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## The Sacred Black Hills An Ethnohistorical Review

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# THE SACRED BLACK HILLS

## AN ETHNOHISTORICAL REVIEW

LINEA SUNDSTROM

The Black Hills area is widely recognized as sacred in the context of traditional Lakota and Cheyenne belief systems. Questions arise, however, regarding the authenticity and historical depth of these beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Some researchers assert that the concept of the sacred Black Hills is little more than a twentieth century scheme to promote tourism or part of a legal strategy to gain the return of Black Hills lands to Lakota and Cheyenne tribal governments.<sup>2</sup> While many Lakotas and Cheyennes today express a strong spiritual link to the Black Hills,<sup>3</sup> some historians have questioned whether today's beliefs about the Black Hills

have historic precedents. Watson Parker questions whether the Lakotas could have developed a sacred geography in the relatively short time they occupied the Black Hills. Donald Worster concedes that the Black Hills are now widely regarded as sacred to the Lakota people, but asserts that the area was not viewed as holy ground prior to the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

The position that the Black Hills held little significance to Indians is most frequently based on two sources: Richard I. Dodge's *The Black Hills*, written in 1875, and Edwin Denig's *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, written in 1854.<sup>5</sup> Both assert that the Lakotas then living in the area made little use of the Black Hills, venturing in only to gather tipi poles. Dodge and Denig state that the Lakotas avoided the Black Hills because game was scarce, pasturage was insufficient for horses, and there were "superstitions" about evil spirits inhabiting the mountains. This information has been cited with little regard to the historical context in which it was compiled.

Denig reported that "much superstition is attached to the Black Hills by the Indian," incorrectly attributing this "superstition" to volcanic action causing smoke and loud noises

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in the interior mountains.<sup>6</sup> While later writers mentioned loud, booming noises in the Black Hills, there is no evidence for any recent volcanic activity in the area, and the phenomenon remains unconfirmed and unexplained. Denig's informants told him the noises were the groans of a Great White Giant condemned to lie under the mountains as punishment for intruding into the Lakotas' hunting ground and as a lesson to all whites to stay out of the area, a story clearly meant to scare whites away from the Black Hills. Denig himself had no personal interest in the opening of the Black Hills to white settlement, but seems merely to have been repeating what his informants told him.

The same cannot be said of Dodge. The thesis of his later book, *Our Wild Indians*, was that Native Americans entirely lacked morality and were something less than human, and the theme of *The Black Hills* was the need to get the area into the hands of whites who could extract wealth from the natural resources wasted under Indian occupation. He foresaw stock ranches, cities, and tourist hotels springing up in the country as soon as the "miserable nomads" could "be got rid of."<sup>7</sup>

In this context, Dodge quotes a Lakota named Robe Raiser, whom he had met with two mixed-blood men, all prospecting for gold on Rapid Creek.<sup>8</sup> According to Robe Raiser, Indians of his band entered the Black Hills only occasionally to hunt or cut tipi poles and usually avoided the area because it was the abode of spirits, had little game and many flies, was too rainy, was bad for horses, and had frequent violent thunderstorms. Dodge implies that other Indians confirmed Robe Raiser's information, but nowhere in his diary or book does he specifically mention speaking with any other Indian. Robe Raiser's comments, like those of Denig's informants, imply that the interior Black Hills were avoided at least in part because they were considered holy ground, "the abode of spirits."

Overall, both *The Black Hills* and *Our Wild Indians* are rife with error and should not be cited uncritically. For example, Dodge's state-

ment that the interior Black Hills contained no evidence of Indian habitation is now entirely refuted by more than 3000 archaeological sites recorded for this area.<sup>9</sup> Even Dodge's own diary and the report of the 1874 Black Hills Expedition specifically mention discovery of old Indian campsites in the Black Hills.<sup>10</sup>

Dodge's Black Hills diary is a study in self-contradiction. One passage describes "a great Indian trail as large as a wagon road." Another mentions seeing the remains of Indian camps "all along the day's route." Later, however, these observations are replaced with assertions that the area was never used except for gathering lodge poles.<sup>11</sup> The changes coincide with Dodge's recognition of the great potential of the Black Hills to white entrepreneurs, but whether they were truly coincidental is impossible to know. In alternately describing the Black Hills as void of evidence of Indian habitation and full of such evidence, Dodge seems to have made a distinction between the interior uplift and peripheral zones. In fact there is much less evidence for sacred places in the interior than in the outer edges of the Black Hills.

Neither Dodge nor Denig contradicts the assertion that the Black Hills were sacred to the Lakota people. The "superstition" they noted is simply a biased description of the Indians' religious beliefs about the area. In Dodge's Black Hills diary, he reports finding the site of a Medicine Lodge (Sun Dance) encampment on Castle Creek, well inside the western Black Hills.<sup>12</sup> If the Indians did not use the area for camps, it was not because the mountains lacked religious significance. Neither writer addressed the possibility that the Black Hills were sacred to earlier groups inhabiting the area.

From a more objective perspective, Donald Worster writes that the Lakotas did not mention anything about the sacredness of the Black Hills until the dawning of a religious revitalization movement in the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Worster implies that current views of the sacredness of the Black Hills are the product of this revitalization movement, which followed decades

of frustration in attempting to regain an economic foothold after the extinction of the bison herds that had been their mainstay and the forced removal of the Lakotas to non-arable lands. Worster notes that Lakota testimony before various treaty and claims commissions stressed the economic, not spiritual, value of the Black Hills and asserts that no documentary evidence before the 1970s suggests that the Black Hills were the Lakotas' sacred place.

The question of the sacredness, or lack thereof, of the Black Hills to Native American groups demands a more exacting view. The question must be rephrased: what portions of the area, if any, were considered sacred, when, and by whom?

Published ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts provide evidence of whether the Black Hills were considered sacred historically by various Native peoples or whether their "sacredness" is merely a product of a clever tourist promotion or legal strategy. Such information explores the historical depth of present-day traditions and beliefs and provides a framework for building more detailed understandings of the traditional or sacred landscape. Ethnographic and historic sources used here are generally limited to information collected at least fifty years ago, long before the 1970s and within the lifetimes of people who had enjoyed the freedom of movement, and concomitant geographic competence, of the pre-reservation era. In some instances, more recent information, such as James LaPointe's 1976 compilation of Lakota legends, is included when it is consistent with and supported by older references.<sup>14</sup>

#### LAKOTA SACRED PLACES

Historic and ethnographic sources indicate that both specific locations and specific kinds of places were sacred to the Lakotas. Specific locations in and near the Black Hills mentioned as sacred include Bear Lodge Butte (Devils Tower), Bear Butte, the Racetrack or Red Valley, Buffalo Gap, Craven Canyon,

Gillette Prairie, the Hot Springs-Minnekahta area, Inyan Kara Mountain, Harney Peak, Black Buttes, White Butte, and Rapid Creek Valley.

A historic Lakota map of the Black Hills shows most of these localities. Between 1890 and 1913, Amos Bad Heart Bull made an extensive series of drawings, interpreted and printed after his death, that record the history and traditions of the Oglala division of the Lakota alliance. His map of the Black Hills (Fig. 1) shows eight features of known religious significance. A yellow band surrounding the Black Hills is labeled *Ki Inyanka Ocanku* (The Racetrack). This refers to a circular depression surrounding the interior uplift, still known as the Racetrack or Red Valley. Other features shown and labeled on the map are: *Mato Tipi Paha* (Bear Lodge Butte or Devils Tower); *Hinyankagapa* (Inyan Kara Mountain); *Baha Sapa* (Black Buttes); *Re Sla* (Gillette Prairie); *Mato Baha* (Bear Butte); *Mini Kata* (Hot Springs); *Pte Tali Yapa* (Buffalo Gap); and *Miniluzan* (Rapid Creek).<sup>15</sup> Each of these features is discussed separately below.

Was Bad Heart Bull participating in a latter-day conspiracy to designate the Black Hills sacred land so that the Lakotas could demand their return? Such a conclusion ignores the historical context of the creation of the map. Bad Heart Bull made the map, and the rest of his pictographic history, simply to record the story of his people as tribal historians remembered it. He never attempted to publish or publicize his work, and few people outside his family knew of it until it was "discovered" in 1926, thirteen years after his death. His family, extremely reluctant to share the manuscript with outsiders, eventually agreed to let Helen Blish record and study the drawings and their notations. When Bad Heart Bull's sister died in 1947, the manuscript was interred with her.<sup>16</sup> Bad Heart Bull was hardly attempting to mislead whites about the religious significance of the Black Hills. Neither he nor Blish's Oglala informants identified the map specifically as a chart of sacred locales, although other information confirms the sacred nature of the

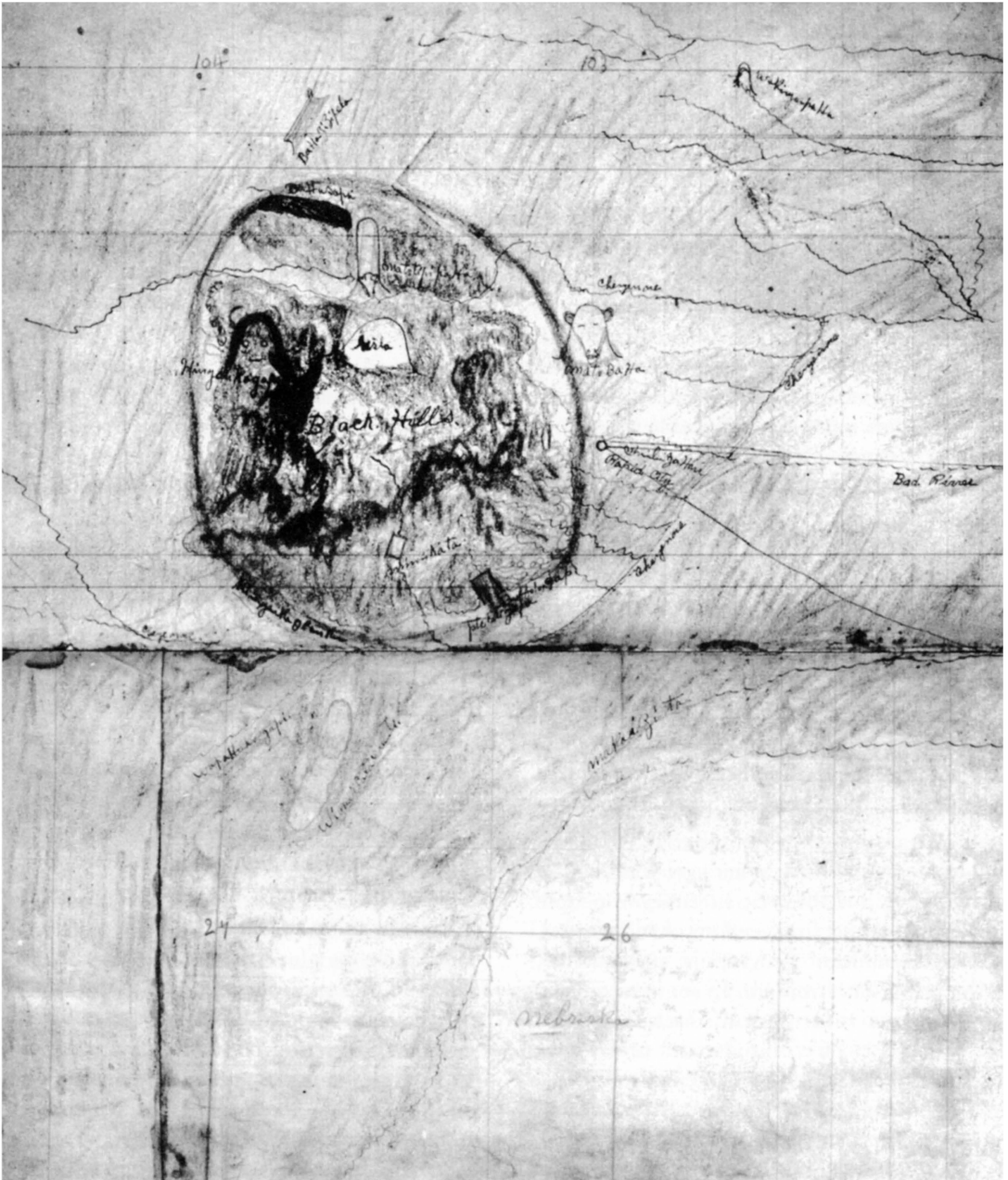


FIG. 1. Amos Bad Heart Bull's map of the Black Hills. Reproduced from *A Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux*, by Amos Bad Heart Bull, text by Helen H. Blish, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright © 1967 by the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright © renewed 1995 by the University of Nebraska Press.

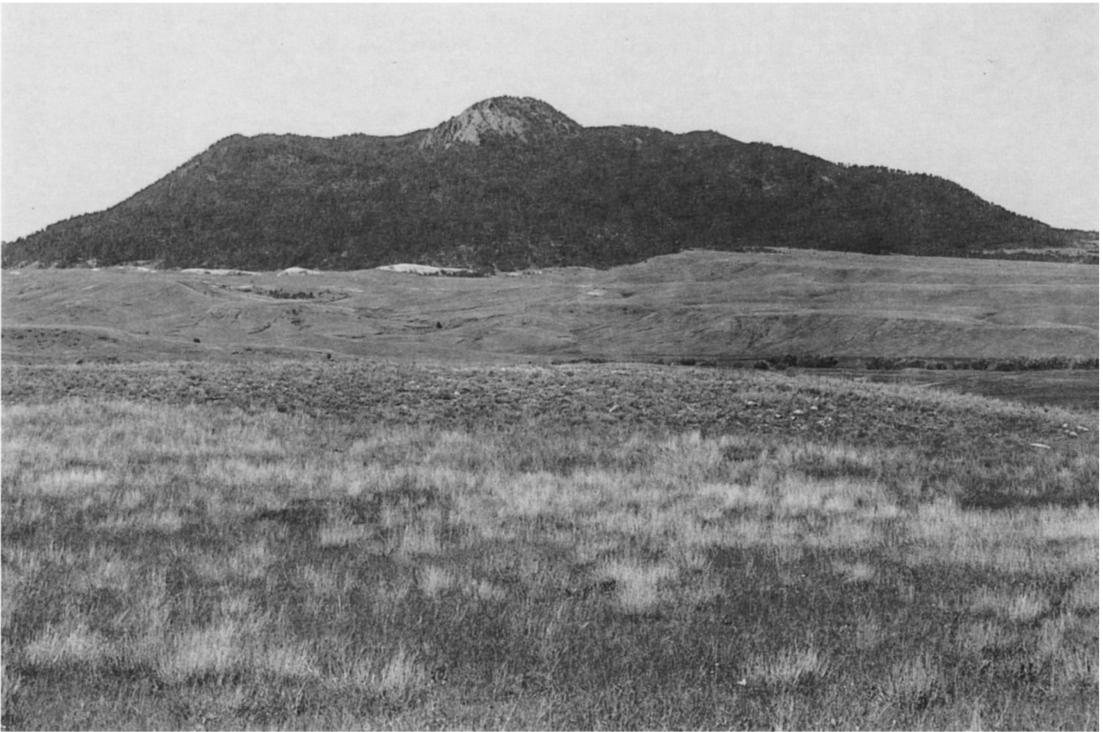


FIG. 2. *Inyan Kara, the Stone Creator, rises above the western Black Hills. It was sacred to the Lakotas and Cheyennes, and an important landmark for early non-Indian explorers in the Black Hills country. Photograph by Linea Sundstrom.*

features shown on the map. Besides being literally buried, the map was figuratively buried among the 408 drawings comprising the entire manuscript.

*Inyan Kara Mountain* (Fig. 2). Bad Heart Bull's written notation on the map identifies one peak as *Hinyankagapa*, which Blish translates as Ghost Butte.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Cheyenne informants told John Bourke in 1877, "Inyan Kara Peak they [the Lakotas] call *ihancaja-paja*, that is to say the hill where the ghosts live."<sup>18</sup> These terms are variants of *I<sup>nya</sup>n Kaga Pa*, (or in corrupted form, *Inyan Kara Butte*). Although they are consistent in drawing a connection between *Inyan Kara Mountain* and ghosts, the translations do not make sense.

The Lakota word for ghost is *wanagi* (the soul when separated from the body) or *wica nagi* (a person's ghost) or *wamaka nagi* (animal's ghost) or simply *nagi* (spirit).<sup>19</sup> *I<sup>nya</sup>n* means stone; *Kaga* refers to the action of creating or imitating; and *Pa* means peak, butte, or hill. The location of this butte on Bad Heart Bull's map, on the western edge of the Black Hills, west of Gillette Prairie and south of Black Buttes, confirms that *Inyan Kara* is represented.

The term *I<sup>nya</sup>n Kaga* can be translated several ways. *I<sup>nya</sup>n* refers both to rock and to a superior being from whose blood the earth and sky were created. The spirit *I<sup>nya</sup>n* literally bleeds dry and hardens into stone in creating the earth. In this sense *I<sup>nya</sup>n* is one of sixteen "aspects" of *Waka<sup>n</sup>Ta<sup>n</sup>ka* (Great Sacredness or

Great Mystery). *I<sup>ny</sup>a<sup>n</sup>* is one of four beings that existed prior to creation and is the creator of sky and earth.<sup>20</sup> *Kaga* means to make, create, or imitate. This same term is used for one who makes, creates, or imitates. *Kaga* also refers to the performance of a ceremony in which a spirit is evoked or imitated.<sup>21</sup> The name of this mountain thus has meaning on several levels. Translated as Stone Maker, the name may refer to the creation of the earth through *I<sup>ny</sup>a<sup>n</sup>*'s self-sacrifice—i.e., Stone creates [the world]. This would identify *Inyan Kara* as the place where creation began or ended or where creation is manifest in the visible features of the mountain.

On another level, the name refers to the geologic origin of the mountain. *Inyan Kara* is an igneous intrusive thrust up through the main ranges of the northern Black Hills. The semi-volcanic origin of the feature and resulting odd shape of the mountain is expressed as stone creating [itself]. An early translation of the place name is "the peak makes the mountain."<sup>22</sup> This seems to express the same idea; however, the term follows English, rather than Lakota, syntax, and thus is probably not correct. Lakota syntax indicates the phrase is "the stone makes" or "the stone is made"; the term *pa* simply means the name refers to a peak. A reporter accompanying the 1874 Black Hills Expedition translated the name as "The Mask."<sup>23</sup> The Lakota word for mask is *iteha*; thus, the idea of imitating or evoking an image, rather than a mask in the literal sense, is suggested here.

In the final sense of the term, *I<sup>ny</sup>a<sup>n</sup> Kaga* would refer to the performance of a ceremony in which *I<sup>ny</sup>a<sup>n</sup>* is invoked. According to a recent study of Lakota ethnoastronomy, Lakotas preparing for the Sun Dance first traveled to *Inyan Kara* to gather stones to be used in the purification (sweat bath) preceding the Sun Dance.<sup>24</sup> I have not found any historical references to this practice.

The name *I<sup>ny</sup>a<sup>n</sup> Kaga* thus can refer to the act of creation, to the creation of the particular feature, and perhaps to a ceremony through which this act was commemorated

and renewed, or to those conducting such a ceremony. The name may also refer to any combination of these.

*Harney Peak* (Fig. 3). There has been some confusion as to the identity of the mountain that Bad Heart Bull labeled *Hinyankagapa*.<sup>25</sup> A footnote to the text says that one informant spelled the name *Hinhan Kaga*. This indicates an entirely different name for the mountain, rather than just an alternative spelling. The word *Hi<sup>n</sup>ha<sup>n</sup>* means owl; the entire phrase might be translated Owl Maker Hill. This is one of the Lakota names for Harney Peak.

In one story in the Lakota Fallen Star myth cycle, the term Owl Maker (Owl Imitator) is used to refer to the evil spirit Double-Face. The people rescue a child taken by Double-Face in the guise of an owl-like monster. This event is said to have taken place at Owl Maker Butte.<sup>26</sup> Although the specific location is not given, Owl Maker Butte would translate to *Hi<sup>n</sup>ha<sup>n</sup> Kaga Pa*, the term supplied by Blish's informants for Harney Peak. Blish's informants apparently thought that the map showed Harney Peak, rather than *Inyan Kara*. The location of the feature on Bad Heart Bull's map is correct for *Inyan Kara*, but not plausible for Harney Peak, which is east, not west, of Gillette Prairie (*Re Sla* on Bad Heart Bull's map).

On the Bad Heart Bull map, *Inyan Kara* is pictured with horns and a human face. In Cheyenne tradition, this indicates a spirit being.<sup>27</sup> Horned humans were also sometimes drawn by the Lakotas to depict spirit beings.<sup>28</sup> The tradition of a ghost or evil spirit inhabiting either Harney Peak or *Inyan Kara*, or both, apparently originated with the Cheyennes. Blish's informants told her that Ghost Butte was the Cheyenne name for the mountain in question.<sup>29</sup> This term could either be a poor translation for "spirit being" or a correct translation for ghost. In the Cheyenne language, the same word, *mis tai*, is used for ghost and owl. In Cheyenne tradition ghosts are said to fly around at night like owls, preying on young children, and are said to make a sound like an

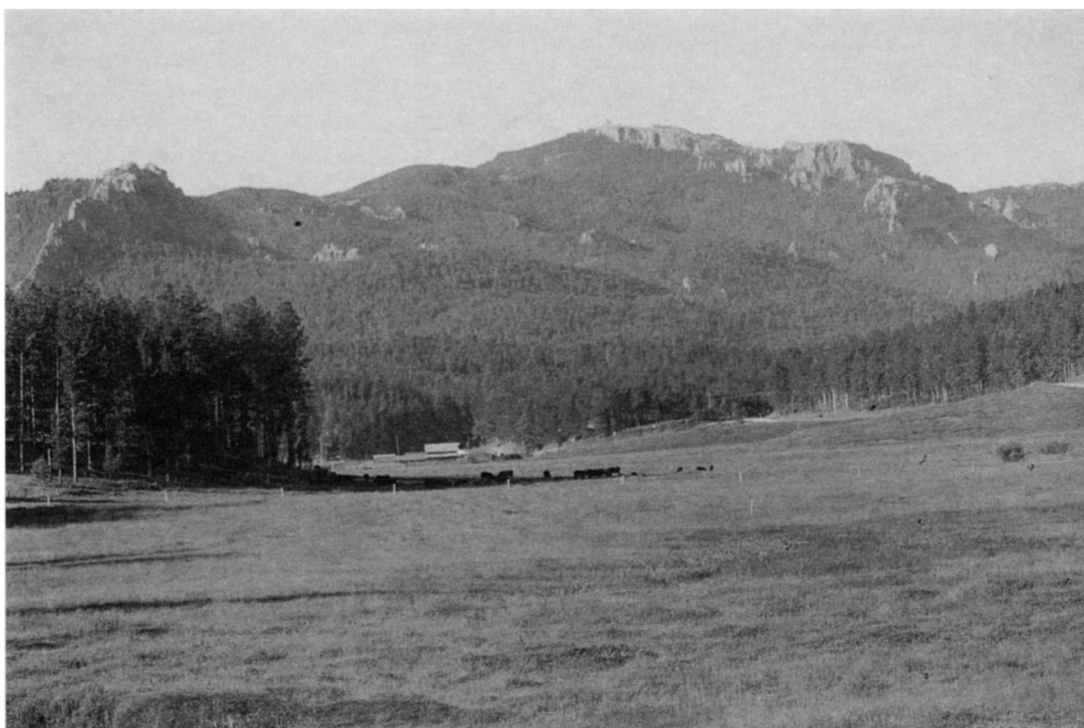


FIG. 3. *Harney Peak is the highest point east of the Rockies and marks the center of the granite ranges forming the heart of the Black Hills.* Photograph by Linea Sundstrom.

owl hooting. Such ghosts occupy high peaks.<sup>30</sup> The Lakotas, by contrast, use separate terms and concepts for ghosts and owls but sometimes call the old woman who guards the Ghost Road (Milky Way) *Hi<sup>n</sup>ha<sup>n</sup> Kaga* or Owl Maker.<sup>31</sup> It seems plausible that the Lakota name for Harney Peak, Owl Maker [or Owl Imitator] Butte, is a translation of the Cheyenne word Ghost [or Owl] Hill. A Cheyenne story tells of a girl who is captured by a huge Ghost Owl and eventually escapes to a “high mountain” with the aid of some hawk people.<sup>32</sup> This may refer to Harney Peak, but unlike the Lakota version of the story, no specific place-name is given. It does, however, suggest that the mountain may have been incorporated into the mythology of both groups.

Another source provides a sacred term for Harney Peak. Nicholas Black Elk made several references to Harney Peak in telling his life story to John Neihardt in 1931, always referring to it as “the center.” In Lakota theology the center of the universe could be (and was) anywhere.<sup>33</sup> One established a center by making an altar or praying with the sacred pipe to the seven directions—south, west, north, east, up, down, and center. In Black Elk’s account, Harney Peak was the center both because it marked the center of the Lakotas’ territory at that time and because it was the center from which he had received instruction and knowledge of the four directions of the universe. The term translated as “the center of the earth” was part of a sacred language,



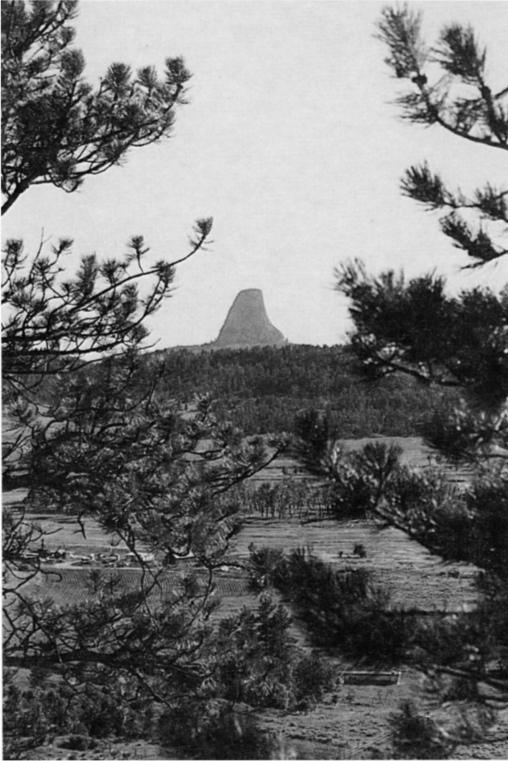


FIG. 4. *The Bear Lodge Butte (Devil's Tower) is revered in Kiowa, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Lakota tradition. It is remembered in oral traditions as the place where the rock saved the children from a monster bear. Photograph by Linea Sundstrom.*

distinct from everyday speech and used in religious discourse.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the term refers as much to the religious significance of Harney Peak to Black Elk as to its physical location. It is clear, however, that Black Elk referred specifically to the Black Hills as the center or heart of the earth and to Harney Peak as the center of that center.<sup>35</sup>

*Bear Lodge Butte (Devils Tower)* (Fig. 4). Bad Heart Bull shows a feature in the Black Hills that unmistakably represents Devils Tower, despite a somewhat distorted geographic placement. I have used the name for this feature, the Bear Lodge, that was used in common by Lakotas, Cheyennes, Arikaras, Arapahos, and Crows.<sup>36</sup> This name is indi-

cated pictographically on the Bad Heart Bull map by showing a bear's face at the base of the butte and is preserved in the adjacent portion of the Black Hills, known as the Bear Lodge Range. The name refers to an old myth, widely told on the northern Plains, about the formation of both Bear Lodge Butte and the Black Hills. As a girl and seven brother helpers attempt to escape from a monstrous bear, the Black Hills rise up as a barrier between them and their pursuer. The Bear's Lodge is formed when the girl and her seven helpers pray to the rock to rise up and save them from the bear. From the top of the towering rock, the people rise up to the sky to dwell there as the stars of the Big Dipper or Pleiades. (See discussion of Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache traditional beliefs, below.)

Few historic Lakota versions of this story were recorded. One version, collected both historically and recently, refers to two boys, who are set upon by a great bear and run to the rock for refuge. The butte is formed as the rock rises up carrying the boys to safety. In another version, collected in 1933, the youngest of seven brothers goes to rescue his sister-in-law from the leader of a den of monster bears. All eight escape by praying to a rock that rises to become Bear Lodge Butte.<sup>37</sup> Unlike the Kiowa, Cheyenne, Arikara, and Arapaho versions of the story, the older Lakota texts do not associate the feature with the Big Dipper or the Pleiades. The Lakotas did make a connection between Bear Lodge Butte and stars—one of their principal constellations was known as *Mato Tipila* or the Bear Lodge.<sup>38</sup> In this case, it represents the butte itself, not the people who escaped from the great bear.

In addition to its mythological significance, some Lakotas believed Bear Lodge Butte to be an earth center (see discussion of Harney Peak) and the place from which the Great Spirit scattered game animals to provide food for them.<sup>39</sup> Some Lakotas today associate Bear Lodge Butte with their Sacred Calf Pipe,<sup>40</sup> but I could find no written historical precedent for this belief.



FIG. 5. *Sundance Mountain was a fasting site overlooking the traditional Sun Dance grounds along the Redwater River and Sundance Creek in the northwestern Black Hills. Photograph by Linea Sundstrom.*

*Sundance Mountain* (Fig. 5). Sundance Mountain is not shown as a separate feature on Bad Heart Bull's map but is known from other sources to have been a Lakota sacred site. According to Nicholas Black Elk, the Belle Fourche River was referred to as the Sun Dance River "in olden times" because it flowed near the old Sun Dance grounds and was only later referred to as the northern branch of the Good [Belle] River.<sup>41</sup> A stream running through the Red Valley between Bear Lodge Butte and the Black Hills proper is still known as Sundance Creek. The importance of the traditional Sun Dance ground is also reflected in the name Sundance, Wyoming, and nearby Sundance Mountain. An account of the area around Sundance Mountain, written in 1886,

refers to it as "a summer rendezvous of the Sioux who came [t]here to hunt, gather berries, and hold their sun dance."<sup>42</sup>

One reach of Sundance Creek, known as Medicine Flat Creek, runs through the Red Valley just east of Sundance Mountain, between the Bear Lodge range and the Black Hills proper. This name is a translation of *Wapiya Oblaye I<sup>n</sup>ya<sup>n</sup>*,<sup>43</sup> or "plain of the rocks that heal [or make fortunate]," and refers to porous rocks believed to have healing properties. This connection between porous rock and healing is confirmed by the English and Lakota names of another sacred site, *I<sup>n</sup>ya<sup>n</sup> Oka Toka*, or Medicine Rock State Park in southeastern Montana.<sup>44</sup> The Lakota name refers to porous rock while the English name

indicates the site was recognized as a place of healing.

*Black Buttes.* Bad Heart Bull's map includes the Black Buttes, just northeast of Inyan Kara in the Bear Lodge range, but no interpretation of this feature appears in the accompanying text.<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to track down any specific ethnographic or ethnohistoric references to this feature, because its Lakota name, *Paha Sapa*, is one of the terms applied to the Black Hills as a whole. An older term, *He Sapa*, also means Black Mountains and refers less ambiguously to the Black Hills.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, their presence on Bad Heart Bull's map suggests that Black Buttes bore a traditional significance.

*Bear Butte.* On the eastern edge of the Black Hills, Bad Heart Bull drew a butte in the form of a bear's head. Bear Butte (*Mato Paha*) is an important Lakota holy site, an area used for ceremonies and individual prayers,<sup>47</sup> including the *Ha<sup>n</sup>blecheya* (Crying for a Vision), prayers for fertility, and prayers of remembrance. During such prayers it was traditional to place stones or other objects in the forks of trees on the butte<sup>48</sup> in remembrance of the ancestors, whose spirits were believed to congregate at the sacred mountain.<sup>49</sup> Because of its importance as a holy site for various groups, Bear Butte was traditionally considered neutral ground. The various divisions of the Lakota nation held a council there in 1857 to discuss the incursion of whites into the Black Hills country.<sup>50</sup> Bear Butte appears to have been included in a set of seven ceremonial sites (Star People Villages) that corresponded to constellations.<sup>51</sup> Some Lakotas today associate the Sacred Calf Pipe, their holiest object, with Bear Butte, but this belief may lack historical precedent.<sup>52</sup>

*Rapid Creek Valley.* The inclusion of Rapid Creek (*Mnilusahan*) on Bad Heart Bull's map suggests that it, too, had special significance for the Lakotas. According to James LaPointe, Rapid Creek was a favorite winter camping

ground because it did not freeze in winter and game and shelter were abundant in the creek valley. LaPointe ties a Fallen Star myth to this area, suggesting that it may have had religious significance. In the 1940s, Nicholas Black Elk also related a Fallen Star story linked to Rapid Valley.<sup>53</sup>

Black Elk's narrative about Fallen Star also refers to a place called *He Ska* or White Buttes, located north of the Black Hills.<sup>54</sup> This probably was either the White Butte near the town of the same name in Perkins County, South Dakota, or the White Butte in nearby Slope County, North Dakota, both outside the Black Hills proper. The latter site is revered by the Hidatsas as one of the buttes associated with Earthnaming rites.<sup>55</sup>

*Hot Springs.* Bad Heart Bull indicated the location of an area of hot springs in the southern Black Hills portion of his map. The identification of Hot Springs (*Mnikahta*) as a sacred locale is supported by a more recent statement by Stella Swift Bird:

Hot Springs was called holy water or holy place. When people got sick they went there to drink the holy water. They drank four times and each time it had a different taste. They drank four mouthfuls and prayed.<sup>56</sup>

James LaPointe also collected recent Lakota beliefs concerning the warm springs of the southern Black Hills. According to his informants, the term *Mni awoblu makoce* (land of bubbling waters) was applied to this region of the Black Hills. The area was highly regarded both for its abundant plant and animal resources and healing waters and for its religious significance.

The Lakotas say these lands belonged to the "underground people," highly intelligent beings with supernatural powers, who inhabited subterranean lands. . . . Legends say these people bred game animals for human consumption and kept perpetual fires ablaze to heat the waters that flow up to the

surface, thus keeping the flowers in bloom and the medicinal shrubs growing the year round.”<sup>57</sup>

These beliefs tied the warm springs area to the underground nation and the perpetuation of the buffalo herds, but I have found no written confirmation that these beliefs date before 1970.

*The Racetrack.* A ring of low relief surrounding the interior Black Hills is shown on Bad Heart Bull’s map as *Ki Inyanka Ocanku*, the Racetrack. This valley is still known by that name, taken from an origin story known as the Great Race.<sup>58</sup> The four-leggeds and two-leggeds race entirely around the Black Hills to determine which will eat the other. The earth and rocks there turn red from the blood flowing from the exhausted racers’ mouths and feet. The two-leggeds win, establishing that people will thereafter eat bison instead of being eaten by them. This event established order in the universe. It accounts for the beginning of the Sun Dance and the use of the bow and arrow. All the Lakota versions of the story of the Great Race refer specifically to the Black Hills and to the Racetrack.

Eagle Shield further explained the significance of the Racetrack in terms of the Lakota Crow-Owners Warrior Society. Interestingly, he treated the animals’ use of the Racetrack as an ongoing event, not as something from the remote past.

The reason why the Black Hills were so long unknown to the white man was that Wakantanka [Great Spirit or Great Mystery] created them as a meeting place for the animals. The Indians had always known this and regarded the law of Wakantanka concerning it. By this law they were forbidden to kill any of the animals during their great gatherings. In the Black Hills there is a ridge of land around which is a smooth, grassy place called the “race-course.” This is where the animals have the races, during their gatherings. Even small animals like

the turtle are there. The crow is always first to arrive, and the other birds come before the animals, while insects and creatures like the frog travel slowly and arrive last. Sometimes it takes 10 years for all the animals to arrive, as they come from long distances and camp whenever winter overtakes them.<sup>59</sup>

Although the Racetrack is less well known than many of the other purported sacred sites in the Black Hills, it certainly is of primary importance, historically, as the place where order was established and the Sun Dance was begun.

*Buffalo Gap* (Fig. 6). Bad Heart Bull identified a gate-like figure at the southeastern edge of the Black Hills as *Pte Tali Yapa*, the Buffalo Gap or Buffalo Gate. As the name indicates, Buffalo Gap was the place where the great bison herds entered the Black Hills in the fall and came out again in the spring. It was also considered a gateway into the interior Black Hills for Lakota people as they sought winter quarters in the shelter of the mountains.<sup>60</sup> A more recently collected story concerns the formation of the Buffalo Gap through the action of countless herds of bison passing through the area after emerging from Wind Cave.<sup>61</sup>

*Upland Prairies.* Bad Heart Bull’s map includes a feature labeled *Re Sla*, referring to an upland prairie or “bald,” more commonly written *Pe Sla*. I could find no other historic references to this place, with one possible exception. In Black Elk’s version of the Fallen Star myth cycle, the hero is traveling in the Black Hills country when he comes to a flat place, the home of Thunder-beings.<sup>62</sup> Since the central Black Hills—unlike the lowland prairies—were often associated with the Thunders, this hints that Gillette Prairie was the place Fallen Star visited. Nothing in the story permits a definite identification, however.

Some Lakotas today associate the three upland prairies—Reynolds Prairie (Fig. 7), Gillette Prairie, and Danby Park—with a



FIG. 6. *The Buffalo Gap, a natural pass through the sandstones that ring the Black Hills, is referred to in Cheyenne and Lakota traditions about the Great Race and the emergence of the buffalo from Wind Cave.* Photograph by Linea Sundstrom.

spring ritual known as “welcoming back all life in peace.”<sup>63</sup> The largest of these, Gillette Prairie, was known as *Pe Sla* (Bald Place).

*Other locations.* Several other locations considered sacred by some Lakotas today are not included in Bad Heart Bull’s map. Wind Cave is sacred to Lakotas today who recognize it as the place from which *Tokahe* (First Man) emerged from the underworld to bring wisdom and power to the Lakota people through his teachings.<sup>64</sup> *Washu’ Niya*, the breathing hole, is the Lakota name for this feature. In other contexts, the cave is also seen as a doorway to the underworld. Some view the cave as the place from which the buffalo and other animals periodically emerge from the underworld to replenish the herds. A story published in 1951 relates that the cave was the home of

a sacred white buffalo bull, while a later tradition tells of a Lakota man named *Taopi Gli*, who eloped with a maiden from the underworld nation and thereby ensured the prosperity of his people.<sup>65</sup>

A creation story collected around the turn of the century explains that *Tokahe* appeared as the first messenger from the world of the sacred beings and taught the people how to be human. He gave them the concept of religion and taught them about the world of the sacred mysteries, how to heal sickness, and how to seek visions.<sup>66</sup> He brought the Buffalo Ceremony celebrated at a girl’s coming of age. Although this version does not link *Tokahe* to Wind Cave, he is said to have emerged from the underworld and eventually to have returned there. It is clear from LaPointe and Powers that these events are associated with



FIG. 7. The unforested rolling uplands seen in the center of this photograph are Reynolds and Gillette prairies. These are shown on the *Bad Heart Bull* map as Pe Sla, the Bare Place, a place associated with the return of spring. Photograph by Linea Sundstrom.

Wind Cave in the minds of traditional Lakotas today, but the age of this tradition is not known.<sup>67</sup>

When mankind first came upon the world, they did not know how to live so as to please the Gods. Therefore the Gods sent *Toka*, one of the *Pte* (Holy Buffalo) people who dwell in the regions under the world, to teach them. They did as *Toka* bade them and thus established their customs, their usages, and their ceremonies. *Toka* chose two of the people and gave into their charge the ceremonies that should be done according to the will of the Gods, and he taught them how to know and speak the wishes of the Gods. He told them the sacred mysteries so that they would have greater authority and powers than any which mankind

could give them. *Toka* bade them teach this lore to those only who were worthy and acceptable to the Gods. He stayed with the people until they lived aright, and then he went from among them. Thus *Toka* established the order of holy men and they alone commune with the Gods and speak their will.<sup>68</sup>

Craven and Red Canyons, in the southern Black Hills, are recognized today as sacred locales, based on the presence of rock art there.<sup>69</sup> Although the old name is no longer remembered, this is probably the place referred to by Nicholas Black Elk:

There is a place in the Black Hills, also on the Little Big Horn, a bank of solid inscriptions that only a medicine man can read. It

is a mystery [i.e., holy]. There is one in the Black Hills that only a medicine man can read (pictograph). We don't know who wrote it, but a medicine man can decode it and get the meaning. We would camp and when we came back there would be more writing.<sup>70</sup>

Another Lakota, John Around Him, provided a similar account at a later date:

Up there in the Black Hills somewhere, I don't know where, a long time ago there was a piece of rock—a bank or something—the people went there every year. Every year there would be a different picture on the rock. Nobody knew who put the picture on the rock, but if there is going to be a war within the next year, there will be a picture of people laying there. That shows that there is going to be a war. If they go there and see pictures of buffalo and pictures of drying racks where they hang the meat to dry, if they see that, then they'll have a good year. Plenty to eat.<sup>71</sup>

A large panel of rock art in Craven Canyon may be of Lakota origin. It has many similarities to Lakota picture-writing, but cannot be directly “read” like other pictographic art.<sup>72</sup> Another possibility is that the passage refers to the Pringle Pictograph site, 39CU70, an isolated rock art site containing many triangle designs and a few other painted designs. Its location, next to a spring and below a tall granite outcrop high in the Black Hills, suggests that it was used in a ritual context. A third rock art site, a panel of red drawings on the back of a small rock shelter in the bluffs overlooking the Cheyenne River, contains designs similar to those at Craven Canyon and the Pringle Pictograph. These three sites are stylistically similar to each other but are different from other Black Hills rock art.<sup>73</sup>

Marie McLaughlin identifies a “mysterious butte” with a cave in it as a mystical or sacred site. Based on the description of the cave and a Lakota drawing of its rock art that accompa-

nies the story, I believe this legend refers to Medicine Creek Cave in the Bear Lodge range or to Ludlow Cave in the Cave Hills north of the Black Hills. The drawing reveals that the cave contained representations of bison, elk, deer, antelope, and mountain sheep heads, as well as a large number of hoofprints and a few anthropomorphic figures. These correspond fairly well to the rock art recorded from Medicine Creek Cave.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, the story refers to a drawing of a shield with an eagle or Thunderbird on it and many offerings, which fit better with Ludlow Cave in the northern Cave Hills.<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately, most of the rock art once present in Ludlow Cave was destroyed before it could be recorded.

Two Lakota sources refer to Sylvan Lake as a holy place.<sup>76</sup> These would seem to be anachronistic, because the lake did not exist until construction of a dam in 1892, but a more careful reading suggests that the place referred to is actually in the deep valley downstream of the lake. Here several natural pools are formed in the granite rocks over which the stream flows. One of the overlooking rocks resembles a human, identified in a story collected for the South Dakota Writers Project as a stately young woman, sent by the spirits to guard the pools from animals who might dirty the waters needed by the people in times of drought. According to an account given between 1928 and 1930 by Sitting Bull's nephews, One Bull and White Bull, the Hunkpapa Lakota leader received a vision near the present Sylvan Lake, in which he saw what looked like a man in the rocks above the pools and he heard singing. He climbed up to investigate and saw that it was an eagle. It flew away, but Sitting Bull remembered that it sang: “My father has given me this nation; in protecting them I have a hard time.”<sup>77</sup> This song meant that Sitting Bull was to devote his life to protecting his people.

*The Black Hills Area in Visions.* The Black Hills were important as a place where powerful visions were received. One of the great pieces of Lakota religious literature is the vision of the Oglala holy man, Black Elk, as

related to John G. Neihardt in the 1930s. Neihardt presented Black Elk's vision in *Black Elk Speaks*. Later, in *The Sixth Grandfather*, Raymond J. DeMallie reproduced the actual transcripts of Black Elk's teachings as Neihardt collected them. Black Elk's teachings are too long and complex to relate here and are easily accessible elsewhere. Suffice it to say that the holy spirits transported Black Elk to Harney Peak, the center of the world, to receive their teachings. From this center Black Elk traveled in his vision to the north, south, east, and west edges of Lakota territory, always returning to Harney Peak.

Less well known is the vision of Brown Hat, also known as Battiste Good, a Lakota historian born about 1822. Brown Hat related his *Ha<sup>n</sup>blecheya* as follows:

In the year 1856, I went to the Black Hills and cried, and cried, and cried [i.e., prayed for a vision], and suddenly I saw a bird above me, which said: "Stop crying; I am a woman, but I will tell you something: My Great-Father, Father-God, who made this place, gave it to me for a home and told me to watch over it. He put a blue sky over my head and gave me a blue flag to have with this beautiful green country. My Great-Father grew, and his flesh was part earth and part stone and part metal and part wood and part water; he took from them all and placed them here for me, and told me to watch over them. I am the Eagle-Woman who tell you this.

"The whites know that there are four black flags of God; that is, four divisions of the earth. He first made the earth soft by wetting it, then cut it into four parts, one of which, containing the Black Hills, he gave to the Dakotas, and, because I am a woman, I shall not consent to the pouring of blood on this chief house (or dwelling place)—that is, the Black Hills. The time will come that you will remember my words, for after many years you shall grow up one with the white people." She then circled round and

round and gradually passed out of my sight. I also saw prints of a man's hands and horse's hoofs on the rocks [referring to rock art], and two thousand years, and one hundred millions of dollars. I came away crying, as I had gone. I have told this to many Dakotas, and all agree that it meant that we were to seek and keep peace with the whites.<sup>78</sup>

Recollections of Lakota people indicate that the Black Hills were frequently used for the individual vision quest. According to Frank Kicking Bear, his grandfather, Chagla, learned ritual and songs of the Sun Dance from a vision received in the Black Hills. Stella Swift Bird recalled six places where her grandfather, Fast Thunder, had fasted: one in the buttes above Beaver Creek in Nebraska, one at Scottsbluff, one in Montana, one in the Black Hills, one in North Dakota, and one on top of Bear Butte, "always on the highest butte he could find."<sup>79</sup> The renowned Oglala holy man Chips prayed in the Black Hills in 1874.<sup>80</sup> Peter Bordeaux related an account of huge eagles visiting a vision seeker in the Black Hills:

There were some white eagles, twice as large as the ordinary eagles, that increased and existed in the air and space above the vast country and nestled on the land of the Black Hills all the time prior to the year of 1875. A warrior observed the ceremony of the fast on the top of one of the Black Hills; on his third day, one of the said white eagles flew down and landed on the altar hill by the fasting warrior and talked to him in plain Sioux language. It said that the white men will invade your Black Hills in the very near future and will take over the resources under their possession and give you a bad time. Then the white eagles relinquished their roaming from the vast country of the Black Hills.<sup>81</sup>

A much earlier account of vision-seeking in the Black Hills was given by One Eye, the brother of Bull Bear. In 1846, he told Francis



Parkman that he had fasted in a cave in the Black Hills as a boy, or approximately 1782.<sup>82</sup>

While a vision might be sought at any secluded place, the repeated use of a particular place for vision seeking suggests a more specific religious significance for that place. Brown Hat's vision is perhaps the strongest ethnographic evidence that the Black Hills area as a whole was considered sacred ground. In this vision, the Eagle Woman told Brown Hat that the Great Father gave the Black Hills to the Lakotas as their dwelling place.<sup>83</sup> Nicholas Black Elk also considered the Black Hills the "heart of the earth" and the promised land of the Lakotas, based on the story of the Great Race.<sup>84</sup>

#### CHEYENNE SACRED PLACES

Bear Butte, *Nowah'wus*, is the most sacred location in the traditional Cheyenne belief system.<sup>85</sup> Known as Sacred Mountain Where People Are Taught, or Medicine Pipe Mountain, Bear Butte was central to many Cheyenne beliefs and ceremonies. "The old Proto-Tsistsistas and Tsistsistas [Cheyenne] concept of the spirit lodge derives from the configuration of the sacred mountain [Bear Butte] that itself is a spirit lodge and that is associated with *maheonoxsz*, the sacred caves, and *heszevoxsz*, the underground caverns where the animal spirits reside."<sup>86</sup> This belief is mirrored in the sweat lodge as a medium of renewal. Cheyenne sacred tradition involves a series of stories whereby the people are saved from crises by receiving sacred knowledge at Bear Butte. When the Cheyennes were starving, Sweet Medicine and Erect Horns brought them prosperity and cultural identity from the spirit beings residing within Bear Butte. Bear Butte as the source of the people's power and beliefs appears to be both old and fundamental to Cheyenne religion. The connection between Bear Butte and the Cheyenne people is very complex and intricate.

Today, Cheyenne pilgrims climbing *Nowah'wus* see the marks of the past all

around them. Circles of rocks form the tipi rings of older camp sites. An eagle-catching pit is near. High on the butte itself, that great bird so close to Thunder still nests. Circling above the stone heights he watches the fasters down below. A spring marks the place from which the people gathered blue clay to make the sky color used in decorating the rawhide parfleches. And to the southwest lies the spot where the Buffalo People themselves first gave the Suhtaio the Sacred Medicine Lodge, the Sun Dance.

This is the heart of the Cheyenne sacred places and sacred ways. This is where the All Father and the Sacred Powers themselves gave Sweet Medicine the four Sacred Arrows.<sup>87</sup>

In his discussion of Lakota beliefs about the Black Hills, Donald Worster states that the Black Hills were not thought of as holy ground by earlier generations. "They [the Black Hills] were not exactly their equivalent of Mecca."<sup>88</sup> This statement certainly does not apply to the Cheyennes and Bear Butte. During Cheyenne ceremonies, villages, ceremonial structures, and supplicants were often oriented to Bear Butte.<sup>89</sup> Like the Muslim praying toward Mecca, religious Cheyennes were constantly aware of their location in relation to the sacred mountain. John Bourke specifically stated in 1877 that "Bear Butte, at the northeast corner of the Black Hills, was once a sort of a Mecca for the Cheyennes" where they fasted, prayed, and honored the spirits of their dead.<sup>90</sup> The location of various Cheyenne bands during their seasonal movements mirrored their arrangement around Bear Butte during gatherings for ceremonies.<sup>91</sup>

The Racetrack, Buffalo Gap, Sundance Mountain, and Bear Lodge Butte (Devils Tower) are associated with Cheyenne traditions regarding the Great Race and the origins of the Sun Dance. The story of the Great Race plays an important role in Cheyenne cosmology, especially in establishing order among living things.<sup>92</sup> As in the Lakota version of the

tradition, the story is closely linked to the Racetrack.<sup>93</sup> Two versions of the story place the beginning and ending point at Buffalo Gap.<sup>94</sup> Other versions refer to the first Sun Dance near Bear Lodge Butte and Sundance Mountain.<sup>95</sup>

The Cheyenne name for Bear Lodge Butte is *Nakoevë*, Bear Peak. It was revered in Cheyenne tradition as the place where the girl was saved from the giant spirit bear and is linked to the constellations Pleiades and the Big Dipper.<sup>96</sup>

Like the Lakotas, the Cheyennes believed rock art sites were sources of power and information about the future.<sup>97</sup> Beverly Badhorse notes that most incised rock art in the northern Plains was probably made by Lakotas and Cheyennes. Recognizable Cheyenne motifs include V-neck humans, lizards, turtles, circles with dots in the middle, and bisected circles, some of which refer to the Sun Dance. The Cheyennes say the V-neck human is a variant of the "man" symbol used in the Sun Dance and in other Cheyenne ceremonies.<sup>98</sup> According to Badhorse, the lizard or horned toad is the most powerful religious symbol of the Cheyennes because it does its own Sun Dance. Lizard body-painting is common among modern sun dancers. At least one lizard and several V-necked humans are known from Black Hills rock art, and at least one Cheyenne shield motif is present.<sup>99</sup>

Karl Schlesier argues that some or all of the stone alignments called medicine wheels are of Cheyenne origin. Whatever their exact origin, these features do tend to be associated with Algonkian speakers.<sup>100</sup> As the Cheyennes and their Arapaho allies were the only Algonkians in the Black Hills, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the single medicine wheel in the Black Hills was of Cheyenne origin. This circle of stones had five "arms" extending outward, each with a smaller circle of stones at its end and another about one-third of the way in from the end.<sup>101</sup> The site lies on the eastern edge of the Black Hills, but most of the wheel has been destroyed by highway construction.

When a group of Cheyenne elders visited Bear Butte in 1940, they detoured on their way home to visit a hot spring in the southern Black Hills that was "famous in Cheyenne legend." They also visited a place called "hole in the wall" near the town of Mystic in the central Black Hills and the remains of a ceremonial antelope pit in the town of Belle Fourche.<sup>102</sup>

#### ARAPAHO SACRED PLACES

Because the Arapahos were closely allied with the Cheyennes, we can assume that for the most part they shared the same sacred sites. An abbreviated version of an account of how the Arapahos acquired their seven sacred bundles, or "Medicine Bags" suggests that Bear Butte was a focal point of their religion, as it was for the Cheyennes:

There was a vision in which a man found himself inside a cave. He saw the medicine arrows of the Cheyennes, but "they were too powerful." Instead, he took the seven medicine bags, which he gave to the seven most honored men in the tribe.<sup>103</sup>

The reference to the Cheyenne arrows strongly suggests that Bear Butte was the place visited in the vision. The Lakota holy man Fools Crow, who fasted at Bear Butte around 1914 and again in 1950, noted that Cheyennes and Arapahos alike made much use of the mountain.<sup>104</sup>

The Arapahos have traditions about Bear Lodge Butte similar to those of the Cheyennes, Kiowas, and Lakotas. Their name for the feature translates to Bears' Lodge.

#### KIOWA AND KIOWA-APACHE SACRED PLACES

The identity of the Kiowa people was closely tied to the Black Hills. The Lakotas called the Kiowas the Island Hill people, referring to the island-like position of the Black Hills, surrounded by grasslands. According to

the Lakota holy man Black Elk, "there was another tribe that grew from this band, and they called them the Island Hill [*Witapaha*, Kiowas], by which I think they meant the Sioux called the Black Hills at that time the Island Hills." The Lakotas also used the term Island Hill people to refer to any ancient inhabitants of the Black Hills. This suggests that the Kiowas were in the Hills long enough to be considered the prehistoric inhabitants of the area.<sup>105</sup>

Although much information has been lost, a few sources provide a glimpse of the sacred landscape of the Kiowas and their Kiowa-Apache allies in the Black Hills. Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache myths refer specifically to Bear Lodge Butte and Bear Butte Lake.<sup>106</sup> It is reasonable to hypothesize that the entire northern border of the Black Hills from Bear Lodge Butte to Sundance Mountain to Bear Butte was sacred ground for the Kiowas, as it was for the Cheyennes and Lakotas who followed them.

According to James Mooney, the Kiowas had a myth accounting for the origin of the Black Hills, though he did not record the text or cite a source for it. The Kiowa name for the Black Hills, however, provides a link to Kiowa mythology. The Kiowas called the Black Hills *Sádalkañi K'op*, translated as stomach rind or manifold mountains.<sup>107</sup> The name refers to the rugged, broken nature of the Black Hills country. In one version of the story of Bear Lodge Butte, a girl and several warriors are pursued by a giant bear. They receive supernatural help from three spirit beings: a monstrous creature living under the waters of a river, a hill, and a rock. The rock becomes Bear Lodge Butte, lifting the people safely out of the reach of the bear. Before that, however, the hill offers to help, if the people will instruct it what to do.

The little girl said, "I want you to turn into a buffalo's entrails. There is a certain part of the entrails that has some rugged gullies. You must become similar to buffalo en-

trails." And a miracle occurred. The land became hilly and full of canyons, and the men and girl ran ahead while the bear was slowed by these hills and gullies and canyons.<sup>108</sup>

The correspondence between the girl's description of the area as "entrails" and the Kiowa metaphor of stomach rind suggests that this part of the story refers to the creation of the Black Hills, the most prominent broken landscape near Bear Lodge Butte. Like the Lakotas, Cheyennes, and Crows the Kiowas associate Bear Lodge Butte with a constellation, either the Pleiades or the Big Dipper.<sup>109</sup>

Another Kiowa version relates that the power of Bear Lodge Butte saved, not a girl or sisters, but the Kiowa culture-hero Sun-Boy or Half Boy. This supernatural boy had split himself in two; thus the two parts are often referred to as the Twin Gods, although each was half of the same person.<sup>110</sup> In 1890 an old Kiowa woman related that about 1690, the Kiowas had settled in the Black Hills country near the Rock That Pushed Up the Boys, another name for Bear Lodge Butte. Because Sun-Boy brought the Kiowas their sacred spirit power, this story indicates that Bear Lodge Butte was an important religious place for the Kiowas.<sup>111</sup>

According to Kiowa tradition, the Bear Kidney *taime*, one of three great tribal religious objects, came from Bear Butte.<sup>112</sup> This was a stone believed to house great supernatural powers.

A Kiowa-Apache tradition refers to a sacred lake in the northern Black Hills as a portal to the land of the dead. Here a Kiowa-Apache culture hero received one of the sacred bundles of his people. This apparently refers to Bear Butte Lake, the only natural lake in the Black Hills apart from a few small sinkholes. Its proximity to Bear Butte is reflected in its identification as the sacred lake of the Kiowas and Kiowa-Apaches. This echoes a Kiowa tradition of a sacred lake in the northern Black Hills.<sup>113</sup>

## ARIKARA SACRED PLACES

The Arikara story accounting for the origin of Bear Lodge Butte is similar to the Kiowas' and also associates the feature with the Pleiades.<sup>114</sup> In one version of the story, seven sisters were set upon by a bear while playing. They ran to a big rock which rose up, carrying them out of reach of the great bear. Their people could not get them down again, so they rose up into the sky to become the stars of the Pleiades.

The Arikaras told a series of stories about Bloody Hands, a poor orphan boy who lived with his grandmother at the edge of the village. Bloody Hands succeeded in various undertakings, despite his lack of wealth and physical beauty, because he possessed great powers. The story of Bloody Hands becoming an eagle is the last of the series, told in April, at the end of the storytelling season.<sup>115</sup>

When Bloody Hands asked his grandmother's permission to join a war party, she refused, explaining that the other warriors would make fun of him because he was so ugly and pitiful. His feelings hurt, Bloody Hands turned into an eagle. Heedless of his grandmother's pleas that he return to his natural form, he flew off "where the highest of the Black Hills are." The grandmother followed him and attempted to bring him down by posing as bait—first a rabbit and then a deer. The eagle was not fooled and reached the Black Hills, where he lighted on top of a tall rock—Bear Lodge Butte. The grandmother begged him to come to the edge so that she could have one last look at him. When he did she turned into a bear that leaped up the sides of the rock, scratching it with her claws, but unable to reach him. When she grew tired, the eagle-grandson departed, where the grandmother could not follow. Thus they were separated.

Now grandson, grandson, you have made it hard for me. It is impossible to go over there. It is only rocky land . . . you have hurt my

feelings here. And now we've separated. It is truly the way it is: we have separated. The eagle is going all around. He is going around in the Black Hills. But I'll go around pitifully over there.<sup>116</sup>

This story suggests that the Black Hills were beyond the usual territory of the Arikaras, a place where supernatural beings could live undisturbed by human interference. This echoes the Lakotas' view of the Black Hills as the abode of spirits.

## MANDAN SACRED PLACES

One version of the Mandan account of the Great Flood refers to Bear Butte. According to one source, Mandans made pilgrimages to Bear Butte annually to commemorate the flood and to pray that it not return.<sup>117</sup> This account suggests a Mecca-like status for the mountain even before the Cheyennes made it the focus of their religion. Mandan oral tradition states that the group lived for a time in the Black Hills before establishing themselves on the Missouri River, a tradition supported by the presence of Initial Middle Missouri (proto-Mandan) archaeological sites in the eastern and northern periphery of the Black Hills.<sup>118</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Groups occupying the Black Hills had traditional or sacred landscapes encompassing three kinds of properties: distinctive regions, such as the area around Sundance Mountain; specific points in the landscape, such as Inyan Kara or Bear Butte; and kinds of places, such as springs and caves. Table 1 summarizes references to the Black Hills in the mythology of various groups occupying the area. Groups new to the area often adapted the sacred landscape of their predecessors to their own beliefs and traditions. As a group became separated from the Black Hills area in space and time, the number of remembered places became fewer and fewer. Thus, we have much information

TABLE 1  
STORIES REFERRING TO THE BLACK HILLS

MYTH	FEATURES NAMED IN MYTH	GROUP	REF.
The Monster Bear	Black Hills, Bear Lodge Butte	Kiowa, Lakota, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Arikara	1
Half-Boy Brings the Boy Medicine	Bear Butte Lake	Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache	2
Half-Boy Vanquishes the Monster Bear	Bear Lodge Butte	Kiowa	3
The Great Flood	Bear Butte	Mandan	4
Bloody Hands Becomes an Eagle	Bear Lodge Butte	Arikara	5
Erect Horns Gets the New Life Lodge Ceremony and Sacred Hat	Bear Butte	Cheyenne/Suhtai	6
Old Man and Old Woman Wolf	Bear Butte	Cheyenne	7
The Stone Buffalo Horn	northern Black Hills	Cheyenne	8
Sweet Medicine Receives the Sacred Arrows	Bear Butte	Cheyenne	9
The Death of Sweet Medicine	Bear Butte	Cheyenne	10
The Great Race	The Racetrack, Sun Dance Mountain, Buffalo Gap, Inyan Kara	Lakota, Cheyenne	11
The Ghost Owl	Harney Peak	Cheyenne, Lakota	12
Emergence of the Holy Buffalo People	Wind Cave	Lakota	13
Taopi Gli Goes to the Underground World	Wind Cave	Lakota	14
The Great Flood and the Origin of the Lakotas	Harney Peak or Bear Lodge Butte	Lakota	15
Thunderbird stories	Harney Peak	Lakota	16
Uncigila's Seventh Spot	Black Hills (cave with rock art)	Lakota	17
Why the Crow is Black	Rapid Creek	Lakota	18
Fallen Star and the Chief's Arm	Bear Butte, White Butte	Lakota	19
The Seven Star Villages	Bear Lodge Butte, Bear Butte, Rapid Creek, possibly Gillette Prairie	Lakota	20

TABLE REFERENCES (REFER TO NOTES AT END OF ARTICLE)<sup>133</sup>

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2. Nye, *Bad Medicine* (note 113), p. 49; McAllister, "Kiowa-Apache Social Organization" (note 113), p. 162.

3. Nye, *Bad Medicine* (note 113), p. vii; Boyd, *Kiowa Voices* (note 111), pp. 2-12.

4. Rosen, *Pa-Ha-Sa-Pah* (note 117), p. 54; Odell, *Mato Paha* (note 117), p. 32.

5. Parks, *Traditional Narratives* (note 114), pp. 508-14.

6. Dorsey, *The Cheyenne* (note 133), pp. 46-48; Erdoes and Ortiz, *Myths and Legends* (note 37), pp. 34-

37; Powell, *Sweet Medicine* (note 27), pp. 467-71; Odell, *Mato Paha* (note 46), p. 9.

7. Schlesier, *Wolves of Heaven* (note 3), pp. 77-79.

8. Grinnell, *Cheyenne Campfires* (note 30), pp. 46, 167-71.

9. Erdoes and Ortiz, *Myths and Legends* (note 37), pp. 202-03; Grinnell, *Cheyenne Indians* (note 30), pp. 345-81; Powell, *Sweet Medicine* (note 27), pp. 460-66; Schukies, *Red Hat* (note 3), pp. 283; Hyde, *Life of George Bent* (note 85), p. 242; Stands in Timber and Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories* (note 52), pp. 35-43.

10. Stands in Timber and Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories* (note 52), pp. 39; Erdoes and Ortiz, *Myths and Legends* (note 37), p. 204; Grinnell, *Cheyenne Indians* (note 30), pp. 345-81; Powell, *Sweet Medicine* (note 27), pp. 460-66.

11. Stands in Timber and Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories* (note 52), pp. 19-24; Powell, *Sweet Medicine* (note 27), pp. 472-77; Schlesier, *Wolves of Heaven* (note 3), p. 58;

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12. Marriott and Rachlin, *Plains Indian Mythology* (note 32), pp. 43-47; Deloria, *Dakota Texts* (note 26), pp. 14-16.
13. M. Powers, *Oglala Women* (note 64), pp. 41-42, 50.
14. LaPointe, *Legends of the Lakota* (note 14), pp. 80-84.
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18. LaPointe, *Legends of the Lakota* (note 14), pp. 74-77; DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather* (note 33), pp. 395-409; Neihardt, *When the Tree Flowered* (note 53), pp. 168-91.
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concerning Cheyenne and Lakota use of the Black Hills, less about Arapaho and Kiowa use, and little about Mandan and Arikara use.

The territories of ethnic groups often changed over time. In new territories, new ethnic markers were established. Often the sacred places of earlier—even evicted—groups were adopted because they were natural landmarks and powerful, impressive locations. In a sense, immigrating groups brought their sacred places with them. For instance, when the Suhtais lived in eastern South Dakota their sacred mountain was located in the Timber Mountains of southwestern Minnesota. When they moved to the Black Hills region around 1670, they adopted Bear Butte as their foremost sacred place and transferred to it the origin of the New Life Lodge ceremony that had belonged to the Minnesota mountain. Bear Butte was not a territorial marker but an important spiritual place for a number of ethnic groups in historic and prehistoric time.<sup>119</sup>

The very scarcity of prominent landmarks may help explain why they tended to be used in similar ways by different ethnic groups:

Finally the Cheyennes reached the prairies where the rippling blanket of buffalo grass was cut by the swiftly flowing waters of the Yellowstone, the Tongue, and the Platte rivers. Ahead lay the apparently endless sweep of the plains country, its color changing with the shifting rays of the sun. Here, except for the pine hills and low-lying buttes, there were few places where a man could fast and pray. Thus the heights of the Sacred Mountain remained all the more deeply embedded in Cheyenne tribal memory.<sup>120</sup>

The Black Hills provides a prime example of this phenomenon. We can trace Lakota beliefs about Bear Lodge Butte and Bear Butte to the more elaborate Cheyenne traditions, which in turn appear to have derived in part from Arikara, Kiowa, or Crow traditions. The association of Devils Tower with bear taboos perhaps is a hold-over from when the Athabascan and Algonkian groups were living far to the north.<sup>121</sup> That the Lakotas lacked this long-standing tradition of bear avoidance is evident in their rather abbreviated version of the myth. Nevertheless, they adopted both the place and much of the mythical context that had built up around it.

Religious traditions about the Black Hills clearly antedate the beginnings of tourism in the 1930s and the legal battles of the 1960s and 1970s, extending back at least several centuries. The Kiowas, Mandans, Arikaras, Cheyennes, and Lakotas all have traditional histories regarding extensive migrations in precontact times. From the perspective of these traditional histories, the recognition of sacred places is sometimes a matter of having returned to a place remembered from the oldest times. It may also be viewed as a matter of perceiving an intrinsic sacredness of place that does not depend on beliefs specific to any one group for its definition.

New groups entering or reentering the area recognized the sacred sites of their predecessors and often adopted them as their own. Thus, the question of whether the Lakotas "had time" to develop religious traditions about the Black Hills reflects a naive view of culture change.<sup>122</sup> Both the Lakotas and the Cheyennes placed old religious traditions into new (or renewed) geographic contexts as they entered (or reentered) the Black Hills area. Rather than having to invent such traditions, the Lakotas recognized and adopted the religious traditions of those who preceded them in the area. Myth structures permitted the reconciliation of old traditions to new places, as well as the adoption of new beliefs. Whether this was a process of borrowing new traditions or renewing old ones, the result was a complex sacred geography. For as far back as the historical and ethnographic record can take us, the Black Hills have been a physical manifestation of sacred relationships between earth, sky, and the underworld, between people and the spirit beings, and between the temporal and spiritual realms.

Whether the Black Hills, as a whole, were considered sacred is a more difficult question. At least thirteen places in the Black Hills are specifically referred to as sacred in historic and ethnographic documents. This does not count generic sacred places, such as rock art sites, caves, and high peaks associated with the Thunder-beings. Deciding whether thir-

teen sacred sites in a discrete area constitutes a holy land is a bit like asking how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. At least two Lakotas, Nicholas Black Elk and Battiste Good, specifically referred to the Black Hills as a promised land, but both were speaking after the loss of the area under the bitterest of circumstances. James H. McGregor, Indian agent at Pine Ridge in the 1930s, also described the Black Hills as the "special gift" of *Waka<sup>n</sup> Ta<sup>n</sup>ka* to the Lakota people, based on his conversations with Oglala elders.<sup>123</sup> The Cheyennes believed that they were given all the territory around Bear Butte as their promised land.<sup>124</sup> The beliefs of earlier groups in this regard are not recorded.

The northern Plains contains many places historically considered sacred by various Native American groups. Were the Black Hills more sacred than these other places? The answer certainly is yes as regards Bear Butte and Bear Lodge Butte (Devils Tower). The Racetrack and associated locales were also primary sacred sites for the Lakotas and Cheyennes, as was Bear Butte Lake for the Kiowa-Apaches. At the same time, those portions of the Black Hills richest in sacred sites were also richest in resources, especially after the introduction of the horse made the interior mountains less attractive to Native groups. In ceding the Black Hills in 1876, Lakota leaders made a last-ditch effort to reserve for themselves that portion of the Black Hills from the Racetrack outward.<sup>125</sup>

Were these leaders acting to retain the lands containing their most important holy places, including Bear Butte, Bear Lodge Butte, Inyan Kara Mountain, Buffalo Gap, and the Racetrack? Or were they acting to retain the lands most accessible on horseback and most valuable to them economically? Since Lakotas viewed the abundance of resources in the Black Hills as an expression of the beneficence of *Waka<sup>n</sup> Ta<sup>n</sup>ka*, the two kinds of value were intertwined in their minds.<sup>126</sup> Red Cloud clearly implied this by asking that the federal government provide for the Lakotas once the Black Hills were denied them: "God Almighty placed

those hills there for my wealth, but now you want to take them and make me poor, so I ask so much [compensation] so that I won't be poor."<sup>127</sup> It can be argued that hunting and other resource gathering in the Black Hills were as much religious as economic activities. In 1874 William E. Curtis wrote that "according to the evidence of Sitting Bull, the Indians had went in former days to make their hunting [in the Black Hills] a mere accessory to—very possibly a part of—their worship."<sup>128</sup> From the Lakota viewpoint, resource gathering did not preclude approaching the Black Hills in "a reverential mood."<sup>129</sup>

In emphasizing the economic value of the Black Hills, the Lakota negotiators may simply have been trying to meet the whites on white terms. After all, a religious argument could hardly be persuasive to a people who considered Native religion ignorance at best and devil worship at worst. Such an argument was more likely to have had the opposite effect because the sooner the religion of the Lakotas could be broken down, the sooner they would become "good" (i.e., fully acculturated) Indians. Removing them from their purported holy land would only hasten the process. On the other hand, the whites were already grumbling about the cost of the annual treaty payments to the reservation Lakotas. Faced with this expense, perhaps the whites could be persuaded to reconsider their taking of the Black Hills.

The most revealing statements of white and Indian attitudes about the Black Hills in the 1870s come from newspaper accounts. Reporters accompanying the 1874 Black Hills expedition, with opportunity to discuss the Black Hills with Lakota, Santee, and Arikara scouts, were unanimous in describing the Black Hills as the holy land of the Lakotas and Cheyennes. N. H. Knappen of the *Bismarck Tribune* said the Indians regarded the Black Hills as the home of the Great Spirit. For the *New York World*, William E. Curtis described the Black Hills as the Indians' "earthly paradise" and "combined deer park and Mecca," and noted that the Black Hills were often the site

of the annual Sun Dance, "most solemn of festivities." He concluded that, to the Indians, "the Black Hills are holy ground of the very holiest sort." With a perspicacity unusual for his day, Curtis hypothesized that Lakota religious leaders were increasingly stressing traditions about the sacredness of the area in order to preserve intact this last undisturbed remnant of their once vast territories. Samuel Barrows of the *New York Tribune* wrote that the Black Hills were the Indians' "fable-land," invested with legends and superstitions. Aris B. Donaldson of the *St. Paul Pioneer* also stressed that the Black Hills were sacred to the Indians.

It [the Black Hills] is the famed stronghold and favorite hunting ground of the red man. It is even dearer to him than the land of the "graves of his forefathers." He believes that the souls of the departed revisit these earthly abodes, and in spiritual forms pursue the spiritual game over the old, familiar hunting grounds. To the simple faith of the Indian, it is the most sacred spot on earth, to him the "holy of holies."<sup>130</sup>

Nowhere in these newspaper accounts was the sacredness of the Black Hills questioned. It seems to have been the accepted knowledge of the day that the Black Hills were, indeed, the holy land of the Lakotas. At the same time, the reporters clearly show that they considered the issue of sacredness entirely irrelevant. Just as they were unanimous in recognizing the sacredness of the Black Hills, the reporters were unanimous in demanding that the area be quickly opened to white settlement. For example, after describing the Black Hills as the Lakotas' "holy of holies," Donaldson wondered how much longer the area would be left as only an occasional hunting ground for "the most obstinately depraved nomad" in the human race. In the 1870s, Indian beliefs about the Black Hills were either to be forbidden, reformed, or ignored. The real issue was how quickly the Indians could be either reformed or exterminated and the area



opened to white use.<sup>131</sup> The reporters, who reflected the prevailing attitudes of the day, had no motive for exaggerating the Indians' beliefs about the sacredness of the Black Hills.

When Lakotas asserted in the 1970s, with seeming suddenness, that the Black Hills were sacred ground, they were responding to the federal government's equally sudden policy that sacredness was relevant to their claims on the area. The rise of interest in Native American religious rights in the 1970s was to culminate in passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978. Public attitudes were changing rapidly. Instead of asking why the Lakotas were claiming sacred status for the Black Hills in the 1970s, we might more productively ask how the conventional wisdom of the 1870s—that the Black Hills were the Lakotas' holy land—came to be disputed in the 1970s. The answer seems to lie in the sudden relevance of sacredness to land claims disputes. The Black Hills have increasingly become a symbol of Native American resistance to acculturation, and because of this symbolic role, they are today sacred in ways that they historically were not. This does not, however, mean that the area had no religious significance in the past.

We may never know for certain the degree to which the Black Hills were considered sacred ground by their past inhabitants. At least portions of the area were sacred to many groups at many times. The presence of about a hundred rock art sites in the Black Hills, many illustrating recognizably religious themes and some dating back thousands of years, suggests that the area has had considerable religious significance for much, if not all, of its human history.<sup>132</sup> The current religious revitalization movement among Lakota and Cheyenne people is as much a rediscovery as a reinvention of traditional beliefs, including beliefs about the Black Hills.

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