



Sitting Bull
BILL YENNE





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Frontispiece: One of the most memorable portraits of Sitting Bull, this photograph was taken by David F. Barry in Bismarck, Dakota Territory, probably between 1883 and 1885. (*Montana Historical Society*)

Half title page: Sitting Bull's hieroglyphic autograph. Title page: Sitting Bull's cursive autograph. (*National Anthropological Archives*)

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The greatest Indian enigma of his time, perhaps of all time.

—*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*

Sitting Bull, leader of the largest Indian nation on the continent, the strongest, boldest, most stubborn opponent of European influence, was the very heart and soul of the Frontier. When the true history of the New World is written, he will receive his chapter. For Sitting Bull was one of the Makers of America.

—Stanley Vestal

I began to see when I was not yet born; when I was not in my mother's arms, but inside of my mother's belly. It was there that I began to study about my people. God gave me the power to see out of the womb. I studied there, in the womb, about many things. The God Almighty must have told me at that time that I would be the man to be the judge of all the other Indians—a big man, to decide for them in all their ways.

—Sitting Bull, 1877

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NOTE ON TERMS

SITTING BULL's name in the language of his people, the Lakota, is Tatanka Iyotanka. Tatanka is the Lakota word for buffalo bull, although it is often used as an umbrella term for the entire species. Iyotanka, meanwhile, implies that the bull is intractable or stubborn. The term "tatanka iyotanka" also is the first stage in an old Lakota allegory of the four stages of life (see page 5).

In this book, where Lakota words are used, my general reference is *Lakota Dictionary: Lakota-English/English-Lakota: Comprehensive Edition*, by Eugene Buechel (editor) and Paul Manhart, published in 2002 by the University of Nebraska Press. In other cases, such as with names, I have tried to use the most widely accepted spellings. I use the term "wasichu" for "white people," rather than the less common term, "wasicun." Wasichu also has the alternate meaning of "the one who steals the bacon," or "fat taker."

PROLOGUE

ONE night, long ago, on the windswept prairies of Western Canada, he stepped into the faint light of a kerosene lantern to speak with a man from the tribe that his people call the wasichu, and that we call Euro-Americans. Jerome Stillson of the *New York Herald* looked into the eyes of this man, who was both the most famous American Indian in the world and a scarcely understood mystery. “Your face is dark,” Stillson told this enigma who had come to him in the form of a man. “My people do not see it.”

What Stillson said that night many years ago remains true to this day. His name is still the best known of any American Indian leader in history, but despite this, his face remains clouded by mystery, unseen and not truly understood by the wasichu. “He’s known around the globe,” Mark Holman, the library director at the college that bears his name, told me. “You can go anywhere in the world and mention his name and people know.” His fame is assured. He was world famous when he died, and he is at least as well known around the globe today—but why? What is it about him that makes him as relevant and as current in the twenty-first century as he was in the nineteenth century? Who was he and what is his legacy?

He was many things to many people and he remains as such today. He was a warrior, a shaman, a villain, and a hero. He was a showman happily selling autographed pictures of himself, and selling them at a discount to ladies to whom he took a fancy. He was a man of great charisma. Today, his face is not so much dark, as it is like a face illuminated by the lantern,

or by the shifting, flickering light of a campfire like that which burned the night he was born or the night he was laid to rest.

Both James Walsh and Adirondack Murray, who knew him and respected him, understood that he projected an indefinable presence and power that made the nineteenth-century term “medicine man” a meaningless understatement. Murray saw him and sensed an oracle of mysteries and saw in him the highest expression of wisdom. Stanley Vestal, who did not know him but probably talked to more people who did than anyone else who has written about him, saw him as the very heart and soul of the frontier, one of the makers of America.

He saw himself as a man, a man who saw things that others did not see. The Lakota have a word for men like him. They call them *wikasa wakan*, but even that seems a pale way to understand something that can't really be described in words.

What most people know of him today is known through a shifting, flickering amalgam of images, some true, some ambiguous, and a great many that are totally false. His image is like a collection of partially assembled pieces of a puzzle. Like many historical figures with which most of us have only a passing acquaintance, he is known through an often distorted lens. He was a great man, but he was also a human man. Like all great men, he had his weaknesses, his moments of doubt and fear. Like all great men, he was a very complex man who we have reduced to simple terms in order to try to grasp who he was. To do so, we often miss the point.

Though the man is long gone, and his face still remains unclear, his name has never been forgotten. However, exactly who he was remains less clear in that collective memory than what his name has come to represent. The caricature was easy to grasp, but the reality was far more complex than the simplistic image that has been ingrained into popular culture for more than a century.

Who was the man in Stillson's flickering lantern light so long ago? Who was the man behind the face that remained in shadow despite global

notoriety? What Stillson hoped to accomplish in his interview on that cold night so long ago was to cast some light into the darkness that obscured that face, and that is what I hope to accomplish in these pages.



This buffalo herd was photographed on the Standing Rock Reservation not far from Sitting Bull's birthplace early in the twenty-first century, but the scene is essentially identical to what one would have encountered two centuries before. (*Bill Yenne*)

WANIYETU WOWAPI

HE WAS BORN A VERY LONG TIME AGO into a world very unlike our own, and very unlike the world in which he lived his final years.

He was probably born early in the wasichu year of 1831, though he might have been born a couple of years earlier, or maybe as late as 1837. It is recalled among his people that he was born in the “Winter When Yellow Eyes Danced in the Snow,” and this has been calculated to be the equivalent of 1831. His people, the Lakota, reckoned a year from the first snow one year to the first snow the following year; these pictographic *waniyetu wowapi* (winter counts) lead us to 1831. Therefore, that date is the one that most people now use.

A *waniyetu wowapi* was a document that counted winters. In the language of his people, the word *waniyetu* literally means winter, but it is a synonym for “year.” The word *wowapi* literally translates as a document. It might be a single-page document, or a pictograph, or it might be a book in the wasichu sense. The Holy Bible is known in the language of his people as the *Wowapi Wakan*, literally, the “Holy Document.”

In actual practice, a waniyetu wowapi was a series of pictographs painted on a single flat surface, usually a buffalo hide. Later, as they became available from wasichu sources, cloth and paper came into use. There would be a pictograph for each year that was a picture that reminded everyone of a memorable event that occurred during the year, and by which people would recognize and recall the years. Even if someone did not have a firsthand recollection of Yellow Eyes dancing in the snow, they had heard about it through the stories told by older people. Today, there is no one left who remembers Yellow Eyes, and few who remember who he was—but the name is in the winter count.

As George Hyde remembered, and told us a century later, in 1937, Yellow Eyes had many names. He was a wasichu who grew up in a prominent St. Louis family with the name Thomas Lestang Sarpy. In Nebraska, there is a county named for this family. As he grew into adulthood, Thomas would share neither his family's prosperity, nor this family's name. It is said that he left home to escape a bad marriage, working for a while for the American Fur Company. In their employ, he traveled upstream on the Missouri River, where he established a trading post in what is now South Dakota. By now, he was known as Thomas Leston, but he came to use the name "Blestan," because to the people with whom he traded, this word sounded like their word for red lake.

In the space of three or four winters, he earned the name Yellow Eyes and took a wife from among the people with whom he traded, and they had a child. Some people say that he had two wives and two children, but that is beside the point. In 1831, a keg of gunpowder blew up next to where he was standing and Yellow Eyes was hurled to his death. To those who saw this, it was unforgettable, and the winter became the Winter When Yellow Eyes Danced in the Snow. Two years later, the Year the Stars Fell, was correlated to 1833 because of the Leonid meteor shower that occurred in November of that year.

But let us return to the winter that Yellow Eyes left the world, which is the winter that the subject of our story came into it.

He was probably born in a cottonwood grove along the south side of what is now known as the Grand River. This place was about 30 miles west and upstream from where the Grand enters the Missouri River, in what is now known as South Dakota. However, in 1881, he told a newspaper reporter that he was born on Willow Creek, just below the mouth of the Cheyenne River. Many years later, he told an interviewer, “I was born on the Missouri River; at least I recollect that somebody told me so—I don’t know who told me or where I was told of it.” He might have said, and the interpreter did not understand, that he was born in the “Missouri River Country,” which would have included the banks of the Grand River.

In the 1920s, old men who had known him when they were young men and he was an old man told interviewers that he was born at a place along the Grand that was called Many Caches. It was known as this because it was here where people routinely camped, and where they excavated caches to store their goods. He may also have been born elsewhere in what is now western South Dakota. If anyone knows for sure, they are probably keeping it a secret.

The conventional wisdom is that he was born in the late winter, during the month called the Moon of Sore Eyes, a time of lengthening days and abating overcast when the sun reflecting off the snow was painfully bright. If he was indeed born in late winter, then it is probable that his family were still in an established winter encampment area such as Many Caches.

Ironically, the place where he later left this world was just a few miles from where he was probably born. Also ironically, the nearest town—Bullhead, South Dakota—is named for one of the men who shot him. Today, this part of the Grand River seems nearly as far from the *wasichu* world as it was in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century. Those who routinely commute by air between the coasts casually dismiss the Dakotas as part of “flyover country.” Indeed, the contrails that criss-cross the dark blue sky on a cold, crisp late winter morning, when snow drifts cover the

narrow country roads, are about the only feature one sees out here that allows us to realize that we are not standing here in the early nineteenth century—or the eighteenth, or before. In late winter it can take as long—or longer—to drive to the probable place of his birth from the nearest Interstate highway (I-90) than it does to drive from New York to Washington, D.C.

Today, the confluence of the Missouri and the Grand is submerged beneath the reservoir created by the Oahe Dam, but upstream, near where Many Caches once existed, the Grand River appears more or less as it did back in Sitting Bull's time. The sound of the wind rustling through the trees near the place where he was born is still punctuated with the familiar trill of the western meadowlark, a bird that is said to have had a special meaning for him throughout his life, and whose language he is said to have understood. He also had a special relationship with the yellow-shafted flicker. When he was a boy, one of these birds saved his life, awakening him from a nap and warning him to lie perfectly still when a grizzly bear passed so close that the young man could feel the damp warmth of its fetid breath.

When he came into the world during the "Winter When Yellow Eyes Danced in the Snow," the boy who is now universally known as Sitting Bull received the name Jumping Badger. At the time, his father was called Sitting Bull, though he too would be known by other names. Among their people, name changes were common, though not undertaken lightly. As they matured, people were often given new names that better described their character than the names they were given at birth. Indeed, before he took the name Sitting Bull, the elder Sitting Bull had been known as Returns Again, a name that he earned by being a warrior who successfully completed a raid on a rival tribe and came home to tell the tale. Speaking of tales, the way that Returns Again took the name Sitting Bull is also an interesting story.

Returns Again was thought to possess the rare—but not unheard of—ability to communicate with animals in their own language. One day



Cottonwood groves grow in the river bottom land near where Sitting Bull was born. The area has changed only a little since Sitting Bull rode these hills and valleys. (*Bill Yenne*)

while hunting—or in some variations of the tale, one evening while eating dinner around their campfire—Returns Again and three other hunters were approached by the Great Buffalo, who is the earthly manifestation of the deity that provides adequate game to Lakota hunters. The Great Buffalo spoke, but only Returns Again could understand him, so it was known that the message was meant for him rather than his companions.

Speaking to Returns Again, the Great Buffalo named the four stages of life. Everyone has heard the metaphor about the three stages of life in which a person walks on four legs in the morning (a crawling baby), two legs at noon (a walking adult), and three legs in the evening (a person walking with a cane). In the parallel Lakota parable, there are four stages. First is *tatanka iyotake*, the sitting bull, followed by *tatanka psica*, the jumping bull, and *tatanka winyuha najin*, the bull who is standing with a cow. Finally, there is *tatanka wanjila*, the bull who stands alone.

Returns Again interpreted the message of the Great Buffalo to mean that he should take the name Sitting Bull, which he did. Some years later, when his son became a man and was renamed Sitting Bull, the elder

Sitting Bull (formerly Returns Again) took the name Jumping Bull, the next stage of life in the continuum referenced by the Great Buffalo on that portentous day.

Returns Again had been born around the turn of the nineteenth century, possibly in 1799. Little is known of his ancestors, although his own father is said to have received a King George III peace medal at the time of the War of 1812, when the British were currying favor with the Western Tribes. Returns Again had at least two siblings. Of one brother, Looks for Him in a Tent (Looks for Home), little is known except that he was killed in a battle with Crow warriors in the winter of 1869–1870. Another brother was Four Horns, who later became an illustrious leader of his people. Much younger than Returns Again, Four Horns was born in about 1814 and may have been his half-brother.

The wife of the elder Sitting Bull was called Mixed Day at the time she gave birth to Jumping Badger, although she was later known as Her Holy Door. When Jumping Badger was born, Mixed Day and the elder Sitting Bull had a daughter who was about six years old and whose name was Good Feather. A second daughter, Twin Woman (also known as Brown Shawl Woman) was born much later, although the exact date has not been established. Both the elder Sitting Bull and Mixed Day were ethnically Hunkpapa Lakota, but prior to Mixed Day's becoming his wife, the elder Sitting Bull also had a son named Fool Dog by a woman who was Arikira. Little is known of Fool Dog other than that he remained with the Arikira people. The name Fool Dog pops up from time to time in nineteenth-century lore, including as one of the signatories of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, but it cannot be said for certain that each mention is that of the same person.

JUMPING BADGER was born into the Hunkpapa, a branch, or oyate, of the tribal grouping known to many as the Teton (Tetonwan) or Western Sioux, but who refer to themselves as Lakota.

The Sioux did not call themselves “Sioux.” That name, which is still used officially by the wasichu after more than 200 years, is a truncation of the word “Nadouessioux.” In the language of the Chippewa (aka Ojibwa or Annishinaabe) people, it means “little snakes” or adders. The derogatory term was applied by the Chippewa to all the Plains tribes that shared the Hokan-Siouan language. The Sioux are simply one of the tribes whose language is of this linguistic group, but there are other Hokan-Siouan-speaking people. These include central Plains tribes such as the Iowa, Kansa, Omaha, Osage, Oto, Ponca, Quapaw, and Winnebago, as well as the Hidatsa (Gros Ventre) and Mandan on the Northern Plains. Other tribes who lived in what is known to the wasichu as Virginia, as well as the Biloxi people living near the mouth of the Mississippi River, were linguistically related to the Sioux.

The Sioux refer to themselves by a name that literally means “friend” or “allies,” and implies “all Sioux people.” The name varies within three distinct Hokan-Siouan dialects. The ethnographers say that from east to west, the three groups refer to all members of the tribe as “Dakota,” “Nakota,” and “Lakota,” respectively. This geographical breakdown is an oversimplification, because the “Sioux” subgroups are all mixed around today, but it is a useful shorthand way to understand the origins of the tribal divisions.

Once living generally in what is now Minnesota, the eastern branch of the tribe, known as the Dakota or Santee, included such subgroups as the Mdewakanton, Sisseton (Sisseton), Wahpekute, and Wahpeton (Wahpetonwan).

The central branch, or the Nakota, living in what are now the Dakotas, included the Yankton and Yanktonai (Little Yankton), subgroups. The Yankton and Yanktonais are also called the Wiceyala or Middle Sioux. When they moved eastward onto the prairie, they had contact with the semi-sedentary farming tribes such as the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara. Eventually the Yanktonai displaced these tribes and forced them upstream

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