

# BLACK MOON: THE MINNECOUJOU LEADER

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Joseph White Bull (*Ptesan Hunka*) recorded in 1931 that, prior to settling on the reservation, the Minnecoujou recognized six hereditary leaders within their tribe. In addition to White Bull's father, Makes Room, these men included Black Shield, Lone Horn, White Hollow Horn, White Swan, and Comes Flying. He added that there were also two men who became renowned war leaders among the Minnecoujou, presumably rising through the ranks of the men's warrior societies. "They were treated as chiefs because of this," White Bull explained. "They wore shirts decorated with scalps." He identified these two leaders as Lame Deer and Black Moon.<sup>i</sup>

Not to be confused with the prominent Hunkpapa leader by the same name, Black Moon (*Wi Sapa*) was born about 1821. He was also known as *Iteboga*, the exact translation of which is uncertain.<sup>ii</sup> Nothing is known of Black Moon's early years, though presumably he demonstrated his bravery and fortitude as a warrior and later war leader in raids against their traditional enemies and against the whites on the Upper Missouri. He had achieved band leader status by 1869 when he was present for the appointment of Sitting Bull as head war leader of the Lakota. By the time of the Great Sioux War of 1876-77, this fifty-five year old headman was leader of a small Minnecoujou band that chose to remain away from the Cheyenne River Agency on the Missouri River.<sup>iii</sup>

Black Moon is listed as one of the Minnecoujou leaders who had joined the northern village by the early summer of 1876. Though not mentioned specifically by witnesses as being present at the Custer Battle on June 25, the well-informed scout John Bruguier later told Walter Camp that he understood "[o]ne of the head chiefs of Minnecoujou at the Little Big Horn was Black Moon." This leader's precise role in battle, however, is not known.<sup>iv</sup>

Following the Little Big Horn, the Minnecoujou traveled with the other northern Lakota through the summer and fall of 1876. When the army moved to dismount and disarm the Indians at the Cheyenne River Agency, many of the friendly Minnecoujou bands fled to join the northern tribe, including leaders such as Touch the Clouds, Roman Nose, Bull Eagle, and Spotted Elk. Most of these new arrivals eventually returned to Cheyenne River, surrendered at the Tongue River Cantonment, or journeyed south to the Spotted Tail Agency in northwestern Nebraska. Black Moon and Lame Deer, leading the core of the Minnecoujou resistance, chose to remain out.

Black Moon's band may have been with Lame Deer when Colonel Nelson A. Miles encountered the Minnecoujou village on Muddy Creek in May 1877. In the skirmish that followed, Lame Deer was killed and his village burned. Four months later, the majority of Lame Deer's band surrendered at the Spotted Tail Agency. Meanwhile, Black Moon and his remaining followers crossed the international border into Canada, joining Sitting Bull and others near Wood Mountain.<sup>v</sup>

After several years struggling to survive in Canada, the majority of the exiled Lakota returned to the U.S. and surrendered to military authorities, culminating in the surrender of Sitting Bull at Fort Buford in July 1881. A small number of Lakota however elected to remain in Canada, divided into small groups under the leadership of men such as Black Moon, the Hunkpapa headman No Neck, and a Brule named Black Bull who claimed to be a nephew of Sitting Bull. In what is today south Saskatchewan, these Lakota families lived near frontier communities such as Moose Jaw and Willow Bunch, establishing relationships with the Canadians in the region. Black Moon's daughter, Mary, married Thomas W. Aspdin, a corporal in the Royal Mounted Police stationed at nearby Fort Walsh. Black Moon was mentioned living near Willow Bunch during the winter of 1883-84, where locals later recalled enjoying a native dance near the trading store of Jean Louis Légaré.<sup>vi</sup>

Canadian authorities endeavored to persuade the remaining Lakota to return to the U.S. No Neck finally left for the Standing Rock Agency in the spring of 1884. The ration issue ledger for this agency also lists a new arrival named Black Moon, implying that perhaps the Minnecoujou leader may have come in with No Neck. Black Moon's name, however, disappears from the ledger several months later. If this was the Minnecoujou headman, the meager record implies that he soon returned to Canada.<sup>vii</sup>

In the spring of 1889, Black Moon's son-in-law, Thomas Aspdin, succeeded in persuading the respected headman to return to the U.S. Leaving behind two daughters and their mother, Black Moon departed in April 1889 with eleven lodges, among the last to finally surrender. Word of his movement south across the international border prompted the army to send out several companies of soldiers from Fort Buford to sweep the area, hoping to intercept the Indians. On June 2, Captain Henry W. Sprole with Troop K 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry located Black Moon's party, halting them about fifteen miles from the mouth of the Little Missouri River, near the Berthold Agency. Sprole counted 34 men, women, and children as well as 49 ponies. What few weapons the party possessed were confiscated.<sup>viii</sup>

Captain Sprole was ordered to remain in camp with Black Moon's party until further instructions could be obtained from Army headquarters. In talking with his captives, the officer learned that if Black Moon was treated well and arrived at the agency unharmed, the last thirty-five lodges of Lakota remaining in Canada would also return. Official orders finally arrived two weeks later, allowing Black Moon's party to continue on to the Standing Rock Agency without a military escort. Captain Sprole assisted the small band in recrossing the Missouri River and, on June 23, they continued south.<sup>ix</sup>

Black Moon finally arrived at Standing Rock in July 1889. The agency census recorded twelve individuals in his immediate family, including his wife, Red Lodge, as well as three sons – Two Spears (age 25), White Dog (age 20) and High Back (age 19) – and three daughters: Yellow Ears (age 25), Wounded

Often (age 11) and Taken From Her (age 15). Black Moon's family also included a woman named Rattling Wind, listed in the census as his sister but in a later document as his wife, in addition to three grandchildren.<sup>x</sup>

Not all of the Lakota who had departed Canada with Black Moon surrendered at the Standing Rock Agency. At least two families, including Hard to Shoot and He Killed Two (both of whom had married granddaughters of Black Moon) returned to Canada where they reported the news of their detainment by the Army. They told relatives the disturbing story that the elder headman had been put in chains, presumably to prevent the band from slipping away at night, and that Black Moon had attempted to commit suicide. Aspdin wrote to the Commission of Indian Affairs desperately seeking any information regarding his father-in-law. Months would pass before he would finally receive a letter from James McLaughlin, the agent at Standing Rock, informing him that Black Moon had arrived at that agency safely and was doing well.<sup>xi</sup>

The following spring, Black Moon and his three sons requested permission to return to Canada to bring back other family members still living there. "Black Moon has been at this Agency for the past year," wrote Agent McLaughlin, "and is an inoffensive and well disposed Indian." If Black Moon actually made the trip, he was not gone long. Five months later in October 1890, he was allowed to transfer to the Cheyenne River Agency to join his Minnecoujou relatives, arriving about November 1 amidst the Ghost Dance fervor. The family appears to have split in two. Black Moon, Red Lodge, Two Spears, and four other family members were enrolled at the agency.<sup>xii</sup>

Four other members of Black Moon's party however decided not to report to the agency but instead joined the camp of the Minnecoujou leader Big Foot. When Big Foot's band fled Cheyenne River for the Pine Ridge Agency the following month, these four were among the party. Tragically, they found themselves swept up in the massacre at Wounded Knee. Rattling Wind, Black Moon's sister (or wife) was killed, as were his son White Dog and daughter Brown Ear. High Back was wounded but survived.<sup>xiii</sup>

Black Moon lived the remainder of his life along Cherry Creek on the Cheyenne River Reservation. Writing in 1891, the agent at Cheyenne River passed along the following message to Thomas Aspdin in Canada from his father in law: "Black Moon wishes me to say to you that he intends to remain here; he likes the people here because they are all peaceable and satisfied; he is living with his son Two Spear who has a good home; he is not far from an issue station; he thinks you could come and see him; he wants you to know that he has been well treated here and that he will send the two boys to the boarding school." Black Moon died on March 1, 1893 at the age of seventy-two.<sup>xiv</sup>

Black Moon's family continued to visit their relatives in Canada. Today on the Cheyenne River reservation, several families are recognized as descendants of Black Moon's son Abraham Two Spears (c1863-?) and grandson Philip Black Moon (1882-1957). Nearly half of the Lakota still living in Canada today also trace their ancestry back to the Black Moon family. His legacy continues to live on in the traditions of these people.<sup>xv</sup>

<sup>i</sup> James H. Howard (ed.), *The Warrior Who Killed Custer: The Personal Narrative of Chief Joseph White Bull* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968) pp. 31-32. For more on White Bull, see Stanley Vestal, *Warpath: The True Story of the Fighting Sioux, Told in a Biography of Chief White Bull* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934).

<sup>ii</sup> McLaughlin to Agent, Cheyenne River Agency, Oct. 14, 1890, Letter press book, p. 350 (McLaughlin Papers, Roll 21 Frame 358). The Lakota word *ite* means "face" but translation of *boga* is uncertain. According to relatives, he was also known as Loves War. John Okute Sica Mss., courtesy Margaux Allard, a great-great granddaughter of Black Moon.

<sup>iii</sup> The name of Black Moon's band is not known for certain, though historian Kingsley Bray has suggested it may have been the Ashke or Lock of Hair Band. Black Moon's band appears to have disintegrated by the time they went to Canada in 1877 or shortly thereafter. Stanley Vestal, *Sitting Bull: Champion of the Sioux* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1932) p. 92.

<sup>iv</sup> Stanley Vestal, *Sitting Bull* p. 143. Bruguier interview, in Bruce R. Liddic and Paul Harbaugh, *Custer and Company: Walter Camp's Notes on the Custer Fight* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998) p. 90. These editors mistakenly confused the Minnecoujou Black Moon with the Hunkpapa leader of the same name.

<sup>v</sup> Jerome A. Greene, *Yellowstone Command: Colonel Nelson A. Miles and the Great Sioux War 1876-1877* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) pp. 201-219.

<sup>vi</sup> Joseph Manzione, *I Am Looking to the North for My Life: Sitting Bull 1876-1881* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1991). Ron Papandrea, *They Never Surrendered: The Lakota Sioux Band That Stayed in Canada* (privately printed, 2003), p. 19. *Poplar Poles and Wagon Trails* (Willow Bunch Historical Society, 1998) vol. 2 pp. 737-739. Thomas W. Aspdin (1854-1906) joined the Northwest Mounted Police in 1873 and was part of the "original 300" sent to police Saskatchewan. Because of his Lakota wife, he later became involved in the welfare of the Indians who remained in Canada and worked for some years in the Indian Department at Moosejaw. 1881 Canadian Census, Wood Mountain, Northwest Territories, District 192 p. 15. 1901 Canadian Census, Assiniboia District, Sinteluta Subdistrict, p. 6.

<sup>vii</sup> Issue Records, May 20-July 29, 1884, Records of the Standing Rock Agency, National Archives Regional Branch, Kansas City.

<sup>viii</sup> Aspdin to Indian Commissioner, April 26, 1889, vol. 3599 file 1564 part A, Indian Affairs, Central Registry Files (RG10), Public Archives of Canada (copy courtesy Ron Papandrea). Post Returns, May-June 1889, Fort Buford, Dakota Territory (M617 Roll 159); see both Record of Events and Official Communications Received. Assistant Adjutant General, Division of Missouri, to Adjutant General, U.S. Army, June 4, 1889, copy in Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received (McLaughlin Papers, Roll 33).

<sup>ix</sup> Assistant Adjutant General, Division of Missouri, to Adjutant General, U.S. Army, June 11, 1889, copy in Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received (McLaughlin Papers, Roll 33).

<sup>x</sup> Standing Rock Agency Census, 1890, Hunkpapa Tribe, individual number 1576.

<sup>xi</sup> McLaughlin to Agent, Cheyenne River Agency, Oct. 14, 1890, *loc. cit.* A short time later, McLaughlin replied to Aspdin that Black Moon and his family had been transferred to Cheyenne River Agency. McLaughlin to Aspdin, Nov. 14, 1890, Letterbook, p. 413 (McLaughlin Papers, roll 21 frame 421). Army correspondence does not mention Black Moon's attempted suicide; however, a contract surgeon was to join Captain Sprole in the field.

<sup>xii</sup> McLaughlin, May 26, 1890, Standing Rock Agency, Letters Sent, (McLaughlin Papers, roll 21 frame 53). Palmer to Aspdin, Aug. 5, 1891, Office of Indian Affairs, Letters Received (McLaughlin Papers roll 34).

<sup>xiii</sup> Richard E. Jensen, "Big Foot's Followers at Wounded Knee," *Nebraska History* (Winter 1990) p. 204. "Paul Highback's Version of the Disaster of Dec. 29, 1890 at Wounded Knee," *The Wi-Iyohi*, South Dakota Historical Society, vol. 10, no. 3 (June 1956).

<sup>xiv</sup> Palmer to Aspdin, Aug. 5, 1891, *loc. cit.* Cheyenne River Reservation census, 1891, p. 64; 1892, p. 40.

<sup>xv</sup> A surviving safe conduct pass dated 1894, preserved in the collections of the South Dakota Historical Society (H79-24), shows that Black Moon's wife and children continued to visit their relatives in Canada after Black Moon's death.