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*Nicholas Black Elk*

## *Dakota Images*

Black Elk traveled both the Lakota and white roads, seeking to preserve traditional Indian culture and religion even as he converted to Christianity and worked for the Catholic church.

Black Elk, the son of an Oglala medicine man from Big Road's band, was born in December 1863 on the Little Powder River. Following the Battle of the Little Bighorn, he fled with his band to join Sitting Bull in Canada. As a child, Black Elk experienced what he described as a "great vision" calling him to lead his people in the ways of their grandfathers. With guidance from a number of spiritual leaders, he became widely sought after as a medicine man who possessed healing powers.

Black Elk settled at the Pine Ridge Agency in 1882 and in 1886 joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. He spent the next three years touring Europe, performing for personalities like Queen Victoria and learning more about white ways. In 1889, he returned to Pine Ridge, where he worked as a store clerk. At this time, he joined the Ghost Dance movement, whose image of a sacred tree surrounded by the hoop of the people resembled his childhood vision.

In 1892, Black Elk married Katie War Bonnet, and the couple had three sons. Following his wife's death in 1904, he converted to Catholicism and took the Christian name "Nicholas." He married Anna Brings White in 1906, and the couple became respected church leaders at Pine Ridge. For over thirty years, Black Elk served as a catechist, conducting Sunday services and working as a missionary on the Pine Ridge, Yankton, and Sisseton reservations.

During the 1930s, his interest in traditional ways revived, and he spent many summers portraying a medicine man in Alex Duhamel's Sioux Indian Pageant, a reenactment of traditional Indian life staged for tourists in the Black Hills. Black Elk's strongest legacy is probably his work with John G. Neihardt, the Nebraska poet laureate who recorded the story of his life as a traditional Lakota in *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). The interviews anthropologist Joseph Epes Brown conducted with Black Elk in the late 1940s formed the basis for an important work on Lakota religion, *The Sacred Pipe* (1953).

Although afflicted for much of his life with tuberculosis, Black Elk reached the age of eighty-six. He died at the home of his son, Benjamin Black Elk, in Manderson, South Dakota, on 19 August 1950.

by JOAN ANDERSON

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