

“Sans Arc Lakota” Ledger Book, 1880–1881

Black Hawk was hard-pressed to feed his family of four during the harsh winter of 1880–1881. His tribe, the Sans Arc, was one of seven divisions of the Lakota, a nomadic group of Plains Indians who followed the great herds of buffalo that fed, clothed, and housed them. The herds had been hunted to near extinction, mostly by the settlers who came in increasing numbers, and the Plains tribes were being moved to reservations.

Black Hawk, a spiritual leader, had a vision dream, which William Edward Caton, the Indian trader at the Cheyenne Agency in Dakota, asked him to record, offering fifty cents in trade for every drawing he would make. Caton provided sheets of lined writing paper, colored pencils, and a pen. Black Hawk produced seventy-six drawings over the course of the winter and received thirty-eight dollars in exchange, a sizable amount for the time. In 1994, the book (by then in a private collection) sold at auction for nearly four hundred thousand dollars.

Black Hawk’s drawings followed a long tradition of Plains Indian art. Lakota men painted images on their teepees and buffalo

hide robes to display their accomplishments and brave deeds. Winter counts (communal histories of tribes or families) were also painted on buffalo hide. Each year, which began with the first snowfall, an image of an event that affected the whole group was added, serving as a memory aid for oral renditions of the tribe’s history. As cloth, paper, and art tools were acquired through trade or in raids, the Lakota began to make images with these materials as well. Ledger books were valued because they were portable and provided many surfaces for drawing and painting, either on blank pages or superimposed on used ones. Black Hawk’s work, though one of the finest examples, is not technically a ledger book, for he drew on separate sheets of paper that were bound in leather by Caton.

Black Hawk drew only two images of his dream before he began, like Audubon (see 6-A) and Catlin (see 6-B), to record the natural world and Lakota customs and ceremonies. He even recorded processions of Crow warriors, traditional enemies of the Lakota. In this image (8-B.1), the Crow are recognizable by their hairstyle: a short tuft swept up at the forehead, and long plaits augmented with extensions and daubed with clay in the back. The Crow were known for their beauty, and Black Hawk described their appearance in detail. Several sport metal bands on their upper arms, and all wear multiple-strand necklaces of white shell beads (wampum), as well as precious eagle feathers (twelve feathers were equal in value to a horse). Some feathers decorate the hair or are carried as fans—two with additional tiers of feathers—while others adorn war lances and forked coup sticks. (Touching an enemy with a coup stick in battle showed a man’s bravery.) Faces are painted red and some bodies are painted red or yellow. The C-shaped horse prints on the middle two figures indicate skill in battle; another man’s legs are marked with diagonal lines that mean “strikes the enemy.” Three men carry beaded and fringed bags to hold the mirrors they acquired through trade.

The other drawing (8-B.2) shows a Lakota social dance performed by men and women. Both sexes wear their hair parted in the middle, the men with feather and quill ornaments, and the women with the part painted yellow or red. There are beaded belts, strips of brass buttons worn around the waist or across the body, shell jewelry, and a beaded bag to hold craft tools (first woman at the left). The most costly dress, worn by the fourth figure from the right, is decorated with rows of the upper canine (eye) teeth of elk, the only two elk’s teeth that are ivory.

We know little about Black Hawk’s life after he produced these ledger drawings. He does not appear in the records of the Cheyenne River Agency after 1889. Scholars believe he is the man named Black Hawk listed among the followers of Big Foot, who were killed at Wounded Knee in the newly formed state of South Dakota in December of the following year.



8-B.1 Black Hawk (c. 1832–1890), “Sans Arc Lakota” Ledger Book (plate no. 18), 1880–1881. Pen, ink, and pencil on paper, 9½ x 16¼ in. (24.13 x 41.275 cm.). Thaw Collection, Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. Photograph © 1998 by John Bigelow Taylor, New York.

8-B.2 Black Hawk (c. 1832–1890), “Sans Arc Lakota” Ledger Book (plate no. 3), 1880–1881. Pen, ink, and pencil on paper, 9½ x 16¼ in. (24.13 x 41.275 cm.). Thaw Collection, Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. Photograph © 1998 by John Bigelow Taylor, New York.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to carefully study the details of this ledger drawing.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E

Have students stand and link arms like the figures in the lower drawing. Discuss how standing and moving together like this shows unity with the group.

E M S

Ask students what the people are doing in both of these drawings. *In the top drawing, warriors are processing or parading; in the lower one, men and women are dancing. Which figures are women? The women have a colored part in the center of their hair.*

E M S

Have students identify repeated patterns in the drawings.

There are many repeated patterns, including the feathers, hoof prints, and fringe.

E M S

Ask students to describe how Black Hawk created a steady rhythm in each of these. *He drew a line of similar figures equally spaced across the page. Ask students to imagine the regular drum beat to which these figures are moving.*

E M S

Ask students what materials Black Hawk used to create fine details in these drawings.

He used lined writing paper, colored pencils, and a pen. The pencil strokes are visible in the long dresses.

Before the Lakota lived on reservations, what materials did their warrior-artists use to create similar traditional drawings of their history and traditions? *They painted similar images on teepee walls and robes made of buffalo hide.*

M S

Have students compare Black Hawk's drawing of American Indians to Catlin's painting (6-B) and N. C. Wyeth's painting (5-B). Ask which of these they think shows the most historically accurate clothing. Why?

American Indian artist Black Hawk was more accurate and familiar with details of his own people's dress than artists of European descent. In his painting, Catlin left out significant details. Wyeth created his work based upon current stereotypes of Indians—for example, he didn't follow Cooper's description.

How is the clothing in Wyeth's and Catlin's art similar to that in Black Hawk's? *In all three pieces of art, Indians wear feathers in their hair. The chief in Catlin's painting wears a fringed shirt and leggings like some of the warriors in Black Hawk's painting. Wyeth's Mohican wears an armband and body and face paint as in Black Hawk's drawing.*

INTERPRET

E M S

What can we learn about the Lakota from these pictures that we might not understand if their history were just written with words? *We can see how they dressed.*

E M S

What were "winter counts" and why did the Lakota and other Plains Indians create these?

Winter counts were paintings on buffalo hide recording communal histories of tribes or families.

E M S

Ask students why it was difficult for Black Hawk and other Sans Arc Lakota families to have food during the winter of 1880–1881. *These Plains Indians were no longer able to hunt buffalo, one of their primary sources of food, because settlers had killed the buffalo to near extinction.*

E M S

Ask students how drawing these pictures helped Black Hawk earn money to feed his family. *William Edward Caton, the trader at the Cheyenne Agency in Dakota, paid Black Hawk thirty-eight dollars for the set of seventy-six drawings.*

M S

Why do you think William Edward Caton wanted these drawings?

Perhaps he realized that American Indian culture and traditions were changing because Indians were no longer able to hunt and live as they had for centuries before settlers moved west.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: Manifest Destiny; Westward Expansion; Battle of Tippecanoe; Plains Indians; Battle of Little Bighorn; Wounded Knee

Historical Figures: Tecumseh; Andrew Jackson; William Henry Harrison; Crazy Horse; George Armstrong Custer; Geronimo

Civics: Indian Removal Act

Geography: Great Plains region

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *Little House in the Big Woods*, Laura Ingalls Wilder

(elementary); *Four Ancestors: Stories, Songs, and Poems from Native North America*, Joseph Bruchac (middle)

Arts: compare to works by George Catlin; compare to Egyptian Book of the Dead