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Fieldworker
Goldie Turner
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Interview with Jim Murie

Ghost Dance

In 1890, it was rumored among the Pawnees that a Messiah had appeared to an Indian somewhere in the mountains and that all the dead Indian people would return to the earth. The story was that a Piute Indian had died and was taken up to the top of a high mountain, and laid out. After he had lain there four days, he revived and came down from the mountain, and told his people that while he was on the mountain his spirit had traveled in a strange and beautiful country. On his journey he crossed a small stream of clear water and came to a cedar tree where he saw handkerchiefs of every color, and all sorts of feathers, and at the base of the tree he saw several pipes and different kinds of paint. He took a white cotton handkerchief and some of the red earth, and went on. As he neared a mound he saw someone standing there, clad in white and purple robes. This person had long hair, parted in the middle, and he held out

his hands to show the cuts in them, but he did not look up. The man saw that he was the Messiah, the white man's Jesus, the Son of the Father in the Heavens. The man noted by his manner that he wanted him to pass by, for he did not speak, so he passed on his left and went on. Presently he saw in a valley an Indian village, extending along the whole bottom of the valley.

As he neared the village of tepees he noticed a man approaching, and when they met he found the man was his father; who embraced him and took him into the village. On the outskirts of the village he saw men playing javelin games. The old men were playing with the big hoops and sticks, and the boys with rings and sticks. He also saw some women playing with brackets and plum seeds, and others playing with staves. He could not understand the speech of these people, but when the two came to a tepee they entered, and there the dead man saw his dead relatives, mother, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters. The old people sitting near the entrance, he was told, were his grandparents. He was given food, and after eating he was told to watch the people who were dancing.

His father took him to the dancing ground, and when they arrived he saw the people dancing in a circle. The dancers were all painted and each wore feathers. Finally, he joined in the dance and learned some of their songs, but while dancing he saw people acting queerly and seemingly possessed with a spirit. There were seven singers and two men with long poles acted as soldiers, but took no part in the dancing. Some men inside the ring ran from one person to another, finally downing some of the people, and mesmerizing one another. One man came to him, blew his breath upon his breast, embraced him, and finally blew his breath into his mouth, at which instance the newcomer fell into a trance. He arose quickly, however, and joined the dance, and danced a long time until the man who had hypnotized him took him to one side and said, "Brother, you are now possessed with our power. You must return to your people and start this dance among them. Tell them you have seen the Messiah, the Son of the Father in the Heaven, and he is leading us to your people. They must dance so they will also receive the power you now possess. We know you are living, so whatever you

saw at the tree is yours. Give the red earth you find in the mountains to your people, let them paint their faces before they dance. Tell them of the Messiah, and let them mourn as you now see these people doing. We mourn for you and your people must mourn also. When you have started this dance among your people you will be able to come to us anytime and we will teach you more about our ways. People will come to you from all over the country and you must tell them what you now see, for this religion is for the Indian people. The spirit will be sent to you, and you must now return to your people."

The man revived and went down from the mountain to his people. Night overtook him as he reached a valley and as he was going through some bulrushes trying to find a bed, he saw someone coming towards him on a mule. He saw that it was the same Messiah he had seen while in a trance. This time the one on the mule said, "My son, what you saw is all true. Tell your people that I sent you, and that my spirit will be with them." Then he disappeared and the man then made a bed of rushes and lay down. The next morning he arose and went to his home.

The people were frightened by his return, but when he

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told his story they rejoiced. For days afterwards he told them to prepare for a dance. When they were all standing around in a circle, with hands joined, he told his story, and then he began to sing and all moved in a circle and began to have queer feelings, shivering all through their bodies. When the prophet shouted some of the weaker ones fell into a trance. Sometimes when he waved the cotton handkerchief at some of them they would go down while others danced on. Some who began to mourn, cried out, holding their hands towards the skies and cried; seemingly they could not stop crying.

This dance was carried on by the Piutes in Nevada until a northern Indian came to visit them. The story is told that this northern Indian had lost his child and was wandering over the country when he finally came to the dance and there was able to see his lost child through the prophet, Jack Wilson. He also saw their strange doings and got the story from Jack Wilson, who claimed that he knew beforehand that he was coming. This northern Indian returned to his people and told them about the new religion. He claimed that he himself had seen the Messiah in the mountains, that he also

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had seen his own dead relatives, and that the Messiah had talked to him and that through the Messiah he had seen the dead people. So a party of four men, Badger, a Sioux, Sitting-Bull a northern Arapaho, and two others went to Nevada to visit the prophet.

When these men arrived at Walker Lake, they found Jack Wilson and his Indians dancing. They made him some presents and asked to see the Messiah and their dead relatives to which Wilson replied, "Go and dance with my people and you will see all you want to see." These men joined in the dance, and in a few days they too fell into a trance and saw the Messiah and their dead relatives.

These four men then went north to their homes; Badger, the Sioux, went to the Standing Rock Agency and started the dance. Sitting-Bull, instead of going to his own people, the Northern Arapahoes, came into Oklahoma. This was about 1890, and here he started the ghost dance among the Southern Arapahoes and Cheyennes. Soon the news spread among the Wichita, Kiowa, and Comanche Tribes. At this time a young Pawnee Indian, Frank White, living among the Wichitas, joined the dance. He went into a trance, saw the stream, the tree, the Messiah, and then

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the village of people. He also saw them dance, joined in, and learned some songs which were in Pawnee. The first song was as follows:

Wey rey hey iri si ra.
Now you are coming.

Weyti ku wa tura wa hey
I am longing for the village
(Kingdom)

Wey rey hey iri si ra.
Now you are coming.

A sicks Y wey ta tu ta hi i.
And now I place my spirit upon you.

When he awoke from the trance he told the people what he had seen. Thus, he too became a prophet and possessed of the same power as Sitting-bull.

In the fall of 1892, Frank White came among the Pawnees and told his story to a few of his friends. He selected a few young men to whom he taught some of his own songs and also some of his Arapaho songs. As soon as they could sing a few songs they went to a camp to dance. Whenever the prophet shouted the dancers dropped to the ground in a trance. Some of the dancers, began to mourn and others shook all over, for a mysterious spirit took possession of them. Then they danced a short time and the prophet told them of his experiences.

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He told the people that if they made up their minds to dance and see the Messiah and their dead relatives, they would fall and see them; that the principal thing in the dance was to mourn and be humble in spirit. He then sent them home.

The next day, the people told of the dance they had and how they trembled and fell. The chiefs of the different bands took it up and set a day for the people to make their camp circle on Camp Creek. When the people had made camp, the chiefs met in council and invited the prophet, and asked that he start a dance and tell the people about the new religion. The prophet consented, so a special tepee was set up for the prophet where he was to stay with the singers. The next day the prophet sent two of the singers through the camp to get some paint of all colors from each tepee. This paint was taken to the prophet, who gave orders that all who wanted to dance must come into the tepee and have their faces painted. Each Indian now took presents to the tepee and was then painted. The singers painted their faces, and everybody was ready. The prophet went out of the lodge, the others following until they came to an open space where the prophet and singers joined hands and stood in a circle and sang. The people in the village came out of their

tepees and ran to the circle. Some did not get into the ring for the unknown spirit took possession of them and stopped them, and they raised their hands to the skies and began to cry. In the ring the dancers began to tremble and seem crazy. When the prophet went to them they fell to the ground, but late in the evening they quit dancing and began feasting.

After they had eaten they danced again until ten o'clock they began to dance again. This time there were about four men and three women who seemed to be trembling badly, and they ran around the camp crying, "I do not want you, go away from me." About the third day, one of the women fell and lay on the ground about five minutes and then sat up. She began to cry and finally her crying turned into a song. One man went to her and she told what she had seen while she lay on the ground. The fourth day a young man fell and lay upon the ground all night, and when he came to, he ran to the prophet's tepee and told what he had seen. The prophet ordered that all the people go upon a hill and hear the young man tell his story. This was about eight o'clock in the evening, and when all the people were on the hill, standing in a line facing west, the young man was told to sit down in front of them, and the village crier went and sat beside him. The

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young man told the following story:

"When I joined in the dance I was filled with some kind of a spirit. I felt a queer sensation passing through my body, and I began to tremble and cry. I saw a strange being who wanted to catch me, and I ran out of the ring and kept running away from the strange man. When he caught up with me I could see many wonderful things. He told me that if I stopped he would teach me the wonderful things I saw, but I would not do this for I wanted to see some of my dead people. I ran until I was exhausted and could go no further and fell down as one dead. I was in a beautiful country where the grass was green, and I saw a small pathway which I followed. I came to a clear stream of water and crossed it, and then I came to a cedar tree. On it were feathers of different birds, and handkerchiefs of many colors. I took one of red silk and passed on, then on a small hill I saw the Child of the Father in the Heavens dressed in purple. He held out his hands so I could see the cuts in them. He did not speak but I knew he wanted me to pass. I went by him and I saw at a distance the village of our dead people. As I neared the village four men came to meet me, each with a pipe in his

hand. One of them said, "My son, when you return to your people tell them you saw us and that we asked our people for a smoke. We are about to smoke to our people who are still living through the one who is leading us to your land. Go into the village and see your people." I passed them and went on. Near the village I saw a woman. It was my mother. She embraced me, and said, "my child, I am glad to see you. We will go where our people are dancing." So we went on, and there in the center of the village our people were dancing the same dance we were dancing. I joined them and men came to me and blew their breaths upon me, and I danced a while then one man asked me to tell you that I had seen the dance and that it was all true. He then told me to return and when I turned around I awoke. I had been lying upon the ground for some time. This is the end of what I saw."

The people went to him and as each person took hold of his hand, he either fell or began to tremble. After this four men were selected to smoke to the dead people. After the smoke everyone began to cry, and the prophet and the

new prophet ran around among the people throwing them down upon the ground. After the excitement they all went back to camp and danced until ten o'clock that night. The next morning all joined the dance again, and this time a woman entered the ring and began to act as if crazy. She slapped a man and struck a woman and continued to slap and strike people, so everyone sat down. This woman stood in the center and said, "That young man, the prophet, is lying. He is not telling the truth." Two men whom the chiefs had previously selected to act as police took her out of the ring and took her home as the prophet directed, for he said she was possessed of a bad spirit. The next day the prophet and his singers took this woman to the creek and cleansed her. Afterwards she joined the dance again and was all right.

While the Wichitas had been indifferent to the teachings of White, the Pawnees soon became enthusiasts. White went first to the Pitahaurata village and began his ceremonies. At once a few had the trances, and as the news spread the chiefs of all the Pawnee villages met to see demonstrations and discuss the movement. Two days were given over to

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dancing, but the first camp was broken up by a fire. A tepee catching fire ignited the grass and destroyed much property; but undismayed, a new camp was formed. Many persons went into trances, while many were alarmed at the intensity of the phenomenon. White then demonstrated his power by putting bystanders into trances by touching them. Finally he closed the demonstration by a spectacular race. Taking his position in the center, the converts around in a circle, he caused them to fall at will.

After this, practically the whole of the Pawnees were under white's influence. Dances were almost continuous during the winter and the following summer. Infatuated with the belief in the immediate destruction of the world, they planted no crops and threw away their property. Naturally, they became sullen and disobedient to their Agent, resulting in the arrest of White by United States Marshals.

This excited the Indians greatly and almost caused hostilities. In the meantime the Otoes had taken up the

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Pawnee dance and also threatened to go on the warpath. Owing to the skill of their agent, the Pawnees were quieted and White released. He himself did what he could to develop the movement into a less militant religion. To do this he magnified the Christian elements. There was opposition for a time for all the old Pawnee medicine men took the trances as forms of the powers formerly exercised by the animal lodges and began a vigorous revival, each setting himself up as a prophet and seeking to out do the others. White died in 1893, after which the strength and unity of the religion quickly disappeared among the many rival prophets.

This Pawnee ceremony seems to have been largely original with White and far from identical with the ghost dance as followed by neighboring tribes. It is clear, however, that White had based his teachings upon the fundamental conceptions of the true ghost dance. Some few years after White's death some visiting Wichitas brought in the regular ceremony. According to this there was no supreme leader, but all who had trances could teach and direct. The prescribed ceremony extended over

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four days. There were seven regular singers each wearing an eagle feather in his hair and seven assistant singers wearing down feathers.

In 1904 three Pawnees went to Walker Lake, Nevada, to take instructions of Jack Wilson, who was still the recognized leader. Here they learned what is now regarded as the correct ritual for the ceremonies. According to this formula, a special painted tepee is set up near the center of the camp as the temple. Ordinarily, the Pawnees did not use the camp circle, but the modern ghost dance camp is pitched in a circle and the ceremonial tepee set off center toward the north or south side according to the place of the host. Otherwise, the procedure is about as previously stated.

The religion still flourishes (1914) but has evolved into a Christian ethical belief, demonstrated by a ritual. The trance and its intensity have passed out, but dreams and ordinary visions are still valued.

Some time after 1904 the hand game was introduced into the ghost dance ritual by the dreams of a devotee. This

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has developed until it is about the only ritual now demonstrated. The game sets are kept in bundles and treated in the same general fashion as the regular Pawnee bundles. Special halls have been built for these ceremonies. In this as in all other games, the players take their hereditary sides of north and south.

NOTE: The hand game is still practiced by the Pawnees. They have two Round Houses, one north and one south of Pawnee.