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Article Summary: The 1987 Nebraska State Historical Society exhibit, "The First Nebraskans," traced Nebraska's Indian past from its beginnings 12,000 years ago to the twentieth century. Illustrations suggest the diversity of the artifacts included in the exhibit.

Cataloging Information:

Place Names: Webster County, Saunders County, Gage County, Genoa, Pine Ridge Reservation

Photographs / Images: three human effigy head pipes from Pawnee sites, two from Webster County, one from Saunders County; horse effigy from Saunders County; portrait probably from the 1850s found in the belongings of an Oto Indian; Cheyenne beadwork gloves made about 1890; Winnebago Indian dolls collected about 1870; a group of Sioux Indians, all wearing feathered headdresses; ration tickets for government supplies at the Oto Agency, Gage County, about 1870; Red Cloud wearing a white man's suit; Red Cloud on the Pine Ridge reservation; cigar box label with Red Cloud's image; government school for Indians at Genoa, Nebraska; undated composition by a twelve-year-old Sioux student, Margy Red Cedar; Class C high school championship trophy won by the basketball team from the Genoa Indian School; boy's jacket and knickers of beaded buckskin owned by Willie D McGaa, Pine Ridge Reservation; Indian drum made by Rabbit Thunder about 1915; interior view of 1915 Winnebago home, replicated by museum curators for the exhibit

FACES OF THE FIRST NEBRASKANS

By R. Eli Paul

In 1895 the Nebraska State Historical Society purchased two new display cases. In them were placed treasures accumulated during the previous two decades. Since its founding in 1878, one of the Society's objectives had been "to encourage investigation of aboriginal remains" and to keep "a cabinet of antiquities, relics, etc." The members of the Society listed exactly what they sought: "Facts illustrative of our Indian tribes . . . contributions of Indian weapons, costumes, ornaments, curiosities, and implements. Also stone axes, spears, arrow-heads, pottery, or other relics of the prehistoric races." A statement reconfirming this collecting policy was issued in 1894.¹

These modest beginnings helped lay the foundation for a collection and exhibition program culminating over ninety years later in the September 1987 opening of a new exhibit, "The First Nebraskans," in the Society's State Museum of History. "The First Nebraskans" traces Nebraska's Indian past from the earliest inhabitants of 12,000 years ago to those of the twentieth century. The 5,000-square-foot hall showcases the Society's excellent archeological and ethnological collection, but it is more than just a display of interesting artifacts. The exhibit looks at Nebraska's Indian history from the perspective of those who made or used the objects being shown. It seeks to promote understanding and appreciation of the cultural diversity and significant contributions of these people.

Unlike previous Society exhibits, "The First Nebraskans" does not close

the record of Indian history with the Indian Wars of the nineteenth century. Beyond Custer's "Last Stand" and Wounded Knee, a new era began with life on the reservation. Nebraska

Indians have now lived as long on reservations as they once did as nomadic horsemen of the plains. Though the Society's archeological collections span thousands of years, most of its



R. Eli Paul was the Curator of Exhibits for "The First Nebraskans." He currently serves as the Society's Director of its newly formed Research Division.

First Nebraskans



Three human effigy head pipes from sites 25WT7, 25WT1, and 25SD31: A stone pipe (left) was sculpted as a human head. It comes from a prehistoric village site in Webster County and dates to A.D. 1400. A small catlinite "straight" pipe (above right) came from a Pawnee village site, also in Webster County, and was probably made in the early 1800s. Also from a Pawnee site, though from one located in present-day Saunders County, is this stone pipe (above left). It probably depicts a white man because the ring at its top symbolizes a white man's hat brim. The pipestem would have been pushed in the open mouth, a clever feature executed by its maker. (NSHS-25WT7; NSHS-25WT1-1592; NSHS-25SD31)

ethnological holdings are from the post-1880 reservation period. This fact is highlighted in the exhibit.

The philosophy of "The First Nebraskans" exhibit is in sharp contrast to that commonly held in the early years of the twentieth century. Elmer E. Blackman, the Society's first museum curator, wrote, "We must . . . so arrange our exhibit that our visitors are forced to see, study, and appreciate every specimen in our museum."² Luckily for today's visitors, the Society no longer takes this stern approach.

Highlights abound in "The First Nebraskans." A complete bison skeleton illustrates the uses made of this valuable beast by prehistoric and historic tribes. Dozens of complete pottery vessels recovered during the past half-century of Society archeological fieldwork, reveal the extraordinary skills demonstrated by Indian potters over hundreds of years.

A full-scale replica of a hide painting depicts the 1720 defeat of a Spanish army near the present site of Columbus, Nebraska. The army, sent from Santa Fe to investigate French activity on the plains, was attacked by a force of Pawnee and Oto Indians. Several Spaniards, including commander Pedro de Villasur, were killed. Although the reasons for the painting's commission are unclear, the original still exists under the ownership of a Swiss family named von Segesser.³ The more than seventeen-foot-long painting is the oldest known of a Nebraska scene. The Society's replica shows how the painting looked when new. It is a stunning illustration of the international political dramas played out on the plains of Nebraska one hundred years before the first U.S. military post was established west of the Missouri River at Fort Atkinson.

Other displays spotlight the diverse individual and tribal histories of Nebraska Indians. An area devoted to clothing reflects the increasing influence of white culture on style and ornamentation. An 1860s Pawnee earthlodge from the previous Indian

exhibit remains, but a full-scale recreation of a Winnebago Indian living room of 1915 offers a striking counterpoint. Besides presenting a contrast to the earlier dwelling, the living room gives a glimpse of reservation life and reflects the great changes of Indian life styles over just a few decades.

The objects illustrated here introduce the broad scope of "The First Nebraskans" exhibit. Change and diversity is its major theme. The exhibit portrays the richness of 12,000 years of Indian life and shows how Nebraska's history and culture has been significantly shaped and continues to be affected by the contributions of Nebraska's Indian people. It also shows how their technical skill and artistic sense rendered beautiful works of art from utilitarian objects. Considered from an aesthetic viewpoint, or as an important chapter of Nebraska's heritage, "The First Nebraskans" is an exciting new look at a time-honored subject.



Horse effigy made of clay. It was found at an Oto Indian village site near Yutan, Saunders County. (NSHS-25D1-323)

NOTES

¹The information about the early years comes from the following sources: "Constitution of the Nebraska State Historical Society," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, 2nd ser., vol. 1 (Lincoln 1894), 236-41; Anne Polk Diffendal, "A Centennial History of the Nebraska State Historical Society, 1878-1978," *Nebraska History*, 59 (Fall, 1978), 311-437; and Robert W. Furnas, ed., "Constitution and By-laws," *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, 1st ser., vol. 1 (Lincoln 1885), 219-28.

²Undated manuscript on museum display case design, MS25, Box 7, Elmer E. Blackman Papers, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society.

³The Museum of New Mexico now owns the painting.

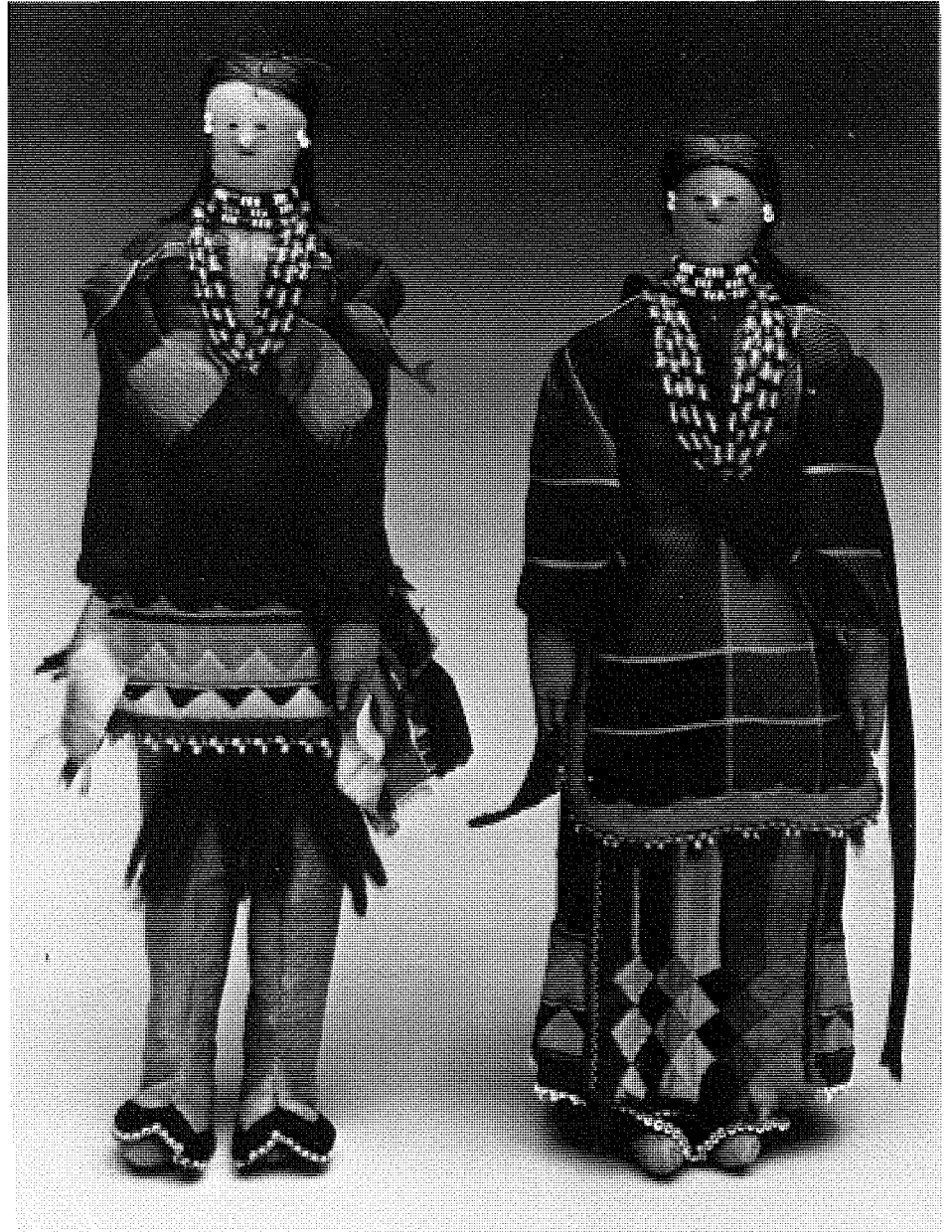


Found in the belongings of an Oto Indian, this may be the owner's portrait, his image captured by a white photographer. The original is a tintype, probably made in the 1850s (NSHS-I394-13)

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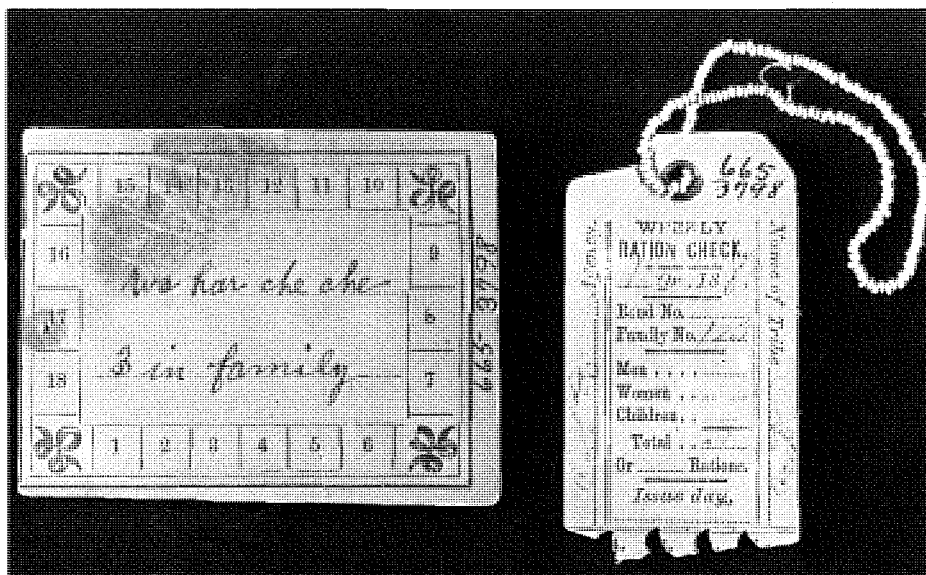
A Cheyenne beadworker exhibited magnificent artistic skill with this pair of gloves made about 1890. (NSHS-8634-200)



A member of the Sac-Fox tribe traded for these dolls from a Winnebago Indian. They were later collected about 1870 by Thomas Lightfoot, Indian agent at the Great Nemaha Reservation. (NSHS-3972)



Every man was a chief, according to this turn-of-the-century view by Rushville, Nebraska, photographer B.F. Ray. Clothing styles changed radically during the reservation era. War exploits no longer determined one's right to wear a feathered headdress. Whites believed that all American Indians owned and wore them, and in this photograph these Sioux Indians have obliged this popular misconception. (NSHS-1392-231)



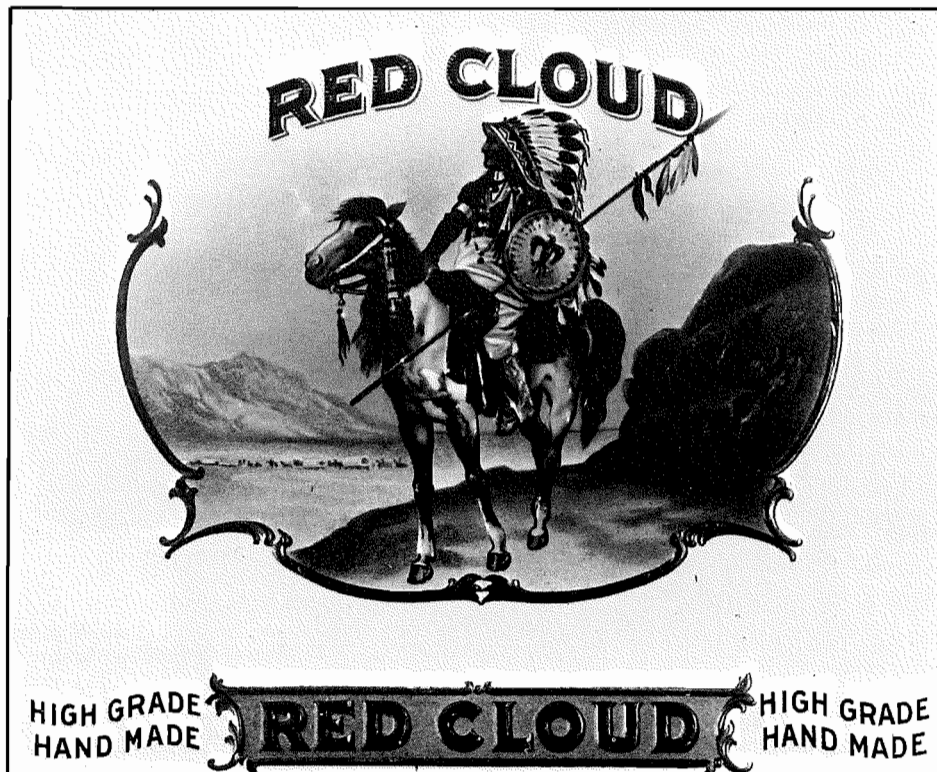
Ration tickets entitled the bearer to government supplies at the Oto Agency in Gage County about 1870. A string of beads was run through one ticket. (NSHS-3798)



The famed Oglala Sioux chief Red Cloud was one of the most photographed Indians in history. The portraits taken of him through the years not only chronicled his career but also accurately reflected the changes in the lives and fortunes of his people. Red Cloud often mediated between two opposing cultures. Wearing a white man's suit seems to symbolize his efforts in the political arena. (NSHS-I392-36)

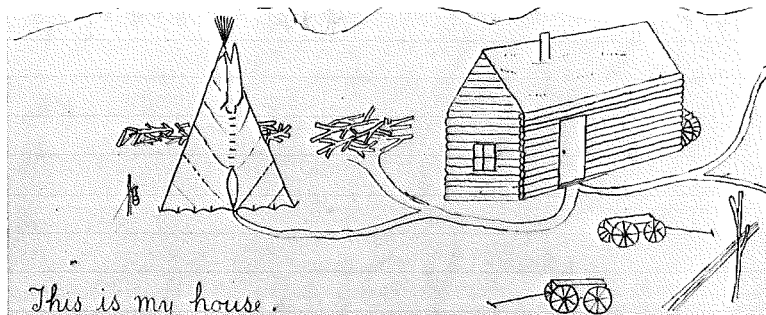


Red Cloud spent his last years on the Pine Ridge Reservation. His political influence gone, he still remained as a living reminder of the preceding turbulent years on the frontier. (NSHS-I391-386) ... (below) With this cigar box label, Red Cloud's image passed from reality to that of the "Indian of the imagination." This artifact portrays the romantic notions of the American Indian held by the public at the end of the nineteenth century. (NSHS-7956-4358)





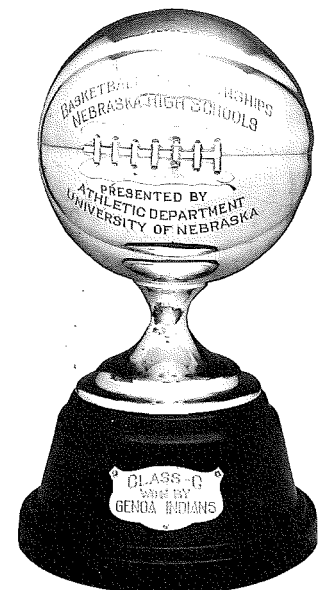
Reservation life brought many changes to Nebraska's Indian groups. Girls and boys sit attentively in class at the government school for Indians at Genoa, Nebraska. Children from several different tribes were sent there to shed old ways and to receive an education heavily weighted towards the domestic and industrial arts. (NSHS-G335-20)



This is my house.
 My old grand mother and her old husband live
 in the teepe. We have three old wagons around my
 house and some teepe poles leaning on a high post.
 We have two wood piles.
 One wood pile is for my mother and the other is
 for my grand mother.
 When I first going to school, four men build our
 house up and I was glad to live in the house.
 We live in a teepe before and some frogs were
 jumping all around the teepe.
 A man gave the house to my mother and he
 want a horse for it.
 When the winter comes my grand mother and
 her old man live with us in the house.

This undated composition was written by a twelve-year-old Sioux student, Margy Red Cedar. Although decades old and from a place and life style foreign to most of us, it reveals that universal look that schoolchildren's work seems to have. (NSHS-7294-3734)

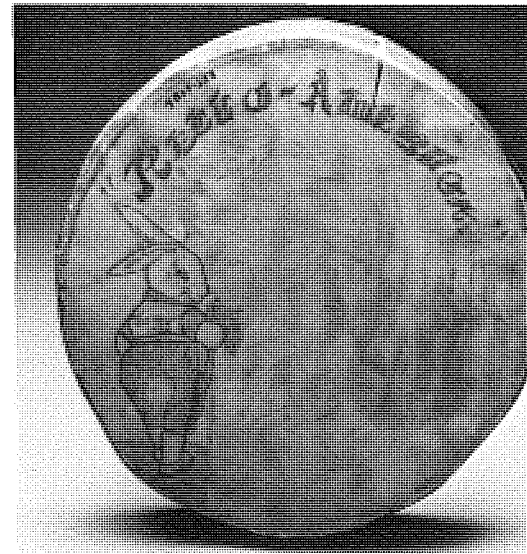
In 1927 the basketball team from the Genoa Indian School, appropriately named the "Indians," won the state Class C high school championship. (NSHS-4295)



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Boy's jacket and knickers of beaded buckskin owned by Willie D. McGaa, whose family lived on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The outfit was made of traditional Indian materials but tailored in the latest 1900s white fashion. (NSHS-180)



Indian craftsmen attempted to meet the white demand for native curios. The drum was made by an Indian named Rabbit Thunder about 1915. Peter Rabbit served as the maker's artistic inspiration. (NSHA-4364-158)

Interior views, such as this, of several Winnebago homes on their reservation guided museum curators in the careful replication of a 1915 living room for "The First Nebraskans." The pennant over the doorway reads, "I Love You, America." (NSHS-I398-53)



