

June OMM – Bull Lodge Shield – Kay Miller

“Bull Lodge’s Shield,” Bull Lodge, 1860, L2009.188 - G261



Minneapolis Institute of Arts curator Joe Horse Capture, shown with Bull Lodge’s Shield.

“Our tribe has always been a small one, and we lived in Canada for hundreds of years, so compared to other, larger tribes we are little known. But many of us have earned college degrees and with the help of our elders over the years have located and gathered information from the four corners of the earth to provide this glimpse of our history and aspects of our culture.”

- Joe Horse Capture

Historical background:

The 19th c. was the worst of times for American Indians. Populations were decimated by war, poverty and illness, including the small pox epidemic of 1837. Tribes that were traditional enemies were herded together onto reservations where government policies encouraged suppression of their language and culture. Legends and traditions were neglected and forgotten. Artifacts got lost, were abandoned or sold. The past was dying along with the people.

Survival required intelligence and great physical prowess. To become a respected leader, one had to excel by seemingly superhuman efforts. This was true for Bull Lodge, said to have been the last healer of the A’aninin people to have been given supernatural healing gifts.

Bull Lodge's people – commonly known as the Gros Ventre - actually call themselves A'aninin (**AH-AH-NE-NIN**), meaning the "White Clay People." [This is curator Joe Horse Capture's people, as well.] They believed that they were made from the White Clay found along the river bottoms in Gros Ventre country. On ceremonial occasions they decorated themselves with white river mud. Early French fur trappers and traders mistakenly named them "Gros Ventre" because other tribes in the area referred to them as "The Water Falls People." The sign for water fall is passing the hands over the stomach. The French thought the Indians were signing big belly so they called them "Gros Ventre" – "big belly" in French.

At the time of first contact with Europeans in 1754, the A'aninin ranged the Canadian Prairies around the Saskatchewan River Forks. During the first half of the 19th century, the A'aninin were forced to withdraw from what is now Canada after the Cree increased the ferocity of their attacks with guns acquired from the Hudson Bay Company. In response, about 1793 the A'aninin attacked and burnt the Hudson's Bay Company post at South Branch House on the South Saskatchewan River, near present-day St. Louis, Saskatchewan.

The A'aninin relocated to Montana and adopted the Plains culture, learning to use horses and following the bison for food. They also acquired guns. The A'aninin and Assiniboine were nomadic hunters and warriors. They followed the buffalo which provided them with all the necessities of life - food, clothing and teepees. The A'aninin people are a very small tribe. As a result, their art was influenced by many other tribes they encountered, creating a style unique to the region.

During Bull Lodge's time, Jesuit missionaries led by Fr. DeSmet of the St. Louis were making inroads into the various Montana tribes. Catholicism exercised a powerful hold on the A'aninin and resulted in a degeneration of tribal symbolism. The old "morning star" figure, for example, is often regarded as the crucifix. Historically, among Plains people, it represented the first star of day, and the morning star is a character in traditional stories. Many of the old stories were lost as older people died of small pox or other causes.

The tribe's traditional life style passed with the buffalo. In 1888, the A'aninin, Blackfoot and Nakota (Assiniboine) ceded much of their land to the U.S. government in return for reservations and peace after the Indian Wars. That year they were placed on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in north-central Montana. The A'aninin share the reservation with their historic enemy, the Assiniboine, and struggle to survive as a distinct people. By 1904 there were only 535 A'aninin tribal members remaining. Since then, the tribe has had a revival. Today, it has about **3,682** enrolled members.

Finding the stories of one's Native American ancestors is often difficult. Traditional stories were often lost to the ravages of colonization. As tribal members attempt to

reassemble their history, one of the most important sources was material collected for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s/40s. At that time there were still persons with first-hand experience with the buffalo Indians.

Bull Lodge Bio: (1802-1886) Great A'aninin holy man, healer and warrior. We know about Bull Lodge because in the 1930s the WPA hired Fred Gone, a reservation worker, to collect Native stories, paying him **by the word**. Bull Lodge's story was told by his daughter, Garter Snake. As a boy of 7, he showed a great hunger for spiritual knowledge. The story of his spiritual journey and customs of the A'aninin people are retold in the book, "The Seven Visions of Bull Lodge," edited by curator George Horse Capture, father of the MIA's Joe Horse Capture.

- Bull Lodge's father was a Frenchman known by the A'aninin (Gros Ventre) as High Crane, but nicknamed Crooked Rump because he was deformed at the hip. His mother was A'aninin woman named Good Kill. Bull Lodge was raised among his mother's people. Gros Ventre was the only tongue he ever spoke.
- At **age 12**, he had a vision that shaped the rest of his life: One summer day after he had finished a day of "crying" - the ancient act of supplication and prayer, an outward act of calling down the attention of the Supreme Being upon the individual. He lay in the grass on his back with his arms out flat on the ground, elbows bent. He lay in that position for quite a while. As he gazed up at the sky, an object appeared, very small, but he could see that it was moving, like a bird. Gradually, it descended in great spirals. It was a shield, with a string or fine cord attached to it leading up into the sky.
- In this boyhood vision, the **shield** hung suspended before Bull Lodge, as if giving him plenty of time to remember it. It hovered. Then it lowered itself onto his chest. Bull Lodge heard a voice from the Thunderer's voice to duplicate the shield: "My child, look at this thing. I am giving it to you from above. It is for your living. In times of danger when you need my help, you must always, say, 'Help me, Thunder Sing.' I will always hear you concerning what you must do."
- Shields were solely for **spiritual drawings**. They conferred power and protection on the owner. This shield was about a foot-and-a-half in diameter. The surface was painted half red and half dark blue. A painted rainbow went all around the edge. In the center a black bird was painted, and from each side of the bird's head, green streaks of lightning, ending at the rainbow's inside rim. Eagle feathers hung in a double row from the outside rim. In the center of the shield hung a single soft, fluffy feather.

- The **Supreme Being** appeared to Bull Lodge as an old man and told him that he was to undergo seven visions. By his costume and the way his face was painted, Bull Lodge recognized him as a Medicine Pipe owner. The mystical pipe, one of the two most sacred A'aninin objects, was Bull Lodge's guide and teacher
- Instructions – when and which Butte – were given to Bull Lodge for each of the seven visions. Before each, he first purified himself in rain. A friend or relative accompanied him to the site, and helped him make a physical sacrifice to the Supreme Being: the cutting of strips or circles of flesh from Bull Lodge's arms, legs or chest. As Joe Horse Capture explained: All we really possess is our bodies and souls. By giving a part of his body, Bull Lodge showed his dedication to the Supreme Being and to his quest. "All I have to give you to show you I am serious is to give a part of myself." Bull Lodge was then left alone. His hardest vision quest was the first. He was naked. For seven days and nights, he fasted, neither eating nor drinking, and "cried" constantly. As a sacrifice, Bull Lodge cut off part of his own little finger. Each subsequent vision got easier.
- At 23, Bull Lodge completed the seven visions. Only then, did he gather materials to make this shield, which he saw during his vision at 17.
- In return for his faith and endurance of hardships, Bull Lodge received supernatural gifts: song, incense, the pipe filled with *kinnikinnic* [herbs used in smoking mixtures] and prayer. He was given miraculous abilities to heal and protection through the shield during battle. It was said that this included the ability to remove tumors and perform other surgery with a woodpecker tail feather, closing the wound with his breath.
- He was chosen to be the keeper of the Chief Medicine Pipe for a time. Everything connected with the Medicine Pipe or even comes into contact with it is held sacred by the A'aninin
- Bull Lodge was said to have been given the power of resurrection and was in constant communication with "those who watch over him." When the buffalo hides that had to be used for the sweat tent medicine ceremony could no longer be obtained, the ceremony could not be performed and Bull Lodge died. He held the **last sacred place** in the A'aninin's history of the supernatural powers attached to the Chief medicine Pipe.

- There are no known photographs of Bull Lodge. His mark is not found on any treaties. He was considered above everyday affairs. But his abilities as a warrior and holy man spread across the territory.

The Object: Bull Lodge's Shield, (1860):

Buffalo rawhide, buckskin, wool shroud, eagle feather, hawk feathers, glass beads, porcupine quills.

- Description: The shield is about a foot-and-a-half in diameter. It was made from buffalo hide and was festooned with eagle feathers. It has a target design painted in red and white on a field of dark blue. Eagle feathers are attached at the rim. A painted rainbow circles the edge.
- Two small pouches probably hold sacred medicine.
- Belonged to Bull Lodge, a warrior, holy man and the keeper of the A'aninin's most sacred objects.
- Made well over 100 years ago. It may be the only hide A'aninin shield still in existence. It retains its spiritual power and remains a powerful icon for many A'aninin today.
- It was probably the last shield made by the A'aninin people.
- Bull Lodge received the design for this sacred shield during a vision when he was just 12. He did not make the shield until he was 23 and his seven visions were complete.
- Its spiritual power protected Bull Lodge in every battle he fought.
- Like other Plains Indian shield, this shield originally had a decorated cover painted with a thunderbird design. It has since been lost.
- In displaying the shield, Joe Horse Capture makes sure that two shields are never in the same case, or even in vitrines facing one another where they can see each other: If they do, Horse Capture says, "They fight!" Because they still retain their spiritual power. To have them at odds sets the energy off – you can feel it, Joe Horse Capture says.

Questions/Activities:

- 1) Imagine you are lying on your back in a field, arms spread to the side. You are 12 years old and overhead an object appears. At first it looks like a bird. As it gets closer, you realize it is this shield. It hovers, as if you are to memorize it, then settles on your chest. Feel its weight. Then hear the thundering voice that tells you to replicate it. What might this experience mean to you?
- 2) Describe this shield. What is it made of? Which of these materials were native to Montana? Which would have come from trade routes? What does that suggest about the influences and pressures on A'ninin's culture?
- 3) What objects do you consider sacred? What is it that makes them sacred to you?

Key Points:

- 1) The images on Native American shields are sacred ones. This shield was believed to carry great power – spiritual, healing, historic and political power for the healer/leader who made and used it.
- 2) When spirit beings singled out individuals as worthy of blessing, those blessings often took the form of objects or images that symbolized the nature and origins of the powers they bestowed. The occasion of such a gift was a vision or a dream in which the spirit being would show images or objects that would thereafter become the dreamer's "medicine." That fit the Bull Lodge's vision of the shield at age 17.
- 3) Materials used to make this shield were indigenous, as well as the products of extensive trade routes that extended to Europe and included wool and glass beads.
- 4) We know about Bull Lodge and this shield because of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which paid reservation workers by the word to record stories that otherwise would have been lost.

Warrior Culture:

In the 19th century on the plains, Native men achieved honor in a variety of ways, including warfare, horse raiding, ceremonial life, hunting, and family life.

The introduction of the horse in the 18th century had changed life on the plains forever, especially the warrior culture. Previously, people **used dogs** to carry their

possessions as they followed the buffalo. Horses enabled them to move farther and faster, making the buffalo hunt easier. But the pressure of westward expansion by European Americans and other Native Americans caused tribes to compete for territory and horses, giving rise to the classic Plains "warrior" culture.

Tribes had developed rules of engagement among themselves and specific ways to attain honor. The highest form of honor was not to kill enemies but to touch them while they were defending themselves. This was called "counting coup." It was done with a specific object, such as the butt of a gun or riding quirt, or with the hand.

Horses were a **form of wealth** to Plains Indians. Tribes took horses from each other. Acquiring a large herd of horses demonstrated one's bravery and prowess. To sneak into the enemy's camp and take their prized possessions could be deadly. (Bull Lodge did this on a number of occasions, protected always by his shield.).

Shields were solely for **spiritual drawings**, which conferred power and protection on the owner. Horses were pictured with handprints painted on them, indicating that the rider had "counted coup" by touching an enemy, and with their long tails tied up to increase their endurance and speed.

The warriors of every tribe placed great significance on their own faces and hair. Certain tribes were known by their hairstyles. Long ago, hair flowed freely, but later the A'aninin roached (shaved) the front of the forehead and had two small braids in front of each ear and a large braid hanging down in back. Their Blackfeet had the same style, and the Assinibonine often had long bangs in front with the remainder hanging orderly and free. Later, most men just wore one braid in back of each ear.

The crowning head items were the tail feathers of a golden eagle. One might expect the feathers of the magnificent bald eagle to be placed in this honored position, but many tribes don't care for them because this bird is a fish eater and that is not a warrior's way. The tail feathers of a mature bald eagle are plain white, like those of a turkey; the pretty and valued black-tipped feathers of the golden eagle are preferred.

Warriors had dreams in which they were wearing certain types of feathers in a certain way or wearing an animal's head skin. They implemented those dreams, so there are many varieties of headpieces. Dreams are considered a way of communicating with the One Above. They remain very important today.

This object would be great for:

Sources of Strength, Wealth and Power

Made in America

Artists' Choices

Sources of Mean and Faith

Resources:

Resources:

"The Seven Visions of Bull Lodge," Gathered by Fred P. Gone, edited by George Horse Capture, University of Nebraska Press, 1992.

"From Our Ancestors: Art of the White Clay People," catalog for the xxxx MIA exhibit.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gros_Ventre_people

<http://www.startribune.com/entertainment/art/78979892.html>

<http://www.ftbelknap-nsn.gov/history.htm>

"Rare American Indian artifacts, gather by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts curator Joe Horse Capture, recount the story of his tribe," Minneapolis Star Tribune, by Mary Abbe, Dec. 10, 2009.

<http://buffalopost.net/?tag=white-clay-people>

Joe Horse Capture – class lecture and answering questions after session with Billy Maxwell

"Art of the American Indian Frontier," David W. Penney, 1994, University of Washington Press (available in MIA library)

- **Kay Miller**