

Old Buffalo's War Narrative

The Densmore Repatriation Project



(In August, 1913, Old Buffalo (T̥hath̥h̥ŋka eh̥h̥ŋi) and Swift Dog came to McLaughlin, South Dakota to meet with Densmore. They regarded this conference very seriously.)

Old Buffalo said, *“We come to you as from the dead. The things about which you ask us have been dead to us for many years. In bringing them to our minds we are calling them from the dead, and when we have told you about them they will go back to the dead, to remain forever.”*

Old Buffalo was born in the year 1845, designated in the Sioux picture calendar Ti-T̥h̥h̥ŋka obl̥čha k̥h̥gapi kiŋ wan̥iyetu, “Winter in which lodges with roofs were built.” When he was 28 years old he led a war party against the Crows. On this expedition he and his comrades were entirely surrounded by the Crows, an event which Old Buffalo depicted in a drawing (Figure 33). Old Buffalo said that at the time of this expedition his band of the Sioux were living in the “Queen's Land” (Canada), but had come down to

the United States on a buffalo hunt. From this temporary camp the expedition started under his leadership. Old Buffalo said further:

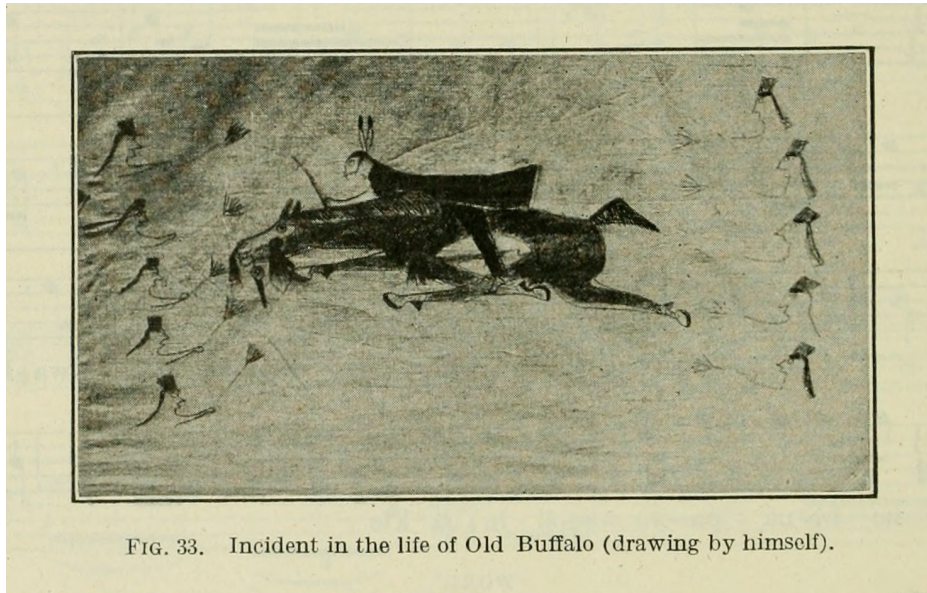


FIG. 33. Incident in the life of Old Buffalo (drawing by himself).

“One night the Crows came and stole our horses. I had an older sister of whom I was very fond. The Crows stole her horse, and she cried a long time. This made my heart very bad. I said, ‘I will go and pay them back.’ A friend said that he would go with me. I said to my friend, ‘We will go and look for the Crows. Wherever their horses are corralled we will find them.’ Eleven others went with us, so there were 13 in the party, and I was the leader. It was in the coldest part of the winter, the moon called by the Sioux Čhaŋnáphopa wi, ‘Wood-cracking moon.’ The snow was deep, and I am lame in one leg, but I was angry, and I went. I thought, ‘Even if I die, I will be content.’ The women made warm clothing and moccasins for us to wear, and we started away. We carried no shelter. When night came we shoveled aside the snow and laid down brush, on which we slept. At the fork of the Missouri River we took the eastern branch and followed its course. It was 11 nights from the fork of the river to the enemy's camp.

As we neared the end of our journey, we were overtaken by a fearful blizzard. There was a butte in which we found a sheltered place and stayed for two days, as my leg was very painful. After the storm subsided we looked around and could see the enemy's village. Night came again, but my leg was so painful that we rested another day. The next afternoon, as the sun was getting low, I tightened my belt and made ready for whatever might befall. We walked toward the enemy's village and entered a rocky country, like the Bad Lands. Then it was dark.

A great number of Crows were camped at this place, and there was dancing in two parts of the village. We were close to the village, but no one saw us. Only the dogs barked. We went up to the edge of the village and got in where there were many horses

in a bunch. We drove the herd before us, and they trotted quietly along. After getting a safe distance from the camp we mounted some of the horses and drove the rest before us. We did not stop, but kept the horses trotting fast all night. When daylight came we counted the horses and found that there were 53. All that day we traveled, and as the sun sank we rested. We were tired, as we had no saddles, and that night we slept.

The next morning there came another terrible blizzard. My eyelashes were frozen so that I could scarcely see. I went back a little distance to see if we were being followed, then I returned to my companions. I had realized that the tracks of the horses made a trail and I saw that the enemy was pursuing us. This was my war party and I felt a great responsibility for its safety.

The Crows overtook us and secured most of the horses which we had captured from them. We jumped down a steep rocky place, and soon we were entirely surrounded by the Crows. A Sioux boy about 15 years old was with us, and he was shot in the back. We fought as long as the sun moved in the sky. It was a hard struggle. Every time we fired a gun it turned white with frost. During this fight I sang a very powerful Song of the Fox society, to which I belong.

The Crows took the saddles from their horses and charged back at us, but our fire was more than they could stand, and they finally retreated, leaving their saddles on the ground. We captured these saddles and took them back to the place where we were first overtaken by the Crows. There we found only four horses alive. We put one of the captured saddles on a horse and lifted the wounded boy to the horse's back. I held the reins and walked beside the horse all that night. When daylight came we rested. The boy had no pillow, so I lay down and he laid his head on my body. There was timber near the place, and the next day we made a travois for the boy, and I rode the horse that dragged it. That night we traveled on, and about midnight we reached a certain place and made a camp. We had occasionally killed a buffalo for food, and as the men on foot had worn out their moccasins, we took fresh buffalo hide and tied it on their feet. The three horses ran away, but we caught them.

All the following night we traveled, and the next day we were at the fork of the Missouri River, where we stayed two nights.

While we were on the warpath our friends had finished their buffalo hunt and returned to Canada. I kept four men with me and the sick boy, and sent the others home to make a report of the expedition. We kept the horses with us and followed slowly. The boy was thirsty, and as there was no cup I took the hide of a buffalo head, put snow in it and then put a hot stone in the snow. Thus the boy had hot water to drink. He wanted soup, so I took the buffalo tripe and boiled meat in it. So the boy had soup.

We camped for a time beside a creek, and as we came near the 'Queen's Land' we camped again. There the father and mother of the boy met us. They had heard the news from the other members of the party and started at once to meet us. After we had given the boy to his parents, we went on with the horses, leaving them to travel more

slowly. It was dark when we reached home, and we fired our guns to let the people know of our coming. The next day the boy arrived. For two days and nights I stayed with him constantly. I did this because I felt myself to be the cause of his misfortune. The boy had come to call me 'father,' and at the end of this time he said, 'Father, you can go home now to your own lodge.' I went to my own lodge and slept that night. The next morning the boy died. He is always spoken of as Waṇápa gli yak'u, 'Brings the Arrow,' because he brought home the arrow in his body.

I did not keep any of the horses for myself, because I was the leader of the war party.”

From *Teton Sioux Music* By Frances Densmore

Suggested video links:

Song 136 Clear the Way, I Come (1:42)

Song 159 I Intend to Take His Horses (3:25)

For more about the Densmore Repatriation Project go to:

www.lakotasongs.com/

Bibliography

Teton Sioux Music
By Frances Densmore
Washington, Government Printing Office, 1918