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## Article Title: Wounded Knee and the “Collector of Curios”

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Article Summary: The truth surrounding many artifacts of the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre may never be known. All should be evaluated critically, if not skeptically. The demand for Wounded Knee “curios” far outstripped the supply of authentic items. The method of obtaining such relics, which was documented by various newspaper correspondents, calls into question the authenticity of many such items currently on display.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: George H Harries, Nelson Miles, Big Foot, Dent H Robert, General Crook, Little Chief, American Horse, Will Cressey, Chief Two Strikes, Bill Hudspeth, George Trager, Sitting Bull, John P Bratt, E G Fechet, Charles W Allen, Peter McFarland, John G Neihardt, Charges Alone

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Photographs / Images: Burial detail at Wounded Knee, 1891; Pipe; American Horse’s home; Ghost Dance Shirt; vintage Pine Ridge photograph in Brule Indian camp, Pine Ridge Agency, South Dakota; youngest son of Chief Two Strikes or Bill Hudspeth’s boy; Second photograph of son f Chief Two Strikes or Bill Hudspeth’s boy; Model 1873 Winchester rifle picked up by Charles W Allen at Wounded Knee; Charges Alone portrait



Fig.1. Burial detail at Wounded Knee on January 3, 1891. (NSHS-W938-64)

## Wounded Knee and the

By R. Eli Paul

Many institutions hold artifacts attributed to the Wounded Knee Massacre, the Lakota Ghost Dance, and the Sioux Campaign of 1890-91. One scholar observed, "Today museums probably hold more objects gathered from the field of Wounded Knee than from the scene of any other Indian engagement in the West."<sup>1</sup> He could have been speaking of the museum collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society, which also reflect another feature common to such objects, their poor documentation.

The demand for authentic Wounded Knee "relics" or "curios," as objects of native manufacture were called in 1890s America, far outstripped the supply that Big Foot's decimated village could provide. Fortunately newspaper correspondents, whose ranks swelled to two dozen before the military campaign's end, reported these collecting and selling sprees, and in so doing recorded the variety of methods the "collectors of curios" devised to meet the demands of the marketplace. Reviewing their efforts now raises questions about the credibility of many Wounded Knee items in the Historical Society's collections and, by implication, those in other institutions.

Increased tensions and the perceived threat of an Indian outbreak had brought the United States Army to the Pine Ridge Reservation in November 1890. Along with the military forces came several reporters, representing many of the major

eastern dailies, to witness an overwhelming response by the authorities to the Lakota Ghost Dance. Three of their number reported on its most dramatic and grisly moment, the massacre at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890.<sup>2</sup> This event only heightened the seemingly insatiable thirst for "war news" by the reading public, and the reporters obliged them. They churned out daily accounts of unfolding events, troop movements, and Indian politics, and, when news was slack, turned their attention to the more obscure players at Pine Ridge.

Two categories of "busy men" caught the eye of George H. Harries, correspondent for the *Washington Evening Star*.<sup>3</sup> The first was "the enterprising photographers," whose work, especially on the frozen fields of Wounded Knee, has defined this historical event as have no other chroniclers. Their efforts, sometimes misguided, oftentimes suspect, have been examined elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

The second category of busy men described by correspondent Harries boasted far more practitioners. This was "the collector of curios, the aggregator of relics, the purchaser of everything—good, bad and indifferent—that was offered for sale."<sup>5</sup> Relic hunters descended upon the Indian camps of both living and dead Sioux like a cloud of Nebraska grasshoppers, and stripped them bare. Another reporter sarcastically observed, "[I]f Gen. [Nelson] Miles had only given the relic hunters permission to visit the hostile camp there would have been no trouble about disarming the Indians."<sup>6</sup>

Predictably the items in greatest demand were those from Wounded Knee. This material disappeared from the market quickly, if for no other reason than the thoroughness with which Big Foot's village was stripped. A detail of civilians and soldiers left Pine Ridge for Wounded Knee on January 3, 1891, to bury the Indian dead. They finished their gruesome task the following day. It was at this time that the famous battlefield photographs of Wounded Knee were taken. In one of the surviving sixteen views (fig. 1), a man (standing in front of the horse and rider) holds what appear to be articles of clothing from a massacre victim. As late as January 13, two weeks after the massacre, fifty Indians were seen at the site "picking up various articles and trinkets."<sup>7</sup>

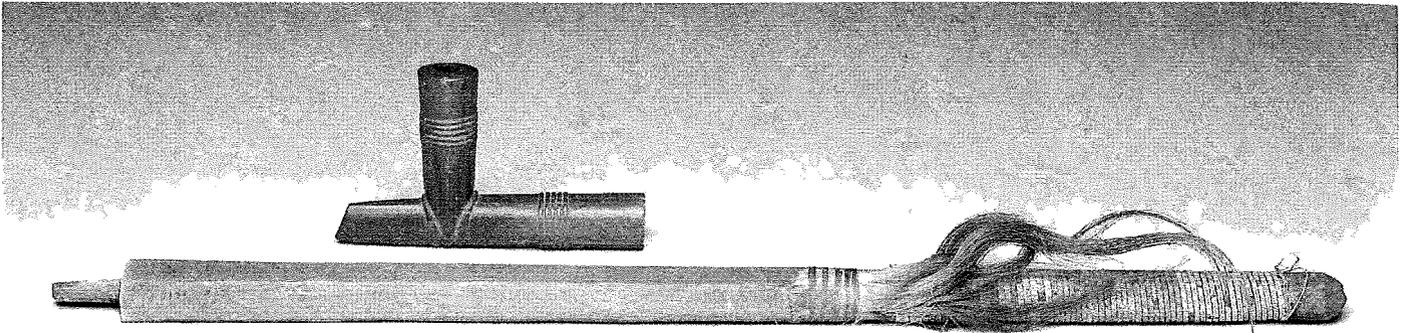
When Harries, the newspaper correspondent, visited the battleground one week later, he wrote:

The relic hunter has been all over the battlefield and has taken away everything of value and interest that was above the surface. Occasionally one will find a memento worth carrying away but not often. Whatever was beautiful or odd in the clothing of dead or wounded Indians was taken by the victors and either kept for personal gratification or sold for cash.<sup>8</sup>

Harries noted the next, logical phase of collecting activity and its effect on the market:

Fictitious relics soon succeeded those mementoes which would naturally interest most people and then followed fictitious values. . . . That was the Ogallalas' picnic. Everything saleable was dragged out of the tepee and disposed of at 'war prices.' The

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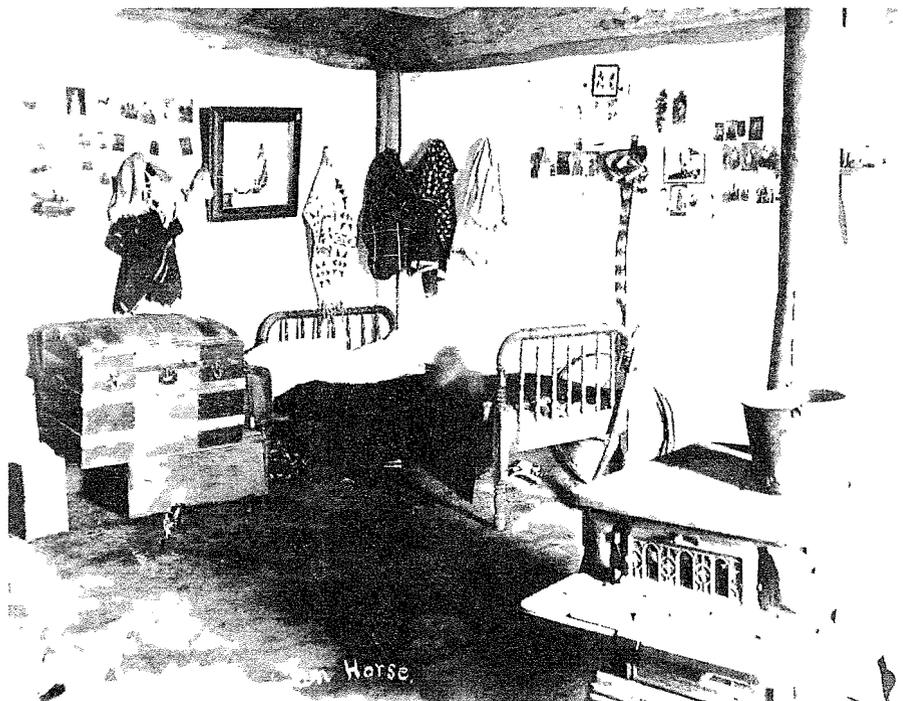
**Fig. 2.** This pipe came to the Nebraska State Historical Society from the collections of the Grand Army of the Republic. Unlike Sitting Bull's rattle (back cover), its connection to an Indian leader is far more tenuous. It was described in the museum catalog as: "Peace pipe made and smoked by Two Strike at close of Pine Ridge Indian War, 1890." The pipe bowl is 16 cm. long, 10 cm. high, and 3 cm. in dia. The stem is 65 cm. long and 4 cm. wide, tapering to 3 cm. at the mouth; the stem would have been inserted in the bowl to allow the horsehair to have hung from the bottom.

average collector was not in it, and the wise man ceased to look at bead work or the fragments which were alleged to have been saved from the strife at Wounded Knee. Never was there such a plentitude of war clubs, each guaranteed to have been the instrument with which Capt. Wallace's life was terminated. Big Foot's clothing would have filled any ordinary baggage car.<sup>9</sup>

Dent H. Robert, another war correspondent, also had his attention drawn to the relic trade and detailed the methods of acquisition:

One is to lie in wait for an Indian and buy what he has with him. One of them, who wore a buckskin coat trimmed with fur and decorated with porcupine work, took it off and went home with his body naked. Another way is to employ half-breeds to hunt up pretty work and bring it in, but... it is expensive. The best way is to go to the camp and talk to the squaws, but that is discountenanced by the military authorities, for even now, though peace has been re-established, they are afraid some evil-minded young buck might prove ill-tempered and do something rash. Still the risk is run by some and every day they come in from the camp loaded with beaded work, saddle-bags, vests, papoose bags, pipes, moccasins, necklaces, tributes of all sorts. Pretty nearly all the pipes have been bought up (fig. 2), and the only ones you can find here now are those the Indians want for their own use and will not sell.<sup>10</sup>

One officer in the Nebraska National Guard employed correspondent Robert's



**Fig. 3.** American Horse's home contained many objects that would have whetted a collector's appetite. (NSHS-W938-119-50B)

second method of securing relics, using a go-between, probably to his later regret:

There was a militia lieutenant who came here after the boys had been sent home and his eagerness for relics was so great that even among relic hunters he became conspicuous. He would walk up to a squaw and show her a dollar, then point at some simple ornament and say "Ugh." The squaw

would laugh and hold up two fingers. Out would come another dollar and the trinket would be his. An interpreter who was in the relic business pretty heavy himself was outraged at such a proceeding. "He is spoiling the market," he said, "but I'll put an end to him; I'll break him," so he kindly volunteered his services to the Lieutenant, and charmed to have his aid, the Lieutenant and he sallied forth on a buying expedition.



**Fig. 4. Ghost Dance shirt obtained on Pine Ridge Reservation in the 1930s by John G. Nelhardt, author of *Black Elk Speaks*. The shirt is 166 cm. long from the tip of the fringe, sleeve to sleeve; 74 cm. from the back of the neck to the tip of the fringe below; stained on its front. Its maker or date of manufacture is not known. (NSHS-9876-23)**

The Lieutenant saw a squaw with a bead necklace and wanted it, that is the necklace, very badly. The interpreter spoke to her in Sioux and asked her what she wanted for it. She asked \$1.50. Turning to the Lieutenant he said: "She wants \$4." "I'll take it," said the Lieutenant, without a moment's hesitation, and out came four shining silver dollars. "The gentleman says he will give you \$4," said the interpreter to the squaw and her face beamed. The interpreter leaned over to one who knew what was going on and said: "He can't keep that lick up long."

The next Indian they came across was Little Chief, a Cheyenne, who carried in his hand a cane like hundreds that are sold on the street corners for 15 cents. The interpreter talked to Little Chief for a while, and then

turning to the Lieutenant said: "Do you want that cane?" What is it?" asked the Lieutenant. "General Crooke [sic] gave it to him." "Did he? How much does he want for it?" "He says it is very near his heart, but he will sell it for \$2."

"All right, I'll take it," and two more of the Lieutenant's silver dollars went glimmering. This lasted for an hour and the interpreter finally succeeded in using up all the Lieutenant's ammunition and driving him out of the field.<sup>11</sup>

Another way relics were acquired was old-fashioned theft. American Horse's home suffered considerable damage from vandals after the Oglala leader sought

safety near the agency.<sup>12</sup> Though the looting was attributed to "hostiles," patrolling soldiers were also accused of breaking into several Indian cabins. This became enough of a public relations problem that one regimental commander ordered his men and the civilians accompanying them to desist from "the taking of even such trifling things as old moccasins, head dresses, bows, pipes and papposes' [sic] playthings."<sup>13</sup> At least one cavalryman was arrested for this offense. Judging from the historic photograph of his dwelling, the personal possessions of American Horse would have been a tempting target (fig. 3).

Demand for items of "historical" importance, those belonging to the principals or associated with specific events, grew to include those of "cultural" significance, more specifically, Ghost Dance shirts (figs. 4 and 5). After Wounded Knee General Miles received several letters from across the country requesting his assistance in securing specimens. Harries observed, "Those taken off bodies after the fight at Wounded Knee were soon disposed of by the soldiers, and it was almost impossible to part a live Indian and his ghost costume. It was 'bad medicine,' he said."<sup>14</sup> But Ghost Dance shirts were to be had at prices ranging from \$2 to \$5. Even before Wounded Knee, they had become the collectible of choice. One anonymous correspondent writing from Pine Ridge in early December wryly commented, "Some old hag has got on it and is making imitations for sale, and not the original ones worn and hallowed by use."<sup>15</sup>

Other recorded incidents raise questions about the authenticity of artifacts. When hostilities ended in January 1891, soldiers, correspondents, and relic hunters returned to their homes with their mementos, most destined, it was written, for "Eastern parlors." Several collectors placed their treasures on exhibit immediately, and then as today, reaped the benefits of legitimization which come from the public display of objects. The Nebraska State Historical Society presented a collection of battlefield relics loaned by Will Cressey of the *Omaha Bee*, one of the three correspondents present at Wounded



Fig. 5. This bizarre tableau appears in an album of vintage Pine Ridge photographs acquired by the Nebraska State Historical Society. The photo's accompanying, handwritten caption reads, "Whites in friendly Bruel (sic) Indian camp, Pine Ridge Agency, S.D." The seated man is wearing what may be an actual Ghost Dance shirt. Note the figure of the bird, a common symbol, on his right sleeve. (NSHS-W938-119-37A)

Knee on December 29. Among the articles described in a Lincoln newspaper account of the display were bracelets from Big Foot's wife, a belt and knife sheath, and a book of psalms, all "more or less blood-stained and all have the strong and disagreeable odor that is indisputable of the genuineness of the articles."<sup>16</sup>

Evidently the Historical Society had no misgivings about exhibiting Cressey's collection, even though the *Omaha World-Herald*, the *Bee's* energetic competitor, had already questioned its authenticity. Commenting in general on "the craze for relics of the late unpleasantness" and the appearance in downtown shop windows of several purported Big Foot Ghost Dance shirts, the *World-Herald* printed a

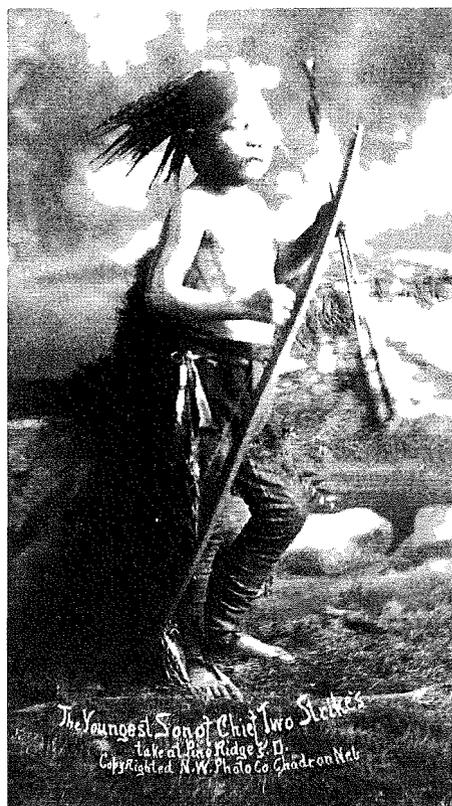
playful expose of Cressey, detailing how to manufacture a Wounded Knee relic.<sup>17</sup> A genuine Ghost Dance shirt was hung on a spinning wheel and shot full of holes with an air gun. Blood from a dead chicken was then spattered over the shirt, which, together with a new label, gave the object the appropriate "indisputable genuineness." And, of course, Cressey's collection included the obligatory war club that had purportedly brained Captain Wallace.

Blood stains and the application thereof are a common theme running through the stories of Wounded Knee relics. A Nebraska guardsman, whose Nebraska City infantry company was stationed south of the Pine Ridge Reservation, wrote home to his father and told of

the transactions of his mates: "Some of the relics which they have purchased and have no blood stains on them are soused in chicken blood to give them a horrifying look."<sup>18</sup> The militiamen brought back a reported "wagon load" of artifacts and displayed them at a public dance. A cabinet of curiosities (literally!) proved to be the central attraction of the gathering.<sup>19</sup>

Soon the fickle public grew tired of Wounded Knee, its attention drawn to other world events. The transactions of the Northwestern Photographic Company, which owned the famous battlefield views of Wounded Knee, reflected this diminished interest. The company's owners also possessed a large collection of artifacts collected from Wounded Knee, but in

## “Collector of Curios”



**Fig. 6a.** “The youngest son of Chief Two Strikes” or Bill Hudspeth’s boy? (NSHS-1392-450)



**Fig. 6b.** Taken at the same time as Figure 6a, this companion view is far less convincing and was subsequently not marketed. (NSHS-R539-101)

March 1891 they sold their relics for a half interest in the Wilbur Springs near Chadron, whose waters were touted as a cure for epilepsy. The backs of Northwestern Photographic Company mounts change at this time to advertise this new business venture.<sup>20</sup>

Considering collecting and marketing efforts such as these, most objects with a Wounded Knee attribution should raise suspicions. In addition, while some photographs are invaluable for ethnographic data (figs. 5 and 9), others are totally unreliable. Figure 6a is a studio portrait of a young Sioux boy, the son of an Indian leader, or is it? A Chadron, Nebraska, newspaper article for March 13, 1891, spilled the beans on this view:

We have a good story on Bill [Hudspeth]. As everyone in this vicinity knows, the picture of Hudspeth’s boy in Indian costume

taken a few weeks ago has been labeled “The youngest son of Chief Two Strikes” by Artist [George] Trager and is selling all over the East like watermelons at a colored camp meeting.<sup>21</sup>

Ethnographic artifacts preserved in the museum collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society also demand close scrutiny and attention to the historical record. Few carry a good provenience or clear associations, which make those that do all the more spectacular.

Sitting Bull’s rattle (back cover) came to the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1944 as part of the United Spanish War Veterans collection of military memorabilia. The rattle was made from a baking soda can and has a quilled handle with attached feathers. Overall length of the handle is thirty-nine centimeters. An original label accompanied the piece, which

reads: “This is the ‘WAND,’ which the great Indian warrior, Sitting Bull used in directing the movements of the dancers in the ‘Ghost Dance.’ It was presented to me by the Indian police, in gratitude for delivering them from almost certain death at the hands of Sitting Bull’s warriors. December 15, 1890. I have presented it to my good friend, Colonel John P. Bratt, as a token of my appreciation of the support he gave me, while on duty with the Nebraska National Guard. [signed] E. G. Fechet.”<sup>22</sup>

Captain Edmond G. Fechet, Eighth Cavalry, commanded the U.S. troops who accompanied the Standing Rock reservation policemen when they went to arrest Sitting Bull. After the Sioux Campaign Fechet was liaison officer between the regular army and the Nebraska National Guard, of which Bratt was a member. The rattle, therefore, possesses an excellent, and unusually clear, pedigree. (Contrast this to the information for fig. 2.)

Charles W. Allen, one of the three newspaper correspondents who saw the Wounded Knee Massacre, told in his autobiography of picking up a battlefield souvenir, also held by the Historical Society (fig. 7):

Among the soldiers and citizens who were moving aimlessly about I saw that one of the latter carried a gun easily recognized as belonging to the late disturbance. Asking where he had secured it, he told me that all the guns taken from the Indians had been piled in haphazard fashion near the breastworks up the valley. He had remarked to one of the guards that he would like to have an old gun as a relic, and as there was no objection he took it. Thereupon I decided to follow suit.

As I stepped out beyond the last tent at the west I saw the stack of guns, also the guards sitting at ease along the trench. I saw also General Forsyth and Colonel Whitesides [Whitside] walking slowly toward me at my right. They were deep in earnest conversation, realizing the magnitude of the grave responsibility that had suddenly fallen upon them. Waiting for their approach, I advanced, saluted, made my request, and was told to help myself. A well worn but still serviceable Winchester was selected, which now has its place among the curios in the museum of the State Historical Society at Lincoln, Nebraska.<sup>23</sup>

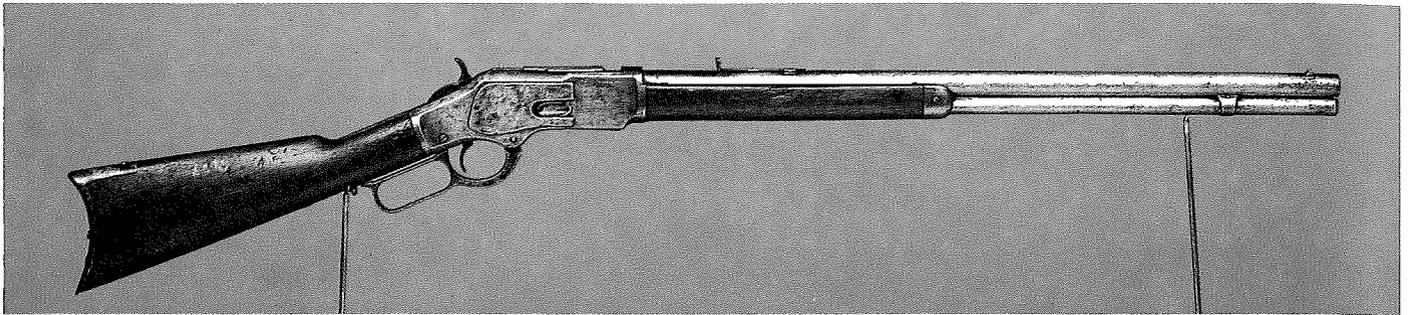


Fig. 7. Model 1873 Winchester rifle picked up by Charles W. Allen at Wounded Knee. (NSHS-6095)

These two artifacts—and their stories—have survived in a museum, though countless others have not. Peter McFarland, a witness to the Wounded Knee Massacre, worked for the army as a civilian teamster (fig. 8). He gave a later interviewer the following information, which was written on the back of a 1905 photograph:

He and Big Foot slept in the same tent the night before the battle of Wounded Knee. He holds an old Sharp's rifle which was turned over by the Indians on that fateful morning. Suspended from the gun is one of Big Foot's moccasins, a piece of the necklace composed of pieces of horn from the hoofs of wild animals, attached to a strip of leather, and a bunch of feathers picked up on the battlefield by McFarland after the battle. He also took the moccasin and the necklace from Big Foot's body. The buffalo overcoat McFarland owned and wore then and owns and wears now. He allowed Big Foot, who was very ill from pneumonia, to sleep on it the night before he was killed. The other moccasin found its way to James H. Cook's [Ranch], Agate, Nebraska, but it was so foul with blood that it was not cleaned and preserved.<sup>24</sup>

Like Allen, McFarland had the opportunity—and apparently the inclination—to gather credible Wounded Knee relics. It gives greater validity to his story.

For other artifacts, such as the remarkable painted war record used as a photographer's backdrop (fig. 9 and front cover), their origin and disposition remain a mystery. Equally puzzling are the circumstances which called for a "collector of curios" to visit a tipi camp and don a woman's beaded dress (fig. 5).<sup>25</sup>

The truth surrounding many Wounded Knee artifacts may never be known. But if



Fig. 8. Peter McFarland and his Wounded Knee mementos. (NSHS-P853)

the historical record is heeded, most will be evaluated critically if not skeptically. One only has to remember the words of another 1891 observer, who commented on the proliferation of Omaha, Nebraska, displays of Wounded Knee relics: "[E]very old duffer that owns a camp knife or a bridle strap with brass tacks in it, or a buckskin pouch, or a painted stick, has them 'on view' in some window tagged Big Foot's. . . it is amusing to see the eagerness with which Eastern people swallow the dose."<sup>26</sup>

## Notes

An earlier version of this study was presented at the annual meeting of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences, Apr. 10, 1992.

<sup>1</sup> George Metcalf, "Two Relics of the Wounded Knee Massacre," *The Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly*, 2 (Winter 1966): 2.

<sup>2</sup> Elmo Scott Watson, "The Last Indian War, 1890-91: A Study of Newspaper Jingoism," *Journalism Quarterly*, 20 (1943): 205-19; George R. Kolbenschlag, *A Whirlwind Passes: Newspaper Correspondents and the Sioux Indian Disturbances of 1890-91* (Vermillion: University of South Dakota Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> George H. Harries, "Pine Ridge Curios," *Washington (D.C.) Evening Star*, Feb. 9, 1891.

<sup>4</sup> Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul, and John E. Carter, *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); R. Eli Paul, "The Faraway Artist," *Nebraska History* 71 (1990): 191-93.

<sup>5</sup> Harries, "Pine Ridge Curios."

<sup>6</sup> Dent H. Robert, "The Sioux Indians," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 29, 1891.

<sup>7</sup> *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, Jan. 14, 1891.

<sup>8</sup> George H. Harries, "At Wounded Knee," *Washington Evening Star*, Jan. 26, 1891.

<sup>9</sup> Harries, "Pine Ridge Curios." Capt. George Wallace, Seventh Cavalry, survived the Battle of the Little Bighorn to be the only officer killed at Wounded Knee. It was generally reported that he was killed by a blow to the head, although some disputed this and put the cause of death as a stray bullet. Capt. and Asst. Surg. Charles B. Ewing, "The Wounded of the Wounded Knee Battle Field, with Remarks on Wounds Produced by Large and Small Caliber Bullets," *The Transactions of the Second Annual Meeting of the Association of Military Surgeons of the National Guard of the United States* (St. Louis: Becktold & Co., 1892), 41.

<sup>10</sup> Robert, "The Sioux Indians."

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* For a photograph of Little Chief holding a cane, see Paul, "The Faraway Artist," 193.

## "Collector of Curios"



Fig. 9. "Charges Alone." (NSHS-T765-14)

<sup>12</sup> Jensen, Paul, and Carter, *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee*, 146-47.

<sup>13</sup> *Rocky Mountain News*, Jan. 14, 1891.

<sup>14</sup> Harries, "Pine Ridge Curios."

<sup>15</sup> *Army and Navy Journal*, Dec. 6, 1890. Modern scholars have noted the problem with establishing authenticity to Ghost Dance shirts and the possibility that one prolific artist ("some old hag"?) may be responsible for many of the surviving examples. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., Trudy Thomas, Jeanne Eder, and George Horse Capture, *Wounded Knee: Lest We Forget* (Cody, Wyo.: Buffalo Bill Historical Center, 1990), 5, 35.

<sup>16</sup> *The Hesperian* (University of Nebraska), Feb. 15, 1891.

<sup>17</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 25, 1891.

<sup>18</sup> *Nebraska City News*, Jan. 16, 1891.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan. 16, Jan. 30, 1891.

<sup>20</sup> *Chadron Democrat*, Mar. 5, 1891.

<sup>21</sup> *Chadron Advocate*, Mar. 13, 1891.

<sup>22</sup> United Spanish War Veterans donor file, Museum of Nebraska History, Lincoln.

<sup>23</sup> Charles W. Allen's unpublished 1931 autobiography, "In the West That Was: Memoirs, Sketches, and Legends," Allen Collection, MS2635, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

<sup>24</sup> McFarland's interviewer was Eli S. Ricker, a Chadron historian, who obtained both the photograph and the story behind it on Apr. 18, 1905. Tablet 31, Ricker Collection, MS8, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

<sup>25</sup> During research for their photographic history, *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee*, authors Jensen, Paul, and Carter encountered a total of seven views illustrating this Lakota war record. Together they show virtually all the painted figures.

<sup>26</sup> John S. Collins to John G. Bourke, Jan. 25, 1891, Bourke Collection, MS28, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.