

# White Bear of the Omaha Chiefs

675 words

According to old Omaha history, the Omahas first saw a white man somewhere close to where today they would find Homer, Nebraska. Those strange white people carried with them “blankets, cloths, trinkets, and guns,” all of which made that first meeting historic—deathly-looking white folks were one thing, but guns—that was amazing.

It was the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and that first sighting was reciprocal because it was the fur traders’ first sight of the Omahas as well. There are no reports of those trappers being equally awed.

That 18<sup>th</sup> century first sighting may explain why the very first “chief” of the Omahas, known to white folks was Blackbird, their leader at the time, is the very Blackbird whose name graces the hills overlooking the Missouri, eight miles north of Decatur, NE, and has, as of late, been affixed to the Omaha tribe’s casino, just west of Sloan.

Blackbird, history says, was a man whose “word was law and obeyed as such,” but a man blessed with “a good and gentle disposition,” a combination which resulted in his being “loved by his people.”

When smallpox took Blackbird, as it took so many Omahas in a few years later in 1800, the tribe’s leader was yet another good man, Big Elk, commonly referred to as “the First,” since his son, not the man his father was, followed him as leader.

Then came a man remembered with a smirk, White Buffalo, who, it is said, is often referred to as “White Cow,” which might be more fitting for a man so amply outfitted with a comic disposition.

White Buffalo and a couple dozen other chiefs from Plains tribes were taken to Washington D. C. in 1851, a sales trip meant to convince them of the inevitability of change a’coming by the innumerable white people back east and all their amazing constructions.

Part of the parley was a warning: the depredations happening along the trails west, their host told them, had to stop. They were adamant.

Now from Blackbird on, the Omahas had lived in peace with white folks coming up the Missouri. They’d done no attacks, but Washington always painted Indians with a broad brush.

Omaha history says White Buffalo got to his feet, straightened his shoulders, and delivered a warning that went something like this.

My Great Father, I fear not death. I have fought my enemies in many battles. I have courted death in the din of hot strife of battle with deadly foes, but death has thus far

disdained me. Send out your soldiers, send out your big guns, and to prove to you, should I be your prisoner, I will crawl into your big gun and tell you to fire away!"

White folks cowered, or so it is said; but his comrades held their sides to stifle laughter. White Buffalo was loved for his comedy, but he'd never stunned anyone with bravery in battle.

Washington got its leg pulled.

And there's this. The winter of 1855 and 56 created such deprivation that the Omaha's agent, a man named Hepner, issued provisions, then held a council with the Omahas, at which time a settler named William Brown made an accusation that the people had killed his hogs and stolen the meat. They hadn't. Once they made clear they were nowhere near, Agent Hepner agreed.

White Buffalo walked over to settler Brown, shaking his head. "My friend," he said, "why do you charge us with a theft we did not commit?" Then, as if they buddies, White Buffalo put one hand on the man's shoulder and pointed heavenward and told him to send his empty purse "to the Lord Almighty who caused the snow and cold weather that froze your hogs."

Mr. Brown was in no position to recoil, but he was probably not as amused as all those giggling Omahas.

I don't know whether there's a portrait of White Buffalo in the new Blackbird Bend Casino. But you can't help wondering whether maybe there should be.