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Article Summary: Appleton, a young clerk at the Red Cloud Agency, wrote to his family just weeks before he was fatally shot by a Minneconjou warrior. His letter describes an Indian dance that he had seen and begs for news of family and friends.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Frank Appleton, John J Saville, Levi Robinson, John Coleman

Place Names: Red Cloud Agency

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Photographs / Images: Frank Appleton, Red Cloud Agency's chief clerk; inset fragment of Appleton's handwritten letter

“Out here among the infernal *Red skins*”

Frank Appleton's 1874 Letter from Red Cloud Agency



Frank Appleton, Red Cloud
Agency's chief clerk.
NSHS RG4341:5

Frunk Appleton was a young man in the wrong place at the wrong time—he just didn't know it yet. Writing to “the folks at home” in Sioux City in January 1874, Red Cloud Agency's chief clerk described life in northwest Nebraska with a mixture of wonder and contempt.

Appleton got the job from his uncle, agent John J. Saville, who had already hired Frank's father, Amos, to build the agency itself. Young Frank found himself far from home in the midst of an uneasy coexistence between whites and natives. The situation was more volatile than he apparently realized.

Red Cloud Agency served as an administrative center and distribution point for government food and goods guaranteed to the Sioux by the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. It took its name from the Oglala Lakota chief who had fought successfully against the United States government a decade earlier, and who now insisted that the agency serving his people be located here where they lived, and not away on the Missouri River as the government had wanted.¹

At the time, the Indian agency system was part of President Grant's peace policy, or “Quaker policy,” meant to halt warfare on the western frontier. It allowed the Quakers and other Christian denominations to administer the agencies and—with government support—to “civilize” and Christianize the Indians. Red Cloud Agency was controlled by the Episcopalians.²

The agency's history is a complex tale of rivalry and resentment. Some Indians saw no alternative to cooperating with whites; others wanted to keep fighting against white encroachment and against traditional enemies such as the Pawnee. Some whites advocated peaceful treatment of Indians; others believed that peace was impossible until the Indians were crushed by war.

By the time of Appleton's letter, Saville was already warning authorities that he might need military assistance. Non-agency Sioux from the north often came to Red Cloud Agency to draw free rations, causing discord and harassing the agent. Finally Saville requested that an army post be built nearby. The army refused, however, believing this would only incite a war.

Saville received several threats against his life. When he was away from the fort on February 8 (leaving Appleton as acting agent), the young clerk was likewise threatened. Though an Indian friend warned

him not to answer his door during the night, Appleton ignored the advice. Around 2:00 a.m. on February 9, he opened his door to a Minneconjou warrior who shot and mortally wounded him. And that—followed later that day by the fatal ambush of Lieutenant Levi Robinson and Corporal John Coleman near Fort Laramie, attributed to warriors from Red Cloud Agency—led to renewed calls for troops. This time they came.³

Appleton's letter (along with his barely-begun diary) resides in the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society. It is valued not only for its content, but also for its link to a larger event: The arriving soldiers built a camp named in honor of the fallen lieutenant, and Camp Robinson—now Fort Robinson—became one of the most storied and significant military outposts of the northern plains.

David Bristow

Red Cloud Agency, D. T. [Nebraska]

Jan'y 7, 1874

Dear folks at home

It has only been a short time since I wrote you a long letter, but as Pa leaves here Sunday I will give you the pleasure of a few more words from way out west. This day the 7th is my birthday. Who one year ago would of thought that I would be out here among the infernal Red skins but it is a fact that cannot be doubted.

For the first time since I have been here to day I seen an Indian dance. What they call the "Omaha Dance." The name is derived from a band, in fact a secret organization, and one of the strongest powers in the Sioux nation.

They came in, formed in procession about twenty of them, and visited both of the traders, had their dance, then came up to Wakpominie and give him a benefit.⁴ They would dance for some time then some of the braves would step into the ring and give an account of the daring and murderous deeds they had committed, tell how many people they had killed and the number of horses they had stolen, but their horses told that, for instance one of them road a white horse, for every horse he had stolen there was a red mark drawn on his hip, and they also gave the place where their horse had been wounded, indicating that by a round red spot, and showing where the blood run down from it. Some of them have their horses marked where if a ball had ever struck him it would have been instant death.

Then they gave the death dance. One of their number entered the ring and commenced dancing

around (he had in his hand a stick with a scalp attached to it) and acted very much as if he would give up but he danced next the fire and acted as if he could not get up. Then an old squaw stepped into the ring and put a piece of calico under and over him and came out crying as hard as ever I saw a person cry, the tears ran down her cheeks as if a barrel of water (perhaps a five gallon keg would answer as well) had been emptied on her head. Then another had entered the ring, he represented the one who had rescued the wounded man and he danced around long enough for a dozen men to die and at last succeeded in getting him on his feet, when both of them went dancing back into their places in the ring. One little boy they have with them (they call him the boy with the yellow hair, for his hair is about the color of my own) they say he is the best dancer in the Sioux nation, but for my part, I could see no difference in them, only as they would keep time with the drum.

I do not know whether Pa gave you an account of the "Squaw dance" they had just before I came, but they say it was amusing. This was just after the fight with the Pawnees and they had the scalp dance.

About one hundred old squaws came into the inclosure and they danced for about one hour, then every one of them took up a club and commenced beating a dog they had brought up on purpose for the occasion. They pounded it till I suppose there was no bone left in him large enough to be broken. To be appreciated all these things must be seen. All the Indian for this time.

We are getting along very well with the work. By next Saturday we will have this enclosed so on Sunday we can open our door and not be afraid that some Indian will be sticking his ugly phiz in and interrupt a person. It will be a relief, I assure you to know that we are perfectly safe.

Why in the world do not some of you write, any time will answer, for they will come to Fort L[aramie] and we will get them once a week anyway. Send all the papers you can. Why did you not send all the NY weeklies. You sent three numbers and they were so far apart I could not catch the story. Yes, if you will send me a diary, I will try and keep it right up to the mark and let you read it when I come home. How!

Is Nora Vance with you yet? If she is, tell her How for me. Are you having any excitement there, or is everything dull? Is there any theatrical troupe there, or has there been any? I suppose the school exhibition was an extensive affair, did they make much out of it? Does Ollie still run on the D. S. and how is he doing? Why does he never write, he must surely have time if he only would. I just tell you you can hardly

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imagine how much good your letters do me. I can read them over three or four times to see if I have not missed something in them. Is _____ and Mr. _____ still living in Dr. _____ old place, or have they moved into one of their own?

Have all of you been well, none of you had the diphtheria have you? Is there as many cases as usual, or has it abated and is there much sickness? Ma is well, is she, and Aunt Callie and the baby, also yourself, Vill & Ollie? In your letters you never tell me anything about them. Does Vill still go to school, and does he grow as usual. I suppose by the time I reach home he will have grown out of all recollections of me. Is Dr. Knott still there, if so give my kindest regards to him. Tell him my leg is all right if he asks about it.

Barringer, I suppose, is in full blast again. Do you ever go downtown, have you been in his store, and do you know what kind of a business he is doing? And did booze start him, or did he start off of what he stole from father. [Several lines illegible]

Since I have commenced this our mail has arrived and we have plenty of papers to read but one letter and that from Aunt Callie. Tell her I am very much obliged for her kind offer, but I hardly think any book can be found that would be of any assistance to me as the work is of an unusual kind not to be picked

up from any business books, it has to be studied out. Uncle John is beating it into my head.

Uncle John leaves here with Pa Sunday for Cheyenne. He has just received a new bond, which he has to be sworn to before a justice of the peace. His reappointment dates from the 19th of December for four years. How do you like that? You may have a chance of coming out here yet, but I hope you never will. Aunt Callie has given up all hopes of ever coming out here, has she not? If she has not, tell her to make up her mind to stay there, for Uncle John will never bring her here to this horrible place as these Indians will have no respect for a white woman.

Love to all until we meet in good health.

Good Bye,

Frank 

NOTES

¹ Thomas R. Buecker, *Fort Robinson and the American West, 1874-1899* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1999), 1-6.

² Robert H. Keller, Jr., "Episcopal Reformers and Affairs at Red Cloud Agency, 1870-1876," *Nebraska History* 68 (Fall 1987): 116-17.

³ Buecker, *Fort Robinson and the American West*, 5-14.

⁴ According to a current Lakota-English dictionary, the word means "to distribute" or "a distribution." This is likely the term agency Indians applied to Agent Saville, who was responsible for the distribution of their government annuities.