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# James Mooney and Wovoka: An Ethnologist's Visit with the Ghost Dance Prophet

L. G. MOSES

BY LATE NOVEMBER, 1890, the newspaper and magazine press in the United States were reporting a great religious excitement among western Indian tribes, most notably the Sioux in the Dakotas. Stories about the imminent uprising of crazed "redskins" filled columns of newsprint. Plains and Great Basin Indians were dancing a "ghost dance" given to them by a mysterious prophet who lived somewhere in the Rocky Mountain West. Half the army of the nation was arrayed against the Sioux.

In addition to his other assignments, James Mooney had been asked by John Wesley Powell, his superior at the Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, to examine the effects of the Ghost Dance religion on the tribes of Indian Territory. Mooney had wanted to visit the region during the winter of 1890-1891 to compare the remnant band of Cherokees from the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina to the large group in Indian Territory, separated as they were by over 1000 miles and a generation since removal. Powell had also asked the ethnologist to investigate the Kiowas. Ever interested in philology as the first step in classification of Native Americans, the explorer of the Colorado River wanted Mooney to gather information about the linguistic affinities of the Kiowas, regarded by many ethnologists as the most "primitive" of plains Indians.<sup>1</sup> If Mooney were seized with excitement at the prospect of visiting the peoples of Indian Territory, that excitement must have increased as he read about the Ghost Dance.

On the morning of December 22, 1890, Mooney boarded a west-bound train that would, for the first time in his career, carry him beyond the Mississippi, near the hundredth meridian, where the "wild tribes" lived.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mooney to Henry W. Henshaw, June 18, 1890. Records of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Letters Received, Selected Correspondence File, Box 14, Smithsonian Institution National Anthropological Archives, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Cited as BAE Records, LR, Box —, SNAA. The "American" was attached to the title of the Bureau of Ethnology in 1894.

<sup>2</sup> *Twelfth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894), pp. xxx-xxxi. Annual reports of the ethnological bureau are hereafter cited in the fashion, BAE, *12th Annual Report* (1894). The date in parentheses indicates year of actual publication rather than year of the report. The BAE was notoriously tardy in the publication of its annual reports.





James Mooney, circa 1910. Smithsonian Institution National Anthropological Archives.

Government sponsored comprehensive programs for assimilation of Native Americans were of recent origin. By 1890 Indians had been conquered militarily and retained small hope of ever challenging the white man's government. Consigned to reservations, Indians could achieve citizenship only if they abandoned their tribes, accepted an allotment of land, and exchanged their hunting rifles and skinning knives for plows. Plains warriors who in years past had followed the great bison herds now queued up at their



agencies on issue day to receive their families' food and supplies. It was hoped that individual freeholds would provide Indians with a means of livelihood, future independence, and a respect for private property. The 160 acre allotment became the assimilationists' solution to the "Indian Problem," despite the fact that many southwestern Indians had been farmers and herders for generations. Such a limited acreage, even where available, might work to their disadvantage in the arid regions. The mercurial largesse of the federal government became even more unpredictable as each tribe, through persuasion or force, surrendered its "surplus land." Treaty provisions were often ignored in the rush of legislation effecting Indians which passed Congress after the adoption of the Dawes Land in Severalty Bill in 1887.

It was the preceding quarter century of broken treaties, encroachment on tribal lands, and assimilationist programs of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Christian reformers that helped to produce one of the greatest social and religious movements among Indians during the nineteenth century. The Ghost Dance religion came at a time when many western and plains Indians were in a demoralized state. The religion promised a return of halcyon days, and a future unencumbered by an Anglo-American civilization. This the ethnologist James Mooney would find when he arrived in Indian Territory. There he would begin his research into the religion—research that led him eventually to Wovoka.

The Ghost Dance religion of the Paiute prophet Wovoka, or Jack Wilson as he was known to non-Indians, blew as a warm wind out of the parched landscape of western Nevada, heating the imaginations of Indians with anticipation of their redemption. A time would come, Wovoka told them, when all Indians living and dead would be reunited in aboriginal splendor on a remade earth. Indians would be free forever from destitution, disease, death, and non-Indians. To hasten the transformation, the faithful were instructed to perform certain rituals, the most spectacular and ubiquitous of which was a circular dance, known by various names but renowned as the "ghost dance." In their exhaustion from performing the dance, and in their wild longing after validation of the prophet's vision, the ghost dancers would collapse and "die." After returning to consciousness, they would tell about their meetings with loved ones long dead, harbingers from a subliminal world of things to come.<sup>3</sup>

Nebulous rumors of the existence of a new prophet reached the office of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in June, 1890. The commissioner and members of his staff remained unconcerned until late in the summer when the Sioux seized upon the religion. By the early fall ghost dances were in

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<sup>3</sup> The standard reference for the Ghost Dance is the classic, contemporary account of James Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion and Sioux Outbreak of 1890," in BAE, *14th Annual Report* (1896), Part 2. Cited as Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion*. See especially pp. 746-802.

full performance at a number of widely scattered reservations in the trans-Mississippi West. The Sioux version of the Ghost Dance, however, was particularly militant. Sioux apostles of Wovoka preached a variety of the doctrine in opposition to the prophet's counsel that peacefulness should reign as the directing principle among the faithful. As the atmosphere at the Sioux reservations grew increasingly tense into the late fall, the Bureau of Indian Affairs sought first to contain the perceived rebellion in the Dakotas and only afterward to isolate the person responsible for the excitement.<sup>4</sup> Once order was restored among the Sioux by mid-January, 1891, and when it appeared unlikely to leaders in the Indian service that the regrettable incidents at Pine Ridge and Standing Rock reservations would be repeated elsewhere, it no longer seemed important to locate the leader and originator of the Ghost Dance religion. The mendacity of the prophet, so Thomas Jefferson Morgan, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, believed, should have been made manifest to the ghost dancers by the death of Sitting Bull and the tragic affair at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota.

Despite the fear and trepidation created by the Ghost Dance among members of the Indian service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs never sent a representative to confer with Wovoka, or to learn from the prophet himself about his mission to America's natives. The first governmental agent to visit Wovoka was Arthur Chapman, army scout and interpreter, under orders from General John Gibbon, commander of the Military Department of the Pacific. Chapman spent a few days with Wovoka the first week of December, 1890. His report went first to General Gibbon, and afterward it climbed a ladder of endorsements all the way to the Secretary of War.<sup>5</sup> The report dispelled much of the confusion that surrounded the sources and tenets of the religion. Remarkably, however, it was never included in the special file kept at the Indian Office on the Ghost Dance.<sup>6</sup> A more complete account of the prophet had to await the publication of James Mooney's history of the religion. Mooney's meeting with Wovoka took place a year after Chapman's. It is a story as fascinating as any other in the pageant of the Ghost Dance of 1890.

James Mooney (1861–1921) was a member of the first generation of government ethnologists. He was born in Richmond, Indiana, February 10,

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Utley, *Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), is still the best source on the Sioux Ghost Dance.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapman to Gibbon, Dec, 6, 1890, in "Report of the Secretary of War," *Executive Documents of the House of Representatives*, 52nd congress, 1st session, Executive Document 1, Part 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1892), pp. 191–194. Cited as Sec. of War, *Annual Report*, 1890–91.

<sup>6</sup> See "Special Case 188: Ghost Dance, 1890–1898," Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Cited as SC 188, RG 75, NA.

1861, the only son of Irish immigrant parents. He received his education in Richmond public schools. For a year after his graduation from Richmond High School in May, 1878, he taught school. Rather than surrender his life to endless drill, chalk dust, and farmers' children, he hankered after a more venturesome career in the newspaper business. He became a typesetter and later advanced to the editorial office of the Richmond *Palladium*.<sup>7</sup>

His fascination with the American Indian began when he was still a child. He started collecting notes on Indians of the Americas with the intention of producing a map that located all tribes, their ranges, and important ethnological sites. His familiarity with Richmond members of the Society of Friends and their work in Indian education in North Carolina brought the Eastern Cherokee tribe to his attention. He planned to visit the western region of that state to begin a study of the Mountain Cherokees but realized that, without extensive financial resources to draw on, the task would prove beyond his means. In 1882 he tried to win appointment to the ethnological bureau of the Smithsonian Institution. He did not receive employment until 1885, after he had visited Washington, D.C., and displayed samples of his work to John Wesley Powell, the bureau's director. He joined the Bureau of Ethnology six years after its founding. Within two years of his appointment as government ethnologist, he escaped the confines of philological research in the capital archives and began field research. He became one of the premier field investigators for the Bureau of Ethnology.<sup>8</sup> It was his research into the Cherokees and Kiowas that sent him to Indian Territory in late 1890, and into an examination of the Ghost Dance religion, the history of which would preoccupy his attention for several years thereafter.

Mooney departed Washington the day before Big Foot's band of Miniconjou ghost dancers from Cheyenne River reservation, South Dakota, escaped their military escort and fled toward Pine Ridge agency. The ethnologist was still en route to the territory on the morning of December 29 when Sioux and soldiers clashed at Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge reservation. A fight started between Miniconjous and troopers of the Seventh Cavalry as the Indians were undergoing a search for weapons. Soon all were engaged in a fierce battle at close quarters that ended with over 200 dead and wounded. By the time Mooney reached the Cheyenne and Arapaho agency at Darlington, Indian Territory, Sioux ghost dancers, and those other Indians who had fled Pine Ridge in fear after the battle, were camped within range of the field guns that ringed the agency compound. General Nelson A. Miles, commanding the Military Division of the Missouri, took the Sioux surrender on January 15, 1891.

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<sup>7</sup> James Mooney Vertical File, BAE Records, SNAA.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



Bloodshed at Wounded Knee followed by the parade of military power at Pine Ridge agency that culminated in a grand review of troops on January 21 served grim notice to all Indians that the United States government refused to countenance any threat to the process of assimilation.<sup>9</sup> Leaders at the Bureau of Indian Affairs had long before decreed that their wards were to become citizen farmers in the fashion of other Americans. The Ghost Dance religion had challenged, if only for a time, the tidiness of the process. For the Sioux who watched the military parade in silence, faith in the prophet ceased to inspire armed resistance to the forces of civilization. But for many other Indians, and especially for those living in Indian Territory, the religion still offered hope.

From Darlington on January 19 Mooney wrote, "Indians are dancing the ghost dance day & night. . . ."<sup>10</sup> He attended Cheyenne and Arapaho performances for the next week. "I am so far in with the medicine men," he boasted to a fellow ethnologist at the bureau, "that they have invited me to take part in the dance although they order any other white man away from the grounds. . . . The Caddos, Kiowas, Comanches [around Anadarko agency] to who I go from here are all dancing."<sup>11</sup> For the next month and a half, Mooney traveled between the two reservations, where he participated in ghost dances, collected specimens of clothing and crafts used in the ritual for the National Museum, and interviewed leaders of the religion.

Toward the end of February, 1891, Mooney received hints about the identity and location of the Ghost Dance prophet. Apiaton (sometimes spelled Apiatom), or Wooden Lance, a Kiowa, had just returned to the Kiowa and Comanche reservation after a visit to the "Indian Messiah." The agent, Charles E. Adams, with the assistance of Lieutenant Hugh L. Scott at Fort Sill, called a council at Anadarko agency and invited the attendance of Cheyennes and Arapahos from their reservation north of the Washita River.<sup>12</sup> With Mooney present, the tribes gathered to hear Apiaton's story of his search for the messiah. The trail had led him first to Pine Ridge and thence to Wind River reservation, Wyoming. From the home of the Shoshonis and northern Arapahos he moved on to Fort Hall, Idaho. Again he learned, this time from Bannocks and Shoshonis, that he must travel farther. After stopping at Pyramid Lake reservation, he arrived at last in Mason Valley near the Walker River reserve, where the prophet told him his search was ended.

Wovoka had told others before Apiaton about his ministry. The prophet

<sup>9</sup> Utley, *Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, pp. 269–270.

<sup>10</sup> Mooney to Henshaw, Jan. 17, 1891, BAE Records, LR, Box 14, SNAA.

<sup>11</sup> Mooney to Henshaw, Jan. 27, 1891, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion*, pp. 900, 909, 911, 913.

had given the delegates a dance, but they had gotten things twisted after leaving him. The Sioux more than other tribes had wandered from the charted path and a great many of them had been killed as a consequence. The violence and bloodshed distressed the prophet. Wovoka recommended that the Kiowa delegate return to his tribe and tell his people to stop the dance.<sup>13</sup> Disheartened by his discovery, Apiaton left Nevada and hurried home convinced, as Mooney wrote later, "that there was no god in Israel."<sup>14</sup>

Apiaton's recounting of his meeting with Wovoka had an effect. Devotion to the religion decreased at both the Kiowa and Comanche, and the Cheyenne, Arapaho and Caddo reservations.

Mooney left Anadarko agency to continue his work on the Cherokees. By mid-April, 1891, he was back in the capital. In short order, however, he was ordered to return to the territory, this time to prepare an exhibit on the Kiowas for the forthcoming Columbian Exposition in Chicago scheduled for the following year (later postponed until 1893). He stayed in Kiowa camps in the Wichita Mountains from May until late July. He returned to Washington in early August, relieved to be free from his role as collector of curiosities for the celebration of the quartocentennial of Columbus, or the "Italian dreamer" as the ethnologist called him. Mooney arranged and wrote descriptive labels for the Kiowa collection stored in the basement of the National Museum and then to his delight, resumed work on the Ghost Dance. From August through October, in preparation for another trip to western tribes, this time to the northern plains, he visited the Bureau of Indian Affairs and War Department to research documents about the late "Messiah Craze."<sup>15</sup>

It was about this time that the ethnologist decided to find the prophet for himself. Confusion about the source of the religion permeated the writings of persons at the Indian bureau. Through his participation in the council at Anadarko the previous winter and his subsequent conversations with a number of delegates who visited Wovoka, Mooney knew that he would need to travel to Nevada during his planned research trip. He wrote to C. C. Warner, superintendent of the Nevada agencies. Warner had been appointed to his post at Pyramid Lake reservation at the height of the Ghost Dance in December, 1890. Warner, a Republican, had replaced S. S. Sears, an appointee from the previous Cleveland administration. Warner answered Mooney's inquiry with a derisive tone. He had never seen Jack Wilson or Wovoka, he told the ethnologist:

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<sup>13</sup> Scott to Post Adjutant, Fort Sill, Feb. 22, 1891, SC 188, RG. 75, NA.

<sup>14</sup> Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 913.

<sup>15</sup> Mooney to Charles Adams, April 3, 1891, Kiowa Employees File, Indian Archives Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City; Mooney to Henshaw, March 6, 1891, BAE Records, LR, Box 14, SNAA; and BAE, *13th Annual Report* (1896), p. xxxix.

I am pursuing the course with him of non-attention or a silent ignoring. He seems to think, so I hear, that I will arrest him should he come within my reach. I would give him no such notoriety. . . . There are neither ghost songs, dances nor ceremonies among them about my agencies. Would not be allowed. I think they died out with "Sitting Bull."<sup>16</sup>

Mooney suspected otherwise. Unable to get any assistance from the man close to the source of the Ghost Dance, the ethnologist determined to follow his own devices. The trail to the messiah, never well traveled by members of the Indian service, was still warm.

Mooney left Washington about the middle of November, 1891, and after stopping in Nebraska long enough to learn that the Omahas and Winnebagos had little to do with the religion, he moved on to South Dakota.<sup>17</sup> At Pine Ridge reservation he rode out to the battlefield at Wounded Knee where he saw the mass grave of the dead from Big Foot's band. The survivors had fenced the perimeter of the trench, and smeared the posts with paint made from the sacred clay of western Nevada given to Sioux delegates by Wovoka. Mooney was touched by the pathetic scene. The grave had been marked so that those recently dead might be among the first at the Indian resurrection.<sup>18</sup>

Research among the Sioux confirmed for Mooney the tragic implications of the Ghost Dance. It was a religion of a beaten people. Seeing and speaking with the prophet would help determine whether the tragedy had been a consequence of the revelation itself or, as so often happened, had been produced by misunderstanding among the faithful, as well as between the faithful and unbelievers.

After arriving at the Pyramid Lake reservation, he learned that Wovoka's uncle, Charly Sheep, lived near the Walker River agency. Mooney spent a lonely Christmas at a hotel across from the Reno railroad station. His thoughts that day were turned toward a different, a newer messiah. After the holiday he moved south and found the prophet's uncle at Walker River reservation.<sup>19</sup> By showing Charly photographs of a number of the ethnologist's Arapaho and Cheyenne friends from Indian Territory, Mooney overcame much of the Indian's initial suspicion. Many Indian delegates from the East had recently descended on Wovoka's home in Mason Valley. As Charly indicated, Wovoka found the visits increasingly annoying, particularly after the government branded the religion dangerous and inimical to

<sup>16</sup> Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 767n.

<sup>17</sup> BAE, *13th Annual Report* (1896), p. xxxix; and Pine Ridge Agency, Guest Register, 1884-1894, Book 1, Archives 165, Box 516183, RG 75, Federal Archives and Records Center, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>18</sup> Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 769.

<sup>19</sup> Mooney to Captain John Gregory Bourke, Dec. 25, 1891, John Gregory Bourke Papers, Series I, Box 1, Folder 15, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.



order and progress. Mooney told Charly that, as an ethnologist, it was his job to study Indians. He wished to bring no harm to the prophet.<sup>20</sup>

Mooney spent a week with Charly Sheep, discussing various aspects of Paiute culture. "When the ice was well thawed, I cautiously approached the subject of ghost songs and dance. . . . I then told Charly that . . . I was anxious to see the messiah and get from him some medicine-paint to bring back to his friends among the eastern tribes." The Indian agreed to take Mooney to his nephew's home.

The two rode the Carson and Colorado Railroad from Schurz twenty miles northwest to Wabuska where they left the train and travelled overland southeast for twelve miles, until they reached Mason Valley. There they met F. A. Dyer, who kept a store at Yerington. Dyer, well acquainted with Wovoka and fluent in the Paiute language, offered his assistance to the ethnologist. Mooney hired a team and driver and moved on up the valley. It was New Year's Day (a Friday), 1892, and a deep snow covered the ground, the result of Wovoka's command of the elements, Charly Sheep assured the group. "It is hard to imagine anything more monotonously unattractive than a sage prairie under ordinary circumstances unless it be the same prairie when covered by a heavy fall of snow," Mooney wrote. He found it difficult to determine whether mounds he saw in the distance were snow-draped sage brush or Paiute wikipups. The party passed a dance ground that, though deserted, offered visible proof of frequent use. So much for Agent Warner's contrary assertion, Mooney thought.

After going several miles Mooney observed a solitary figure on a nearby ridge. On drawing closer, he noticed that it was a man with a gun propped over one shoulder.

Dyer looked a moment and then exclaimed "I believe that's Jack now!" The Indian thought so, too, and pulling up our horses he shouted some words in Paiute language. The man replied, and sure enough it was the messiah, hunting jack rabbits. At his uncle's call he soon came over.

As Wovoka approached the group, Mooney saw that he was a young man about thirty-five and nearly six feet tall—considerably taller than the ethnologist, who stood only five feet four inches. The Indian was dressed in "white man's" clothes, including a rather large, broad-brimmed white felt hat. Wovoka clasped Mooney's hand with "a strong, hearty grasp" and asked what he wanted. Charly Sheep translated Mooney's interest, adding that the small stranger knew some of the prophet's Indian friends in the East. Wovoka said that he was hunting now, but if Mooney would come to his camp this evening, he would tell the ethnologist sent by "Washington" about

<sup>20</sup> The following account, unless otherwise indicated, is taken from chapter nine, "Wovoka the Messiah," in Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion*, pp. 767–776.

his sacred mission to the tribes. With another handshake all around Wovoka moved off.

It was late afternoon. Mooney and his party drove on to the nearest ranch where they awaited nightfall. After supper they started in what they thought was the direction of the Paiute camp. They had been traveling for an hour, with nothing to be seen in any direction but snow covered bushes, when Charly Sheep, the guide of the expedition, announced that he was thoroughly lost. "To be lost on a sage plain on a freezing night in January is not a pleasant experience. There was no road, and no house but the one we had left some miles behind, and it would be almost impossible to find our way back to that through the darkness."

Except for a lantern they carried in the wagon, there was no other light except the winking of a few stars in the cloud-broken sky. To add to the uncertainty, cattle trails, which seemed to be "Indian trails," cut in every direction "and kept us doubling and circling to no purpose, while in the . . . gloom every large clump of sage brush took on the appearance of a wikiup, only to disappoint us on a nearer approach." After vainly following a dozen false trails, and hearing no answers to their frequent shouts for assistance, they decided to leave Charly, the oldest in the party, with the wagon, while Mooney, Dyer and the teamster fanned out from the central point. When each had gone far enough to determine that he was on a wrong trail, the wagon was brought up and the process repeated. This went on for some time until, from the darkness, the driver's shouts brought the group together. He had heard noises in the distance, and as each man strained to listen and searched the blackness for some sign of life, a shower of sparks from a campfire disclosed the existence of the Paiute camp. They leaped to the wagon and with considerable jostling drove directly to the circle of huts.

Wovoka courteously bid the visitors enter his wikiup. He inquired more precisely about the purpose of the ethnologist's visit. Charly Sheep's translation, Mooney explained, "stretched out to preposterous length, owing to a peculiar conversational method of the Paiute." Each statement by the older man was repeated at its close, word for word, by Wovoka, with the same monotonous inflection. This done, the first speaker signified by a grunt of approval that it had been correctly repeated, and then began the next statement. The first time Mooney heard two Paiutes conversing in this fashion at Pyramid Lake, he thought that they were reciting some sort of litany and "it required several such experiences and some degree of patience to become used to it." Finally the prophet signified his understanding, and then in answer to Mooney's questions, he gave an account of his life and the tenets of the Ghost Dance religion.

Wovoka told Mooney about his vision of a restored Indian world. The prophet had a vision during an eclipse of the sun in January, 1889. As

Mooney later learned from a rancher who frequently employed Wovoka, the Indian had been sick with a severe fever of unknown origin. In his delirium, he traveled to heaven where God showed him members of his tribe, all happy and young, engaged in old sports and occupations. God then commanded that Wovoka return to earth and inform all Indians that they must be good and love one another and that they must put away all the practices that savored of war. If the Indians followed the precepts and performed the God-given dance at regular intervals for five days, they would secure their own happiness and hasten the end of the world. Paiute apostles carried the doctrine to other Nevada tribes. Within the year delegates from distant plains tribes began arriving in Mason Valley eager to meet their deliverer.

Wovoka repudiated any idea of hostility toward non-Indians, asserting that his religion advocated universal peace. He disavowed responsibility for the ghost shirt which had formed so important a part of the dance costume among the Sioux and which supposedly made the wearer inviolable.<sup>21</sup> Mooney recorded his impression of the conversation:

I knew that he was holding something in reserve, as no Indian would unbosom himself on religious matters to a white man with whom he had not had a long and intimate acquaintance. Especially was this true in view of the war-like turn affairs had taken across the mountains. Consequently I accepted his statements with several grains of salt, but on the whole he seemed to be honest in his belief and his supernatural claims, although, like others of the priestly function, he occasionally resorts to cheap trickery to keep up the impression as to his miraculous powers.

In subsequent interviews Wovoka added little to the story of his vision and doctrine but showed great interest in Mooney's friendship with the Cheyennes and Arapahos.

Because Mooney had been honest with him, Wovoka allowed the ethnologist to take his picture, something that had never been done before. He would only charge the white man two dollars and fifty cents for the privilege. "I was prepared for this," Mooney explained, "and refused to pay him such charges, but agreed to give him my regular price per day for his services as informant and to send him a copy of the picture when finished." The prophet agreed. Mooney also acquired a number of souvenirs to take back to the Indians at Darlington. "With mutual expressions of good will we parted, his uncle going back to the reservation, while I took the train for

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<sup>21</sup> Wovoka repudiated responsibility for the ghost shirt in his interview with Arthur Chapman in early December, 1890, weeks before the clash at Wounded Knee. See, Sec. of War, *Annual Report*, 1890-91, p. 192. Paul Bailey, Wovoka's biographer, goes into detail on the ghost shirt and uses as his source the E. A. Dyer manuscript of the Nevada Historical Society. See, Paul Bailey, *Wovoka the Indian Messiah* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1957), pp. 120-124.



Indian Territory." Mooney had seen the Indian messiah. Other than a few minor errors or omissions, he had the whole story.<sup>22</sup> Other investigators, with the exception of Arthur Chapman, had been within easy distance of the prophet but had failed, either out of disinterest or inattention, to make the acquaintance of Wovoka and learn about his religion.<sup>23</sup>

News that Mooney had returned after a visit to the prophet caused great excitement among the Cheyennes and Arapahos. Indians gathered around the ethnologist "eager to hear all the details of my visit . . . and to get my own impressions of the man. In comparing notes with some of the recent delegates I discovered something of Wovoka's hypnotic methods, and incidentally learned how much a miracle depends on the mental receptivity of the observer."<sup>24</sup> He sensed that a number of delegates had been prepared to believe all that Wovoka had told them.

Mooney established enough trust between himself and the delegates to be shown written statements which Wovoka had given the Indians during their last visits to him the previous August. One of the Cheyennes, Black Short Nose, asked that Mooney take the letters to Washington, "to convince the white people that there was nothing bad or hostile in the new religion."<sup>25</sup> The ethnologist agreed to the suggestion.

<sup>22</sup> As the anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace writes in his abridgment of *Ghost Dance Religion*, Mooney "mistakes, for instance, the farmer of Wovoka . . . for another man who actually launched the earlier Ghost Dance of 1870. And he grossly underestimates not only the importance of the 1870 Ghost Dance . . . but also the significance of beliefs concerning the return of the dead, traditionally so important among the Paviotso and their northern neighbors." Although a "thorough understanding of the Ghost Dance as a cultural phenomenon requires consultation of later works as well as Mooney's . . .," Wallace adds "it is remarkable indeed, that so early a student was able to accomplish so much under extraordinary difficulties." James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, edited and abridged with an introduction by Anthony F. C. Wallace (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. viii. For biographies of the prophet that contain either first-hand accounts or additional research that goes beyond Mooney, consult Grace Dangberg, "Wovoka," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, XI, No. 2 (Summer, 1968), pp. 5-53; and Bailey, *Wovoka the Indian Messiah*.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Daniel Dorchester, Methodist minister and United States Superintendent of Indian Education, had been assigned by Commissioner Morgan in the spring of 1891 to investigate the Ghost Dance. His report, which appears in the commissioner's 1891 *Annual Report*, showed confusion about the source of the religion. Dorchester, however, had been present for a few days at Walker River reservation in June, 1890, at the very time that Acting Commissioner Robert V. Belt sent out circulars to agents asking them for information about the Ghost Dance. A number of visiting delegations of plains Indians were then present at Walker River. See James O. Gregory to S. S. Sears, June 26, 1890, Records of the Walker River reservation, Letters Sent, Box 314, RG 75, Federal Archives and Records Center, San Bruno, California.

Mooney had met with Gregory during his visit in late December, 1891. Gregory had been replaced the previous summer as farmer-in-charge at Walker River by Nelson Hammond, a Republican. Gregory told Mooney that Wovoka had asked him to write to President Benjamin Harrison asking that he recognize the prophet as a leader of all Indians. The letter, as Mooney correctly notes, was never forwarded. Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 773. See also, Edward C. Johnson, *Walker River Paiutes: A Tribal History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Printing Service, 1975), p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 775.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 776.

True to his word after reaching Washington in early February, Mooney prepared copies of the "messiah letters" for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. "It will be noted," he informed Commissioner Morgan, "that no date is fixed for the change and that [Wovoka] counsels peace with the whites."<sup>26</sup> Since Wounded Knee there had been little trouble at reservations, and the commissioner paid scant attention to Mooney's points. Morgan found other matters more pressing. Since the Ghost Dance no longer threatened disruption of his stewardship over the dependent tribes, the commissioner could carry on with his program for bringing the Indians of the United States into full participation as productive citizens.

Although distracted by other bureau matters, Mooney intermittently continued his research into the Ghost Dance for another two years. It was not until December, 1893, that he began to concentrate on the completion of his manuscript. He spent the next seven months writing, editing and arranging copy for the book.<sup>27</sup> The completed work went to the government printers in the summer of 1894, but owing to a backlog of other manuscripts it was not published until 1896.

When his book on the Ghost Dance appeared in print, it secured Mooney's reputation as an ethnologist of the first order. So praiseworthy did Dr. Washington Matthews, a fellow ethnologist as well as an army physician, find it that Mooney felt compelled to demur, if only a little disingenuously. Matthews had written in the *Journal of American Folklore* that

it is customary for a reviewer . . . to find some fault with the book, if for no other purpose than to show his own superior knowledge. We have read this ponderous tome through, with care, in the hope that we might find some noteworthy blemish; but we are forced to admit that we have failed in our praiseworthy effort.<sup>28</sup>

Matthews sent a copy of the review to the ethnologist while it was still in galleys. Mooney replied that he could suggest no change "in your review of the Ghost Dance, excepting perhaps in the last paragraph. I am not infallible or omniscient & every field trip serves [sic] only to convince me more than before that at the best a whiteman can only hope to gather scraps around the edge of his Indian subject."<sup>29</sup>

Some of the Smithsonian ethnologists (and many anthropologists in more recent times) agreed that Mooney was fallible. His attempt to compare the Ghost Dance religion and other messianic cults troubled individuals

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<sup>26</sup> Mooney to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Feb. 20, 1892, Records of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, LR, RG 75, NA.

<sup>27</sup> BAE, *15th Annual Report* (1897), pp. xliii, xlvi, lii.

<sup>28</sup> Washington Matthews, "Review of the *Ghost Dance Religion*," *Journal of American Folklore*, X, No. 38 (Summer, 1897), p. 249.

<sup>29</sup> Mooney to Matthews, July 4, 1897, Washington Matthews Papers, Box 1, Wheelwright Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

at the Bureau of Ethnology the most. Although often a stickler for detail in his research, Mooney's own writing at times went beyond the prescribed borders of his discipline, and moved from particularism to the universal. He had tried such comparisons before when he described similarities between Irish and Native American mythology. But the extent of his comparisons of the Ghost Dance with other religions was truly grand.

Mooney began the work with a quotation from Thomas Moore, an Irish poet and songwriter, whose lyrics the ethnologist had learned as a child: "There are hours long departed which memory brings / Like blossoms of Eden to twine round the heart[.]" "As with men," Mooney continued into metaphor, "so is it with nations."

The lost paradise is the world's dreamland of youth. What tribe or people has not had its golden age, before Pandora's box was loosed, when women were nymphs and dryads and men were gods and heroes? And when the race lies crushed and groaning beneath an alien yoke, how natural is the dream of a redeemer . . . who shall return from exile or awake from some long sleep to drive out the usurper and win back for his people what they have lost. The hope becomes a faith and the faith becomes the creed of priests and prophets, until the hero is a god and the dream a religion. . . . The doctrine of the Hindu avatar, the Hebrew messiah, the Christian millennium, and . . . the Indian Ghost dance are essentially the same, and . . . have their origin in a hope and longing common to all humanity.<sup>30</sup>

In subsequent chapters, Mooney described the Ghost Dance in careful, elaborate detail, and most of his research has withstood the assaults of scholar-critics. Yet beyond his careful analytical reconstruction of the religion in most of its forms, Mooney tried to demonstrate convincingly that, though aboriginal, the religion still spoke to the wild longing common to the human heart. In chapter sixteen, entitled "Parallels in Other Systems," he returned to his universalist theme. It proved to be the most controversial section of the work then and since. In introducing his comparisons he wrote:

The remote in time or distance is always strange. The familiar present is always natural and a matter of course. Beyond the narrow range of our horizon imagination creates a new world, but as we advance in any direction, or as we go back over forgotten paths, we find ever a continuity and a succession. The human race is one in thought and action. The systems of our highest modern civilizations have their counterparts among all the nations, and their chain of parallels stretches backward link by link until we find their origin and interpretation in the customs and rites of our own barbarian ancestors, or our still existing aboriginal tribes. There is nothing new under the sun.<sup>31</sup>

The last statement, a paraphrase from *Ecclesiastes*, was the most perplexing

<sup>30</sup> Mooney, *Ghost Dance Religion*, p. 657.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 928.

of the book. Perhaps Mooney's lyricism overwhelmed the more prosaic concerns of objective science. But there is another explanation.

Mooney attempted to suggest that Wovoka's religion, described by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs as heathenish and barbarous, was no more fantastic in its precepts than were the more tradition-bound religions of the larger American society; that one's skepticism concerning prophets diminished in direct proportion to the number of years that separated the faithful from the revelation. To liken the Ghost Dance religion of Wovoka to that of Mohammad, Flagellants, Fifth Monarchy Men, or Millerites, was not to scoff at individual differences, but to stress that element common to the experience—a profound difference. Later anthropologists would label such phenomena "crisis cults" or "revitalization movements."<sup>32</sup>

Wovoka's religion had for a time generated interest in the dominant society because it had challenged that very domination. But if the Ghost Dance were simply a religion of the materially and culturally deprived, what possible purpose was served by such an extensive study? In choosing to compare Wovoka's religion to other religions, Mooney wrote as an historian who, stepping back from his notes of incidents and anecdotes, sees themes that transcend denomination or particular philosophy, tribe or nation. More orthodox ethnologists might criticize his bending of methods, but Mooney on occasion stressed that his motives for writing about the Ghost Dance were purely scientific. He desired only to chronicle the evidence. Other agencies were doubtless better equipped, he believed, to protect Indians or to foster sympathy for them.

Although Mooney denied a role as Indian apologist, as if sympathy or humanity were somehow beyond the prerequisites of a scientist, he nevertheless wrote with a sense of compassion, in an almost lyrical style. Universality is a recurring theme. Mooney's mistake may have been in his phrasing: "There is nothing new under the sun." Perhaps he would have been more successful had he emphasized, as did Willa Cather, that there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.

For a time many American Indians were fiercely devoted to the religion of Wovoka. Mooney wrote about the Ghost Dance with such detail and precision as to suggest that it had never happened before. He had the sense to realize, however, that what separated the Ghost Dance from the more conventional varieties of religion was not so much the difference in ritual and belief as it was the absence of authority conferred upon it by the number of

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<sup>32</sup> Anthony F. C. Wallace excluded chapter sixteen from his edition, thus disturbing the provenance of the original work. For ancillary studies in both anthropology and history that either challenge Mooney's thesis, or expand the theme of the Ghost Dance, see the bibliography in Wallace, ed., *Ghost Dance Religion*, pp. viii-x.

believers. Indians, as whites, often believed in the truth of the revealed word. Missionaries, Indian service employees, philanthropists, and ethnologists of Mooney's generation might view the religion as a strange belief of an often quaint, and sometime dangerous race, all the while clinging to their own theologies, which still held that the world would end in a day of divine judgment.

In many ways, Mooney's history of the Ghost Dance religion has proven to be his greatest work. It was the first accurate history of the religion. It has served generations of historians and anthropologists as the fountainhead of research about the Ghost Dance of 1890 and its prophet. Its publication gave Mooney a new sense of authority and acceptance among both his fellow workers at the Smithsonian, and a growing community of scholars interested in American Indians. Mooney's book also gave to Wovoka a larger audience, one which stretched beyond Native Americans, the American continent, and his own generation. Although faith in Wovoka waned relatively early in his life (he lived until September, 1932) interest in Wovoka remained. It continues to this day.