

THE GHOST DANCE WAR



Brian Doyle
Portland, Oregon

Although there were some novel and bizarre ideas bandied about in the Ghost Dance War of 1890, the end result of the conflict wasn't particularly original. Several thousand men, women, and children of various colors and nationalities were killed in a startling number of creative ways, and in the end the Indian nations that had ruled the plains and mountains for a thousand years had been decimated. The Ghost Dance War was the last furious struggle of the Native American against the colonizing whites, and when it was over the tribes were only memories, never to return.

I'm not an Indian. I'm a doctor, born and raised in New York City. I write this account of the Ghost Dance War because I have a patient who was in that war. His name is Red Shirt. He's of indeterminate age, although my professional opinion puts him somewhere in his early 90s. He's as healthy as he can be for a man of such advanced years, his only real medical problem is arthritis in the joints. My initial examination of him revealed a hearty individual in all respects, with the exception of his senses of touch and taste. He's lost both, although his hearing, sight, and sense of smell are all remarkably keen.

I first met Red Shirt when he appeared at my office in the spring of 1952. He complained of joint pain, especially in his knees and ankles. I did a full physical workup and discovered his unusual sensory deprivation, for which he at first provided no explanation. It wasn't until later during his series of weekly checkups that he explained matters to me; and it is this story — the story of the Ghost Dance War — which leads me to commit the account to paper.

The Ghost Dance War was an end with many beginnings, and many a tale is wrapped up in the tumultuous turn of events which eventually erased a whole native people. Red Shirt tells me the war had no official leaders, no official prophets, none of the usual bureaucratic or populist generation that often accompanies or propels civil unrest. Instead the war began at a visionary level and spread almost wordlessly throughout the western United States, spreading "like dust on wind, like loneliness through widows, like dawn through trees," as Red Shirt says.

I know little of the politics of the west. I'm a surgeon and a physician, as I've said, and I've always been more concerned with conflict at the microbial level. I have never mastered the intricacies of politics, preferring instead to deal with conflict on the very personal frontiers of my patients. For years I avoided even a cursory reading of newspapers, and although certain members of my family criticized me for my civil apathy, I found more fulfillment in curing gout and whooping cough than I did in listening to street-corner harangues from blustering charlatans.

Red Shirt changed all that. I learned from him that the process we call politics is a coat of many colors, and some of those colors are blood-red. I learned that being a citizen involves the awful responsibility of making sure your compatriots and colleagues adhere to the moral strictures of our collective gods; I learned that empathy is the last and greatest weapon we have to give our lives in a dream, going through the familiar motions of sleep, work, and love as if we were puppets carefully strung from the cosmic stars, and as we dream, people die. I can't say that, and only a fool would try, or weep because he didn't try. But perhaps I could have saved some of the dead, and their voices call to me on the wind, on dark nights when I'm too tired to fight on the visions of the past.

How to tell Red Shirt's story? He began as an eager boy, grew to manhood, started a family, was cast into a fifty-year war with a new people, became a prophet wrapped in rags and skins, and now he's an arthritic old man working at the local library, known locally only for his odd sensory deprivation. Those are the facts of his life; what do they tell you?

Do they hint at the red ocean of light he swam through as a boy? He tells me that he was born in a village called Goat Haunt, which perched at the confluence of three small rivers. This meeting of the waters provided a rich hunting and fishing grounds for Red Shirt's father and uncles, who settled with their families and extended families, and a shaman, and built a village on a thickly-wooded hill amid the waters.

Facts in and of themselves are prosaic, not poetic. When I say that Red Shirt married his third cousin once removed, does that hint at the tall, terrified boy who, heart in mouth, went to propose marriage one winter morning? Does the fact of their marriage reveal the tender smile of his 16-year-old bride?

Actually, I think, it's the most offhand facts that reveal the truth. "We had three sons," Red Shirt tells me in my office, as he sits there on the examining table without his shirt. "One died. He looks out the window into 1952 and sees 1882, the year he had to fish his little boy from the river and carry home his tiny sodden body. Months later I sat in Red Shirt's kitchen and touched the tiny buckskin shirt that his son had worn that day, and the shock of a lost son suddenly became clear to me.

"I hunted, I fished, I stole horses from my cousins," says Red Shirt. "Then we began to fight the whites." He never says much about these battles, but I understand there's a whole documented history and literature devoted to the "Indian Wars." I understand further that the history books are filled mostly with the courage of the white soldiers and the savagery of the red.

I cannot condone or explain away that savagery, nor will I try. Some of the stories that Red Shirt has told me have literally terrified me, revealing as they do the oft-unimaginable extent of human violence. Yet I believe both sides fought equally savagely in those wars, and both sides suffered enormously, and havoc was visited upon the Indians in larger and bloodier doses, it seems, than they brought upon others.

The end result, perhaps, tells the real story of those wars more accurately than any history book will. The mute testimony of vanished races that once hunted the plains and forests, the silenced cries of newborn Indian babes, the disappearance of the families and clans that once populated the waterways, all these are things that tell in a tongueless eloquence the final chapter of the first American race.

That race is no more. The Ghost Dance War was their last flurry of sound and fury before silence overcame them. Red Shirt tells me that the skirmishes and battles and clashes and ambushes and massacres went on for years and years, for hundreds of reasons and for one reason: because the new people asked the old to leave, and the old refused. Perhaps the hundreds



Illustration by Brian Doyle



Literature

of small battles were the first wars of attrition, as each Indian loss brought the entire race closer to extinction.

By the late 1880s, the Indian tribes were reduced to rags and tatters. Proud braves ate dust and nettles to survive the winter. Women and children grew thin, as thin as wraiths. "There was no wood to burn, no animals to eat, no horses to ride," says Red Shirt. "Then the message came, and I was chosen to receive it."

The origin of that message is unclear to this day. Red Shirt maintains that he was summoned to see the Messiah, and historical accounts concur that one chief from each of the one or two remaining tribes in the West was sent to Pyramid Lake in Nevada to meet the Savior. Whatever transpired at the Lake — and accounts differ wildly — the chiefs returned with a new message for their people, and that message began to spread secretly through the camps and agencies all over the country.

"Pray, I told my people," says Red Shirt. "Sing and dance the ghost dance, the most powerful dance of all. It will bring back the buffalo, the antelope, the elk, and the deer. It will bring back the trees and rivers to us. It will drive the white men away, never to return. Wear the ghost dance shirts, I told them, and the bullets of the soldiers will bounce harmlessly to the ground. Band together, you tribes, and together we will win back our land and our lives. The shirts will protect us, and the dance will give us the fire to defeat the enemy. All the sick shall be healed and will join in the Holy War. Foes will be friends, and the world will be restored to us."

Red Shirt's prophecy spread like wildfire. It slipped through the terrible camps like wind, going as far south as Mexico, where the Yaqui Indians sent word that they would join the Last Battle, and Alaska, where the Inuit prepared themselves for war by fasting and praying. It was carried by the chiefs American Horse and Fast Thunder; it was in the mouth of the famous chief Sitting Bull. It spread as far east as Washington, D.C., where the War Department issued an edict banning the Ghost Dance.

But it could not be banned. The dance raged in the western night for a month, two months, three months, and the various tribes began to march toward secret meeting points. Every night fires sprang up and figures danced madly around them, and the pure white buckskin ghost shirts were handed from man to woman to child. Each boy was given a shirt to protect him from stray bullets, each girl was given a short dress of the same material. Red Shirt blessed the ghost shirts by the hundreds, saying prayers of battle and forgiveness over each. He painted himself white from head to toe to signify his purity, and he rode from camp to camp to oversee the midnight dances and the shirt-blessings.

In early 1890 the war finally burst forth. When it came it came with a fury unmatched in the annals of the West. The Indians attacked at Pine Ridge, at Wounded Knee, at the Rosebud Agency, and at the Little White River. The soldiers, forewarned by the months of buildup, slaughtered the Indians by the dozens, by the hundreds, by the thousands. At some battle sites not one Indian was left alive; children were rounded up and shot because they wore the hated ghost shirts.

The great Holy War, in its end, was a complete and abject failure. So it was that Red Shirt's nation passed into history. Many of the dead were buried in the traditional burial mounds of the respective tribes. Some built burial platforms for their fallen warriors. Others erected markers where their chiefs had fallen. One tribe planted trees where men had died, bushes where women had fallen, and flowers where children were killed.

Not many were left to plant or weep, though. The Ghost Dance War was the last gasp of the nation that was so proud and whole, upon American soil, from the mountains to the seas the survivors were rounded up and marched off to reservations where they sickened and died.

Red Shirt, in his ghost shirt, went among the bodies, closing the eyes of the women and children who lay in heaps on the battlefields. After each blessing he put his hand to his mouth so as to taste the soul of the departed. After about a week he lost his sense of taste. There were too many souls to remember, he says, and his tongue forgot their names.

In the same way he lost his sense of touch. There were too many dead. In the heaped fields the bodies lay strewn like matchsticks. Sometimes the army patrols returned to the field and buried the dead Indians; sometimes they didn't, and after the soldiers took souvenirs the bodies were left to the ravens.

Red Shirt wandered in the fields for months. Sometimes he slept among the fallen warriors; sometimes he slept with his feet in running water for purification. He touched everyone who died. His fingers burned, and once he tried to cut his hands off in despair, but an army sergeant stopped him and for some reason never reported him to the authorities.

They all died, he says, all the men he gave the shirts to, and all their women, and all the children who stared at him as though he were a god. "The bullets went right through the ghost shirts," he said. "I walked among all the fallen and saw the holes from the bullets. I remember the red holes in the pure white shirts . . ."

Red Shirt came into the office this morning for his regular weekly checkup. He hops on my table with a startling spryness for a man so old. He sits on the table and stares out the window as though he sees bodies heaped like firewood in the fields. I test him carefully to see if he's really lost his sense of taste. He has; he can no longer distinguish among flavors. He has some dexterity in his fingers, and he can use his hands to grip things, but he doesn't know what those things are unless he looks at them carefully. He complains of a cold numbness in his hands, and tells me that his fingers no longer feel familiar.

Tests show some arthritic degeneration, but otherwise he's in surprising health for such an old man. He's clear-eyed and his memory is intact. He tends to stare directly at his questioners, which is a little unnerving, but he has developed some confidence in me and answers my questions promptly.

Medically, his only real dangers are burns to the mouth area and the fingers. I counsel him to stay away from fires and hot liquids. We stare at each other in silence. "What do I do about the dead?" he asks suddenly. I mumble a reply and stand there ashamed.

I don't know what to do about the dead. They've gone from the earth, never to return, and there are more dead every day. I don't know where they go or what they do. I don't know if their souls are healed by greater doctors than I or if they're left, like their bodies, in awful piles in nameless fields. I hope that we're blessed when we die, and that an eternal memory remembers us.

The men and women and children who died in the Ghost Dance War left this earth believing in Red Shirt, and he was wrong. How he bears their souls in his heart I'll never know; nor can I ever make it any easier for him. All I can do is remember them, too. So I do, and I close this account with a prayer for their poor souls, pierced by worldly bullets, wrapped in the clean white shirts that brought them down. Pray for them. Pray for me. •

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