"Have To" History: The Ghost Dance Movement(s)

Stuff You Don't Really Want To Know (But For Some Reason Have To)

Three Big Things:

1. The tribes of the Great Plains faced confinement or extermination as the 19th century drew to a close; they were desperate and confused in the face of ongoing U.S. expansion, aggression, and manipulation.

2. The "Ghost Dance" promised to bring back their former way of life, to raise their dead, and to bring peace and prosperity to all who believed.

3. Variations in tribal interpretations of "Ghost Dance" teachings and white fears of Amerindian uprisings led to unnecessary death and violence, most notably at Wounded Knee in 1890 – the effective end of Native resistance on the Great Plains.

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Background

The end of the American Civil War allowed the U.S. to turn its military focus to the Great Plains. The Homestead Act (1862) codified and intensified the westward expansion which had been a defining feature of the United States since its political birth a century before. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 had largely cleared the southeastern portion of the continent of its Native American inhabitants, most famously the Five Civilized Tribes, who were forcibly settled in Indian Territory (I.T.), along with a number of lesser-known tribes, where they did their best to rebuild what lives they could in this strange new land.

When the Civil War broke out, the Five Civilized Tribes largely supported the Confederacy – some wholeheartedly, others in part. Upon Union victory, Congress – controlled by the same Radical Republicans who would try so intently to "reconstruct" the South – punished the inhabitants of I.T. by drastically reducing their land allotments. The Five Tribes were confined to what is today the eastern half of Oklahoma, thus opening the western half to a new round of forced migration. This time it would be the tribes of the Great Plains – roughly the middle third of the U.S. – who would be hunted, cajoled, or otherwise forced onto this ever-shrinking reservation.

The Post-Bellum Indian Wars

The U.S. used a variety of tactics against the Plains Tribes in the decades after the Civil War. A favorite of George A. Custer was the early morning winter attack. Soldiers would surprise a village of "hostiles," bundled with their women and children against the cold, and open fire just before dawn. Startled warriors were caught without their horses, weapons, or even clothing, and were generally slaughtered with relative ease.

A second strategy was less direct but arguably even more effective. Buffalo were essential to cultures and basic survival of most Plains Amerindians. Food, clothing, tools, storage, and rituals all involved parts of this ubiquitous beast. The U.S. began encouraging large-scale hunting of these creatures, on horseback or – no joke – by railroad. Excited urbanites paid good money for the chance to lean out of train windows firing rifles into the herds. The carcasses were often left in the sun to rot.

Then, of course, there were the actual battles between U.S. soldiers and various Plains tribal groups. There were a few Amerindian victories – most notably the Battle of Little Bighorn (aka, "Custer's Last Stand") in 1876, but by and
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large the Native Americans adapted poorly to the sort of hierarchical structure and sustained discipline essential for U.S.-style military engagement. While brave and creative warriors, they carried a deeply-rooted sense of individuality and a distaste for telling other men what they could or could not do. However much this stirred the romantic notions of distant whites, it completely undermined efforts to coordinate large-scale resistance.

In short, the U.S. had them out-numbered, out-gunned, out-financed, and out-structured. By the late 19th century, few Amerindians of any tribe could claim much hope for their collective futures.

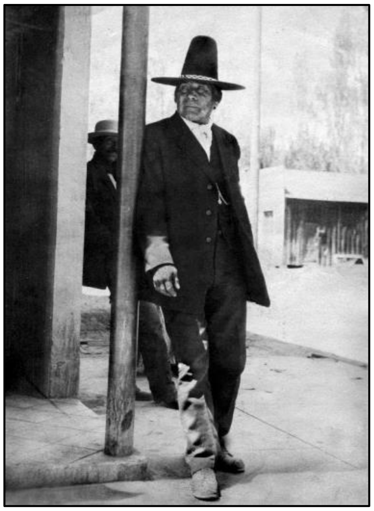
The First Ghost Dance: Wodzibob

Around 1870, a Paiute holy man by the name of Wodzibob began sharing a vision he'd had in which God had taken him up to heaven and informed him that a time of resurrection was soon coming. The dead would be resurrected and the buffalo would return. The people could help speed this by performing a series of rituals, most notably an extended dance involving the entire community, women as well as men, moving rhythmically in a large circle.

"Round dances" were not new to the Plains Amerindians; most tribes had their own variations. Dancers sometimes entered trance-like states leading to visions or prophesies, so while Wodzibob's message was new, the format and source were familiar. It was left to the individual to decide the extent to which someone else's revelation applied to them. As an established healer and respected member of the tribe, Wodzibob's teachings spread quickly and endured for several years, until it gradually became clear his predictions were not coming to pass in the promised time frame.

The Second Ghost Dance: Wovoka

By the late 1880s, the majority of the tribes native to the continental United States had been defeated – by warfare, by disease, by the loss of land, and – in the case of the Great Plains – the disappearance of the buffalo. Many were forced onto reservations or packed into Indian Territory where they were expected to farm and practice "white" lifestyles on unwilling land, without essential tools or adequate supplies, and minus the requisite desire. The provisions "guaranteed" by the U.S. government either never arrived or were of such poor quality as to prove useless. The proud nations of the Great Plains were broken and bewildered, and quite possibly nearing extinction.



In January 1889, an emerging Paiute spiritual leader named Wovoka (aka "Jack Wilson") claimed to have experienced a vision reminiscent of Wodzibob's two decades before. Wodzibob's teachings and experiences would have been familiar to Wovoka, both as recent tribal history and because his father had been a close associate of the revered shaman, so it's probably no surprise the basic message was the same: those who'd been lost would soon return, as would their way of life, so have faith and dance.

Wovoka's message, however, reflected additional influences, particularly his exposure to Christianity. Wovoka taught that the people should love one another, avoid stealing or lying or even fighting the whites, and do their best to live in peace even with those who had abused them. Tribal rituals involving self-mutilation were condemned, although by some accounts Wovoka punctured his hands – a "self-inflicted stigmata" to reflect his role as either the prophet of the returning Christ, or perhaps some form of the Messiah himself.

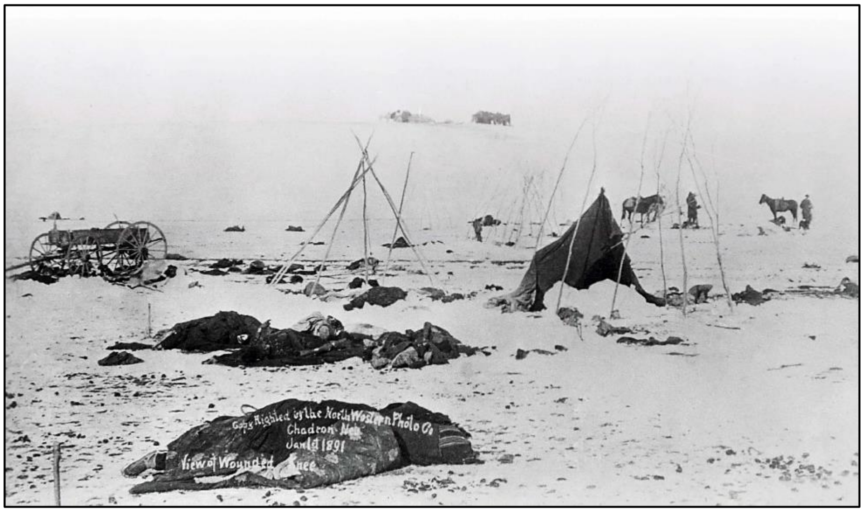
There was also a bit where God put Wovoka in charge of the weather, at least in the western half of the United States. That's the tricky thing about visions and faith and conflicting primary sources – they make history so much more interesting but also so… *messy*.

The Wounded Knee Massacre

As tends to happen with ideas as they spread, Wovoka's message quickly evolved as it was taken up by different tribes. With the Lakota Sioux in particular, it took on a more militant tone. Their concept of renewal – of heaven on earth – was incompatible with the presence of white folks, despite Wovoka's calls for racial unity. It was also most likely a Lakota who added the idea of a "ghost shirt," which would render its wearer impervious to bullets (since, presumably, you can't shoot ghosts). It was exposure to the Sioux version of Wovoka's visions which most led to white characterizations of the dance at the heart of the movement as a "Ghost Dance" with militant overtones.

As U.S. concern over a possible Sioux uprising simmered, they more and more saw the dance as inherently hostile, or even preparatory for war. It was this fear that led to the arrest and subsequent death of Sitting Bull in 1890, a few weeks before Christmas. U.S. military officials next targeted a Lakota chief by the name of Big Foot. Most of his followers were women and children whose men had been killed resisting U.S. aggression. As those who'd lost the most, they were often the most devout adherents of the dance, pushing themselves until they collapsed or became otherwise incoherent.

Big Foot had led his group to the Pine Ridge Reservation to surrender. They were told to set up camp while officials figured out what to do with them next. The next day, December 29th, 1890, soldiers were sent into the camp to gather any remaining weapons among the Sioux. It's unclear to what extent the Lakota resisted. Some accounts refer to a medicine man encouraging them to don their "ghost shirts" and fight, while others focus on a single young Sioux, probably deaf, who attempted to retain his rifle. Whatever the specifics, at some point a shot was fired and things pretty much went to hell from there.



Soldiers opened fire on the camp while panicked Sioux tried to grab what weapons they could to fight back. When the shooting stopped, 153 Lakota and at least 25 soldiers were dead. Most of the U.S. deaths appeared to be the result of "friendly fire," which would be consistent with the sort of panic that comes after weeks of creeping paranoia.

Aftermath

Although periodic smaller conflicts would continue for a time, the Massacre at Wounded Knee marks the effective end of "Indian Resistance" on the Great Plains. Seemingly rubbing salt into the tragedy, the U.S. awarded twenty medals of honor to surviving soldiers for their actions.

As news of events at Wounded Knee spread, reactions were mixed. Some saw the military's behavior as a gross overreaction – further abuse of a people clearly already defeated and pacified. Whatever the extent of the backlash, it did result in temporary efforts by the U.S. to more consistently honor its treaty obligations with survivors.

It would be nearly a century before American Indian groups began actively reclaiming their status and tribal identities.