

Sixteen Bones and a Warrior

Jay Hansford C. Vest

Sixteen boxes with sixteen bones boarded the train at Washington, D.C. Government curators rode with them, keeping company on the long journey home. They were returning from the war trail, their travels had been arduous but their sweethearts were waiting down by the river where they had walked long ago in the sun.

Between the two curators, both anthros, there was a dispute of long standing as Tom turned to his colleague, “Joe, your people are from Fort Belknap, why is it you oppose this repatriation?” Joe had given the litany of scientific reasons but Tom just could not get the idea that his Native American coworker opposed the repatriation of American Indian remains. “Tom, you know how it is. This business is mostly just mumbo jumbo. There is much we can still learn from these bones. It’s our scientific duty to study them; besides, we are conserving them for future generations.”

Tom grunted in an almost inaudible response to the science, because he knew Joe would not budge. The controversy had long raged between the two anthros but Tom liked to needle his friend with it anyway. Settling in for the journey, Tom decided to say no more on the subject at least until they reached Montana.

After traveling some one hundred miles west of Glasgow, Tom picked another topic to discuss. “Hey Joe, you notice how few cattle ranches remain here in the northern plains?”

“Yeah,” answered Joe, “the winter freezes them and the antibiotics cost a fortune. I reckon the ranchers just can’t make it on what shortgrass prairie remains in these parts.”

“It’s a pity, you know, how the great cattle barons destroyed the buffalo just to wreck the Indians’ way of life.”

“What do you mean Tom? The Indians wrecked their own way of life.”

“Well, if you call adapting to the ways of the herds and following them across these plains destruction, then I guess you have a point, but far as I can see the Indians conserved the bison.”

Joe was fuming mad but Tom knew the facts and he was relentless in pursuit

of his point. “Joe, you know full well Sheridan ordered the destruction of the buffalo as a means to pacify the plains Indians. Did you ever read his 1874 speech to Congress? What was it he said, ‘For the sake of lasting peace, let them kill, skin and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated.’”

“Tom, you are just a bleeding heart, what does Sheridan have to do with Indians and buffaloes, anyway?”

“Joe, get real, it was this extermination of the buffalo that led to the starvation of the Blackfeet and the taking of their bones in the first place. It’s why we are involved.”

Silence again fell like a leaden sky upon the two anthros but Tom had made his point and Joe knew it even if he would not admit to it. By 1883 when the Blackfeet starved by the hundreds, there were no more buffalo and Sheridan had his wish fulfilled at the expense of a proud people and a superbly adapted ungulate. Racing along the high line, the Amtrak shot past Fort Belknap, Joe’s ancestral reservation, without a remark. Musing on Joe’s habitual anti-Indianness, Tom tried a different tack. “Joe, what is it that makes you reject your heritage? You seem to hate everything about it.”

“Tom, that is low. What makes you think I hate my Indian heritage?”

“It seems every time I try to express my admiration for the Plains Indian way of life, you reject it and find something wrong with my assessments. What’s the matter, were you a victim of the boarding school?”

“Not me personally,” replied Joe, “but my parents were both inmates of the boarding schools run for the government by the church. They never had anything good to say about their Indian heritage. It was as if they were dropped off here from Mars, alien to these plains and Indian life.”

“Well I guess that explains it, you hate your heritage because the Jesuits taught your parents to hate it.”

“No, Tom, I just moved on when we learned the truth from the Jesuits. They brought us the only answers we needed. It’s all in the Gospels.”

As the mountains loomed on the horizon, the train began slowing down.



In Browning, waiting at the Little Flower Catholic Church, Buster was telling his story. As a child he had often climbed Ghost Ridge seeking to play with the old ones. One day, his grandfather, Old Man Yellow Kidney, caught him and proceeded to tell him the tale of ghosts and the starvation winter while cautioning him not to disturb the dead.

“A shadowy figure making his way from the Agency on Badger Creek

climbed the ridge line. Walking the summit, he found himself among the dead and desiccated remains of some six hundred Blackfeet who had starved that winter. The buffalo had disappeared and death followed on Cold Maker's breath.

"Two weeks before, another government agent had visited the Pikuni camps, finding only a hoof simmering in a pot and a leather pouch being softened to eat. That was all the Blackfeet had, and now they were just so many dead bones on Ghost Ridge. The big cattle barons were eating steaks in Helena on stolen land while there was nothing for the Indians.

"As the wolves howled and the ghostly clouds briefly obscured the moonlight, he passed amid the countless bones. There were so many skulls to choose from and his courage was faltering. Telling himself, *I am a man of science*, the surgeon wearing an extra large overcoat with many pockets reached down, taking the first of fourteen skulls. A wisp blew across the face of the moon, or Old Woman as the Blackfeet called her, and he looked again, turning to the orb, and stuffed the last cranium into his coat pocket. On the ground nearby there were two scattered arm bones that the wolves had torn free, so for good measure he collected a separate humerus and radius lying there on the frozen ground.

"Wrapped in that skeletal overcoat, he hurried back down the ridge to the Agency cabin. In the night, he boxed up his trophies and penned a letter to the Army in Washington explaining his grisly cargo was intended for the National Museum."

Buster led the procession of sixteen warriors, each carrying a box. They danced, turning and presenting to the four directions. Stopping before the great pit, Earl sang the coming-home song four times. He explained its sentiments—the grass is green, the berries are ripe, sweet in your mouth and your sweethearts are waiting by the river in the glade near the water.

Another old elder, Victor, told how the cultural hero—Katoyis, blood-clot boy—had slain a great monster bear above the site. "You can still see his remains in the rocks there along the ridge line." Prayers were given as the grave pit was covered and all present felt a monster had at long last been slain.

To conclude the ceremony, Buster led everyone in a sweat lodge down by the glade near the creek. Tom was surprised when Joe agreed to join the ritual, but Joe would only acknowledge it as a scientific curiosity. After a particularly hot first round in celebration of the returned warriors, Joe found himself seated on the ground outside the lodge next to Buster.

"Aren't you Joe Wells?" inquired the old man.

"Yes," answered the anthro.

“You know after leaving me with old man Yellow Kidney, my mother married a Wells and moved down to Fort Belknap way. You reckon you are one of those Wells?”

“I expect so, they are the only Wells on the reservation.”

“In that case you must be my nephew.”

The second round began and Tom was again surprised to hear Joe singing the old throat chants. By the third round Joe was even helping with the fire and carrying rocks into the lodge. As the sweat concluded Joe appeared to be a changed man.

“Ohey!” Buster called to open the door and Joe exited the lodge as a man reborn. Glancing down towards the creek he called out to his colleague, “Look! Do you see them?” There were sixteen maidens dancing in the twilight by the waters edge.

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