

CHAPTER XI

THE GHOST DANCE WEST OF THE ROCKIES

act 1

The first Ghost dance on Walker Lake reservation took place in January, 1889, about a mile above the railroad bridge near the agency. Wovoka's preaching had already been attracting general attention among his own people for some months. It is said that six Apache attended this first dance, but the statement is improbable, as this would imply that they had made a journey of 600 miles through a desert country to see a man as yet unknown outside of his own tribe. From this time, however, his fame went abroad, and another large dance in the same vicinity soon after was attended by a number of Ute from Utah. The Ute are neighbors of the Paiute on the east, as the Bannock are on the north, and these tribes were naturally the first to hear of the new prophet and to send delegates to attend the dance. The doctrine spread almost simultaneously to all the scattered bands of Paiute in Nevada, Oregon, and adjacent sections.

act 2

In its essential features the Ghost dance among the Paiute as conducted by the messiah himself was practically the same as among the majority of the prairie tribes, as will later be described. The Sioux, Kiowa, and perhaps some other tribes, however, danced around a tree or pole set up in the center of the ring, differing in this respect from the Paiute, as well as from the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Caddo, and others. No fire was allowed within the ring by any of the prairie tribes among whom the subject was investigated, but among the Paiute it seems that fires were built either within the circle or close to it. When I visited the messiah in January, 1892, deep snow was on the ground, which had caused the temporary suspension of dancing, so that I had no opportunity of seeing the performance there for myself. I saw, however, the place cleared for the dance ground—the same spot where the large delegation from Oklahoma had attended the dance the preceding summer—at the upper end of Mason valley. A large circular space had been cleared of sagebrush and leveled over, and around the circumference were the remains of the low round structures of willow branches which had sheltered those in attendance. At one side, within the circle, was a larger structure of branches, where the messiah gave audience to the delegates from distant tribes, and, according to their statements, showed them the glories of the spirit world through the medium of hypnotic trances. The Paiute always dance five nights, or perhaps more properly four nights and the morning of the fifth day,

act 3