



Traditional Plains Indian toys — beaded balls, lifelike dolls, and a miniature cradleboard.

BELOW: "When the Sun died," said the Northern Paiute holy man Wovoka, "I went up to heaven and saw God and all the people who had died a long time ago. God told me to come back and tell my people they must be good and love one another, and not fight, or steal, or lie. He gave me this dance to give my people." Many years after he had founded what whites called the Ghost Dance religion, Wovoka was photographed making a motion picture near the Paiutes' Walker River reservation in Nevada.

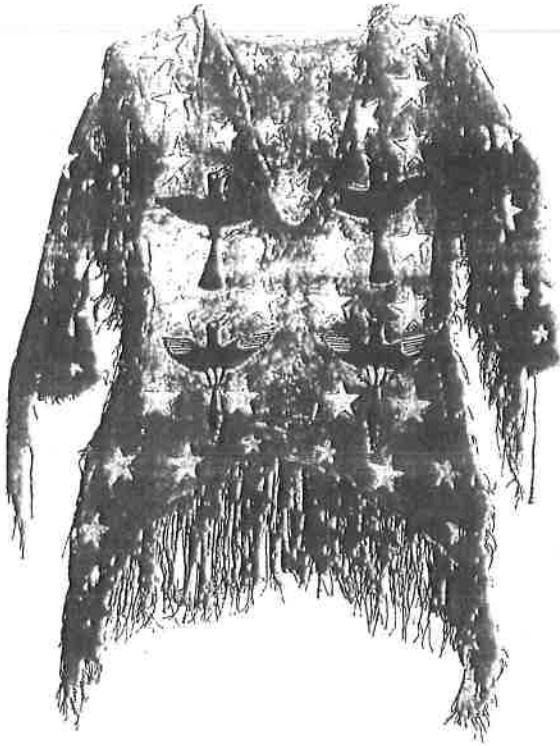
The Last Trail: To Chankpe Opi Wakpala

In 1888, to many of the conquered, despairing tribes in the West there came a sudden message of hope of a new life and of liberation from the bondage of their reservations. From Nevada, a new peaceful religion, preached by Wovoka, a Paiute man from the desert—with powerful medicine and messages from the supernatural world—spread like wildfire to the Lakota Sioux and other Plains tribes.

Performing special dances and songs and offering special prayers, all taught by Wovoka, his followers sought desperately to bring back the world they had lost, the vanished herds of buffalo and the times when their ancestors were alive and the Indian nations were free. Many danced all night and all day for a glimpse of the past. Some wore special shirts, which they believed would ward off the bullets of soldiers, who called the new religion the Ghost Dance and watched its growth with fear and hostility. Going into the Badlands and other places where they could avoid the whites, the Indians continued to dance. A young Lakota Sioux described their ecstasy:

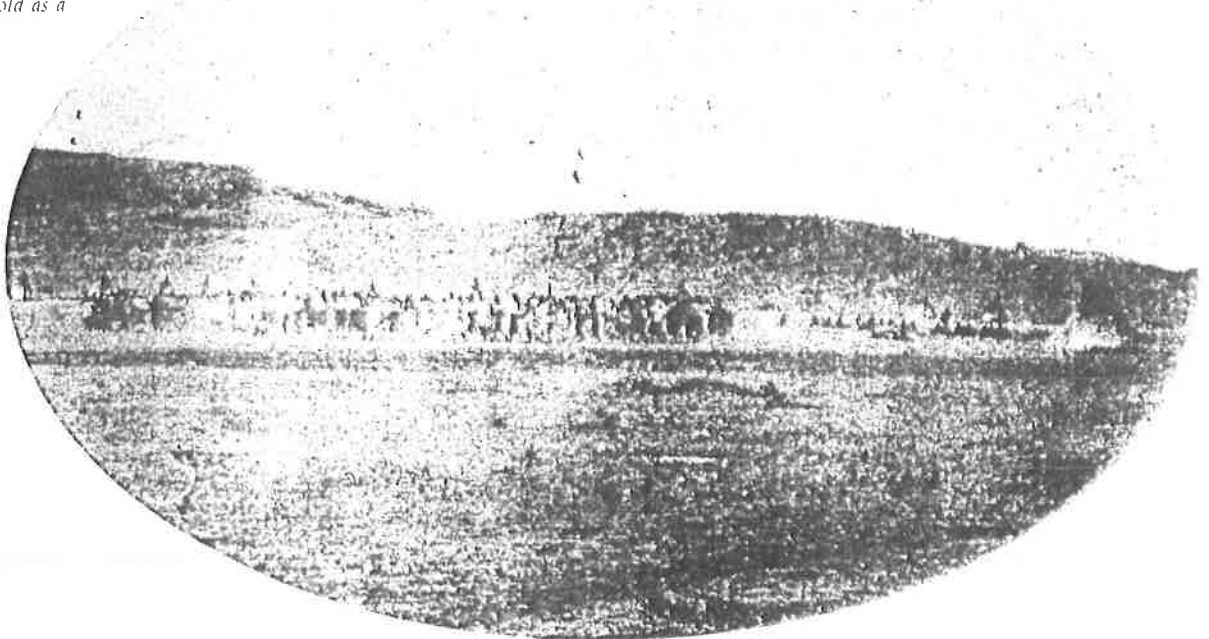
They danced without rest, on and on. . . . Occasionally someone thoroughly exhausted and dizzy fell unconscious into the center and lay there "dead." . . . After a while, many lay about in that condition. They were now "dead" and seeing their dear ones. . . . The visions . . . ended the same way, like a chorus describing a great encampment of all the Dakotas who had ever died, where . . . there was no sorrow but only joy, where relatives thronged out with happy laughter. . . .





Shirts worn by Ghost Dancers were usually covered with symbolic paintings. The stars on this Arapaho shirt symbolized the coming of a happy new age for the Indians, while the magpies and crows reflected the belief that the dancer would be flown from harm during the transition to the new day. Many dancers also believed that the shirt itself would protect them from the white men's bullets.

A photograph of the Ghost Dance, which was applied to a postcard and sold as a souvenir of the West.



The people went on and on and could not stop, day or night, hoping . . . to get a vision of their own dead. . . . And so I suppose the authorities did think they were crazy—but they weren't. They were only terribly unhappy.

Even old Red Cloud, who had counseled accommodation with the American government and now lived at the Oglalas' Pine Ridge agency in present-day South Dakota, understood and sympathized with the dancers:

The people were desperate from starvation—they had no hope. . . . We felt that we were mocked in our misery. We had no newspapers, and no one to speak for us. . . . We were faint with hunger and maddened by despair. We held our dying children, and felt their little bodies tremble as their souls went out and left only a dead weight in our hands. . . . Some [were] talking of the [Messiah]. . . . The people did not know; they did not care. They snatched at the hope. . . . The white men were frightened, and called for soldiers. We had begged for life, and the white men thought we wanted theirs.



As the Ghost Dance spread among the bands, the whites on the frontier panicked, assuming that the Indians were dancing a war dance and preparing for a huge, concerted uprising. Dedicated to the education and assimilation of the tribes, the government decided to halt the dances, but felt first that it would have to isolate the Indian leaders.

Sitting Bull, the Hunkpapa chief, did not join in the religious revival, but his commanding presence among the Sioux posed a continuing threat to the government's authority. After the defeat of Custer, he had been the last Lakota leader to surrender, finally ending his Canadian exile and giving himself up to the Americans at Fort Buford in present-day North Dakota in July 1881. After a period of imprisonment at Fort Randall, he was transferred to permanent residency among the Hunkpapas at the Standing Rock agency on the Sioux reservation.

Regarded as the man who had defeated Custer, he was celebrated by whites as the most famous living Indian, and for a while he toured with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, wryly reenacting his victory at the Little Bighorn and insulting white audiences in his own tongue, forcing nervous translators to think fast and conceal what he had said. When he returned to Standing Rock, he used his fame to agitate on behalf of his people, becoming a thorn in the side of the agent, who detested him and tried, unsuccessfully, to assert his authority over him.

Finally, the agent sent Sioux Indian police in the hire of the government to arrest Sitting Bull for allegedly supporting the Ghost Dancers at Standing Rock. Awakened from sleep at dawn on December 15, 1890, Sitting Bull was murdered by the police when other Sioux in his camp tried to help him. During the melee, Sitting Bull's circus horse—a gift from Buffalo Bill—began performing, sitting on its hind legs and pawing the air.

Some six hundred Oglala Sioux women wait patiently in line on ration day at the Pine Ridge agency in South Dakota to receive rations of flour, bacon, cornmeal, coffee, and sugar. Intended to help the Plains Indians make the transition from hunting to farming, the rations were cut by about 20 percent in 1890, a year that also saw a serious crop failure. Many Indians died of starvation, and the widespread suffering, together with the Lakotas' desire to regain freedom and control of their destiny, contributed to the popularity of the Ghost Dance.



After the murder of Sitting Bull, Chief Sitanka, or Big Foot, pictured here, led his band of Miniconjou Sioux on a wintry flight from the Cheyenne River reservation to the Pine Ridge reservation, where they thought they would find protection in Red Cloud's camp from hostile American soldiers. Near Wounded Knee Creek, the 7th Cavalry intercepted their path with tragic consequences.

The great chief's death portended further trouble. Ghost Dancers fled in terror, some attaching themselves to Big Foot's band of Miniconjou Lakotas on Cheyenne River. Although the band still contained many devout Ghost Dancers, Big Foot, a mild-mannered, peace-loving chief, and a number of his followers had recently stopped dancing and turned away from the religion, a fact unknown to the army. Troops now closed in on Big Foot's people, sending them in fearful flight for 150 miles across the wintry plains and Badlands to what they hoped would be safety with the Oglalas of powerful Chief Red Cloud at the Pine Ridge agency. Dying from pneumonia, which worsened during the journey, Big Foot was carried along in an open wagon. Short of their goal, the cold, hungry, and tired refugees were intercepted by the 7th Cavalry—Custer's old command—and taken to Chankpe Opi Wakpala (Wounded Knee Creek) on the Pine Ridge reservation.

There, on the morning of December 29, 1890, they were encircled by the troops and ordered to give up all their weapons. "It was understood that just as soon as all the guns were stacked in the center we were to continue on to Pine Ridge agency," recalled White Lance, one of the Miniconjous. Mrs. Louis Mousseau, the Sioux wife of a man half Indian, half white, who owned a log trading post at Wounded Knee, remembered later that "The white men were so thick here like a whole pile of maggots. . . . They took everything away from us that had a sharp point, any metal that had a sharp point. . . ."

On a hill overlooking the surrounded Indians, the troops set up a battery of four Hotchkiss guns, ready to fire on Big Foot's people. Down below, at a little distance from the circle of soldiers, was a newspaper correspondent, Thomas H. Tibbles of the *Omaha World-Herald*, who had ridden to Wounded Knee with the 7th Cavalry. "Suddenly," he wrote, "I heard a single shot from the direction of the troops—then three or four—a few more—and immediately a volley. At once came a general rattle of rifle firing. Then the Hotchkiss guns."

The single shot that Tibbles heard was an accidental one, coming from the rifle of a deaf Indian, who had not heard the soldiers' order to surrender their weapons and had raised his above his head, resisting efforts to take it from him. The shot panicked the troops, and in a fraction of a second, the soldiers and the Indians were shooting at each other. Screaming with fright, many of the Sioux burst through the army's lines, running for the protection of coulees. The soldiers chased them, shooting at everything that moved. Within the original circle, Big Foot, dozens of his people, as well as soldiers, lay dead, many of the latter felled by their own cross fire.

A Miniconjou woman, later known as Mrs. Rough Feather, was in the middle of the firing. "An awful noise was heard and I was paralyzed for a time," she remembered. "Then my head cleared and I saw nearly all the people on the ground bleeding. . . . My father, my mother, my grandmother, my older brother and my younger brother were all killed. My son, who was two years old, was shot in the mouth that later caused his death."

American Horse, an Oglala chief, described the deaths of the surrounded Indians and the Miniconjous' attempts to flee from the soldiers:

There was a woman with an infant in her arms who was killed as she almost touched the flag of truce. . . . A mother was shot down with her infant; the child not knowing that its mother was dead was still nursing. . . . The women as they were fleeing with their babies were killed together, shot right through . . . and after most all of them had been killed a cry was made that all those who were not killed or wounded should come forth and they would be safe. Little boys . . . came out of their places of refuge, and as soon as they came in sight a number of soldiers surrounded them and butchered them there.

"Though the active attack lasted perhaps twenty minutes," correspondent Tibbles wrote, "the firing continued for an hour or two, wherever a soldier saw a sign of life. Indian women and children fled into the ravine to the south, and some of them on up out of it across the prairie, but soldiers followed them and shot them down mercilessly."

At sunset, the weather turned bitterly cold. After dark, cavalrymen arrived at the agency with a long train of army wagons bearing dead and wounded soldiers and Indians from Wounded Knee. The injured soldiers and Indian warriors were taken into the troops' quarters for medical attention, but forty-nine wounded Sioux women and children were left lying in a few open wagons in the freezing cold. Eventually, they were carried into the agency church, where they lay in silence on the floor beneath a pulpit decorated with a Christmas banner reading PEACE ON EARTH, GOOD WILL TO MEN.

"Nothing I have seen in my whole . . . life ever affected or depressed or haunted me like the scenes I saw that night in that church," Tibbles continued. "One unwounded old woman . . . held a baby on her lap. . . . I handed a cup of water to the old woman, telling her to give it to the child, who grabbed it as if parched with thirst. As she swallowed it hurriedly, I saw it gush right out again, a bloodstained stream, through a hole in her neck.



FLORENCE ARPAN/HONWOJU
AND TWO KETTLE BANDS

"I went to a meeting at Wounded Knee in November when there was snow all over the ground. And as we were traveling, and we were on our way to the burial place, I could not help but think back, how my people wandered, were wandering trying to find shelter for themselves out in the cold. And that is what happened along Wounded Knee Creek, where they were massacred. When we were there to that meeting, I was standing there at the burial site. And there was a feeling there. There was a feeling that those that were there in the graves were trying to tell us something and a great deal to us at that time."



*Wounded Indian women and children were brought from Wounded Knee in army wagons to the Holy Cross Episcopal Church at Pine Ridge, where they were laid out, as seen here, on beds of hay stacked on the floor. A Christmas tree had been moved out of the way, but "joyous green garlands still wreathed windows and doors," wrote Elaine Goodale Eastman, an observer, in her book, *Sister to the Sioux*.*

"Heartsick, I went to . . . find the surgeon. . . . For a moment he stood there near the door, looking over the mass of suffering and dying women and children. . . . The silence they kept was so complete that it was oppressive. . . . Then to my amazement I saw that the surgeon, who I knew had served in the Civil War, attending the wounded . . . from the Wilderness to Appomattox, begin to grow pale. . . . 'This is the first time I've seen a lot of women and children shot to pieces,' he [said]. 'I can't stand it.' . . .

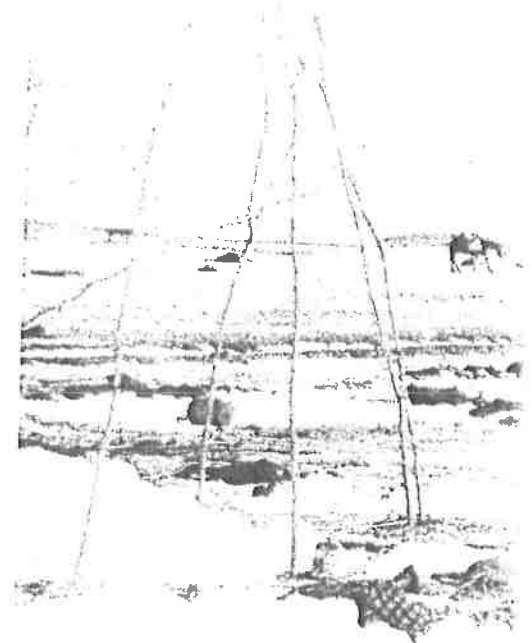
"Out at Wounded Knee, because a storm set in, followed by a blizzard, the bodies of the slain Indians lay untouched for three days, frozen stiff where they had fallen. Finally they were buried in a large trench dug on the battlefield itself. On that third day Colonel Colby . . . saw the blanket of a corpse move. . . . Under the blanket, snuggled up to its dead mother . . . he found a little suckling baby girl."

The massacre of the Sioux at Wounded Knee, two years short of the four hundredth anniversary of the landing of Columbus in the Western Hemisphere, was a final exclamation mark to the long story of the white man's conquest of what is now the United States. The promises of Wovoka's religion did not long survive what happened at Wounded Knee. For the invaders, the American West was won. The attack on culture—and the resistance against it—would continue. For the Indians, the words of the Oglala holy man Black Elk, who was present at Pine Ridge in 1890, have moved humanity through the years:

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. . . .

The nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.

The aftermath of Wounded Knee: Indian dead and the remains of their shot-up encampment and wagons in the stillness and snow that followed the massacre.



The last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth marked the low point for the Indian nations of North America. In Mexico and Central America, the descendants of the Aztec, Mayan, and other great pre-Columbian civilizations lay suppressed and mostly silent under foreign-dominated, imperialist dictatorships. In Canada, the Indian nations, broken into relatively small groups by the Dominion government to "diminish the offensive strength of the Indian tribes should they ever become restless," were scattered on more than fifteen hundred different reserves, living for the most part in poverty and neglect "out of sight and out of mind" of the non-Indian population. And in the United States, the Indian population was down from its pre-Columbian total of many millions to fewer than 250,000, and the traditional Indian, subjected to every pressure of coerced assimilation, had taken on the popular image of a "vanishing American."



MARIO DONZALEN/OGLALA
SIOUX

"We have lived under the white man's greed, the white man's deception, and we have suffered because of it. Our cultures have been assimilated, our lands have been stolen, and we're still here as a people, and we're fighting the same battles that have been fought for the last three hundred years, they're unresolved. And it's up to us to resolve them in a fair and honorable manner. Death is not a matter of fate, it's a matter of choice. And we have some choice of continuing to survive here on this planet as Indian people. That's our goal, and we're going to accomplish it. We're going to survive as a nation."





This 1891 photograph, titled Gathering Up the Dead, was taken after the battle of Wounded Knee as bodies were removed from the field where they fell.

OPPOSITE: Piegan tipis like these, painted in the traditions of the tribe's forefathers and here photographed by Edward Curtis, can still be seen on the northern plains, standing like hallmarks of the future, as well as the past, of the American Indian nations.

Since then, enormous changes have occurred. Population trends have reversed dramatically, and in the United States, for example, the Indians in 1990, a century after Wounded Knee, reached a total of approximately two million. Poverty, high unemployment, ill health, substandard housing, discrimination, racial and religious bigotry, homelessness, inadequate educational opportunities, stealing of land and natural resources, and other problems still afflict Indian nations everywhere. At the same time, after revitalized struggles during the twentieth century, many nations successfully defeated the white men's policies of forced assimilation and, reasserting pride in their histories, traditional cultures, and achievements as Indian peoples, took long steps forward on the road to restored self-determination, self-government, and sovereignty.

At the time of the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's landing, tribal leaders of the United States gathered in ceremony in front of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. They gave speeches not about the shattered dreams of the past nor the broken hoop of the present, but about new dreams, a mended hoop, and the possibilities of the next five centuries for spiritually strong and determined peoples who, in the face of every travail and oppression, survived. That, in essence, was the story of the 500 Nations. They ended with the following words:

We stand young warriors

in the circle

At dawn all storm clouds disappear

The future brings all hope and glory,

Ghost dancers rise

Five-hundred years.

But that is another story. . . .