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EDITOR'S PICK

Landmark 'A Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux' back in print for 50th anniversary

L. KENT WOLGAMOTT Lincoln Journal Star Jan 13, 2018



This image, titled "The Sun Dance" is a portrayal of a group of women watching one of the acts of the Sun Dance ritual through the pine-bough barricade that surrounds the dance ground as reproduced from "A Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux, 50th Anniversary Edition" by Amos Bad Heart Bull and edited by Helen Blish, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press.

University of Nebraska Press

Around 1890, Amos Bad Heart Bull, an Oglala Sioux who was a U.S. Army Indian Scout at Fort Robinson, purchased a largely blank ledger book in Crawford.

In its pages, over the next two decades, Bad Heart Bull recorded the history of the Oglala in drawing and Lakota writing.

In 1926, Helen Blish, a Detroit schoolteacher who had grown up around Indian reservations, encountered Bad Heart Bull's ledger of drawings in the possession of his sister, Dollie Pretty Cloud.



Enrolling in graduate school at the University of Nebraska, Blish “leased” the ledger from Pretty Cloud, bringing it to Lincoln to study and write about its drawings, Oglala history and the artist in a thesis.

In 1947, Pretty Cloud died and Bad Heart Bull's ledger was buried with her.

In 1959, acclaimed Nebraska author Mari Sandoz proposed that the University of Nebraska Press turn Bad Heart Bull's ledger drawings and her friend Blish's thesis into a book, beginning a nearly two-decade process of creating the massive volume.

Initially, a full copy of Blish's thesis could not be located and, in 1960, Pretty Cloud's family refused repeated requests to temporarily exhume the ledger.

Over the next seven years, through family and friends, the full thesis was found as were sets of photographs of the drawings. The press raised funds, prepared the text and pictures for publication and, three months before she died, Sandoz contributed the book's introduction.

“A Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux” was published in 1967, instantly becoming a landmark volume of Native history and art, a status that it retains five decades later.

Until this month, however, “A Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux” could only be found in libraries, private collections and, for a price, at booksellers.

“We did a set run in 1967 with about 200 special edition copies with a few extra pages inserted,” said Heather Stauffer, associate acquisitions editor. “Once they sold out in the early ‘80s, it went out of print.”

To remedy that and celebrate a half-century of the book, a 50th Anniversary Edition of “A Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux” has just been published.

On shelves for a little over a week, the 648-page volume listed at \$95, reproduces and augments the original with newly reproduced images of the drawings and a pair of introductory essays -- one on Bad Heart Bull and Blish, one on the significance of the ledger drawings.

Outside of a new preface and the introductory essays, the text in the new volume is identical to that of the 1967 version, literally so.

“What we did is take one of the originals and scan the pages,” Stauffer said. “That’s what appears in the new volume. It was about the only thing we could do if we didn’t want to retype and reset it.”

More problematic was reproducing the 414 black-and-white illustrations from the ledger and 32 color plates that were included in the original volume.

“We had no negatives from the previous edition,” senior designer Annie Shahan said. “It had to be scanned, which we did from the original for the type. To rescan them (the images) would have degraded them a great deal.”

The negatives, in the form of photographic plates, did, in fact exist. But they’d been missing for decades.

Hartley Burr Alexander, Blish’s advisor at the university, had the ledger photographed and took the plates with him when he left Nebraska to create the humanities program at Scripps College in Claremont, California.

When he died in 1939, Alexander’s papers, including the hand-colored prints, went into the Scripps library. But the negatives did not get sent with the drawings and were thought to be forever lost.

In the mid-1980s, the plates turned up at a garage sale in Claremont, where Alexander spent his last years.

In 2011, the latest owner of the plates brought them to the attention of the Plains Indian Ledger Art Digital Publishing Project at the University of California-San Diego, which purchased the plates and sent them to the Smithsonian Institution’s National Anthropological Archives for permanent preservation.

The plates then could be digitally scanned. But there were issues with the imagery and condition of the plates.

“They hadn’t been kept in a controlled atmosphere, so the photographic emulsion cracked and shrank,” Shahan said. “That made gaps in the images and some of them were damaged by mold or mildew. There were some that were ruined.”

But the majority of the damaged images could be restored, through manipulation of the digital imagery in Photoshop.

“The ones I did most of the work on, there was enough of a shot of getting them to work,” Shahan said. “The ones that were fairly clear, but just fractured were the ones I worked on because it was possible to fix them.”

That “fixing” is dramatically illustrated in a comparison of the scan of a damaged plate and the reworked version included in the preface to the 50th anniversary edition.

In the scan, a thick black line curls through the plate, “cutting off” the head of a mounted Oglala warrior and bisecting another horse and rider below with a large black triangle on the bottom of the emulsion, which appears to have peeled away.

In the reworked version, which was done by repositioning and stretching the broken section and melding pieces of the 1967 book illustration with the folded and missing edges, the image is tight and pristine.

“It was really satisfying when it worked really well,” said Shahan, who worked on more than 100 of the images. “Sometimes I could stretch some of the fragments and work them to fit together and they’d meet the edge perfectly. It was a lot of fun to see the images. ... They’re all different, so it never felt repetitive.”

What they do feel like to Shahan is a vibrant visual history of the Oglala.

“It’s a remarkable historic document,” Shahan said. “The things that are so much of our mythology and history are there in drawings from somebody who was part of them, at the scene.”

That history was intentional.

Following his father’s footsteps, Bad Heart Bull served as his band’s historian, collecting documents and reports related to the relations between the Oglala and the federal government, even though he couldn’t read them, and in his drawings, recording key events in the tribe’s history.

Many of those events took place before the birth of Eagle Lance (who later adopted the name Amos Bad Heart Bull) in 1869.

Some of those drawings can be found in a section of drawings Blish titled “Events Perhaps Earlier Than 1856,” which include images of the Sioux Council, the moving of tribal bands, the Sun Dance, warrior societies and buffalo hunt.

The largest number of drawings fall under the heading of “Sioux-Crow Fights,” depicting conflicts between the Oglala and their, in Blish’s term, “hereditary enemies,” the Crows, including battles and skirmishes seen in overviews, individual combat and a horse stealing expedition.

The most compelling drawings are of the Battle of Little Big Horn, more than 50 images, most of which depict the attack of a Seventh Cavalry battalion, led by Maj. Marcus A. Reno, on the upper end of a Native village on the banks of the Little Big Horn River in Montana. The attack was repelled by Native fighters, scattering the Army troops into a panicked retreat -- all well documented in the drawings.

While he was in the village at the Little Big Horn, Bad Heart Bull, contrary to some published accounts, did not participate in the battle. He was only 7 or 8 years old. Nor was he a participant in the Battle of Wounded Knee. But his uncle Short Bull was and he’s depicted in one of the six drawings of the 1890 tragedy.

While the depictions of the “Greater Indian Shows,” largely of Fourth of July celebrations on the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1898 and 1903, are derived from personal experience, the remainder of the drawings are based on recollections Bad Heart Bull gathered from his warrior uncles He Dog and Short Bull and other Oglala elders.

“Bad Heart Bull was clearly an assiduous researcher,” ethnologist Candace Greene of the Smithsonian writes in her introductory essay to the new volume. “He seems to have sought out information from many men, transformed it into a visual representation, and then presented his drawing for review and correction. While all of the images were made by his own hand, the history that Bad Heart Bull recorded was a communal project.”

Given its origins, it is understandable why Bad Heart Bull’s drawing of the killing of Crazy Horse at Fort Robinson appears to be cold-blooded murder, with a pair of guards holding his arms and a soldier running at him from the back with a fixed bayonet. That depiction, Blish noted, does not match up with other accounts of the killing.

Equally as important as the history are the drawings themselves, which are something of a breakthrough in Native art of the late 19th and early 20th century..

“Bad Heart (Bull) experimented with new modes of representation, fearlessly tackling three dimensionality, back and three-quarter views, and aerial perspective,” Native art expert Janet Berlo wrote in an essay about the color prints. “His dynamic and vigorous opus stands as an unparalleled achievement in Native American art.”

Specifically, Greene points out in her essay, Bad Heart Bull selectively added elements of Western technique and illustration to Plains-style Native art, continuing to use the traditional strong outlines, but adding three dimensionality by overlapping and drawing men and horse in dynamic, varied postures, conveying a sense of immediacy and action.

As a result, there are images that appear to be modern, including one with a series of horse heads stacked above the primary image of a horse and rider.

Just as notable, however, is the lack of variation in the faces of those depicted in the drawings, even those getting stabbed have a bland, non committal look on their faces.

“They all kind of look alike,” Shahan said. “The distinguishing characteristics would have been in the paint, the colors, the details of the horse, what they wore. That’s the identifying characteristics in Native iconography.”

Some of those identifiers can be found in the black-and-white imagery. In the two of the plates depicting the Battle of the Little Big Horn, for example, Bad Heart Bull the elder can be identified in Blish’s description, by his “personal charm, the fox skin ... worn in his characteristic and peculiar manner.”

Even so, it would be illuminating to see Bad Heart Bull’s full-color drawings. Here’s how Blish described a dark mass of a figure in a plate that is simply labeled “Indian love flute”:

“The central figure in the drawing is that of a man; he is robed in a decorated buffalo skin, his face is painted yellow with two red diagonal stripes on the cheek, he wears an eagle feather in his hair, and he plays a flute. The figure is framed by a circle, the right half of whose circumference is red, the left, yellow. The wavy blue line reaching from the oddly represented sound issuing from the flute, to the yellow ring of the circle indicates that this man’s music possessed spiritual powers not usually found in flute music.”

The color in the plates, in fact, is not from Bad Heart Bull. Rather, it was commissioned by Alexander to go onto the reproduced photographs in the 1930s.

The color gives the images some punch. But it would be much more effective, and accurate if it was Bad Heart Bull’s original. That, however, was not to be.

The sharp, detailed black-and-white images, however, still powerfully convey much of the history that Bad Heart Bull was recording, retaining the status of the “A Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux” as a remarkable landmark volume, 50 years after it was printed and more than century after Bad Heart Bull put pencils to the ledger.

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