Lone Dog, a Yanktonai Nakota, was the keeper of the first published winter count. His count covers the winters of 1800-1871. The society’s copy contains symbols painted on cowhide that are read counter clockwise from the center. This copy was donated to the society by

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Theodore Riggs, the son of missionary Thomas Riggs, from the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation area. The younger Riggs received it from Chris Colombe (born sometime in the 1880s), who got it from William Stranger Horse, who was ten or twenty years older. The count is considered an authentic copy of Lone Dog's original count.

**Unattributed winter count** (archives catalogue, H75.321, Folder 25, Sioux Miscellany Collection). This winter count, donated by Mrs. Frank Eaton in 1875, covers the years from 1789 to 1926. It is handwritten in Lakota on six sheets of lined paper. The years are given in arabic numerals on the lefthand side of each page, and the written inscriptions are immediately to the right of the dates.

**Swift Bear Winter Count** (museum catalogue, 77.76). This count was donated by Forrest G. Bratley, whose father, J. H. Bratley, was a teacher on the Rosebud Indian Reservation at the turn of the century. The senior Bratley collected the count from Singlewood, a Sicangu Lakota. The count was attributed to Swift Bear, also a Sicangu, with Singlewood being the last of three successive keepers. The history deals with the 1800-1899 period. The chronicle is painted on a 3½-inch-by-69½-inch strip of muslin. A variant of this account was published by Lucy Kramer Cohen in 1942.

**Brown Wolf Winter Count** (archives catalogue, MF 1832; museum catalogue, 1970.247). The Brown Wolf Winter Count covers the years between 1835 and 1921 and is represented by a microfilm copy of a ledger-book count created by Philip Brown Wolf, a Brulé, or Sicangu, Lakota. In 1967, museum staff also drew the winter count with permanent marking pen on unbleached cotton muslin. The

ledger book was donated for copying by Oliver Brown Wolf of Eagle Butte, South Dakota.

**Long Soldier Winter Count #1** (museum catalogue, 69.162). This pictographic count deals with the years between 1798 and 1904 or 1905. The pictures are arranged in an inward-moving spiral, which begins in the upper lefthand corner of a 72-inch-by-35-inch piece of muslin bearing the handwritten inscription, "History of a band of Dakota [sic] who lived Near the Mouth of the Grand River." Little is known about where this State Historical Society count, which covers the dates 1878-1905, originated. However, it is a variant of a count covering the period 1798-1902 that was painted by Long Soldier and bore the catalogue number 11/6720 at New York's Museum of the American Indian-Heye Foundation and is presumably now in the collections of the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. A Hunkpapa named Long Soldier, or Akicita Hanska, signed the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. By the reservation period (after 1881), he was known for his height (perhaps as great as six feet four inches) as well as his habit of carrying about a sharpened iron poker. With Running Antelope and Red Horse, Long Soldier served as a leader of the last Hunkpapa buffalo hunt, which took place on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in 1882.

**Charging Thunder Winter Count** (museum catalogue, 74.2.9). This pictographic winter count covers the period 1764-1901, the oldest events in any Hunkpapa history reported to date. An artist using red, blue, and gray pencil drew it on a 36-inch-by-70-inch piece of unbleached cotton muslin. The drawings are arranged in an inward-moving rectangular pattern that commences in the upper lefthand corner of the cloth. Handwritten notations in Lakota accompany those covering the chronicle's first forty-two years. The following

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45. According to the catalogue-card information connected with this count, it was collected sometime after 1905 by Mrs. M. K. Squires, apparently at Fort Yates, North Dakota, and accessioned to the museum in 1923 as a gift from Thea Heye, the founder's wife. Typewritten file cards containing the count's events note that Long Soldier himself provided the interpretation of incidents.

The society's Charging Thunder Winter Count features both pictographs and notations handwritten in Lakota.

message appears on the count: "Winter count drawn by Standing Rock Indian—Ft. Yates—Bought of a very old man by Miss Collins" (noted missionary Mary C. Collins). The date of collection is not known, but the count was accessioned by the State Historical Society in 1920. The count is attributed to Charging Thunder, whom pioneering Smithsonian Institution researcher Frances Densmore identified as a hereditary band chief who provided material for her 1913 studies of the Standing Rock Hunkpapas. She described him as "a man of genial countenance and powerful physique." He said of himself, "My prayer has been heard and I have lived long." He was a member of the elite White Horse Riders warrior society, organized by Sitting Bull in 1876 just prior to the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Charging Thunder accompanied Sitting Bull into Canadian exile in 1877, returned to the United States in 1881, and spent the period 1881-1883 imprisoned with Sitting Bull at Fort Randall, South Dakota. Released in 1883, he moved to Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota. According to the winter count of his compatriot Swift Dog, Charging Thunder died in 1922. 

**Long Soldier Winter Count #2** (museum catalogue, 2001.39.2). This winter count appears to have been created by Long Soldier, a

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Lakota Sioux from the Standing Rock reservation. The chronicle covers the years from 1798 to 1906 and includes events particular to Standing Rock, such as agent Major James McLaughlin’s attending the last communal buffalo hunt held on the reservation. The winter count is painted on a heavy-weight muslin cloth with the images starting in the upper left corner, reading across the row to the right, then down one row and back to the left. Ralph Reed of Enumclaw, Washington, recently donated the count to the society. Reed’s grandfather, George Waldo Reed, collected the item while he was a Congregational minister for the American Missionary Association. He replaced Mary C. Collins on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in 1887 or 1888.

Since Garrick Mallery’s time, Lakota winter counts have both fascinated and frustrated students of tribal history. This condition is at

While the pictographs of the society’s Long Soldier Winter Count #2 (shown here) closely resemble those of Long Soldier Winter Count #1 in style and subject matter, they differ in their arrangement.
least partly attributable to the fact that, as sources of historical information, the winter counts fall into the "nontraditional" category. From a historian's perspective, however, winter counts have less to do with "history," in the sense that events are corroborated by outside sources, than with tribal ideology, or the glue that holds the members of a group together. Historiographer Harry E. Barnes once pointed out that the European medieval historian "frequently considered most important for his record some insignificant miracle or the transfer of the bones of a saint, information of little value to the modern historical investigator, except in so far as it revealed . . . his limited historical perspective." Today, Barnes's characterization of such a perspective as "limited" seems wrongheaded. After all, an understanding of precisely such a perspective as Barnes alluded to is a crucial element in any reasonable attempt to comprehend how a people view their history. In other words, the occurrences Lakotas deemed sufficiently important for inclusion in the canon of their historical memory demand serious consideration by anyone seeking to compose a clearer picture of their saga as Lakotas themselves perceived (and still seek to perceive) it. Whether pictographic or written, whether committed to a buffalo hide or the paper pages of a schoolchild's exercise book, winter counts faithfully served their intended purpose. They insured that Lakotas could claim their history, sing paeans to a remembered past, and not become "like wind on the buffalo grass."

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