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**"THE FATHER TELLS ME SO!"
WOVOKA: THE GHOST DANCE PROPHET**

by
L. G. Moses

THE HEBREW PROPHET Joel, in a time of great distress, warned the Israelites to turn away from sin. A plague of locusts was ravaging the land; the day of the Lord's wrath was approaching. If the people gathered, repented, and renewed their covenant with the Almighty, however, Joel assured them that bounty would again reign in Zion. God, speaking through his early surrogate, warranted that for the chosen people, having returned to righteousness, "I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions."¹ Prophets, dreams, and visions were very much a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and both Old and New Testaments are replete with direct divine guidance to mortals. The same was true among American Indians, who, like the Israelites, suffered from great distress. Prophets emerged among many Indian groups, and by far one of the most important was Wovoka, the "Ghost Dance" Prophet.²

The Ghost Dance, one of the largest social and religious movements among American Indians during the nineteenth century, developed as a result of many factors. The tribes had been defeated militarily, concentrated onto reservations, removed from their homelands, and forced to accept new laws directed by the government of the United States. Broken treaties, land encroachment, depletion of game, and assimilationist programs of the Bureau of Indian Affairs had demoralized the tribes to such an extent that they awaited deliverance from their depression and sorrow. Indeed, by 1880 Indians in the American West retained small hope of ever challenging the white man's government. Consigned either through persuasion or force to reservations, Indians were subjected to government-sponsored programs of assimilation, believing that the "Indians must conform to the white man's ways." Government agents encouraged Indians to abandon their tribal affiliation, to accept allotments of land, and to lead, in the opinion of Indian-policy reformers, productive lives as citizen-farmers. "This civilization may not be the best possible," wrote Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas Jefferson Morgan, "but it is the best the Indians can get." Their children were forced to attend reservation day or boarding schools, or distant boarding schools such as the Carlisle

Indian Industrial Training School in Pennsylvania. They were to become educated and white-like, abandoning forever their "Indianness." It was the hope of white reformers that, within a generation, Indians would cease to be Indians, and, for the allotted tribes, that individual freeholds would have provided them with the means of livelihood, independence, and a respect for private property.³

Indians had difficulty adjusting to the new order created by the reservation system, and many Indians turned inward toward their religions in search of divine help in their demoralized state. Throughout the ages frightened and oppressed humans have longed for deliverance, and Wovoka's message of renewal, rebirth, and "revitalization" offered hope for many Indian people. Like many prophets, Wovoka "died" and was reborn, returning from heaven with divine messages about how to live and worship. Furthermore, God gave Wovoka specific instructions about a sacred dance and ceremony which the Prophet was told to bring back to the Indians. The ritual and dance became known by many names but is best remembered as the "Ghost Dance." Wovoka believed that all Indians—living and dead—would be reunited in a world paradise, where Indians would be eternally free from poverty, disease, and death. Wovoka prophesied a great cataclysm whereby whites and their ways would be swept away, inaugurating an Indian millennium. All of this would be hastened by the continual performance of the "Ghost Dance," a religious movement which spread rapidly among numerous western tribes.⁴

The leader of the Ghost Dance was born around 1858 near the Walker River in Mason Valley, Nevada. Wovoka (the Cutter) was a full-blood Paiute Indian who was born during an era of radical change for the Paiutes and other Indians in the West. Little is known about Wovoka's mother, but his father, Tavivo (White Man), helped shape the life of the future prophet. Tavivo followed the teachings of a spiritual leader named Wodziwob who was a part of the first Ghost Dance movement of the 1870s and taught that the world would soon end and whites would be destroyed. Tavivo himself was a "'dreamer' with supernatural powers," and both he and Wodziwob shaped the beliefs and values of young Wovoka. As a boy of twelve or fourteen, Wovoka learned about the great cataclysm prophesied by Wodziwob and others, and of the new religious wave that was rolling across the plains, mountains, and deserts of the West.⁵ "The prophetic claims and teachings of the father," wrote James Mooney, the renowned anthropologist who studied Wovoka's religion, "the reverence with which he was regarded by the people, and the mysterious ceremonies which were doubtless of frequent performance in the little tule wikiup at home must have made early and deep impressions on the mind of the boy,

who seems to have been by nature of a solitary and contemplative disposition, one of those born to see visions and hear still voices.”⁶ But Wovoka is equally remembered as Jack Wilson, “stepson” of David Wilson.

As a youth Wovoka worked at the ranch of David Wilson who in 1863, with his brothers William and George, had preempted table lands along the southern rim of Mason Valley, land wooded in juniper and scrub pine but otherwise ideal for running cattle.⁷ David Wilson, a devout Presbyterian, and his sons gave Wovoka his anglicized name, provided him with steady work, and introduced him to Christianity.⁸ So it appears that Tavivo, Wodziwob, the Wilsons, and their seemingly incompatible religions shaped the youth of a man who would become one of the most significant of the Indian prophets.

In the twenty years that separated the Ghost Dances of the 1870s with those of the 1890s, Wovoka grew to adulthood. Those twenty years also marked the military conquest of the Plains and Great Basin tribes. Apparently, at the age of eighteen Wovoka ended his association with the Wilsons, gravitating to his father and the ritual life of the Paiutes.⁹ “For two years,” wrote Wovoka’s only biographer, Paul Bailey, Wovoka “shunned his white brothers, and wrestled with a hate for the whole white race that all but consumed him.”¹⁰ The documentary evidence upon which the author bases the remark is nonexistent, but the biblical allusion is inescapable. The seeker, prophet, the “messiah,” withdraws into the wilderness—of his own making in this instance—to search his soul for answers to questions that throb in his brain. At the end of his exile, he beholds his vision and begins his public ministry.¹¹

By the time Wovoka was twenty, he stood nearly six feet tall. He married a Paiute woman to whom he gave the name Mary, in honor of David Wilson’s wife, a fact which belies little of the self-consuming hatred for whites alluded to by Wovoka’s biographer, Paul Bailey.¹² Wovoka may also have visited the states of the Pacific Coast. Bailey, using the reminiscences of E. A. Dyer, for many years a friend of Wovoka and a storekeeper in Yerington, Nevada, claims that the Prophet traveled extensively in California, Oregon, and Washington. Dyer, in the transcription of his memoir edited by his son, stated simply that not much “is known of his activities as a young man, except that he did considerable wandering about this state and neighboring California. Regarding his travels he was never “loquacious.” Paiutes were hired as pickers in the hop fields of Sonoma and Mendocino counties in northern California. But elsewhere in his account, Dyer equivocates that probably “young Jack Wilson also traveled to the California hop fields.”¹³ Bailey inferred that Wovoka traveled widely and therefore came into contact with other Indian messianic or millennial religions,

particularly the Washani or "Dreamer" religion and the Indian Shakers of John Slocum. Given certain similarities in beliefs, James Mooney also wondered if these Indian religions of world renewal had influenced Wovoka.¹⁴

In 1892 Mooney learned that two Indian Shaker missionaries had traveled throughout the Willamette Valley and other parts of Oregon. "It is said among the northern Indians that on this journey those apostles met," Mooney wrote, "a young man to whom they taught their mysteries, in which he became such an apt pupil that he soon outstripped his teachers, and is now working even greater wonders among his own people. This man can be no other than Wovoka." The only question that troubled the anthropologist was whether the story told among the Columbia tribes was a legend based on vague rumors of a great prophet to the south or whether Wovoka actually derived his knowledge from these northern apostles. Mooney knew from his survey of correspondence in the files of the commissioner of Indian affairs that Indians from the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon that Plateau Indians occasionally visited Mason Valley and the nearby Walker River Reservation. But, as Wovoka had told Mooney and, even earlier, Arthur Chapman, Wovoka had never wandered far from his home. Thus, we may accept that Wovoka knew about Wodziwob, John Slocum, Smohalla, Jesus of Nazareth, and perhaps even the revelations of Joseph Smith, whose followers labored among the "Lamanite" descendants in Nevada.¹⁵

Wovoka probably began his public ministry as weather prophet and healer in the mid-1880s, but it was not until January 1, 1889, according to Mooney's calculations, that Wovoka experienced his major revelation. Wovoka had been hearing "voices" for about two years, when on New Year's Day, 1889, he lay ill with a high fever in his wikiup. The day was marked by an eclipse of the sun, and on this day Wovoka "died" and journeyed to heaven. According to Wovoka,

he saw God, with all the people who had died long ago engaged in their oldtime sports and occupations, all happy and forever young. It was a pleasant land and full of game. After showing him all, God told him he must go back and tell his people they must be good and love one another, have no quarreling, and live in peace with the whites; that they must work, and not lie or steal; that they must put away all the old practices that savored of war; that if they faithfully obeyed his instructions they would at last be reunited with their friends in this other world, where there would be no more death or sickness or old age. He was then given the dance which he was commanded to bring back to his people. By performing this dance at intervals for five consecutive days each time, they would secure this happiness to themselves and hasten the event.

Finally God gave him control over the elements so he could make it rain or snow or be dry at will, and appointed him his deputy to take charge of affairs in the west . . . He then returned to earth and began to preach as he was directed, convincing the people by exercising the wonderful powers that had been given him.¹⁶

Wovoka had already introduced a dance two years before, but it was apparently nothing more than his version of the Paiute Round Dance. Following his revelation, however, the ceremony, staged at the appropriate intervals as commanded by God, became the Ghost Dance where, in their exhaustion and delirium, the participants communicated with the dead.¹⁸

There has been a tendency among certain authors who write about Wovoka, interpreting his revelation as entirely self-serving. Many have relied on Bailey's account wherein Wovoka, seeing so many of his people defer to him, is swept up in the masque. But it may be simpler to explain. Wovoka believed himself to be a prophet ordained by Providence with a special mission to the American Indians. So intense was this conviction that he elicited the assistance of the farmer-in-charge at Walker River Reservation. In February 1890, James O. Gregory wrote Indian Superintendent of the Nevada S.S. Sears stationed at the Pyramid Lake Reservation, admitting that "You will doubtless be amazed at the letter you will have received from Jack Wilson the prophet." Gregory confided that Wovoka "has got the Indians all wild at his wonderful command of the Elements" because the Prophet had apparently convinced the people "that he alone is responsible for the storms of this season." Wovoka had written Sears to learn if the government believed "in him and will acknowledge him as a prophet." Gregory reported that well over two hundred men, women, and children had turned out to see and hear the Prophet, despite a driving snow storm. Indeed, the crowd talked "of nothing but Jack Wilson and the miracles he performs" and they took up a collection of \$25 which they presented to the holy man. According to Gregory, Wovoka wanted "to come on the reservation to farm and guarantees the Indians that if the government gives him permission to come he will cause lots of rain to fall and they will never lose a crop again."¹⁹ Wovoka and the other Indians expected the government to answer the letter, but Sears never forwarded the correspondence. There is no reason to suspect that he would have, once confronted with the fantastic claims of as far as he was concerned, an "ignorant" and superstitious people. The letter is only remarkable in retrospect and takes on added significance when one considers the response of the government to the Ghost Dance. It is part of the tragedy that the first information received by the Bureau of Indian Affairs about the

religion spoke not about an apocalyptic religion of peace and fraternity, but rather of a possible rebellion among disaffected Sioux.²⁰ Gregory's letter is equally noteworthy because it supports the implication that Wovoka took his mission seriously. In addition, corroborating testimony appears in the correspondence of the commissioner of Indian Affairs. From the Indian Territory seven months later, Cheyenne and Arapaho Agent Charles F. Ashley wrote that a letter had recently arrived from the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming which told that the "messiah" had written to the "Great Father in Washington" to ask that he remove within two years all whites from the western United States lest they be destroyed.²¹

Following his New Year's revelation, Wovoka's renown increased throughout 1889, first among Paiutes and later among western and southwestern tribes who heard the good news of the Prophet. In March of the year Sarah Winnemucca, daughter of a Paiute headman, reported to the editor of *The Daily Silver State* that "a prophet has risen among the Indians at Walker Lake and is creating some excitement among the ignorant and more credulous Piutes [sic]. He says the spirits of all the Piute [sic] warriors who have died . . . are to return to earth and resume their old forms. They have condemned the whites and the Indians who write and speak their language or adopt their customs, and will exterminate them from the earth."²² By summer, news about Wovoka had reached distant Plains tribes who learned, not about a prophet who foretold wondrous things, but instead about the "Indian Messiah" himself. Elaine Goodale, teacher at the White River Industrial School on the Great Sioux Reservation, reported that while camping with a hunting party on the evening of July 23, she met Chasing Crane, a Sioux just returned from the Rosebud agency.⁸ He had a wonderful story to tell. "God," he explained, had "appeared to the Crows across the Stony Mountains." The appearance of "Christ" among the Crows, as Goodale described him, suggests both the rapidity with which Wovoka's doctrine had spread and his transformation from prophet to messiah, as the rumors flew from reservation to reservation growing more fantastic with each retelling.²³

Although Wovoka would have disavowed the honor of being the Indian Messiah, his identity underwent a metamorphosis in the minds of the faithful from the Paiute Prophet to the Indian Messiah, and finally to the inviolate Christ.²⁴ By the time the Plains tribes began their investigations of the new religion, Wovoka had ascended to such spiritual heights that his visitors, by some accounts, approached him with averted eyes.²⁵ Wovoka, however, never said he was the messiah, claiming only to be a prophet of God. Indeed, this fact was recorded by John S. Mayhugh, former agent at the Western Shoshone Reservation

in Nevada and the allotment officer of the Nevada tribes. Mayhugh, who knew Wovoka, wrote that the Prophet foretold the coming of a Messiah who would appear on Mount Grant near the Walker River Agency. Mayhugh's accurate message never became the prevailing view, and even today Wovoka is usually referred to as the "Indian Messiah."²⁶

Wovoka's message spread quickly from the Paiute wikiups huddled around Walker Lake, southward to the Hualapais and eastward to the Bannocks, Shoshones, Arapahos, Crows, Cheyennes, Caddos, Pawnees, Kiowas, Comanches, and Sioux. To learn more about the doctrine, tribal delegates traveled westward to Mason Valley to sit at the Prophet's feet. They then returned to their tribes with written instructions. Engaged in research among the Southern Cheyennes, James Mooney obtained what he called a "Messiah Letter." His free rendering appears here in its entirety.

When you get home you must make a dance to continue for five days. Dance four successive nights, and the last night keep up the dance until the morning of the fifth day, when all must bathe in the river and then disperse to their homes. You must all do in the same way.

I Jack Wilson, love you all, and my heart is full of gladness for the gifts you have brought me. When you get home I shall give you a good cloud which will make you feel good. I give you a good spirit and give you all good paint. I want you to come again in three months, some from each tribe there Indian Territory.

There will be a good deal of snow this year and some rain. In the fall there will be such a rain as I have never given you before.

Grandfather says, when your friends die you must not cry. You must not fight. Do right always. It will give you satisfaction in life.

Do not tell the white people about this. Jesus is now upon the earth. He appears like a cloud. The dead are all alive again. I do not know when they will be here; maybe this fall or in the spring. When the time comes there will be no more sickness and everyone will be young again.

Do not refuse to work for the whites and do not make any trouble with them until you leave them. When the earth shakes do not be afraid. It will not hurt you.

I want you to dance every six weeks. Make a feast at the dance and have food that everybody may eat. Then bathe in the water. That is all. You will receive good words again from me some time. Do not tell lies.²⁷

Wovoka gave this message, or one very much like it, to all the delegations that visited him. The first Sioux delegates, for example, left their reservations in the fall of 1889 and after many adventures, returned in the early spring of 1890.²⁸ By summer Ghost Dances had been organized at a number of reservations scattered throughout the west.

The government's response was premised, however, on the hostility of a religion as practiced among the Sioux that promised the destruction of whites through whatever means.²⁹

When the western Sioux, then among the most populous tribes in the United States and popularly recognized as the most warlike and recalcitrant Indians, embraced the religion, the Ghost Dance conjured images of half-crazed "savages" ready to follow lives of rapine and slaughter.³⁰ During the fall and early winter of 1890, newspaper accounts from the Dakotas sustained the prevalent image of the Indian as erstwhile predator.³¹ For all the years the Sioux had huddled around the agency—lulled into submission by rations and gimcracks—they were now portrayed as demonic killers. Mythical stories about treacherous Sioux, joined by other "hostiles" in a grand Indian conspiracy, overshadowed the actual story of Wovoka and his religion of peace and love. Dancing, peaceful Indians awaiting their divine redemption did not sell newspapers, so journalists surfeited the country with stories about Indians dancing themselves into frenzies as they awaited reinforcements from the risen dead. No journalist and no official of the Indian service ever traveled to Mason Valley to hear the Prophet's unadorned message.³² Instead, misunderstanding of Wovoka's religion significantly contributed to the Dakota disaster that ended at Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

On the cold morning of December 29, 1890, Big Foot's band of Minneconjou Sioux were attacked by troopers of the famed Seventh Cavalry. The Indians were encamped at Wounded Knee, and most of them were followers of the Ghost Dance, a religion that had been banned by agents on the Sioux Reservations. Fighting had erupted after the soldiers decided to search the camp and some of the Sioux had refused to submit. The camp of tipis was raked by the bullets of Hotchkiss guns, and at least 150 Indians—men, women, and children—were killed while many others were wounded. Wovoka's vision of an Indian world filled with peace, restoration, and brotherly love crumbled that bleak December day. Three days after the tragedy at Wounded Knee, a burial party interred in a mass grave the frozen corpses of the Sioux, and it buried something else as well. In the words of Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux holy man who had witnessed part of the slaughter, a dream was buried with the slain Sioux. That dream was of a redeemer who would "drive out the usurper and win back for his people what they had lost." For a few short seasons Wovoka's dream had flourished, but his religion of hope died with the Sioux on the snow-swept plains surrounding Wounded Knee.³³

When Wovoka learned about Wounded Knee, he understandably feared that he would be blamed. He counseled delegates, whose ardor

still sent them to Nevada seeking news of the millennium, that they should return to their respective tribes and stop the dances. The Indian resurrection had been postponed. For the nation, the Ghost Dance soon retreated into memory as the "Last Indian War." As one historian has noted, the Sioux died at Wounded Knee at the end of the same year in which the superintendent of the census announced the closure of the frontier.³⁴ Thus, Wovoka, his religion, and Wounded Knee have become a metaphor for a nation in transition from the wilderness to a modern industrial state.³⁵

Transition was equally an appropriate element of Wovoka's life, especially during that period after Wounded Knee. Although his promise of an Indian millennium was not fulfilled, he still inspired devotion among followers beyond his own Paiutes. That devotion represented, in part, a continuing desire for a better life. Burdened by the present and discomfited by a future that offered little hope, many Indians sought succor in a restored past. For his followers, Wovoka served as a last link in a chain that bound them to individual ways of life, separate and distinct from mainstream American society which stood poised on the threshold of a new century. Through relentless government programs, Indian societies had been undermined, their leaders had been dishonored—sometimes imprisoned or killed for their recalcitrance—their traditional means of subsistence had been destroyed, their lands had been expropriated or considerably reduced, their religions had been harassed, and their children in many instances had been taken from them and sent to the white man's schools. The government, with the assistance of a legion of well-intentioned reformers, had decreed that Indians should be like other Americans. They should lead useful and productive lives. For some tribes, the Dawes Act divided tribal lands into 160 acre parcels upon which Indians would farm and grow independent. Once independent, the reformers and government agents believed anachronistic tribalism would retreat, giving way to "civilization." The favorite aphorism of Richard Henry Pratt, a contemporary of Wovoka and a proponent of Indian education, was "kill the Indian and save the man."³⁶ It is little wonder that for thousands of Indians Wovoka offered solace and a sense of continuity with the past in an alien world.³⁷ Although Wovoka did not preach his religion as extensively after 1891, he continued to serve the Paiutes as a holy man and healer, and for erstwhile ghost dancers, as an object of continued veneration. Wovoka has been most criticized for the latter capacity, charging that the Prophet personally gained from his celebrity. Indeed, some claimed that Wovoka connived with a local storekeeper, E.A. Dyer, to create a lucrative business in Ghost Dance memorabilia.

For years after the demise of the Ghost Dance, Wovoka received letters of supplication from the faithful. Many asked for sacred objects

such as the red clay paint used in the dance. Very few of these letters have been preserved, but Dyer reported that Indians asked for Wovoka's "garments, particularly shirts," which they believed held "miraculous powers." In fact, anything "he had worn, owned, touched, looked upon or simply just thought about" reportedly had powers. "In time a great many requests were for hats, specifically for those which he had personally worn. I was very often called upon to send them his hat which he would remove forthwith from his head on hearing the nature of the request in a letter." In return Wovoka reportedly expected and got, \$20 for such a gift. Dyer and others criticized Wovoka for conducting "a steady and somewhat profitable business in hats." Wovoka also sold "magpie tail feathers and red ochre" but his critics remarked that the prices were "on a par with those asked for similar 'war-paint' and geegaws in our modern salons."³⁸ That Wovoka "sold" objects or received money for services is only significant if one disregards the traditions of Paiute shamanism and "gift giving" among most Indian peoples. Objects such as feathers, hats, or paint were signs of individual power—analogous in a broad sense to the use of sacramentals, such as holy water or blessed medals, by Roman Catholics. Wovoka transmitted signs of his power, and occasionally their efficacy, by giving them to his followers who returned the favor with a gift or offering.³⁹

Yet Wovoka could also demur. Johnson Sides, a Paiute who liked to call himself the "peace maker" and who was for years Wovoka's enemy, reported that the Prophet refused a gift of forty silver dollars dumped at his feet by a Pawnee delegate who happened to be in the service of the Indian Bureau. The money represented a collection taken by the tribe for the Prophet. Sides explained that Wovoka feared the money was tainted and that he might be killed through witchcraft.⁴⁰ Sides may have been telling the truth; but were Wovoka as grasping and as calculating as is often suggested, why should he refuse such a handsome gift? A charlatan with his eye on a chance to gain would never have refused. Clearly, not all Paiutes were enamored with Wovoka, but for many he was held in respect, his advice sought on matters pertaining to the people at Walker River, and his powers over the weather and disease invoked. On communal rabbit hunts, for example, his position was always one of honor; he rode in a wagon. He had no need to shoot his own game. Every member of the hunt shared his prizes with him.⁴¹

By one account, Wovoka remained on the Wilson ranch until 1920, whereas another holds that between 1912 and 1932 he lived in the Paiute colony at Yerington, Nevada.⁴² Sometime before 1920 he traveled to Idaho, Wyoming, and twice to Oklahoma where his former followers feted and presented him with many gifts that he treasured

for the remainder of his life.⁴³ In the spring of 1919, Grace Dangberg, an aspiring ethnologist and historian, learned that Wovoka's sight and hearing were failing. At the invitation of Carrie Willis Wilson, wife of James Wilson, Wovoka's boyhood companion, Dangberg retrieved some letters from the basement of the ranch house in Nordyke, Nevada, where Wovoka had once lived. These twenty-one letters and fragments, deposited at the Nevada State Historical Society, were written between 1908 and 1911 and indicate the esteem people held for Wovoka. The letters are all that remain of the many hundreds the Prophet received. Dangberg hoped to interview Wovoka, but at the last moment, he refused. She did not press the issue.⁴⁴

Later in the 1920s Wovoka agreed to speak to Colonel Tim McCoy, the only non-Indian, except James Mooney, to speak to the Prophet specifically about his religion. In the winter of 1924 the actor and showman was serving as technical director for the filming of *The Thundering Herd* on location in Bishop, California. McCoy had been a longtime friend of former ghost dancers among the Northern Arapahos. He hired a few of them as "extras" for the film. McCoy knew that he was within easy distance of the Ghost Dance Prophet, and decided to make a "fool's errand" in search of him. McCoy recorded that he drove to Yerington where he found Wovoka and persuaded him to visit Bishop the following day. Three decades after the end of the Ghost Dance, Wovoka found the Arapahos deferential. But McCoy commented: "Whatever he was to the Arapahoes, Wovoka was still a Paiute Medicine Man to me and I would not put out of my head the story that some years before, after prophesying an early winter, he had directed a flunky to dump blocks of ice into the river near his home."⁴⁵ The story of the floating ice, repeated in numerous accounts of the Prophet, may have been that "miracle" witnessed by E.A. Dyer on the banks of the Walker River. Wovoka had told a group of Paiutes that he would make ice fall from the heavens despite the mid-July heat. According to Dyer, Wovoka probably secreted a block of ice high in the limbs of a cottonwood tree whereupon, after sufficient melting, it dropped to the ground shattering and thereby amazing a hundred Paiutes gathered around their holy man.⁴⁶

Another story, the one alluded to by McCoy, tells of Wovoka having caused ice to float down the river in mid-July. The "flunky" that McCoy refers to was actually two people, the Wilson boys, who served as the Prophet's confederates in a ruse to awaken credulity among the Paiute congregation. This story is repeated by Bailey who used as his source Beth Wilson Ellis, daughter of William Wilson. That McCoy knew of this episode at the time he met Wovoka is doubtful. He probably learned about it from Bailey who had interviewed him

for the biography of Wovoka.⁴⁷ Dyer himself had heard this story a number of years after he witnessed the ice "miracle." But of the ice-in-the-river incident he wrote: "Whether that was a distortion of what I witnessed or a separate affair I can't state."⁴⁸ McCoy also told Bailey during the author's research that the Prophet "appeared to have the impression that he would never die."⁴⁹ In his memoirs, however, McCoy writes that, just before leaving the movie set at Bishop, Wovoka turned to him and said, "I will never die."⁵⁰ What had been an impression became a declaration, but it is doubtful that Wovoka truly believed himself to be immortal. The differences in the accounts, on the surface quite trivial, nevertheless account for some of the misperceptions about Wovoka.

The last years of Wovoka's life were relatively uneventful, but he lived for nine years after his visit with McCoy. Wovoka, the great Ghost Dance Prophet, died on September 20, 1932 and was buried in the heart of the Paiute country. Joseph McDonald of the *Reno Evening Gazette* wrote an obituary about Wovoka, explaining that after the Prophet's death in Yerington, his body was taken to the Paiute cemetery at Shurtz. As family and friends shoveled dirt into his grave, a Christian missionary, the Reverend E.H. Emig, recited prayers. "Whether a special marker will be placed over the grave," McDonald wondered, "has not been decided. It is in the family plot in the Indian burying ground, but Indians at Schurtz and vicinity have indicated that it will represent no special shrine of worship for them . . . though Wovoka once was the powerful Paiute of the tribe. Of late years he has acted as a medicine man, but failing health caused him to become very inactive recently."⁵¹ Ironically, the same newspaper reported the following month that "Indians were staging a ghost dance at Pine Grove under the direction of Jack Wilson, the Indian Messiah."⁵²

The most comprehensive study of Wovoka was made by James Mooney, an anthropologist of the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnography.⁵³ Between 1890 and 1894, Mooney studied the Prophet and his religion, documenting a good deal of his information directly from Wovoka. Mooney left an extensive work on Wovoka, a classic memoir entitled "The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890." Aside from this study, Wovoka's life and religion evoked little interest until 1957 when Paul Bailey published the first and only biography of the Prophet. Like Mooney's study, Bailey's book is sympathetic to Wovoka but intimates that the Prophet trifled with fate and reaped the whirlwind. According to Bailey, Wovoka's religion "came at a time when the Indian was a beaten, frustrated, starved creature, without hope." And Wovoka, "whether divinely inspired prophet, or opportunist and faker," provided hope for numerous Indians.

The inference drawn by Bailey is that chance, in all its perversity and irony, intervened and swept along the Prophet and his vision of a restored Indian world toward an unimagined destiny.⁵⁴

Although Wovoka was one of the foremost Indian prophets of his time, no one has erected a monument in his honor at his gravesite at Schurz, Nevada. However, in 1975, at a cost of \$900, the Yerington Paiute Tribe placed a marker as its bicentennial project in the town where Wovoka spent the last twenty years of his life.⁵⁵ In the windswept cemetery at Schurz, the wood grave marker first placed there in 1932 still stands and records the birth and death, not of Wovoka, the Ghost Dance Prophet, but of Jack Wilson. The mound of sand, well-tended, bears the weathered gifts and offerings—mostly sprigs of sage, flags made of ribbon, and now dessicated flowers in dry mason jars—left there periodically by those who still honor his memory. Anthropologists, historians, and buffs have written thousands of words about Wovoka, trying unsuccessfully to unravel the mysteries that conceal the character of the man. In all the speculation, use of imagination, and other methods of their art, no person has written a more fitting epitaph than that of Edward A. Dyer, Jr., son of Wovoka's trusted friend. "Despite the narrow opinion of some of Jack's white contemporaries in Mason Valley," Dyer wrote, "I submit that he was a very great man who without help, tools, or understanding tried to better the lot of his people who were hit by a cataclysm with which they were unable to cope."⁵⁶

Like Joel, Paul, and countless other prophets and religious leaders, Wovoka had dreamed a dream and had seen a vision. That his vision was unshared by the majority of his countrymen should not diminish his contributions to the rich religious heritage of the American people. Rather than dismiss Wovoka as an opportunist whose doctrine unwittingly inflamed a large number of American Indians who longed for a deliverer, one might also envision a sincere prophet who misdiagnosed the end of the world. In this regard he was far from unique. He was probably as surprised and disappointed as his coreligionists when his dream failed and the glory of the Indian millennium failed to unfold.

The Ghost Dance religion, identified as a "revitalization movement" more than a half-century after its dissolution, was only one of many such Indian movements. Like the others, it sought to return the world to a happier time. However, none of the Indian movements, up until 1890, were as widespread or as popular as the Ghost Dance. Wovoka, the Ghost Dance Prophet, offered American Indians surcease through the intervention of the supernatural to the tragic confrontation with the dominant society. As Joel had promised the Israelites, if they

rededicated themselves to the religion of their fathers, God would pour out his blessings. Wovoka told his followers to lay aside their differences, celebrate their heritage, and await the blessings of the Creator. By any standard, Wovoka, the Ghost Dance Prophet, was one of the most significant holy men ever to emerge among the Indians of North America.

NOTES

1. *Holy Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) 1104.

2. Whether or not the Ghost Dances of 1870 and 1890 originated in deprivation has long been an item of contention among ethnohistorians. Michael Hittman presents a cogent summary of argumentation and argues persuasively that the earlier Ghost Dance, contrary to the speculations of Leslie Spier and Cora DuBois, had its origin in deprivation created by Euroamerican expansionism rather than from diffusion of Basin-Plateau ceremonialism. See Michael Hittman, "Ghost Dances, Disillusionment and Opiate Addiction: An Ethnohistory of Smith and Mason Valley Paiutes," Ph.D. Dissertation, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico; Hittman, "The 1870 Ghost Dance at Walker River Reservation: A Reconstruction," *Ethnohistory* 20 (1973): 247-78.

3. For general sources, see Francis P. Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis: Christian Reformers and the Indian, 1865-1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976); Henry E. Fritz, *The Movement for Indian Civilization, 1868-1890* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966); Robert W. Mardock, *The Reformers and the American Indian* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1971). The quote from Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas Jefferson Morgan is found in *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1890*, 178.

4. James Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890," *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1896) 928; herein cited as Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion." Also, see Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58 (April): 264-81; Robert M. Utley, *Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963); Henry F. Dobyns and Robert C. Enler, *The Ghost Dance of 1889 Among the Pai Indians of Northwestern Arizona* (Prescott, Az.: Prescott College Press, 1967); Hazel W. Hertzberg, *The Search for an American Indian Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements* (Syracuse, Ny.: Syracuse University Press, 1971); Weston La Barre, *The Ghost Dance: Origin of Religion* (Garden City, Ny.: Doubleday, 1970).

5. Mooney suggested that Wovoka was born in 1854, but an article that appeared in the *Mason Valley News* December 26, 1975, Wovoka's year of birth is given as 1856, giving Wovoka's birthplace as Smith rather than Mason Valley. However, the Prophet's grave marker at Shurz, Nevada, records that he was 74 when he died, thus placing his birth in 1858. Mooney provisionally rendered Wovoka, or Wüvoka, "Cutter" from a verb signifying "to cut." Other names for the Prophet were Wevokar, Wopokahte, Kwoh-itsaug, Cowejo, Koit-tsow, Kvit-Tsow, Quoitze Ow, Jack Wilson, Jack Winson, and John Johnson. Lieutenant Nat P. Phister listed the names Kvit-tsow and Wo-po-kah-tee. Judge Eli S. Ricker in his research among the Sioux Ghost Dancers found the names Jocko Wilson and Jakey Wilson. See Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion," 764-65; Nat P. Phister, "The Indian Messiah," *American Anthropologist* 4 (April): 105-108; Eli S. Ricker, "Short Bull's Story," Ricker Notebook 17, p. 94, Ricker Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln; Cora DuBois, "The 1870 Ghost Dance," *University of California Anthropological Records* 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939) 3-7; and see the Arthur Chapman account in the "Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1892" *House Executive Document* 1, 52nd Congress, 1st Session, 192-93; hereafter cited as Chapman, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1892*; DuBois identified the 1870

prophet as Wodziwob, and Mooney identified the prophet as Waughzeewaughber but assumed that it was another name for Tavivo. Hittman, who conducted extensive field work among the Paiutes of Mason and Smith Valleys, writes that Wodziwob, contrary to DuBois's assertion, did not die around 1872 but became a native doctor at Walker River. "Fishlake Joe," who appears frequently in the records of Walker River Reservation after 1872, and Wodziwob were the same person. Wodziwob had come from the southern part of Nevada in the 1860s to Walker River. See Edward C. Johnson, *Walker River Paiutes: A Tribal History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Printing Service, 1975) 42.

6. Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion," 764.

7. Paul Bailey, *Wovoka the Indian Messiah* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1957) 35.

8. Dyer to Friedhoff, May 16, 1965, Dyer Collection, Manuscripts Division, Nevada Historical Society, Reno.

9. Leslie Spier first suggested that the Paiute Ghost Dance had its origins in the Prophet Dance of the Northwest Plateau and that the Paiute Ghost Dance was simply part of a recurring phenomenon. Willard Park wrote that, among the Paiutes, "ceremonial performances are meager and mostly confined to shamanistic curing" and that "the curing rite . . . constitutes almost the entire ceremonial life of the Paviotso." He also wrote that, not only was the Round Dance the most popular dance of the Paiutes but, with the exception of shamanistic curing rites, that the "significant religious beliefs and activities [of the Paiutes] are associated only with the Round Dance." Using these and other references from Willard, Hittman concludes that the Ghost Dance fits into traditional forms of Paiute ceremonialism and were, therefore, not inspired by extra-tribal ceremonialism such as the Prophet Dance. See Leslie Spier, "The Ghost Dance of 1870 Among the Klamath or Oregon," *University of Washington Publications in Anthropology* 2 (1927): 39–56; Leslie Spier and Melville J. Herskovits, "Comment of Aberle's Thesis of Deprivation," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 15 (1959): 84–89; Willard Z. Park, *Shamanism in Western North America* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1938) 12, 71; Willard Z. Park, "Cultural Succession in the Great Basin," in Leslie Spier, A. Irving Hallowell, and Stanley Newman, eds., *Language, Culture and Personality* (Menasha, Wisc.: Sapir Memorial Publication, 1941) 183–84; Hittman, "The 1870 Ghost Dance," 263–71.

10. Bailey, *Wovoka*, 50.

11. Wovoka's afterlife experiences and his rise to the status of Prophet is consistent with that of other Indian religious leaders, including those found in this publication.

12. Bailey, *Wovoka*, 67.

13. E.A. Dyer, Sr., "Wizardsry," Manuscripts Division, Nevada Historical Society, Reno.

14. While it is possible that Wovoka learned about Smohalla and the Washani Religion, it is very unlikely that Smohalla and Wovoka ever met. See Clifford E. Trafzer and Margery Beach, "Smohalla, The Washani, and Religion as a Factor in Northwestern Indian History" found in this publication.

15. Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion," 763; Chapman, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1892* 192–93.

16. Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion," 770–71.

17. Omer C. Stewart, "The Ghost Dance," in W. Raymond Wood and Margot Liberty, eds., *Anthropology on the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980) 181; Hittman, "The 1870 Ghost Dance," 263.

18. Round dances were usually held for five consecutive all-night sessions and were presided over by a singer who stood inside of the dance circle, and also by a dance leader who prayed for rain, fish, game, pine nuts, and good health.

19. Gregory to Sears, February 18, 1890, Records of the Walker River Indian Agency, Box 314, Copy Book 1, 80–81, Records of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, RG 75, LR, Federal Archives and Records Center (FARC), San Bruno, California (SB).

20. L.G. Moses, "Jack Wilson and the Indian Service: The Response of the BIA to the Ghost Dance Prophet," *American Indian Quarterly* 5 (1979): 295–313; Brad Logan,

"The Ghost Dance Among the Paiute: An Ethnohistorical View of Documentary Evidence, 1889–1893," *Ethnohistory* (1980): 267–82.

21. Ashley to Commissioner of Indian Affairs (CIA), *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1891*, 178.

22. *Walker Lake Bulletin*, March 20, 1889.

23. Kay Graber, ed., *Sister to the Sioux: Memoirs of Elaine Goodale Eastman* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1978) 74; Elaine Goodale Eastman, "Ghost Dance War and Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890–91," *Nebraska History* 26 (1945): 28; Utley, *Last Days*, 48, 49, 60, 72; James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) 306–19. The Sioux Bill passed Congress in 1889, dividing the Great Sioux Reservation—established by the Treaty of 1868 and modified by the Agreement of 1876—into six reservations: Standing Rock, Cheyenne River, Lower Brule, Crow Creek, Rosebud, and Pine Ridge. It was not until February, 1890 that President Benjamin Harrison announced the acceptance of the Sioux Bill by a "majority" of Teton Lakota males and thereby created the separate reservations.

24. Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion," 771.

25. Mayhugh to CIA, November 24, 1890, Special Case 188, "The Ghost Dance, 1890–98," RG 75, National Archives (NA), Reel 1, Frames 25, 32, 653; hereafter cited as Special Case 188.

26. *Ibid.*, Reel 1, Frame 274.

27. Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion," 780–81; Mooney to CIA, February 20, 1892, Records of the CIA, LR, RG 75, NA.

28. Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion," 843–94.

29. Moses, "Jack Wilson and the Indian Services," 295–313; Logan, "The Ghost Dance Among the Paiute," 267–88.

30. John C. Ewers, "The Emergence of the Plains Indian as Symbol of the North American Indian," *Smithsonian Institution Annual Report, 1964* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office) 531–44.

31. Oliver Knight, *Following the Indian Wars* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960) 311; Elmos S. Watson, "The Last Indian War, 1890–91: A Study in Newspaper Jingoism," *Journalism Quarterly* 20 (1943): 205–319.

32. Logan, "The Ghost Dance Among the Paiute," 274–75. C.C. Warner, Agent at Pyramid Lake, informed the commissioner on November 18, 1890 that he planned within the next few days to visit Wovoka. The meeting, however, never took place.

33. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1932) 276; Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion," 657.

34. Utley, *Last Days*, vii.

35. L.G. Moses and Margaret Connell Szasz, "Indian Revitalization Movements of the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the West* 23 (1984): 13.

36. Elaine Goodale Eastman, *Pratt the Red Man's Moses* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935) 173–80; Hertzberg, *The Search for an American Indian Identity*, 16.

37. Raymond J. DeMallie would take exception to these and some of Utley's interpretations. About the Ghost Dance among the Sioux, DeMallie argues that standard historical interpretation "takes too narrow a perspective. It treats the ghost dance as an isolated phenomenon, as though it were divorced from the rest of Lakota culture. It also refuses to accept the basic religious nature of the movement . . . To dismiss the ghost dance as only a reaction to land loss and hunger does not do it justice; to dismiss it as merely a desperate attempt to revitalize a dead or dying culture is equally unsatisfactory." DeMallie also suggests "That the ghost dance could be a valid religion was incomprehensible to the whites." In fairness, however, a number of contemporary white observers did see the Ghost Dance as a valid religion and used relativistic language to suggest its validity to the commissioner and others in the Indian service. Prominent among these were Lieutenant H.L. Scott, John S. Mayhugh, Frank Campbell, and Captain Jesse M. Lee. See Special Case 188 and Raymond J. DeMallie, "The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account," *Pacific Historical Account* 51 (1982): 385–405.

38. Dyer, "Wizardry," 3.

39. Grace Dangberg, *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 11 (1968): 5–51. The author states (p. 16) that "The acceptance of money for objects 'blessed' is not . . . peculiar to the Indians . . . [N]o blessing is conferred by the objects or by the treatment of disease unless it is paid for. The fact that the feathers and ochre [paint] were paid for in negotiable currency is an accident of the times and a measure of the extent of influence of Wovoka which was promoted by the white man's civilization."

40. *Elko Daily Independent* August 22, 1894.

41. Dyer, "Wizardry," 16; Hammond to Warner, October 28, 1891, Records of the Walker River Agency, Box 314, Copy Book 1, 228, RG 75, FARC, SB. A portion of the letter is recorded here. In October 1891, Josephus, captain of Indian police at Walker and River and respectful of Wovoka's spiritual powers, reported to the farmer-in-charge that there were "several Indians coming over from Wadsworth [Pyramid Lake] to kill Jack Wilson the messiah. The names of the Indians are Natches, Lee Winnemucca, one Indian from [?] river, name unknown, one from the Sink of the Carson named Johnson, also one from Humbolt named Humbolt Natches. Josephus is anxious for you [C.C. Warner] to retain these Indians and not allow them to come here."

42. Dangberg, "Wovoka," 34; *Mason Valley News*, December 26, 1975.

43. Dyer, "Wizardry," 15–16; Grace Dangberg, ed., "Letters to Jack Wilson, the Paiute Prophet, Written Between 1908 and 1911," *Bureau of Ethnology Bulletin* 164 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1957) 284–85; Logan, "The Ghost Dance Among the Paiute," 280.

44. Dangberg, "Letters to Jack Wilson," 285.

45. Tim and Ronald McCoy, *Tim McCoy Remembers the West* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 222.

46. Dyer, "Wizardry," 5–7.

47. Bailey, *Wovoka*, 207.

48. Dyer, "Wizardry," 7.

49. Bailey, *Wovoka*, 207.

50. McCoys, *Tim McCoy*, 222.

51. *Reno Evening Gazette*, September 20 and October 4, 1932.

52. *Ibid.*, November 8, 1932.

53. Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion."

54. Bailey, *Wovoka*.

55. *Mason Valley News*, December 26, 1975.

56. Dyer to Friedhoff, May 16, 1965.