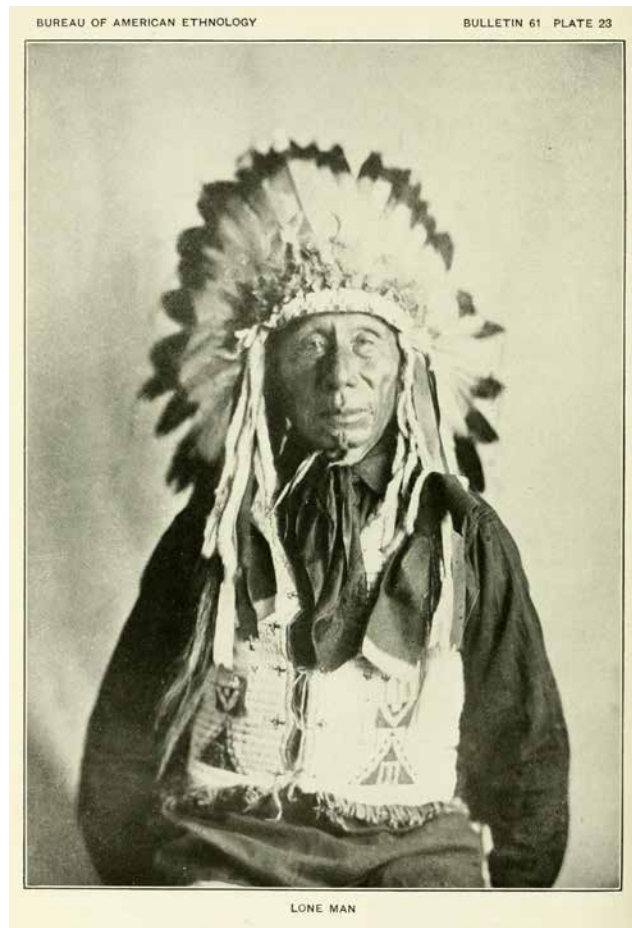


Testimony Regarding the Sun Dance

From Teton Sioux Music



Išnála Wičhá (Lone Man) said to the writer:

“When we heard that you had come for the facts concerning the Sun Dance, we consulted together in our homes. Some hesitated. We have discarded the old ways yet to talk of them is ‘sacred talk’ to us. If we were to talk of the Sun Dance there should be at least 12 persons present, so that no disrespect would be shown, and no young people should be allowed to come from curiosity. When we decided to come to the council, we reviewed all the facts of the Sun Dance and asked Wakan’ tanka that we might give a true account. We prayed that no bad weather would prevent the presence of anyone chosen to attend, and see, during all this week the sound of the thunder has not been heard, the sky has been fair by day and the moon has shone brightly by night, so we know that Wakan’ tanka heard our prayer.”

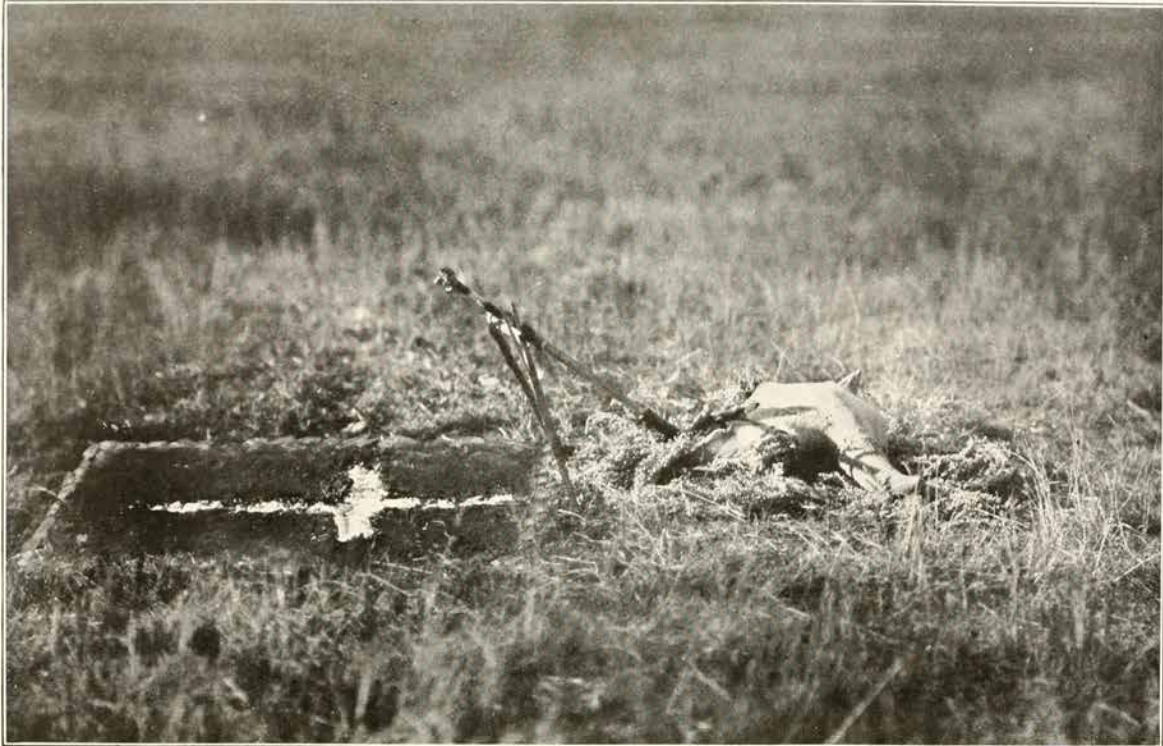
Seated in a circle, according to the old custom, the Indians listened to the statements concerning the Sun Dance as they had already been given to the writer. According to an agreement, there were no interruptions as the manuscript was translated. The man at the southern end of the row held a pipe, which he occasionally lit and handed to the man at his left. Silently, the pipe was passed from one to another, each man puffing it for a moment. The closest attention was given throughout the reading. A member of the white race can never know what reminiscences it brought to the silent Indians—what scenes of departed glory, what dignity and pride of race. After this, the men conferred together concerning the work.

That night until a late hour, the subject was discussed in the camp of Indians. The next morning, the principal session of the council took place. At this time, the expression of opinion was general and after each discussion a man was designated to state the decision through the interpreter. Sometimes one man and sometimes another made the final statement, but nothing was written down which did not represent a consensus of opinion. Throughout the councils, care was taken that the form of a question did not suggest a possible answer by the Indians.

On the afternoon of that day, the entire party drove across the prairie to the place, about a mile and a half from the Standing Rock Agency, where the last Sun Dance of these bands was held in 1882.

A majority of the Indians who went to the site of the Sun Dance with the writer were men who took part in the Sun Dance of 1882 and had not visited the place since that time. When nearing the place, they scanned the horizon, measuring the distance to the Missouri River and the buttes. At last they gave a signal for the wagons to stop, and, springing to the ground, began to search the prairie. In a short time, they found the exact spot where the ceremony was held. The scars were still on the prairie as they were on their own bodies. A depression about two inches in depth, still square in outline and not fully overgrown with grass, showed where the earth had been exposed for the *owánka wakǰáŋ* (“sacred place”). Only three or four feet away lay a broken buffalo skull. Eagerly, the Indians lifted it and saw traces of red paint upon it—could it be other than the skull used in that ceremony? They looked if perchance they might find a trace of the location of the pole. It should be about 15 feet east of the “sacred place.” There it was—a spot of hard, bare ground 18 inches in diameter.

One said, “Here you can see where the shade-house stood.” This shade-house, or shelter of boughs, was built entirely around the Sun Dance circle except for a wide entrance at the east. It was possible to trace part of it, the outline being particularly clear on the west of the circle; to the east, the position of the posts at the entrance was also recognized. The two sunken places (where the posts had stood) were about 15 feet apart, and the center of the space between them was directly in line with the site of the pole and the center of the “sacred place” at the west of it. More than 29 years had passed since the ceremony. It is strange that the wind had not sown seeds on those spots of earth.



CEREMONIAL GROUPING OF ARTICLES IN SUN DANCE

The little party assembled again around the buffalo skull. Mr. Higheagle gathered fresh sage, which he put beside the "sacred place;" he then laid the broken buffalo skull upon it and rested a Sun Dance pipe against the skull, with stem uplifted. He, too, had his memories. As a boy of six years, he was present at that final Sun Dance, wearing the Indian garb and living the tribal life. Between that day and the present lay the years of education in the white man's way. Some of the Indians put on their war bonnets and their jackets of deerskin with the long fringes. How bright were the porcupine quills on the tobacco bags! "Yes, it is good that we came here today." Pass the pipe from hand to hand in the old way. Jest a little. Yonder man tells too fine a story of his part in the Sun Dance—let him show his scars! Yet the memories, how they return!

One old man said with trembling lips: "I was young then. My wife and my children were with me. They went away many years ago. I wish I could have gone with them."

Suggested links:

Song 4 Song for Securing Fair Weather

Song 11 Song of Cutting the Sacred Pole

Song 22 Wankan Tanka Pity Me

Song 4 Song for Securing Fair Weather (2:51) <https://vimeo.com/722679537>

Song 11 Song of Cutting the Sacred Pole (2:51) <https://vimeo.com/718844991>

Song 22 Wankan Tanka Pity Me (4:47) <https://vimeo.com/724070299>