

1885

Anecdotes Relating to "White Cow" or "White Buffalo"

R. W. Furnas

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebhisttrans>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Furnas, R. W., "Anecdotes Relating to "White Cow" or "White Buffalo"" (1885). *Transactions and Reports, Nebraska State Historical Society*. 28.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebhisttrans/28>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Nebraska State Historical Society at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Transactions and Reports, Nebraska State Historical Society by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

took to market every fall large surplus of wheat, corn, and hogs. White Horse, a descendant of the great chief Blackbird, who is living, is another among the Omahas who sets good example, by trying to live like the white people in farming and dwelling in a comfortable house, as well as by precepts given to his people at every opportunity; in turning them from their old habits to civilized ways of living; but these are only examples of many that try to better their condition; and should the Omahas progress as they have in the last ten years, another decade will see them competent citizens.

Some months after the foregoing had been handed me, Mr. Fontenelle wrote me as follows :

By invitation I was at the dedication of the Bellevue College, and the burial of the bones of the Omahas that were taken up in preparing the grounds for the building. I was entirely ignorant of what was done with the bones at the time I wrote the history of the Omahas for you, and I regret very much of having written the sentence of censure, in saying a desecration was committed in digging away the bones of "Big Elk." An apology was due Mr. Clark, the founder of the college, which I did offer. I now wish that that sentence in the History be erased, and substitute the following :

"Much credit and praise is due Hon. H. T. Clark for the kind, Christian act in carefully taking up the bones of Big Elk and others that were buried there generations ago, and put them in boxes and stored them until the appropriate and fitting time of the dedication of the College to its noble use, when they were reburied immediately in front of the building—upon which occasion eloquent and fitting expressions were given by the venerable missionary, the Rev. William Hamilton, and others."

HENRY FONTENELLE.

NOTE.—The editor of this report was, during the life-time of "White Cow," or "White Buffalo," agent for the Omaha Indians, and familiar with the peculiar characteristics referred to by Mr. Fontenelle. A reference to two instances may not be an unpleasant digression.

I was once sent for in great haste by "White Cow," on an exceeding bitter cold day in December, the messenger stating the old Indian was about to die, and desired to make his will, appoint his successor, and such like. I went at once, and found the old man stretched out on a buffalo robe before a blazing fire, in his tepee. He quickly as possible arose to a sitting position, greeted me, lighted his pipe and passed it around—a universal custom, and indicative of friendship and good will. He then proceeded to state his case. He was old, sick, and expected never again to get up and around. He wished a twelve year old grandson, then in the mission school, to succeed him as chief. He wished to be buried or rather placed in a sitting position, on the high bluff of the Missouri river, back a mile or so from the tepee, his face to the river, that the spirit might continue to see the steamboats passing up and down that stream.

I promised all his wishes should be complied with.

The old man thanked me for the promise I made him, then, exhibiting his tattered and not over cleanly, meagre wearing apparel, he said one of his standing ought not to be buried in such an outfit, and hoped I would see he had an entire new suit of clothes—blanket and breech-cloth. This too I promised him. He dropped his chin on his breast for a moment, in deep thought, then raising it, directed the interpreter to say to the Father—a name always given the agent by the Indians—that he was a very kind, good man to thus grant his requests; that he very much desired to thank in person the Father for the new suit of clothes he was to be buried in; that after he, the chief, was dead and buried he could not do so; therefore he thought it best he have the new clothes before he died, that he might have the pleasure of extending thanks in person. The real object in view in sending for me was at once unveiled. The old man wanted a new suit of clothes, and adopted this circuitous mode of obtaining them. The joke was considered so good that I complied with that request, as with others, and sent him next day a new suit. In about a week the old man came up to my office with it on, and thanked me very cordially.

At another time "White Cow" came bounding into my office with an interpreter, and in a very pompous manner threw back his blanket, lighted and passed his pipe, and at once proceeded to deliver himself after this style:

"Tell the Father," said he to the interpreter, "that I am the oldest

and most prominent chief in the tribe; I have traveled to see the Great Father at Washington; I have always been the white man's friend. I am going to visit my friends and relatives, the Ponca Indians, and must have presents to make them. I shall ask from him many things to this end, and expect to get them all."

My knowledge of the old man led me to suspect an African somewhere in the fuel pile, and I was disposed to humor the procedure. "Well," I said, "tell me what you want, and all you want." He said first, "he wanted tobacco, and plenty of it." "How much?" I enquired. "Ten kegs," he replied—that nothing less than that would suffice one of his rank. After talking the matter over for some time, I adopted a course always vexing to an Indian; I commenced to plead poverty, and beg of him. I reminded him that he was very rich; owned hundreds and thousands of acres of land he was not using; and horses almost without number, for which he had no use; and that he should make me presents, and not me to him. The old man assumed his favorite position when in thought, of dropping his chin on his breast. After a few minutes he raised his head, and looking at me very seriously, said to the interpreter: "Tell the poor man that I am old enough to be his grand-father; I have traveled much, and seen many thousand of men and women, white men and Indians, of all sizes,"—then placing his outstretched hand, palm down, to about two inches from the floor, added—"but tell him I never saw a white man no higher than that before."

All the old man wanted and came for was a single plug of tobacco, which, of course, he got.

Some months after this "White Cow" sickened and died. I had him buried as he desired, by having an improvised chair provided, the body placed in a sitting position in it, and surrounded by a stone and wood structure.