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Article Title: The Crazy Horse Scalp Shirt

Full Citation: Gail DeBuse Potter, "The Crazy Horse Scalp Shirt," *Nebraska History* 77 (1996): 96-98.

URL of article: http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1996Crazy_Shirt.pdf

Date: 12/1/2010

Article Summary: This article examines the construction of the "Crazy Horse Scalp Shirt" to determine that it was not worn by the famous Oglala Sioux warrior Crazy Horse, despite this attribution in 1906 when acquired by the Nebraska State Historical Society as part of the Bristol collection.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Crazy Horse, D Charles Bristol, Omaha Charley, E E Blackman, Mari Sandoz, Charles Stewart Stobie, John Colhoff, Marvin F Kivett, Elias Howe, John C Bourke, Nellie Laravie, Greasing Hand, He Dog, Luther Standing Bear, Little Big Man, Richard C Hardorff

Place Names: Homer, Nebraska; Dakota County, Nebraska; Pine Ridge Agency; Rose Bud Agency; Camp Robinson

Keywords: scalp shirt; war shirt; honorary shirt; deer-leg shirt; Teton Lakota; Shirtwearer's Society; Museum of Fur Trade; human scalps; Bristol collection; "Omaha Charley;" *The Oglala Lakota Crazy Horse*; Brule;

Photographs / Images: Mari Sandoz viewing the purported Crazy Horse shirt 1954

THE CRAZY HORSE SCALP SHIRT



A scalp shirt acquired by the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1906 has been attributed to the famous Oglala Sioux warrior, Crazy Horse, for more than fifty years. When the history and documentation of items in the Society's ethnographic collections were being reviewed in preparation for "The First Nebraskans" exhibit that opened in 1987, some of the staff began to question the authenticity of the "Crazy Horse" shirt. The Society received the shirt as part of a collection of American Indian material on loan from D. Charles Bristol of Homer, Nebraska. Bristol, known as "Omaha Charley," had assembled this collection during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the 1890s he toured the Midwest with his "exhibition of Indian relics," known as "Omaha Charley and His Wandering Band of Sioux."¹

The Society had actively pursued the acquisition of Bristol's collection, although Bristol and his wife were reluctant to have the collection moved to Lincoln. They finally agreed when Society archeologist E. E. Blackman assured them that the Society would catalog, exhibit, and care for the collection. The Society's 1908 museum catalog listed more than 400 objects in the Bristol collection including decorated buffalo robes, saddlebags, articles of clothing, household equipment, beadwork, pipe bags, photographs, and portraits painted by Charles Stewart Stobie.

Although the Society exhibited the collection in its quarters in the University Library (now Architecture Hall),

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Bristol was not satisfied with the arrangement, and in 1915 he asked that the collection be returned:

I do not care to have it in such quarters as the state provides. . . . When I gave it to the society's custody I thought that the state would take some pride in the matter and give the society such quarters as would be fit for such an institution. But I have waited in vain as legislature after legislature passed the question up and refused to do anything.²

The Society packed the collection and prepared to return it, but eventually a compromise was reached and the collection remained in Lincoln. After Bristol's death in 1925 the ownership of the collection became the focus of a controversy among his heirs. The issue of ownership was finally resolved in the Dakota County courts in 1927, and the collection was then offered for sale. In 1929 the Nebraska State Historical Society was able to purchase the collection for \$3,000 with a special appropriation from the Nebraska Legislature.³

Since about 1950 the "Crazy Horse scalp shirt" has been one of the most popular objects exhibited in the Society's museums, both in Lincoln and at Fort Robinson. "Documentation" that linked the shirt to Crazy Horse dated from the 1908 museum catalog, which stated, "Scalp shirt having 291 scalps on it. It was worn by Crazy Horse of Pine Ridge Agency."

A letter from famed western writer Mari Sandoz to then Museum Director Marvin F. Kivett on April 19, 1950, helped convince the Society that the shirt was authentic:

I am happy that you are so interested in having the so-called Crazy Horse shirt properly labeled. . . . In 1931 I took a photograph of the Society's Crazy Horse shirt along to Pine Ridge. He Dog was, of course, totally blind but his relations and John Colhoff described the picture to him and he was certain the shirt was the one made for Crazy Horse. As I recall there was a special problem of the very many hair locks he was entitled to have on the shirt, and so the arrangement of the rows differed from the usual pattern and by this He Dog, a very careful man, felt he could say the shirt was the one Crazy Horse wore, or else a very close copy of it. The possibility of a copy is less likely as early as 1906, particularly done by an Indian. . . . There was some other discrepancy in the shirt from the description given by Wissler. . . . but He Dog said that was unimportant. . . . He told us about his own, which was a good and honorable shirt, but not half as impressive as that of Crazy Horse, which was to have, I think he said, 241 locks.⁴

Until the shirt was removed from exhibit in 1983, no additional cataloging had been done, nor had close-up photographs been taken. During the 1983 examination several interesting features were noted. First and most important was the machine-sewn seams. Second, the shirt had not been made from a complete deer skin, but had been pieced together to "imitate" a complete skin. Finally, the fringe had been added to the shirt.

Due to the storage of the Society's ethnographic collection by object category, the Bristol collection had never

Scalp Shirt



Mari Sandoz viewed an exhibit on Crazy Horse at the Nebraska State Historical Society Museum, September 25, 1954. The display case contained the purported Crazy Horse shirt. NSHS-S219-6

been studied as a whole prior to 1983. While many of the objects are old and traditional, it became apparent that some of them were probably created or made for his traveling "relic" exhibition. For example, the beadwork on the buckskin jacket worn by "Omaha Charley" was salvaged from other objects and includes a child's dress yoke, beaded blanket strips, and sections from a cradleboard cover. The beaded neck flaps on a man's shirt are really moccasin tops. Four quirts were made from the same elk antler rack, and horses legs and hooves are mounted as clubs.

The "Crazy Horse" shirt was assembled to give the appearance of a deer-leg shirt, but the "deer legs" are really triangles cut from deer skin and machine-sewn to the body of the shirt. The top sleeve seam is also machine-sewn, with beadwork strips salvaged from other objects and attached by hand. Beadwork squares used for the neck flaps are from a pipe bag, and at one time a moon shell was attached to the front of the shirt, probably by Society staff. The sides of the shirt are open and would have been closed with leather thongs, but the fringe on the sides is separate and attached by hand. The bottom four "deer legs" incorporate rectangular strips of mountain goat hide with fur, hooves, and dew claws attached, then laced to the shirt with a leather strip.

This type of shirt is often referred to by ethnohistorians as a scalp shirt, war shirt, honorary shirt, or deer-leg shirt. Crazy Horse, a warrior in the Oglala band of the Teton Lakota, was one of four men who were awarded membership in the honorary Shirtweaver's Society in 1865. The Shirtweavers acted as leaders in battle and in council. Crazy Horse was required to surrender his

shirt in 1870 after he endangered tribal unity by eloping with the wife of a fellow Oglala.⁵

While the first successful sewing machine was made by Elias Howe in 1846, machines for personal use did not become common until the 1860s. According to the staff of The Museum of the Fur Trade, "the question of early use of sewing machines by Indians is a difficult one. Such use could have occurred relatively early for the wives of white men along the Missouri or in Indian Territory . . . Luther Standing Bear wrote in later life about the Sioux at Rosebud Agency receiving sewing machines and furniture about 1885."⁶ If Crazy Horse received his shirt in 1865 then the partially machine-made garment in the Bristol collection is not that shirt.

Once the shirt was taken away from Crazy Horse, what happened to it? Could D. C. Bristol have somehow acquired it? There is some evidence that U. S. Army Captain John G. Bourke had possession of the Crazy Horse shirt in the 1880s, and he may have acquired it from Little Big Man. According to Bourke,

He [Little Big Man] and I became better friends afterwards, and exchanged presents. I hold now his beautiful calumet and a finely-beaded tobacco bag, as well as a shirt trimmed with human scalps, which was once the property of "Crazy Horse."⁷

Perhaps the key to the origin of the Bristol shirt appears in the last line of the museum catalog, which states that the shirt was "worn by Crazy Horse of Pine Ridge Agency." Crazy Horse was killed at Camp Robinson on September 5, 1877, before the Pine Ridge Agency was established in 1878. In his book *The Oglala Lakota Crazy Horse*, Richard G. Hardorff indicated that five months before Crazy Horse was killed, he married

his third wife, Nellie Laravie. After Crazy Horse's death, Nellie married a Brulé, Greasing Hand, who assumed the name of her famous first husband. The couple lived on the Pine Ridge Reservation, and Greasing Hand may be the "Crazy Horse of Pine Ridge Agency." There is no direct evidence to link Greasing Hand/Crazy Horse of Pine Ridge Agency to the Bristol shirt or to indicate who made it and how or when Bristol acquired it.

Although Mari Sandoz's interview with He Dog led her to attribute the shirt to Crazy Horse, she probably was not aware of the details of its construction. Based primarily on the evidence of machine-sewing, and its incorporation of components original to other objects, we have concluded the scalp shirt in the Bristol collection is not the scalp shirt that once belonged to *the* Crazy Horse, and the Society no longer identifies it as such.

Notes

¹ D. Charles Bristol Collection File, Museum Collections, Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter cited as Bristol file).

² *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 23, 1915.

³ Bill of sale, May 14, 1929, Bristol file.

⁴ Bristol file. Clark Wissler was with the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and had written extensively on Oglala societies, ceremonial associations, and costumes.

⁵ Barbara A. Hail, *Hau Kola! The Plains Indian Collection of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology* (Bristol, R.I.: The Museum, Brown University, 1980), 68-69.

⁶ The Engages, "How Old is Machine Sewing?" *The Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* 22 (Summer 1986):12-14.

⁷ John G. Bourke, *On The Border With Crook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Book rpt., 1971), 415.