

Biographies of Native Spiritual Leaders

Wovoka

Wovoka was born in Smith Valley area southeast of Carson City, Nevada, around the year 1856. Wovoka's father may have been the religious leader variously known as "Tavibo" or "Numu-Taibo" whose teachings were similar to those of Wovoka.

Regardless, Wovoka clearly had some training as a medicine man. Wovoka's father died around the year 1870, and he was taken in by David Wilson, a rancher in the Yerington, Nevada area, and his wife Abigail. Wovoka worked on Wilson's ranch and used the name Jack Wilson when dealing with European Americans. David Wilson was a devout Christian, and Wovoka learned Christian theology and Bible stories while living with him.

Wovoka gained a reputation as a powerful medicine man early in adulthood and is now perceived to have been adept at magic tricks. One feat he often performed was being shot with a shotgun, which may have been similar to the bullet catch trick. Reports of this feat potentially convinced the Lakota that their "ghost shirts" could stop bullets. Wovoka also performed a feat of levitation. One of his chief sources of authority among Paiutes was his alleged ability to control the weather. He was said to have caused a block of ice to fall out of the sky on a summer day, to be able to end drought with rain or snow, to light his pipe with the sun, and to form icicles in his hands.

Wovoka claimed to have had a prophetic vision during the solar eclipse on January 1, 1889. Wovoka's vision entailed the resurrection of the Paiute dead and the removal of whites and their works from North America. Wovoka taught that in order to bring this vision to pass the Native Americans must live righteously and perform a traditional round dance, known as the Ghost dance, in a series of five-day gatherings. Wovoka's teachings spread quickly among many Native American peoples, notably the Lakota. Wovoka's vision brought about the question of his sanity.

The Ghost Dance movement is known for being practiced by the victims of the Wounded Knee Massacre; Indian Agents, soldiers, and other federal officials were predisposed towards a cautious, wary, and defensive posture when dealing with a movement that was so mysterious to them. Important to note is that Wovoka's preachings included messages of non-violence, but that two Miniconjou, Short Bull and Kicking Bear, instead emphasized the possible elimination of whites which contributed to the existing defensive attitude of the federal officials who were already fearful due to the unfamiliar Ghost Dance movement.



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Wovoka died in Yerington on September 20, 1932 and is interred in the Paiute Cemetery in the town of Schurz, Nevada

David “Daddy” Bray

David Kaonohiokala Bray was born March 5, 1889 in Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii.

Bray’s maternal grandmother Namahana Namahana, was married to William Bray III, Grandson of William Bray. Namahana’s grandfather was High Priest Holoa’e a relative of Kamehameha the great and one of the priests present at the arrival of Captain Cook. David's wife Lydia claimed royal lineage through her mother Nakuikaina, but there is no written documentation.

His mother having died when he was young, Bray was hanai (adopted) and raised by his aunt, kahuna Lukia Kahalaopuna. His great-aunt kahuna Ka’ilianu also trained him. Bray met kahuna Kuamo’o at an early age and his son, William Kaniho, later became his teacher. Hawaiian was his first language. Bray said, “I was brought up to study everything Hawaiian, and we always thought the monarchy would be restored. I was preparing for it through my studies.”

Bray was commended in a resolution in 1959 by the Territorial House of Representatives. It stated in part:

WHEREAS, due to the great diligence and interest of David K. Bray together with the enthusiastic assistance of his family, he has bridged the deep gap which threatened to doom the Hula and spanned two conflicting schools of thought, to revive and preserve the Hula in its ancient form; and WHEREAS he has for fifty years been a practicing Kahuna, has long been a high priest of the Sons and Daughters of Hawaiian Warriors, [a group of 100 with demonstrated lineage to the court of Kamehameha] and is a master and the leading exponent of the old Hawaiian chants and mele, and for many years has been in great demand for ceremonial blessings at private and public ceremonies, including this House of Representatives . . .



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Black Elk

Black Elk was born in December 1863 along the Little Powder River (thought to be in the present-day state of Wyoming). According to the Lakota way of measuring time, (referred to as Winter counts) Black Elk was born “the Winter When the Four Crows Were Killed on Tongue River”.

When Black Elk was nine years old, he was suddenly taken ill and left prone and unresponsive for several days. During this time he had a great vision in which he was visited by the Thunder Beings (*Wakinyan*), and taken to the Grandfathers — spiritual representatives of the six sacred directions: west, east, north, south, above, and below. These “...spirits were represented as kind and loving, full of years and wisdom, like revered human grandfathers.” When he was seventeen, Black Elk told a medicine man, Black Road, about the vision in detail. Black Road and the other medicine men of the village were “astonished by the greatness of the vision”.

Black Elk had many visions throughout his life which reinforced what he had experienced as a boy, and he worked among his people as a healer and medicine man.

He was involved in several battles with the U.S. cavalry. He participated, at about the age of twelve, in the Battle of Little Big Horn of 1876, known as the Battle of the Greasy Grass to the Lakota; and was injured in the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890.

In 1887, he traveled to England with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, an experience he described in chapter twenty of *Black Elk Speaks*. On May 11, 1887, the troop put on a command performance for Queen Victoria, whom they called “Grandmother England.” He also described being in the crowd at her Golden Jubilee.

In spring 1888, the Wild West Show set sail for the United States. Black Elk became separated from the group and the ship left without him, stranding him with three other Lakota. They subsequently joined another wild west show and he spent the next year in Germany, France, and Italy. When Buffalo Bill arrived in Paris in May 1889, Black Elk obtained a ticket to return home to Pine Ridge, arriving in autumn of 1889. During his sojourn in Europe, Black Elk was given an “abundant opportunity to study the white man's way of life,” and he learned to speak rudimentary English.

For at least a decade, beginning in 1934, Black Elk returned to the work that he had done earlier in life with Buffalo Bill - organizing an Indian Show in the Black Hills. Unlike the Wild West shows which were used to glorify Indian warfare, Black Elk's show was used primarily to teach tourists about Lakota culture and traditional sacred rituals - including the Sun Dance.

Black Elk saw similarities between Christianity and the Lakota religion which allowed him to practice as a medicine man while also being Catholic. Black Elk was a leader in the revival of the Sun Dance (an important religious ceremony among several tribes) and

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its reinstatement in Lakota life. Lakota traditionalists now follow his version of the dance.

Since the 1970s the book *Black Elk Speaks* has become an important source for studying Native spirituality, sparking a renewal of interest in Native religions. Black Elk worked with John Neihardt to give a first-hand account of his experiences and that of the Lakota people. His son Ben would translate Black Elk's stories, which were then recorded by Neihardt's daughter Emid, who would then put them in chronological order for Neihardt's use. Within the American Indian Movement *Black Elk Speaks* became an important source for those seeking religious and spiritual inspiration. They also sought Black Elk nephew and medicine man, Frank Fools Crow for information on Native traditions.^[15]



Black Elk, daughter Lucy Black Elk and wife Anna Brings White photographed in their home in Manderson, South Dakota, about 1910

Black Elk married his first wife, Katie War Bonnet, in 1892. She became a Catholic, and all three of their children were baptized as Catholic. After her death in 1903, he became a Catholic in 1904, when he was christened with the name of Nicholas and later served as a catechist. He continued to serve as a spiritual leader among his people, seeing no contradiction in embracing what he found valid in both his tribal traditions concerning Wakan Tanka and those of Christianity. He remarried in 1905 to Anna Brings White, a widow with two daughters. Together they had three more children and remained together until her death in 1941.

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Toward the end of his life, Black Elk revealed the story of his life, and a number of sacred Sioux rituals to John Neihardt and Joseph Epes Brown for publication, and his accounts have won wide interest and acclaim. He died August 19, 1950 at the age of 87.