



Black Elk (Heñáka Sápa)

Black Elk was an Oglala Lakota holy man who made a lasting impact on global understanding of Indigenous Plains cultures and religions during the 19th Century. He was involved in some of the most notable events in the American West and is still celebrated today.

Early Life

Born around 1863 in present-day Wyoming, Black Elk had five sisters, one brother, and was second cousin to Crazy Horse. He was the fourth man in his family to go by the name of Black Elk.



He began having visions at five years old. When he was nine, he became extremely sick and had a vision in which he met with the Six Grandfathers representing the four cardinal directions, the earth, and the sky. They each offered him gifts that bestowed power, including a pipestone pipe. He recovered after his vision, but kept it a secret for years, allowing its meaning to reveal itself over time.

The Battle of the Greasy Grass (The Battle of Little Bighorn)

In 1874, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer (known to the Lakota as Pahuska or Long Hair) led an expedition through the Black Hills to find a location for a military post, violating the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 which designated the Black Hills as Lakota land. To make matters worse, Custer's expedition reported the discovery of gold in the Black Hills. Tensions rose as the Lakota, Dakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho bands united under Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse.

On June 25, 1876 the stage was set for one of the most notable battles in U.S History. The US Army, including Custer and the Seventh Cavalry, attacked late that afternoon but were no match for the united tribes. Black Elk was only twelve when the battle took place, but remembered hearing the songs his people sang following the victory of the Battle of the Greasy Grass.



Prior to the Horse Dance, Black Elk feared punishment from Thunder-Beings (storm spirits from the west) for not acting upon his vision. This ledger drawing of a Thunder-Being was created by Chief Black Hawk in 1880 or 1881.

The Horse Dance

Black Elk's spiritual powers continued to grow. He eventually revealed his vision to a medicine man named Black Road. Black Road told him to reenact his vision before his people in a ceremony called "the Horse Dance." Another vision and ceremony soon followed and Black Elk became established among his people as a holy man and healer.

Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show

In 1886 Black Elk joined Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show. They traveled by train to New York and performed at Madison Square Garden. The following year the show went to England via steamship.

Black Elk had never experienced being on boat at sea; some Indigenous passengers even sang their death songs. They safely arrived in London and performed in the American Exposition, part of the Golden Jubilee celebration for Queen Victoria. When scheduled to return to the U.S., Black Elk and a few other men got lost and missed their ship. They joined a rival wild west show and traveled across Europe before reuniting with Buffalo Bill and returning home.

The Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee Massacre

Black Elk returned to Pine Ridge and found his people short of food and ravaged by disease. Black Elk resumed his position healing the sick but watched many people die.

Before Congress outlawed the practice of Indigenous religions and public ceremonies in 1883, Black Elk had participated in a Ghost Dance at Wounded Knee. The spread of this dance drew concern from reservation agents already worried that Sitting Bull would join the movement and incite a rebellion. This fear resulted in the U.S. Army opening fire and killing 150 Lakota people at Wounded Knee in South Dakota .

Black Elk was not present at the start of the slaughter, but helped counter the attack after hearing the cannons and guns. He helped survivors and wept for the dead. Black Elk took part in skirmishes over the next few days until Red Cloud and his people surrendered to the United States.



Black Elk and Elk, while touring with the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, 1887 *Public Domain/Courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution*



Black Elk Peak in the Black Hills is the highest point in the Midwest at 7,244 feet

Family and Later Life

After Red Cloud’s surrender, those who remained were forced onto reservations and had to adapt to a new way of life. In 1892 Black Elk married his first wife, Katie War Bonnet and had three kids. Katie died in 1903 and Black Elk remarried Anna Brings White in 1905. They remained together until Anna’s death in 1941.

Black Elk Speaks, an autobiographical interview, was written by John G. Neihardt in 1930 and grew in popularity in the 1970s. Black Elk symbolizes courage and wisdom for people all over the world. A monumental tribute to his legacy now lies in the Black Hills. On August 11, 2016, South Dakota renamed its highest peak after Black Elk to honor its role in his vision and respect its spiritual significance to the Lakota people.