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And a Cloud of Witnesses

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To read what was there on the grave stone was not a great surprise. I had known for some time that Joseph Four Bears was a believer in Jesus Christ. His granddaughter, Marcella, 98 years old, had told me as much, weeks before, when we started talking about her life. I’d asked her about Christianity, and she’d told me how Mom, Dad, two brothers and two sisters would step up into the wagon and go to church, twice a week, in Promise, South Dakota, a village on the Cheyenne River Reservation so small you can find it only on specialty maps, if it can claim to exist at all.

Her grandparents were Christian believers “in that time,” she’d explained, as if Christianity were a short story in the epic of both her life and the history of her Lakota people. When Joseph Four Bears put his thumbprint on the Ft. Laramie Treaty in 1868, she said, he promised peace and tolerance for the white man and was thereby given title to the land where he and his family had been living for years. The Great Father graciously advised him that, now that he’d signed the treaty, he could live there.

“Isn’t that crazy?” she said, shaking her head in sheer disbelief.

We were on our way to her grandparents’ graves just outside of La Plant, South Dakota, a town where once there were eight or nine churches. On a good day, La Plant’s population is 250 or so, but only if you count volunteer workers who come from white churches somewhere vaguely back east. “They build houses for the people,” she told me, pointing at one painted in a peculiar style. “There’s one right there.”

I was surprised she commended those volunteers, but she did. La Plant, the census claims, is one hundred percent Native. Close to 70 percent of its residents live below the poverty line, but then the Cheyenne River Reservation is among the poorest regions of the country.

La Plant’s Episcopal Cemetery sits up the hill north of town. Marcella claimed we would find Joseph Four Bears’ grave somewhere within. I was driving, Marcella beside me, and two of her great-granddaughters in the back seat, bright kids who wanted to learn some things about this long-gone ancestor. On the way up the hill, we tried to string together just how many “greats” they needed to precede his name—after all, the man whose thumb-print adorns the Ft. Laramie Treaty is their great-grandma’s grandpa.

Despite her age, she got out of the car with us, and we all walked through uneven grasses be-
between upright stones festooned with the adornments that flourish in most Native-American cemeteries.

A meadowlark—young and a little woeful—sat up high on a set of deer antlers tethered to a pole above a cemetery stone, letting his or her mother know he was there. Behind him, and behind us, as far as you could see in every direction, reservation grassland ran invisibly into a sky so bright the sun seemed little more than an ornament. In a couple of hours, it would be scorching.

One of the granddaughters let out a yell and pointed when she found the Four Bears plot. The stones were all newer than they should have been because the remains had been relocated from neighborhoods now deep beneath Lake Oahe, one of the deep blue seas created when the Missouri River was dammed up fifty years ago.

The girls were proud. We’d found it. The morning sun spread so bright on all that open land that Joseph Four Bears’ stone was just about unreadable. Marcella came over slowly, smiling, while the granddaughters stooped and visored their eyes with their hands to read an inscription almost fully there: “For more than 36 years, a faithful Christian and loyal friend of…” and then what’s etched was messed, “of the whites?” one of them said, guessing. Look for yourself.

It was not what they’d expected. “Grandma,” one of them said, as if shocked, “our great-great-grandpa was a Christian?” She’s a Gates scholar, on her way to study botany. “Joseph Four Bears was a Christian?” she said again.

That last word was repeated in a tone that registers as something akin to a wound. It was if she’d been slapped into humiliation, wounded by a testimony written forever in stone. She was thinking he was some old tribal chief more in the line of Crazy Horse.

“Seriously?” she said and looked up at Grandma.

I’ve only rarely lived outside the company of Christian believers. I’d never heard words spun to that effect in a snickering voice.

When Grandma spoke to her granddaughters, she did so kindly. She wanted them to understand how to grasp the difficult trek that is the history of the Lakota people. She told them what she’s told me, that Christianity lent a helping hand during the hopelessness of the transition time, when the people had to adjust to a way of life unlike anything they could have imagined. For a time, back then, going to church and praying to a white man’s god were simply passages in their lives, experiences that had to be lived through, a necessary but temporary entanglement in the much bigger Lakota story.

Native people aren’t the only ones who register disdain for the Christian faith. You can hear it here, there, and everywhere. The Bible claims that derision is a given for those who believe. Grandma didn’t hammer away the white man’s Christian faith, not at all. Christianity had to be used, she claimed, for a time at least; laced-up leather boots had to replace moccasins—wool coats wore better than blankets around the shoulders.

The snickering that morning stayed with me, in great part because it left me speechless. What could I say, really, a white man who’d always embraced Christianity? It wasn’t the time for Four Spiritual Laws or John 3:16. There I stood, grieving, not simply for my heart’s emptiness but for the sins of my people, a white culture who weaponized “Manifest Destiny” to use it in the arsenal of assimilation and acculturation.

There I stood, an old white man who’s written a half-dozen books of meditations, a professor who spent 37 years teaching in a Christian...
college, and more of my life in church than most Americans can even imagine. I had nothing to say to a couple of Lakota kids saddened and snickering that a cemetery stone said their ancestor had been “a Christian and a friend of the whites.”

Some epiphanies are received in wounds. Some revelations carry the anguish I heard just then in the song of that motherless young meadowlark, fifty feet away, perched on an antler strapped to a grave, somehow searching.

Lake Oahe

Back in the car, we kept going down winding gravel roads, stopping at old cemeteries and small-town museums Grandma wanted us all to see. We had planned this trip through the reservation as an opportunity for me to see where Marcella had grown up almost a century ago. The family house is gone—a log cabin her father had built, she told me; but she could get us close enough to see the old neighborhood. Her mother’s house, abandoned, still stood up on the hill above the Moreau River. The church has been replaced, but it’s not in good shape. The cemetery behind it holds more relatives’ graves.

When her granddaughters had heard what she and I were going to do, they wanted to go with, Grandma said. Once we were in the car, it was clear that my enlightenment that day was not the first order of business. This trip through the Cheyenne River’s historic past offered her opportunity to teach the girls about her and her people—*their* people. Mostly, she’d tell them the precious stories of her childhood. In truth, Great-grandma Marcella was less concerned with the white man driving than she was with the granddaughters in the seat behind hers. That they loved her, that they worshipped her, was obvious and a blessing.

One stop on our trek was simply for me. The girls knew the story; you couldn’t grow up on the reservation and not know it. Marcella wanted me to see the old Cheyenne River Agency, the town designated 150 years ago for distribution of commodities, the white man’s treaty obligations: blankets, clothes, wagons, and food, all sorts of food.

At the beginning of the 20th century, when Marcella was born in a log house on the river, the agency had become not only the reservation’s trading center but also its busiest village, home to the boarding school, the reservation hospital, and every kind of official office and department. The Agency was where she had worked when she took her first nursing job back home on the Cheyenne River Reservation. Marcella was a veteran Army nurse who’d been released at the end of World War II, having served her country at the Battle of the Bulge and elsewhere.

I followed her directions when she motioned to go east a dozen miles or so, right up to the shoreline of Lake Oahe, at the far southeastern corner of the reservation. I pulled off the highway and drove into the sand and prairie grass of a largely unkept roadside park west of the bridge, following the weedy road all the way to the water’s edge.

“There,” she said, pointing at the lake. A half-mile off, a boat pulled a water skier from a rig up over the back. There was nothing in front of us but a glistening azure lake, shimmering like a jewel in that barren Great Plains landscape.

“The whole agency is gone?” I asked.

She didn’t need to answer. That the Corps of Engineers’ system of dams had altered the Missouri River was as true as the fact that those dams changed South Dakota life all along its banks. But I’d never thought before about what those waters, on the rise, must have felt like to people who watched their homes, their institutions, and their histories simply drown away. Today, the old Cheyenne River Agency—the center of tribal life even before the 1868 Ft. Laramie Treaty—is gone beneath the shining
Earlier, I’d seen a book with the alarming title “Dam Indians.” I’d hesitated to point it out to Marcella, thinking it downright offensive. But at that moment, right with the lake in front of us, I understood the title in a way I hadn’t.

My Dutch-American background will never allow me to understand how a Native heritage shapes perception in an indigenous soul. I’ll never really think Lakota. But, blessedly human, we still share a range of emotions as broad as the prairie. But our experiences shape our perceptions and create much of what and who we are, and of where we belong in a world that seems to do very well even without us.

In the same wayside park, a marker stands a little closer to the bridge, a granite boulder, sliced in half and set on a concrete walkway. There, in English and Lakota, the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe has determined “to honor our Leaders who have made an impact on the lives of our people, assured the safety of our traditions and helped to preserve our native language.”

Beneath a banner headline in the Lakota language, “Lecamu hantas, mitakuye ob wani kte lo” (“If I do this, through my people I will live”), the monument lists the names of 28 leaders, including two men whose names I recognized—Charger and Four Bear, father of Joseph Four Bears, the Christian, and “friend of the whites,” the man at whose grave we had just stood.

In my mind, some puzzle pieces were falling together. I knew that Joseph Four Bears’ father, Four Bear, was a Fool Soldier.

**The Fool Soldiers**

Swing off Main Street, Mobridge, South Dakota, right downtown, and in less than a block you’ll run into the town cemetery, where a granite pillar stands front-and-center.

A foot or so from the top of that pillar, weather-worn lettering on a smoothed space commemorates what happened many years ago, in the cold of winter: “Shetek captives rescued here November 1862 by Fool Soldiers Band.” To the left stands a steel map wide as a wagon box that traces the movement of a band of Santee Sioux, who left southwest Minnesota after killing 15 settlers and taking women and children hostage at a place named Lake Shetek, then moving west and north into Dakota Territory to avoid Minnesota militia.

Several impressive Depression-era, Oscar Howe murals are just down the street in Mobridge. Even as a child, Oscar Howe, a Yanktonai from the Crow Creek Reservation, showed talent as an artist, studying with Dorthea Dunn at the Sante Fe Indian School, and graduating in 1938, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Progress Association (WPA) hired Howe to paint murals in the Mobridge municipal building.

The murals illustrate Native life and history along the Missouri. One of them features Lakota warriors, on foot, surrounding an ox-cart carrying white women and children, the story of the Fool Soldiers. Against a blue sky and the muscular hills of the river valley, that horse-drawn cart takes the Shetek captives south, returning them to their families.

The Fool Soldiers would have fared better had they rescued the Shetek captives mid-June; their heroism was made more difficult by snow and sub-zero temperatures on a wide-open grassland that offered no shelter.

Marcella’s great-grandfather, Four Bear, played a role in that story, a story that began in August of 1862, when two Santee-Dakota headmen, White Lodge and Lean Bear, determined that, like their Dakota brothers farther north along the Minnesota River, they would wipe the land clean of the settlers taking Dakota land.
Attacks came as a surprise; in both areas Dakota warriors were not strangers to the settlers, whose log cabins some Dakota visited regularly.

Relationships, however, hadn’t been all that brotherly. There’d been some tussles, some flare ups, some bad words.

When White Lodge and Lean Bear heard of the battles on the Minnesota River, they sent word to Little Crow, the Dakota chief, that their own warriors were eager to remove white people from their home also. Attacks were carried out systematically and not without deception. One of the Dakotas, Old Pawn, initially claimed to be taking the side of the settlers, even vowed to fight for them. That was a lie.

The slaughter was terrible. John Wright was gone to Mankato. His wife, Julia, survived and was captured, as was their daughter Eldora, five. But John, three, and an infant son were brutally murdered.

Emma and Jefferson Duley lost four children, one of them, Belle, just four years old, clubbed, then knifed to death. Lily Everett lost her father and her little brother Charles, two.

When the Santee Dakotas came back to their camps, the captives were assigned to different families to keep them from escaping. Then the attackers headed north and west to hills, where they could find shelter. Meanwhile, “the Sioux uprising” out east ended, white militias outnum-bering rebels and securing the region. White Lodge knew the captives meant that his band would be pursued.

Like slaves, the white women and children began doing the dirty work of the families to whom they were assigned, jobs done at dawn or sunset because the Santees moved only at night. The white woman most familiar with the Sioux language, Julia Wright, was shot in the foot so she couldn’t escape. One of the children, Francis Duley, was simply murdered, or so one of the captives said in her memoir. The Santees had grown frustrated by his unending crying.

Years later, Lily Everett claimed she was caned repeatedly by an old woman to whom she’d been assigned, beaten so badly she’d been left for dead. Another Santee family found her and spent some weeks nursing her back to health.

What the 200 men, women, and children didn’t anticipate was the antagonism they created within the other bands of Sioux people with whom they came into contact as they traveled north. They were not greeted kindly. Northern Sioux bands simply would not put them up; after all, they hadn’t joined them earlier in warfare. Mounted white men, those bands knew, would be after them, far less interested in justice than in bloody eye-for-eye, tooth-for-tooth slaughter.

In central Dakota, the Santees wanted to stay with the Two Kettle band. All-night councils followed until it was determined the Santees would be given the provisions they so obviously needed, then sent on their way.

The Santees moved up river, eventually stopping at the confluence of the Missouri and the Grand, where Mobridge is today. That’s where they were camped when a band of Two Kettles warriors came up, determined to take the prisoners back with them and return them to their families. That warrior society called themselves “the Strong Hearts.” Others, soon after, shook their heads and began referring to them as “Fool Soldiers.”

When they’d prepared for the rescue, the Fool Soldiers had packed whatever their mission might require, whether they would fight the Santees or bargain with them. They had committed themselves to freeing the white captives, action that had to be seen by some as treasonous, as it is even today.

What was unclear to me was why a warrior society had determined to make peace and not war, why the Strong Heart Society became the Fool Soldiers. What was the nature of vision that made battle-tested warriors, renowned for bravery, determine to save lives by risking their own? Why did Four Bear, Joseph Four Bears’ father, decide to

**What was unclear to me was why a warrior society had determined to make peace and not war, why the Strong Heart Society became the Fool Soldiers.**
rescue white women and children, thereby risking their lives and the scorn of others? An answer to that question might help explain the inscription on the gravestone of Four Bears’ son, an inscription that had seemed humiliating to his grandchildren: “For 36 years, a loyal Christian and friend to the whites.”

Some Lakota answer that question by telling the story of one man’s strange dream. Several winters earlier, a warrior named Kills Game and Comes Home had been plagued by a dream in which an elk had spoken to him. “There will be ten of you,” he said, the biggest elk in a herd. “You must be strong and respected.” It was neither odd nor strange for a warrior to hear that directive, bravery and courage being foremost among the attributes of warriors and tribal leaders.1

But Charger, one of the Strong Hearts, called the others together to consider what the elk’s prophecy might mean for them, the Strong Heart Society. Charger’s interpretation of the vision began with something his father had told him, that

dreams are often “contrary” visions meant to be understood in opposite ways to what they might explain themselves to be. Charger said dreams must be interpreted in ways that are contrary to what they appear to mean.

What Kills Game and Comes Home’s dream offered the Strong Hearts was the truth that they would be “strong and respected” if they did good deeds and acted with the generosity. Legend has it that Charger’s father had told him that being wounded a hundred times in battle amounted to nothing at all if a warrior did not amply supply the needs of the poorest of the poor in the band. True warrior leadership didn’t mean only making war but also making peace—and doing good.

Once the Fool Soldiers found the Santees, it was obvious that White Lodge’s band of Santees vastly outnumbered their dozen or so warriors. The people of White Lodge’s band were in very bad shape, very hungry, winter upon them. Despite the numbers, some Fool Soldiers were determined to continue the mission; others, not convinced, left.

When they made a case for their setting camp just outside the camp of the Santees, they told the Santees that Two Kettle warriors were thought to be young and foolish by their own people. “You see us here,” Charger said. “We are only young boys. Our people call us crazy, but we want to do something good.” 2 Then he set out the terms: they would buy the prisoners with horses, proof that they were serious about taking the captives back with them.

When White Lodge made clear he was no friend of the whites, Charger returned to the Fool Soldiers’ own camp without the prisoners. The next day they tried again. And again. At a fourth meeting, Charger was adamant. “Three times we have offered our horses for the captives, and you have refused us,” he told the White Lodge. “Now we will take the captives and put them on the horses and lead them to their friends.” And then, people say, he gave the Santees warning: “If you make trouble for us, the soldiers will come against you from the east, and our people, the Tetons, will come against you from the west and we shall then see how brave you are.” 3 He waved his arm in those directions, as the other Fool Soldiers rode
back and forth just out of sight, as if there an entire war party was ready to swoop in.

The son of White Lodge stood in council to say that Charger and Kills Game were doing a good thing, that they seemed to be telling the truth. Then he admitted what was obvious: “We are starving, and it is winter.” And then came the concession: “I have one white child which I will give up,” Black Hawk said. “Let the others do as I have done.” 4 That mural on the wall of the Mobridge municipal building pictures several Lakota braves and those white women and children. One of the Lakota stands behind the wagon as if on watch. Likely, he is. Once the Fool Soldiers left with the captives, they weren’t sure White Lodge wouldn’t come after them and take the captives back.

The next day, a blizzard arose along the Missouri. Charger gave one of the women his moccasins; others gave up blankets and shirts to keep them from freezing in the heavy snow because they were wearing the same clothes in which they were captured.

A day’s travel south they discovered the frozen bodies of their friends who had determined to return, friends who’d been caught in the open during the blizzard. All of them were dead.

When they reached a place just north of Pierre, they crossed the mostly frozen-over and therefore dangerous Missouri River, and finally delivered the captives to their first real warmth in the LaFramboise Trading Post.

The brave intercession, their long trek through the snow in deadly cold temperatures, the ever-present fear of the Santees, the lack of food and clothing to withstand the immense danger of the winter—all of that suggests a joyous homecoming.

Instead, when they reached Ft. Randall, the Fool Soldier were...treated like animals... ."

Josephine Waggoner

Josephine Waggoner’s monumental study of her own Lakota people, an 800-page tome titled Witness, is a collection of tales of the Lakota people, a kind of encyclopedia intended to preserve a history she felt was lost with the deaths of thousands of men and women who’d grown up in the old ways. Witness is a marvelous Lakota recording of Lakota stories and lives, a blessing that gives us a better window into Joseph Four Bears’ story too.

Josephine Waggoner’s white father died just a few years after she was born. When he did, her mother left the relative comfort of the Grand River Agency (present day Wakpala) and went north to the Standing Rock Reservation, where Josephine was placed in a Catholic boarding school, an experience that may have been as difficult for her, as her time at the Hampton Institute, Virginia, a bit later, was edifying and memorable (“When I think of Hampton, I think of everything that is pure, good, and holy,” she once wrote).5

When she returned to the reservation in 1888, she was only sixteen, but she knew the English language so well that each Sunday, she’d translate sermons for both Episcopal and Congregational missionaries. In 1889, just 17 years old, she mar-

She was often asked to translate other things as well, including many of the letters Sitting Bull, the famous Lakota holy man, received. When Sitting Bull was killed, just a few days before the massacre at Wounded Knee, Josephine Waggoner helped lay out his body.

Life on the Standing Rock Reservation was not easy, and the Waggoners’ nine children didn’t make it any simpler. Throughout that time, Mrs. Waggoner wrote poems and stories in tablets she put away for safekeeping.

When her children had finally left home, she determined to record what she could of a way of life she’d known as a child, had grown up with as a girl, but was watching now—well into the 1930s—disappear. “The old people are dying off so fast a person must work fast or their stories will be like a closed book,” she wrote in her journals. What Josephine Waggoner understood was that any comprehensive history of the people and the region would be fragmentary, at best, if that story lacked a Lakota voice.

Her manuscripts remained unpublished until 2013. Why? Not because it was amateurish—it did require basic editing—but because white historians had difficulty verifying the facts of the stories she told. Determining the validity or truth of the stories told by indigenous people—in this case, a woman who lived through many of the stories she tells—can often be accomplished only by matching what they say with other, outside sources. Those outside sources are almost invariably Euro-American, for instance records military forces posted in regions where Native people were losing their land. For many years, historians regarded what happened before the soldiers came west as myth—the time after, history.

Witness was not published in Mrs. Waggoner’s lifetime. Too many passages and narratives couldn’t be easily “verified” because much of it relies on the oral history.

What I discovered about the Fool Soldiers in Witness is simply not “verifiable.” But what she describes came to me as revelation by way of a different story to help understand what the stone over Joseph Four Bears’ grave says: “For 36 years a faithful Christian and loyal friend of the whites.”

Mrs. Waggoner tells the story of a Yanktonai headman named Mad Bear, a name I didn’t recognize. That story refers to the life of Father Pierre De Smet, the Jesuit priest who came to the American West already in 1823 and, through the decades, grew to be as beloved as any white man or woman was or could have been. When Mrs. Waggoner tells Mad Bear’s story, she begins to explain De Smet’s high regard:

When Father De Smet came to Fort Pierre in 1851, it was an event to be remembered by the Indians. Cholera had taken its toll from the lives of the people; there was suffering everywhere, and to cap the climax, smallpox was coming on. The Indians were in terror, but the good Father had had the cholera the year before as he traveled up the Missouri in a steamboat and had also had the smallpox. He was familiar with the treatment of these diseases, and he went from tent to tent relieving the sick and baptizing the dying. Many Indians remarked on the mercy of a man whose religion took him to minister to those with the dread diseases. Many a man, woman, and child were saved from death. At this time Mad Bear was a mere lad of about fourteen years, but like many at the time, was greatly influenced and impressed by the principles of the black-robed priest.

Mrs. Waggoner then moves the story along a decade to relate that Mad Bear and his friends, all of them taught by Father De Smet, came together to form what amounted to a warrior society of their own.

Ten years later, some of the warriors Father De Smet had taught formed a society, and pledged themselves to uphold what was right, always to do good as far as they could, and to right all wrongs that came their way. These men who formed the first Christian society west of the Missouri River among the wild tribes . . . called themselves Strong Hearts, but because they did so many unusual things in fulfilling their pledge to keep law and order and in punishing many a lawless man, the other Indians called them Fool Soldiers.

That story was new—brand new, something I hadn’t known before. Could it be that Joseph Four Bears was a “faithful Christian” for 36 years
because his father, Four Bear, was before him? I hadn’t considered that possibility. Waggoner’s explanation is convincing in its own right. She says, simply, that some warriors determined to do what they considered “good” works because they’d witnessed the miraculous blessing of doing good in the selfless ministrations of Father De Smet among people suffering—and dying—from cholera and smallpox. When they’d seen love given selflessly, Mrs. Waggoner says, they were changed.

The story is not verifiable. Mrs. Waggoner was a Christian, a Roman Catholic. Her tales clearly reveal that she was ever anxious to testify her regard for the Christian faith. Mrs. Waggoner’s version may well be skewed by that commitment, and her story can’t be verified. She told the truth as she saw it, a Lakota woman who was also a devoted Roman Catholic. Whether she’s right about the origins of the Fool Soldiers, I don’t know; but I would like to believe her, to believe the Fool Soldiers’ counter-cultural moral compass was created somehow by their having witnessed a beloved priest who’d come among them to serve, to care, and to love.

What I’d discovered—what Marcella and her granddaughters knew only in part—was that Joseph Four Bears, the man whose epithet seemed humiliating, may well have been “a faithful Christian and a loyal friend of the whites”—because his father was. Four Bear, the Fool Soldier, was a Christian because he’d witnessed of the selfless love of a “black robe” named De Smet.

Could it be that Joseph Four Bears was a “faithful Christian” for 36 years because his father, Four Bear, was before him?

The St. Ange

But the story Mrs. Waggoner tells goes further. The roots of De Smet’s miraculous power, she claims, lie in an account I’d read in more detail long before I’d ever heard of Fool Soldiers or stood at Joseph Four Bears’ grave, the story of a steamship, the St. Ange (“Saint Angel”), moving north up the Missouri River in 1851.

The Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz is as much a wonder as the strange, Swiss-born artist must have been. In Europe, Kurz met another Swiss artist named Karl Bodmar, who’d come to this country to paint in the West. Kurz followed suit, packed his brushes, and sailed to America to chase a peculiar and offbeat vision that something fundamentally virtuous could be found in the primitive (and naked) female figure.

Kurz was not independently wealthy, so his visit to the Dakota territories was underwritten by his own sweat. He worked in a variety of jobs in camps and forts and aboard ships like the St. Ange. While he did, he recorded closely what he experienced in sketches and in an extensive journal. Here, he describes the sudden assault of cholera:

June 16. “The steamer is really a hospital for victims of cholera—the sick and the dying! My cabin is filled with the effects of people who have died. My box now serves a sick person for a pillow…."

June 17. “No doctor on board; two more deaths since yesterday! Evans, a professor in geology, prepared the remedy (meal mixed with whiskey) that I administer. Father Hoecken gives spiritual consolation. Father De Smet is also not well ….”

Father Christian Hoecken was called, by some, “the Kickapoo Father” because of his ministry to the Kickapoo tribe, who’d been pushed west from their homelands in Indiana, first to Missouri and then to Kansas. Even though the word kickapoo may mean “he who moves from here to there,” the Kickapoos in Kansas were literally refugees.

Father Hoecken’s lingual dexterity was immense. He was conversant in three languages when he arrived in America—Dutch, French, and Flemish, probably more. He had to learn English once he arrived, and reportedly he picked up the language of the Kickapoo very quickly.

But Father Hoecken didn’t stay with the Kickapoos. In 1838, 800 Potawatomi were herded from the Great Lakes region to Kansas on that tribe’s own “Trail of Tears.” Only 650 arrived—some simply disappeared, went to Canada or returned home in hiding, and 30 men, women,
and children died. Father Hoecken was called to minister to the needs of those who survived their long walk and was there to welcome them.

He learned the Potawatomi language with such agility and speed that the Church determined he should continue to use those skills with tribes farther up the northern Missouri, regions as yet without a mission. That’s where he was going on June 19, 1851, when he was called to the bedside of his loyal friend Father De Smet to hear his confession and administer last rites, which he did. As Kurz makes clear in his Journal, De Smet wasn’t the only passenger suffering. Father Hoecken consoled many who’d contacted the cholera on board. In De Smet’s own memoir, he says his friend Father Hoecken maintained a presence at the bedsides of the dying. “That day,” De Smet remembers, “he assisted at three deaths.”

What happened in two nights aboard the St. Ange is as full of horror as it is of sadness. More than a dozen passengers died quickly. But what passed between the two young Belgian Jesuits is unforgettable. Father De Smet remembered it this way:

Father Hoecken’s cabin adjoined mine and in the early silence, between one and two o’clock in the morning, I heard him call me. I dragged myself to his bedside, to find him in his death-agony. He asked me to hear his confession, which I did, and while I administered Extreme Unction, he replied to all the prayers.

That Father De Smet dragged himself next door indicates his own miserable condition. He believed he was going to die. The bed-side scene must have gathered an audience because De Smet makes clear that what transpired when the sacrament was granted “added to the veneration in which [Father Hoecken] was held by the passengers.”

But because Father De Smet believed himself ready to die, he then, in a moment, asked the dying Father Hoecken to hear his confession:

He was still conscious of what I was saying. With tears streaming down my face, I knelt by the bedside of my faithful friend and sole companion, and to him, in his death-agony, I confessed, being myself in an almost dying condition. He soon became speechless. Resigned to God’s will, I read the prayers for the dying. Ripe for heaven, Father Hoecken rendered his soul to God June 19, 1851, twelve days after his departure from St. Louis.

Rudolph Friederich Kurz notes what followed in this way in his Journal: “We anchored in the evening and buried him by torchlight. Father Hoecken was to have gone as a missionary to the Nez Perces.”

That extraordinary story of sacraments mutually performed needs no embellishment. Hoecken was, De Smet says, “my faithful friend and sole companion,” a fellow traveler in their purposeful mission in the West, a man De Smet describes in his own memory of the events as blessed with the “richest qualities of an apostle: ardent zeal, robust health, invincible courage, extreme prudence, simplicity of manner, and a calm and cheerful nature.”

Am I overreaching to suggest that in mid-June, 1851, Father Pierre De Smet lost a brother, a man who might well have been the colleague closest to his heart, so close that when he stood under torchlight on the banks of the Missouri River and watched the body being lowered into the dusty sand, the tears that showed on his face were no match for the grief that rained down in his soul? I’d certainly like to believe that’s true.

Now consider how Mrs. Waggoner describes the origins of the mission of the Fool Soldiers, a society of Yanktonai, Miniconjou, and Two Kettle warriors dedicated to doing good: “Many Indians remarked on the mercy of a man whose religion took him to minister to those with the dread diseases. Many a man, woman, and child were saved from death.”

Aboard the St. Ange, Father Pierre De Smet picked up an immunity from diseases that would strike entire bands of Native people up river, many victims suffering and dying. Might the immunity he carried from the disease that took the life of his very close friend in just a few hours enable him to bring comfort and care and love to those suffering from the disease, an immunity that enabled him to walk among the dying in a way that became a witness to Lakota warriors who were by his strength and courage changed.
to become something other than what they once were? Could his loss of a friend be the opening line of a story that helps understand the inscription on the grave of Joseph Four Bears?

If this often-painful chain of cause-and-effect approximates what may have happened well over a century ago in the American West, then I know a story I could tell, standing in the Episcopal cemetery with Marcella and her granddaughters.

Maybe Joseph Four Bears, who lived from 1834 to 1909, a chief, the stone says, “for 36 years a loyal Christian and friend of the whites,” took on the Christian faith of his father, Four Bear, a Fool Soldier who put his life on the line for suffering women and children because he’d committed himself to a way of life based, at least in part, on the model offered by Father De Smet’s selflessness, a “black robe” who risked his life to relieve suffering among Native people because the immunity to cholera he received resulted from a horrendous night aboard the St. Ange, a night when his “faithful friend and companion,” a servant of the Most High, was stolen away by death.

If I could explain all of that clearly, perhaps my friends out there in the open spaces of the reservation would read in the words etched into his stone a story that would help them understand and maybe even read what the stones says as a tribute to his spirit.

Out there, the spirits of others, I do believe, would also be moved—two warriors named Four Bear, two much-beloved Jesuit priests, and a committed, life-long writer named Josephine Waggoner, and somewhere not far away an entire cloud of witnesses more.

Endnotes

2. Doane Robinson, South Dakota Historical Collections, 1946, as quoted in Ketchen, 12.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 13.
5. Susan Bordeaux Bettleyoun and Josephine Waggoner, With My Own Eyes: A Lakota Woman Tells Her People’s History (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), xix.
7. Ibid., 305.
8. Ibid., 305
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
15. Laveille, 232.
16. Waggoner, 305.