

## Indians and Japanese Swords on the North Plains Frontier

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Article Summary: Two photographs provide evidence that North Plains Indians procured Japanese swords at a time when such swords were very rare outside Japan. The author suggests that world travelers who had visited both Japan and the North Plains may have presented the swords as gifts to important Indian leaders.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Red Cloud, Dog-Child, Waldemar Bogoras, Francis Bannerman, William J Turner

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Photographs / Images: Chief Red Cloud's house, Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, December 7, 1890; Dog-Child and wife, Gleichen, Alberta

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Figure 1. Chief Red Cloud's house, December 7, 1890, Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

# INDIANS AND JAPANESE SWORDS ON THE NORTH PLAINS FRONTIER

*By Peter Bleed*

European swords were popular trade items among Indian groups in all parts of the American frontier. Indians accepted swords as weapons, status symbols, and ceremonial objects and readily adopted them into their own material culture. Since European swords were available from explorers,

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traders, and soldiers, it is not hard to determine how they came to be possessed by Indians. The accompanying photographs show that in addition to European swords, Japanese swords were also used by Indians on the North Plains frontier. What makes the presence of these swords remarkable is that they were in use by Plains Indians at a time when they were still very rare anywhere outside Japan.

The first photograph (figure 1) is copied from an original in the anthropology collections of the Univer-

sity of Nebraska State Museum. It shows the interior of Chief Red Cloud's house on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.<sup>1</sup> The photograph was collected by Major William J. Turner, an officer in the Second U.S. Infantry, which was sent to the Pine Ridge in December of 1890 to put down unrest caused by the Ghost Dance. The photograph was transferred to the University of Nebraska State Museum from the Omaha Public Library, but little else is known about its history or background. There is a penciled note on the back of the

original: "Pine Ridge Agency, S.D. Chief Red Cloud presented this picture to me, December 7, 1890. Red Cloud's wife (blind), Interior of his home." The interior matches another photograph of Red Cloud's home in the files of the Nebraska State Historical Society.<sup>2</sup> That fact, together with the knowledge that Major Turner was in the Pine Ridge in December of 1890, argues strongly that the penciled inscription is trustworthy. To offer further authentication, a print of the same photograph is contained in a vintage photograph album recently obtained by the Nebraska State Historical Society. This album is entitled "Indian War Views From 1890 to 1891 at Pine Ridge, S.D."

The photograph deserves thorough analysis, because it shows a great many objects in interesting and authentic context. Of particular significance is the sword hanging on the cabin wall. There can be no question that this sword is Japanese. It is a true samurai sword, or *katana*, mounted in so-called *handachi* fittings. This type of sword would have been worn either in battle or on semi-formal occasions.<sup>3</sup> Handachi-mounted swords are not common, because they were intended for serious use and were not the model for "tourist" or souvenir swords.

Like most handachi-mounted swords, the sword on Chief Red Cloud's wall appears to be of relatively high quality. It also appears to be in very good condition. The handle wrapping of silk cord is intact, and the lacquered wood scabbard seems undamaged. Both of these fittings are quite fragile, and the experience of many American collectors is that they are easily damaged.

The sword also looks essentially unaltered, except that it is hanging on a cord tied to the top of the scabbard. This is *not* authentic and certainly represents a minor alteration made by Red Cloud or some other Indian.

The other things that Chief Red Cloud hung on his wall range from utilitarian to decorative to religious. It



Figure 2. Dog-Child and wife, Gleichen, Alberta.

is thus impossible to determine how he viewed this sword. The fact that it is prominently displayed suggests, however, that it was highly regarded or perhaps newly acquired.

A second photograph of a Plains Indian with a Japanese sword is presented in figure 2. This print was supplied by the Glenbow Foundation, but

copies of the same photograph are in the collections of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Museum in Regina, Saskatchewan, and in the RCMP archives in Ottawa. The original photograph is labeled "Trueman and Caple, Photo, Vancouver, B.C." It also bears the caption "1115 N.W.M. Police, Indian Scout 'Dog-Child' and Squaw

(Blackfeet Indians) Gleichen, Alb." RCMP catalogue files describe the photograph as showing an "Indian Scout" and indicate that it was taken at Fort McCleod, Alberta. I have been unable to obtain any background information about the photograph and cannot resolve the discrepancy between the caption and the catalogue. There is also no information available on when it was taken. Based on style and content, it seems reasonable to suggest that the photograph was taken before 1900.

This photograph presents a wealth of information that deserves thorough study. The present discussion, however, focuses on the sword held by the man. This is a Japanese long sword in so-called *tachi* fittings. Tachi were worn on formal occasions by high ranking Japanese. Those with wrapped handles, like this one, are called "military tachi." They were intended to be worn with armor, and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they were regularly used as parade swords.<sup>4</sup> Tachi mounted swords are not uncommon, but they were produced in a range of quality from very good to mediocre.

It is difficult to judge the quality of Dog-Child's sword, although the handle appears to have been wrapped with rather thin cord, which suggests that the mounts were overall of low quality. The sword seems to be in good condition, but like the Red Cloud sword, it has been slightly altered to make it easier to handle. Cords have been tied to the suspension rings on the scabbard so that it could be hung from a gun belt. Even with this alteration, it does not appear that Dog-Child wore his Japanese sword very comfortably. It seems doubtful that he could have used it effectively.

These two photographs may be the only ones showing American Indians with Japanese swords. Inquiry at the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian and elsewhere has not located any similar pictures. A paper written by two Japanese sword collectors<sup>5</sup> refers to a Catlin painting which

shows a Japanese sword hanging in the interior of a North Plains tepee. I have not been able to locate this picture and remain skeptical that if it exists, it in fact shows a Japanese sword.

By themselves, these two photographs offer clear proof that Japanese swords had made it to the Plains frontier, and they raise the question of how these oriental weapons came to their Indian owners.

It is tempting to speculate that the swords could have arrived in North America through direct trade among the native groups between Japan and the North Plains. There is little question that there was active pre-European trade across wide portions of the north Pacific rim, but it seems improbable that trade could have brought these swords to the New World. Before the 1870s Japan had only very limited trade contact on its northern frontier, and there were specific prohibitions on selling arms to the native peoples in that area.<sup>6</sup> Thus, swords like those in the photos were not available to Siberian groups. In his classic study of the Siberian Chukchee, Waldemar Bogoras collected no Japanese cutlery. Working at the turn of the century, Bogoras did find a suit of Japanese armor in use by this Siberian group,<sup>7</sup> but even that piece argues against the possibility that the Japanese swords were brought to America by native traders. The armor Bogoras found in Siberia was in serious disrepair, and as is often the case with foreign objects used by native cultures, it had been extensively altered. If trade goods had not been altered before reaching North America, it would be reasonable to expect them to be altered after they arrived, just as European weapons and tools were altered by Indian users.

Neither of the swords shown in these photographs appears to have been damaged, and neither had been significantly altered from the original Japanese form. It seems likely, therefore, that they had not long been in Indian hands.

If native trade could not have brought the swords to America, they must have come to their Indian owners by way of Euro-American middlemen. Explaining how that could have happened, however, is quite difficult.

Until 1854 Japan neither sought nor tolerated serious contact with outside countries. To be sure, there are records of odd pieces of Japanese art, including some swords and other weapons, showing up in the West before that time,<sup>8</sup> but the flow of goods out of the country was hardly more than a trickle.

After Admiral Matthew C. Perry and the U.S. Navy forced Japan into contact with the rest of the world, Japanese art began flowing to Europe and America, and the late Victorian period saw a great deal of interest in things Japanese. Swords, however, were not common among the early flood of exports from Japan. For many years after the initial opening, the country remained under the rule of the samurai warriors, who symbolized their social standing by wearing swords. While swords were a status symbol they were jealously guarded and highly valued.

Only after 1876, when the Japanese government banned the wearing of swords, did they begin to lose their value and become available for export. Even then, mounted swords did not initially leave the country at the same massive rate that marked the export of porcelain, netsuke, prints, unmounted sword fittings, and other objects that found ready markets in the West.

Significant numbers of mounted swords seem to have been exported only after the Russo-Japanese war (1903-1905), when new military demands made antique weapons far less valuable than the cash they could return. The flow became so steady that in 1907 the New York arms dealer Francis Bannerman was able to offer Japanese long swords at \$3.00 each. Short swords brought \$1.40! It is hard to believe that Japanese swords would be available to those trading directly with Indian groups even at that time.

The question then remains: How

could Indians on the North Plains acquire Japanese swords in the late nineteenth century? It is doubtful whether any of the usual suppliers of trade goods could have sold these swords to their Indian owners, simply because the limited supplies would have made trading in them impractical. It is perhaps more likely that they were gifts given by world travelers who had been both to Japan and the North Plains. As improbable as it seems, history does record at least a few opportunities for this to have happened.

In September of 1876, for example, three high ranking officers of the newly formed Imperial Japanese Army visited Camp Robinson as guests of the United States government.<sup>9</sup> With a military escort, they traveled from Fort Laramie, Wyoming, to what is now Fort Robinson, where they stayed for a day or two. The purpose of their trip was to observe American military practices, and it included a visit to the Red Cloud Agency, which was located near the post at that time. There is no record that these officers actually met Chief Red Cloud, although as visiting dignitaries such a meeting seems reasonable. Japanese etiquette would require a gift on such an occasion, and a high quality, traditional weapon would

certainly be suitable for an important leader like Red Cloud. Perhaps these soldiers brought the sword to the Pine Ridge. If they did not give Red Cloud his sword, the chief may have obtained it himself on one of the eleven trips he made to Washington between 1876 and 1890.<sup>10</sup>

History also records an early contact between Japan and the plains of Alberta. In 1895 the Reverend Canon Stocken, the resident Anglican missionary to the Blackfoot Indians of Alberta, traveled to Japan to marry his second wife, Gertrude Cox, who had been a missionary there for some years.<sup>11</sup> After their marriage, the couple returned to Gleichen, Alberta, and resumed missionary work among the Blackfoot. There is no proof, but it is tempting to speculate whether either the Reverend Stocken or his wife could have brought Dog-Child's sword to the New World. Whatever route these swords took from Japan to the Great Plains, they must have made the trip rapidly and at a time when these areas were considered to be very remote. Perhaps these swords are evidence that the frontier was more cosmopolitan than we might imagine it to have been.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Arthur H. Wolf recognized the sword in the photograph of Chief Red Cloud's home and called it to my attention. Dr. Charles Watrall of the University of Regina first helped to locate a copy of the Dog-Child photograph. Dr. Dan Smith of the University of Calgary Department of History suggested that the Reverend Canon Stocken and his wife were an early link between Japan and the Canadian Blackfoot. Jim Hanson and Tom Buecker of the Nebraska State Historical Society called my attention to the Japanese visitors to Fort Robinson. Dave Wooley, John Carter, Tom Myers, Paul Hedren, and Georgeen Klassen also offered important help on this project.

<sup>2</sup> James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 242ff.

<sup>3</sup> B.W. Robinson, *The Arts of the Japanese Sword* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Dean Hartley and Thomas Butteiler, "The Wandering Arms of Japan," *Token Taikai*, ed. Roger Dunn (San Francisco: Northern California Japanese Sword Club, 1976), 117-39.

<sup>6</sup> John A. Harrison, *Japan's Northern Frontier* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1953), 3-7.

<sup>7</sup> Waldemar Bogoras, "The Chuckchee, Part 1, Material Culture," *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History* xi(1904): 164.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Reitlinger, *The Economics of Taste* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 484. Hartley and Butteiler, "Wandering Arms."

<sup>9</sup> Paul L. Hedren, "Ft. Laramie in 1876, Chronicle of a Post at War" (National Park Service Study, manuscript on file, Fort Laramie, 1986), 182.

<sup>10</sup> Herman J. Viola, *Diplomats in Buckskin: A History of Indian Delegations in the City of Washington* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Canon H.W. Stocken, *Among the Blackfoot and Sarcee* (Calgary: Glenbow Foundation, 1976).