

Letter I

Fort Yates, N.D. Sept. 27, 1929,

W.S. Campbell, Norman, Oklahoma.

This long letter will bore yours, 23rd, shows you realize the difficulties. After "Sitting Bull-Custer", 1100 edition, had quickly sold, Bishop Mann & others urged me to attempt a Life of S.B. I threw up my hands (The edition had sold without any adverse criticisms printed. I knew that if another edition was made, or if I attempted a Life of S.B., an avalanche of criticisms would come-- from certain parties then living, who had actual devilish hate for S.B. & thought it expedient to let the matter rest, for the time. Old frontiersmen then living so unanimously approved "Sitting Bull-Custer" that assaults in print were not ventured) Also, I felt inadequate to "putting it across" anyway. Here is a man who is unusual among Western Sioux themselves, so much so that they did not feel that they understood him; and he lived in a time so unusual to these Western Sioux that they could only blunder on as best they could without the usual precedents to guide, and besides all that, these Western Sioux so little understood by those who might read a Life of S.B. that there could be little proceeding from the known out into the unknown--- and so how could it be "put across". Times have somewhat changed in 16 years, and a man of your zeal may be able to "put it across." Who that is normal wants to merely write a story-fiction in the matter, & how "put across" an actual Life? Listening to old Sioux talking among themselves regarding these times & things, and while a missionary, actually pretending to be asleep stretched on a tanned hide, after making the prayer to begin the sewing circle of the women, so as to be present & hear their free talk---I've heard enough about these times to make 1000 pages. And in all this talk there is (was then) always the tone that they were strange times which baffled understanding, times when "the people" (Indians) were somewhat hysterically wondering what would come next, and the firm feeling that the white people could not at all be trusted, and that the Sioux must fight them out of their territory or perish. This policy was not new, it was a policy dating back about a century at least which took on new vigor. Plenty of other leading men besides S.B. were alive with this idea. In these times there were many persons who dreamed dreams, besides S.B., & the people tried to see some guidance in such sincere dreams. I have heard a story that in these times a reliable & pious old woman dreamed that she actually caught the Thunderbird, and intuitively in her dream tried to give the Thunderbird to Sitting Bull, then a boy about 17, but S.B. said, "No, Grandmother, the Thunderbird must be free if the people are to prosper, release him and let him go." And that this dream, with what S.B. was dreamed to have said, attracted much attention to S.B.

Undoubtedly S.B. made his puberty vigil, as all Western Sioux youths did (to get a revelation of what his special gift or capability was, & so what was to be his special career, so far as the same might be special). After this vigil, the youth did not announce his vision, but consulted with one or more old men whom he trusted as advisers. Then, in a sort of secret way, the youth stole away to act upon his vision. There are no traditions that S.B.'s puberty vision indicated his actual career, however. There is a tradition that shortly after this puberty vigil S.B. stole away and successfully shot three deers. So the almost certain inference is that he received the revelation that he was to be an unusually successful hunter. Old Indians I've heard talk, believe that was his revelation, and I have no doubt of it. By all accounts S.B. was a phenomenally successful hunter, and very liberally dispensed his game to those of the people who were poor, sick or infirm; but did not use it for making friends among the more noted youths & others, as many others did do, despite so many young Indians, now-a-days, claiming that the poor & sick were always liberally provided-for by the people. And, to speak frankly, among all North West Indians I've known there was a tendency to regard the poor and inefficient as "useless derelicts" & a burden upon the people; though there are a plenty of instances where noble men did not have that attitude toward them. (Old Rising Sun, "Sakanaku Skonk", Chippewa, in the Turtle Mountains, actually could not swallow food, hungry as he might be, unless he shared freely his food with those more needy than himself. I knew him well for many years. This was not "put-on", it was genuine. And I've known many others like-minded) Do not get the idea that among Indians all was "common", or that the "Down-and-outs" were provided for, generally, more liberally than among white folks. Many Indians I've known, Sioux, Chippewas & others, were excessively hard on their neighbors, and took advantage of them in every way possible, unless restrained by the volonte generale of the people. I've heard old Indians say that S.B. never made a feast for his well-to-do acquaintances, or for the youths of his time, when he was a youth. Of course I do not know the exact facts in the matter, myself. But I'm satisfied that S.B. was a sort of recluse, with very few intimates; that he was never what might be called "popular"; that he was not much given to games and sports, and that he never tried in contests among youths, in archery, or foot-races, or the many other things by which youths gained "popularity." Yet according to traditions, not only after puberty, but even before that period many persons, including prominent persons, heeded his dreams more and more. And a noticable