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Black Elk's Legacy

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Black Elk's Legacy

Hehaka Sapa or Black Elk (1863-1950) lived one of the most controversial lives of the 20th century. To most Americans, he is best-known from *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, as told through John G. Neihardt* (Neihardt, 1979). It chronicles his life as a warrior, wild-west show dancer, and medicine man (**photo right**) and, although called his life story, the book ends abruptly in 1890 at the Wounded Knee massacre on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, where Black Elk as a 27-year old was wounded.

All photographs are courtesy of Marquette University and from its Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records, unless noted otherwise.



Black Elk dressed as a distinguished elder, probably at the Duhamel's Sioux Indian Pageant, Black Hills, South Dakota, W. Ben Hunt, photographer, ca. 1939.

This image is accessible online in the Marquette University Digital Collections.

In 1929, Black Elk and the Duhamel family organized a pageant near the developing Mount Rushmore Monument. The pageant included short renditions of Lakota ceremonies and dances narrated by Black Elk to educate tourists about Lakota heritage. It is believed that Black Elk's evolving narration provided the basis for his last collaborative book, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, for which he was interviewed in 1947 and 1948.

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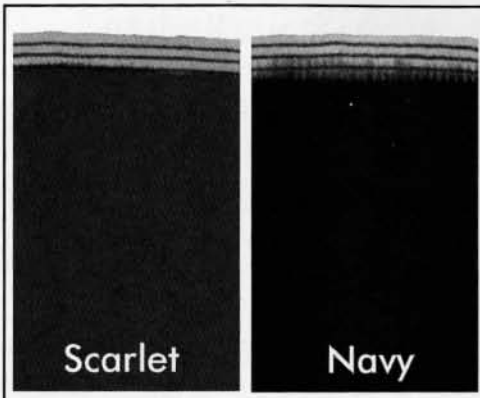
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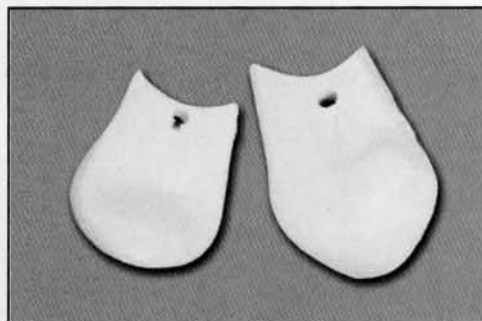
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Black Elk (far right wearing the crow belt or bustle) with Oglala grass dancers who danced at the Interior Roundup (rodeo), South Dakota, Ralph R. Doubleday, photographer, ca. 1901-1910.

From the St. Paul Mission (Yankton Reservation, South Dakota) Collection.

While others wore regalia in vogue for dancing at rodeos, pageants, and wild-west shows, Black Elk wore what was reminiscent of his wild-west show dancing, 1886-1887. Then, the crow belt or bustle was still regarded as regalia restricted to accomplished warriors and Black Elk was a veteran of the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

Doubleday became a prominent rodeo photographer whose career began in 1901 with visits to rodeo events in South Dakota and Wyoming, 1901-1910.

Black Elk endured death and sorrow, but was not defeated and without hope. In 1931, the story he told to Neihardt included the post-1890 life in which he found hope and meaning. While Neihardt omitted the chapter as unmarketable, Black Elk's letters and photographs provide a glimpse of that life, which reveals a profound and humble religious thinker who never knew that one-day he would become a Native American icon. Black Elk converted to Christianity, and like other converts, he struggled to reconcile Indian and Christian beliefs and traditions. Yet, he accepted and remained steadfast to Christianity without rejecting Lakota ways.

Charity resonated deeply in both traditions and Black Elk practiced it to the utmost at all times—he remained poor himself while giving generously to the people. In so doing, Black Elk simultaneously upheld the expectations common to both Lakota medicine men and elders and Christian

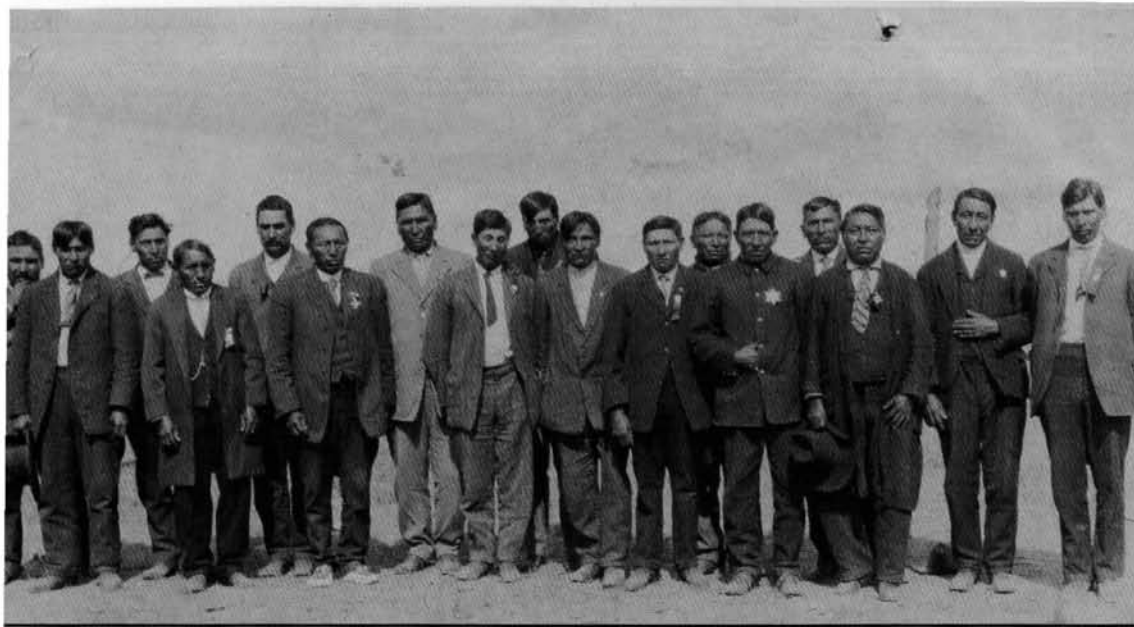
catechists and church society leaders. Ultimately, both Lakota and Christian ways molded his character and being.

Black Elk's Letters to the Lakota People

From 1907-1916, Black Elk wrote 15 letters that called on the Lakota-Dakota people to live good lives. The letters appeared in *Šinasapa Wocekiye Taeyanpaha*, a Lakota-Dakota language newspaper published monthly from Fort Totten, North Dakota, and distributed across five states. In them, Black Elk related his life experiences with references to Scriptures.

The following excerpts were selected from two letters, both of which Black Elk wrote in Manderson, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Reservation. But unlike *Black Elk Speaks*, in these letters his words were translated literally without aesthetic editing.

The first was written undated but published July 15, 1909,



Black Elk (sixth from left) and Oglala catechists at the Catholic Sioux Congress, Holy Rosary Mission, Pine Ridge, Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, 1911.

This image is accessible online in the Marquette University Digital Collections.

In 1907, Black Elk was appointed a catechist or teacher of Christian faith in recognition of his enthusiasm and excellent memory for reading Scripture in Lakota. However, as a profound religious thinker, Black Elk demonstrated his continued regard for Lakota ways as evidenced by wearing moccasins instead of shoes in this non-Indian context as evidenced in the above photograph.



Black Elk teaching Sicangu children with the "Two Roads" catechism, Rosebud Reservation, South Dakota, Reverend Eugene Buechel, S.J., photographer, 1920s. From the St. Francis Mission (Rosebud Reservation, South Dakota) Records.

During the 1840s, Indians and missionaries in Oregon had invented the Two Roads as a pictorial teaching device transcending

language barriers. It featured two parallel red and black roads symbolizing good and bad ways. The Two Roads became widely used across the United States and Canada and when Black Elk became a catechist in 1907, he too used it extensively as shown here. In doing so, Black Elk apparently synthesized and adapted the "Good Red Road" from Church to Lakota teachings.

and translated in 1987 by a fluent Lakota for Michael F. Steltenkamp, S.J., while he researched, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglalas*. When Black Elk wrote this letter, he was a traveling catechist proclaiming the Gospel.

I have seen a number of different people—the ordinary people living on this earth—the Arapaho, the Shoshoni, the Omaha, the tribe[s] living in California and Florida, the Rosebud, the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe, the Standing Rock, and our own, the Oglalas. The White men living in all these places—I have said prayers for their tribe. I'm really moved that I was able to travel to those places and meet people that are very friendly... We all suffer in this land. But let me tell you, God has a special place for us when our time has come.

The second was written on January 6, 1914, published February 15, 1914, and translated in 2002 by Paul Manhart, S.J., at the author's request. (Manhart, a linguist of Lakota, had edited Eugene Buechel's *Lakota Dictionary: Lakota-English / English-Lakota, 2nd edition*. In this letter, Black Elk reflected on the 1912 sinking of the R.M.S. Titanic. In so doing, he recalled his own experiences as a

trans-Atlantic steamship traveler when he was employed by shows nearly two decades earlier.

Men of the United States constructed a very large and fast boat. We made many millions of dollars, so that in a few nights one crossed the ocean. So, great rich men were alone able to do such, and poor men were able to get rich. It was because of great honors that they traveled. They said never would the boat sink.

Yes, those rich men believed it. They did not know what they would come up against. So, one day they struck against something, so that the boat they made sank from blindness, a difficulty that came over them, and their fright was great...

Yes, my Relatives, take a look. There was an accident due to a great honor. The trouble with the world's honor is that the trouble is up above. In worldly honor we twitch. You pay your debts up above when you are up against something. You do not see when you are struck by something large. You wander about, a ghost that will wander about and sinks. There is a grave sin here. Then you will say: "Lord, Lord!" You will say: "That is very troublesome, my Relatives." Desire to be close to our Savior. Desire to stay in our ship.



Black Elk wearing glasses and holding a book, St. Elizabeth Church, Oglala, Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, Reverend Joseph A. Zimmerman, S.J., photographer, ca. 1936.

Also accessible via the Marquette University Digital Collections online.

Black Elk never attended school, yet he was not illiterate. Black Elk became a self-taught linguist, scholar, and intellectual with some proficiency in reading and speaking Lakota, English, and presumably French. (50 years

earlier, while a show dancer in Europe, he lived for 6-months with a girlfriend in Paris. Presumably he had acquired some prior knowledge of French in South Dakota from Frenchmen married to Lakota women.) Black Elk avidly studied and interpreted the Scriptures in Lakota, which was recognized by his 1907 appointment as catechist, a position he served actively until disabled in 1933 by an accident with a horse-drawn wagon. It is believed that Black Elk's study as a Christian thinker contributed to his Lakota theology as well.

Ben Black Elk, son of Black Elk, at his father's gravesite, Manderson, South Dakota, Reverend Paul B. Steinmetz, S.J., photographer, ca. 1970-1971. From the Holy Rosary Mission/Red Cloud School (Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota) Records.

To insure accuracy, Black Elk used his son Ben to translate his words for *Black Elk Speaks* and *The Sacred Pipe*. In so doing, Ben learned about his father's medicine man practice for the first time. Later, Ben too, became a showman by dressing in traditional garb and posing for tourist photos near Mount Rushmore.



On the night of Black Elk's funeral wake, the sky danced with northern lights of unprecedented brilliance, thus fulfilling his prediction that a sign would mark his passing. Since then, *Black Elk Speaks* has been acclaimed and the life of this mystical man has inspired a plethora of books with diverse interpretations regarding his legacy and the intent of his teachings. Although Black Elk's tombstone gives 1858 as his birth year, scholars believe that 1863 is his correct birth year.

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Marquette University Digital Collections, ; the online Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions and St. Francis Mission digital collections includes several images with Black Elk that are searchable with the key-word, "Black Elk."

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About the Author

Mark Thiel is the archivist for Native American collections at Marquette University, author of *Indian Way* (a CD-Rom reference guide to Native American heritage), and a frequent contributor to *WHISPERING WIND Magazine*. He welcomes queries and comments and can be reached at ark.Thiel@Marquette.edu.

