

Bull Lodge Shield – from Curator Joe Horse Capture's gallery talk - Thursday, 3-22-2012

On the plains, shields were used to protect warriors in battle. Now it's not the physical properties of the shield, but it's the spiritual power, spiritual energy that protected the warrior physically. One of the most challenging things I have to do is explain to non-native visitors and, in some cases, non-native museum guides, the concept of sacred. It's very difficult to understand it unless you have experienced it.

If you think about an object like this used in context, think about the kind of spiritual energy it has. Do you remember the movie, "Raiders of the Lost Ark?" It's that kind of spiritual energy, which is given to an owner in a vision.

We are lucky enough with this particular object – it's on loan – this is from my tribe. It is the only shield known to exist from my tribe. This is by a man named Bull Lodge. If you want to read the long version of this story, you can buy the book, "Seven Visions of Bull Lodge." My father wrote it. It's a book about this man and the story of his life.

This was made in 1860, so Bull Lodge had to be born around when Lewis and Clark came. He was a young man who had always wanted to be a keeper of one of the sacred objects of my tribe. There are two very sacred objects: called the flat pipe and the feathered pipe. Now these things have these huge, long, very involved stories as to how they came to the people.

The feather pipe, which Bull Lodge wanted to be the keeper of, came down to the people from the thunderbird or the thunder beings. Care for this sacred object, which you really never see, is wrapped up in this gigantic thing called a **bundle**. It has all these sacred accoutrements. It's kind of a big deal. Again, I can't give anything in western society that's a comparison.

The keeper for an object like this would dedicate his life to it. There's nothing else more important than taking care of it. There are a lot of restrictions that go along when you take care of this sacred bundle.

Bull Lodge as a young man wanted to be a keeper of this sacred object. But he wasn't part of the right family, wasn't in the right circle in order to have it pass to him. The camp would move all the time. He would always stay behind. Wherever the keepers who had the sacred bundle lived, after the camp had left Bull Lodge would go to the circle was and he would pray there. And he did it over and over and over almost until it got dark. Then he'd get on his horse and go to wherever the camp had moved to. He did this over and over and over.

One time, this is where it gets interesting. One time when he was praying, he had this vision. In this vision, the spirit – the creator – came to him and, "What you are

doing is a good thing. At the first rain, I need you to go to a very specific butte." A butte is like a little hill. So he was like, "Huh, that's pretty cool."

So at the first rain, he went to the butte and he fasted. During this vision, [a voice during the vision said], "You will get what you want, but you have to do seven things. You need to fast on seven holy buttes. Each one will tell you what to do for the next one. The first one is going to be the hardest one. You need to go and you need to fast for seven days and seven nights."

I need to pause in the story a little bit. I know that among Christian people, there is a fast. You say, "Well, I'm not going to have any meat." In traditional Native American way, when you fast, you have NO food and NO water. That is old-school fasting. So Bull Lodge went on the mountain. And he fasted for seven days and seven nights. No food or water.

On his fifth day, his friend came – this is hard to explain this concept – but in traditional culture, the only thing that you really have, you can have a nice car, a cool phone, all kinds of things. But the only thing you REALLY have is yourself, your physical being.

When you're praying to the creator, you can't give him \$10. You can't throw \$100 in the basket, when they pass it around the church. That means nothing. You only have your physical self. So you fast, when you suffer, you're giving that PAIN to your creator, saying, "I am THIS serious and I want you to listen to what I say."

Then, you're going to take it to the next step, where you physically give part of yourself. What Bull Lodge did, he cut off this joint (of his finger), this digit, right here. And he held it up to the creator and said, "I give this to you because I want you to listen to my prayers." And he laid it on a rock.

If you look at some accounts of Sitting Bull, right before the Battle of Little Big Horn, in Wyoming, where he had this vision of soldiers falling from the sky, he gave 50 strips of flesh from his body during that fast. So 50 strips – you get a knife and cut out a strip of flesh. He gave **50** of them. So you are physically giving of your body. Because really, that's all we have is your physical self.

So Bull Lodge went there, seven days, seven nights, gave the flesh, had the vision. Each vision became easier – 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. He received a certain gift at the end. He was the keeper of that pipe.

On one of the visions, he was laying on the prairie and this thing came down from the sky. It hovered right in front of him. It was a shield. It said, "If you make this shield, you will always be protected in battle."

After this fast, he went back to his community and recovered. Then, he reproduced that shield which was shown to him, which is this thing. This is Bull Lodge's Shield, which image appeared to him in his vision. We don't know the particulars of it.

You can see on here there are two pouches. They probably contain some kind of sacred herbs. In oral traditions stories, he would go into battle with this shield, come out successfully. **At the end of the battle, he'd take his shield off, shake it and bullets would fall off it – land on the ground.** That's the story of the shield.

The shield itself has the hump of the buffalo. You have all these different accoutrements that empower it. We talk about the thunderbird. The physical manifestation of the thunderbird is the eagle. So we have eagle feathers all the way around. There is horse hair. We have feather plumes that are found under the tail feathers and under the wings. Bells on it. Red shroud cloth.

Traditional people – historic and contemporary – although this has been out of Bull Lodge's hands since he passed away, many traditional people including myself feel that these objects still have a certain amount of spiritual energy. It's something you don't want to mess with. If you think about this shield, it has been nurtured its whole life. So it wants all the attention, all the love

That shield over there feels exactly the same way. It's been nurtured and loved the entire time. So in order for us to honor these things, you never want two shields to be next to each other because they get jealous. The spiritual energy - you put them together and they go, "Rpppppr!" When we installed this object, I then covered them – the shields. They can't see each other. That shield doesn't know this shield is there. And this shield doesn't know that shield is there. It's respecting and honoring a sacred object.

Part of my responsibility is to take care of Native American objects – personally. I am fourth generation person who does that. Horse Capture – who Curtis photographed took care of our sacred pipe. My father was a curator, he took care of the Plains Indian collection in Cody, Wyoming. My older brother takes care of the sacred pipe. And I'm doing the same thing, but in a different way, taking care of these sacred objects.