



Father Eugene Buechel  
*photo courtesy of the author*

## FATHER EUGENE BUECHEL AND THE LAKOTA SIOUX

by  
Anthony H. Richter

In the summer of 2002, a newspaper in Germany ran a large photo of a Jesuit priest sitting next to an American Indian with the caption "Mitten unter den Indianern" ("amongst the Indians," translations by the author).<sup>1</sup> The article described how this priest, Eugene Buechel, worked among the Sioux in South Dakota and how he was responsible for the documentation and preservation of the Lakota language and culture. Father Buechel is well-known among the people living on the reservations of South Dakota, but not by others in either the United States or Germany. Buechel lived among the Sioux for almost 50 years, learned their language, catalogued close to 30,000 Lakota words, wrote a grammar book of Lakota, took over 2,000 photographs to document Sioux life, and collected a large number of items given to him by his Indian friends. Father Buechel was instrumental in preserving the Sioux culture and without him much of it would have been lost.

Eugene Buechel was born in Germany, in Schleid, Thüringen, in 1874. Both of his parents came from families of farmers. When Eugene was six years old, his mother died, and six months later his father died.<sup>2</sup> He was the youngest of ten children, and his brothers and sisters took care of him. After attending schools in Schleid and in Fulda, he entered the Society of Jesus in 1897.<sup>3</sup> In July of 1900 he left Europe, never to see Germany again. His superiors sent him to the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in South Dakota, which until 1907 were a part of the German Province of the Jesuit Order. He stayed there working among the Teton Sioux until his death in 1954.

Red Cloud, the chief of the Oglala-Teton-Sioux who had led the fight of the Sioux nation against the U.S. Army between 1865 and 1868, as well as Chief Sinte Gleska (Spotted Tail), were instrumental in getting Jesuits

---

Anthony Richter is a retired professor of German at South Dakota State University. He has published two books and thirty-four articles. His primary research interest is the field of German-American studies. His article "Russian-German Architecture in South Dakota" appeared in *Heritage of the Great Plains*.

instead of Episcopalian priests to serve as missionaries and teachers on these reservations. In the preceding decades, Jesuits, starting with Father Pierre De Smet who met with the Sioux in 1839, had been the first ones to work as missionaries among the Western Sioux, and the Sioux looked at the Jesuits, whom they called "the Blackrobes," as people whom they could trust. In 1870, under President Grant's Peace Policy toward the Indians (also called "the Quaker Policy" because at first Quakers were assigned to many tribes), agencies on the reservations were allotted to various Christian denominations.<sup>4</sup> Episcopalians were assigned to the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations.<sup>5</sup> De Smet and the Catholic hierarchy lobbied against this, but they were ignored by the Department of the Interior. In 1875 Red Cloud, Head Chief of the Oglala Sioux, requested Catholic priests for his people,<sup>6</sup> and in 1877 Spotted Tail petitioned the president to allow the Society of Jesus to work on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations. He was especially interested in having Jesuits serve as teachers of his people.<sup>7</sup> His petition was granted in 1885. The first Jesuits, Father Jutz and Brother Nunlist, arrived in the Indian village of Owl Feather War Bonnet in December of 1885<sup>8</sup> and in the following year, Red Cloud, together with the Jesuits, founded the "Red Cloud Indian School" on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Buechel arrived in South Dakota in 1902 and went to work in the Holy Rosary Mission on the Pine Ridge. He set out to learn the culture and language of the Sioux, and he came to consider it his life's task to help the Sioux preserve as much of their culture as he could, and he adopted the motto: "damit dieses Volk leben kann" ("so that this people can live"). In 1904 he began to document the history of the Sioux as well as their traditions and customs, and he drew pictures and sketches of their implements and their clothing. He learned the Lakota language and carefully catalogued close to 30,000 Lakota words with their English meanings. This became the largest and most complete collection of its kind. Father Joseph Karol, who worked at the St. Francis mission, reports that Buccael kept cataloguing new words he learned from conversations with his Lakota friends right up to the day he died and that he used Lakota constantly with all those around him as well as in prayer meetings and in several hundred sermons and instructions.<sup>12</sup>

Red Cloud became Buechel's close friend. In the winter of 1909 Buechel officiated at the funeral of his friend Red Cloud. Around that time

Buechel wrote the following to his superiors: "Jedes Mal, wenn ich von dem Mann lese, der von Jerusalem nach Jericho ging und unter die Räuber fiel und der entkleidet und dem alles gestohlen und der fast tot verlassen wurde, dann kann ich es nicht sein lassen, an die Indianer zu denken. Armer indianischer Bruder, mein Herz zerbricht für dich, wenn ich ansehen muss, wie missverstanden du bist, falsch beurteilt und schlecht behandelt."<sup>11</sup> "Every time when I read of the man who went from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among the robbers and who disrobed and from whom everything was stolen and who was left almost dead then I cannot avoid thinking of the Indians. Poor Indian brother, my heart breaks for you, when I have to see how you are misunderstood, wrongly judged and badly treated." This sentiment is similar to what Captain Cook wrote in 1777 about the Maori of New Zealand: "We interduce among them wants and diseases which they never before knew -- ... If anyone denies the truth of this assertion, let him tell me what the Natives of America have gained by the commerce they have had with Europeans."<sup>12</sup>

Buechel taught at the school of the St. Francis Mission and rebuilt the school buildings when a fire destroyed everything except one dormitory in 1916. He visited the sick and the dying and did what he could during epidemics of scarlet fever in 1913, measles in 1915, and influenza in 1918. There were not only the hardships of nature, such as hostile weather, snow, hail, and prairie fires, but also manmade ones when government rations were withheld as they were periodically.<sup>13</sup> Buechel visited scattered communities to help the people with material needs as well as to promote their spiritual ones.

Buechel was influential at the two Catholic boarding schools of Holy Rosary on the Pine Ridge Reservation and the St. Francis Indian School on the Rosebud Reservation. Not only did he have direct contact with a very large number of parents and students, but he was also directly involved with the catechist program on the reservations. Realizing that there were not enough priests to serve the people on the reservations, the Jesuits recruited Lakota catechists to help them. Catechists were trained to instruct new converts, to preach and to teach the youth, and to work with the priests in pastoral work, and they were very much involved in reading and writing. Catechists were the agents who carried out what the missionaries proposed. They were considered community leaders, and they took pride in their positions and often served for

a very long time. Many could not speak English. Buechel would instruct them in what they were to teach those people whom the missionaries could not reach. Among the catechists working with Buechel was one of the world's best-known religious figures, Black Elk, a holy man of the Oglala. In interviews given to John G. Neihardt, who wrote the book, *Black Elk Speaks*, Black Elk recited the prayer he said on Harney Peak, in which he used the phrase "hear me, that my people will live."<sup>14</sup> To do everything he could, so that the culture of the Lakota would live, would also become Father Buechel's focal point, according to Joseph Büchel, his grand-nephew, who lives in Erfurt, Germany.<sup>15</sup>

Black Elk fought in the battle of Little Big Horn in 1876, was a revered medicine man of the Oglala, and went to England with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in 1887. He and three other Oglalas, none of whom could speak English, got lost in Manchester,<sup>16</sup> and Buffalo Bill sailed back to America without them. Stranded, Black Elk joined another wild west show and traveled with it through Germany, France, and Italy. After spending two years in Europe, including a year in Germany, Black Elk returned to South Dakota in 1889 and told his people about the white men's customs.<sup>17</sup> Michael Steltenkamp, author of *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*, speculates that "Black Elk's receptivity of the German Jesuits may very well have been aided by his familiarity with Germany itself."<sup>18</sup> Black Elk told an interviewer that on his travels across the reservation he would take along a big loaf of bread that one of the Jesuits had baked for him and "a box of chicken, some potatoes, and sauerkraut too."<sup>19</sup> The Jesuits on both reservations were predominantly German, and apparently sauerkraut was a regular menu item.

In 1926 Father Buechel built a catechist's house north of the Holy Rosary Mission, and he called Black Elk there to take over the work.<sup>20</sup> Black Elk helped Buechel in teaching the children, and he also conducted Sunday services when Buechel was not able to come. An entry in Buechel's diary from December 23, 1928, reads: "Drove home from Oglala. On the way Black Elk and I prayed for Mrs. Charles Eagle Louse who is sick."<sup>21</sup>

Buechel worked as a missionary-priest-linguist, and in 1924 he published a *Bible History in the Language of the Teton Sioux Indians*. This book of 349 pages is written entirely in Lakota. Buechel was an expert on the Lakota dialect, and this book, as well as the *Sioux Indian Prayer and Hymn Book* which he published in 1927, greatly helped the Lakotas' study of the Catholic religion. He also translated into Lakota all the weekly Bible readings and many hymns.<sup>22</sup> The primary purpose of this was to help the people learn and understand

Catholicism, but he also wanted to preserve the Lakota language.

To help preserve the culture of the Sioux people, Buechel collected Lakota legends, and in 1978 Father Paul Manhart published a book of "Lakota Tales and Texts" written and compiled by members of the Oglala and by Eugene Buechel. Manhart wrote, "In putting this collection of Lakota writings before you, I am doing so with two dreams going. First, that I might do this for our Sioux people, especially for the young. And second, that I might see, and try more to see, what was the dream about the future of the tribes in the minds and hearts like old Walker and young Buechel's, as on June 5, 1904. That day they sat down together to talk and to write. Old Walker spoke; Buechel wrote his words in a little book that fit neatly into his shirt pocket. He wrote in Lakota. ... Walker seemed stirred to a generous openness with this young Jesuit seminarian trying to 'see red'," trying to "think Indian."<sup>23</sup>

In fact, Buechel came to identify himself with the Indians. Father Joseph Gill, who lived on the reservation at that time and who is still alive today, reports that Buechel reacted quickly and seriously to any visitors who showed a lack of understanding or acceptance of the Sioux culture, and he would often start his explanation with the words, "we Indians feel" or "we Indians believe."<sup>24</sup> Father Gill was with Buechel for a little more than a year, and he was much impressed by his kindness and wisdom.<sup>25</sup> Gill points out that when Buechel was pastor at St. Patrick's Church in Spring Creek, he had an office next to the front door. "He had a constant stream of Lakota visitors (mostly elderly). He counseled in Lakota and prayed with them--and he was always checking on Lakota words."<sup>26</sup> Writing down what people on the Pine Ridge Reservation told him, Buechel collected Lakota legends, stories, and tales throughout his life. In addition to writing these down himself, he taught young men and women at the Mission school how to write their Lakota language. Buechel not only became fluent in the language of the people, but also worked on a Lakota-English dictionary. Until 1934 the federal government had worked to eradicate the language of the native Americans, but after 1934 the use of native languages was permitted. To compile his dictionary, Buechel constantly asked the people around him, including the students at the Mission School, for the meaning of Lakota words and phrases. While the nuns scolded the students for speaking Lakota in the classroom, Father Buechel spoke Lakota with them during recess.<sup>27</sup>

During his entire life, Buechel collected Lakota words and phrases

which he wrote down on notecards. He was not able to finish his dictionary during his life, but in 1970 Father Paul Manhart published Buechel's collection in *A Dictionary of the Teton Dakota Sioux Language*. James Green, a teacher of Lakota at South Dakota State University, points out that Buechel's dictionary remains the authoritative reference on the Lakota language to this day, and nothing else of the magnitude or comprehensiveness of his dictionary has ever appeared.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Buechel's dictionary is considered to be of such quality that it was re-published with further editing in 2003. When asked for the reasons for reissuing Buechel's dictionary, which is now over 60 years old, Father Paul Manhart writes that Buechel's collection of Lakota words and definitions remains unmatched, that it is still the authoritative reference on the Lakota language, that the usage illustrations are not to be found anywhere else, and that the beauty of the text is most outstanding.<sup>29</sup>

Buechel felt that the preservation of the language would be the key to preserving the people's culture. His study of Lakota resulted in the publication of a 378-page grammar book in 1939. In the preface to his book, *A Grammar of Lakota*, he stated his commitment in the following words: "In time, however, they would yield to the white man's ways and gradually adopt his language. And the day would come when the Indians would know but little or nothing of their own mother tongue... But who was to help them? In order to assist them the author has prepared this book which may aid to preserve their speech for posterity."<sup>30</sup>

In 1939, a few months after Buechel's grammar book appeared, the National Academy of Sciences published a *Dakota Grammar* book written by Ella Deloria and Franz Boas. Boas was an anthropologist, and Deloria, a student of Boas, was proficient in the translation of *Dakota* into English. Miss Deloria was a graduate of Columbia University, her parents were Yankton Sioux, and she grew up among the Teton Sioux. The *Grammar* book published by Boas and Deloria contains no references to Buechel's *Grammar of Lakota* because Buechel's book appeared only a few months before theirs. But in the preface Boas acknowledges that Buechel's work "contains much valuable material in an improved orthography."<sup>31</sup>

The title of Deloria's and Boas's grammar book is *Dakota Grammar* whereas the title of Buechel's book is *A Grammar of Lakota*. There are dialectical differences between *Dakota* and *Lakota*. Since earlier works such

as that by Stephen Riggs in 1892 and by John Williamson in 1902 used the Dakota dialect, it appears that Buechel's work is the first devoted to the Lakota dialect of the Teton Sioux west of the Missouri River.

Both Green and Steltenkamp report that Buechel's name is legendary among older Lakota speakers, and Steltenkamp quotes one of them who said: "We can't teach the young people how to talk Indian. The only man who ever spoke it perfect was Father Buechel, and he's dead."<sup>32</sup> Green was told by elderly Sioux people that when Buechel talked with them, he would use old words which they no longer knew.

Buechel was held in very high esteem by the Lakotas. They gave those whom they considered a part of their group a Lakota name, and they called him Wanbli Sapa, which means Black Eagle. For the Lakotas the eagle was a sacred animal and to call him "eagle" was a great honor.

In 1922 Buechel started to photograph the Rosebud Sioux community in which he lived. He wanted to document the life of these people, their customs, clothing, buildings, events, celebrations, and to preserve all this before it might disappear. Buechel's photographs remained comparatively unknown until 1976 when examples of the pictures of three photographers, John Anderson, Eugene Buechel, and Don Doll, who had lived on the Rosebud Reservation, were published. Ben Black Bear, Jr., wrote: "These three men lived among the people, lived as they did, and got to know the thoughts and attitudes of the people. These men took photographs of the people based on the knowledge and identity they had with the people. They felt a need to preserve the memory of the Lakota in photographic form in such a way that the photographs will tell a story," and that these pictures are like "a winter count in modern day form."<sup>33</sup> Herman Viola, the Director of the National Anthropological Archives, points out that Buechel's invaluable photographs document Sioux life in an era when they were literally a forgotten people.<sup>34</sup> His pictures document life on the reservation, from the cooking of meals to wedding feasts to tribal ceremonies, from children sitting in classrooms to people attending funerals. He recorded people and events on the Rosebud Reservation, and he carefully numbered the prints and identified the subject matter. The first entry in his photo diary is from August 14, 1922, and the last one is numbered 2,128 and is dated October 13, 1945. He regularly gave his pictures as gifts to the people he had photographed.



The people among whom he lived gave him presents as well, including shawls, moccasins, earrings, medallions, war shirts, blouses, headdresses, beaded saddle bags, pipe bags, and tools. His collection of several hundred items were to become a precious resource for students of the Sioux culture. They are now housed in the Buechel Memorial Lakota Museum on the Rosebud Reservation, named after the man whose foresight and interest in the culture of the people he served made this collection possible.

In addition to all of this, he carefully preserved specimens of the plants he found on the reservations and wrote identifications in Latin, English, and Lakota. The plant collection was another aid in preserving the culture of the Lakota people. His labels contain standard information as to family, genus, and species, as well the English common name and the locality. But in addition to this, Buechel added the Lakota name, as well as remarks about the origin of the name and the uses of the plant. There are approximately 300 plants in his collection. Many of the plant uses given by Buechel are medicinal as well as spiritual or religious, and as the author of Buechel's plant book points out, his work has "cultural, historical, and spiritual relevance."<sup>35</sup> Buechel's sources were accomplished herbalists, and therefore his collection preserves an element of Lakota culture which might otherwise not exist.

Father Joseph Gill had a long conversation with Buechel in early June of 1954, shortly after school had closed for the summer, and says that Buechel "talked about his life as a priest and about his interest in the language and culture. Although the thinking of many of the priests of the time was that the language (and culture) was dying, he was very clearly opposed to that opinion."<sup>36</sup> Father Gill experienced him as "a deeply spiritual person who loved the people (and the language and culture)."<sup>37</sup> Father Buechel died in October of 1954, at the age of 80. He was buried in the St. Francis cemetery. His gravestone has the inscription "Eugenius Buechel, S.J." but his Lakota friends called him Wanbli Sapa, the Black Eagle.

## NOTES

1. Carsten Kieswetter, "Mein Herz zerbricht für dich." *Tag des Herrn* (Leipzig, Germany), 14 July 2002, 16.

2. Jon Peter Rolie, *Der Mann aus der Rhön, der zu den Indianern ging*, trans. Norbert Haunschield. (Erfurt, Germany: self-published by Josef Büchel, 2002), 10.
3. Don Doll and Jim Alinder, *Crying for a Vision: A Rosebud Sioux Trilogy 1886-1976*. (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Morgan & Morgan, 1976), unpagued.
4. Robert H. Keller, Jr., *American Protestantism and United States Indian Policy, 1869-82*. (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1983), 17-18.
5. Ross Enochs, *The Jesuit Mission to the Lakota Sioux*. (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 21.
6. Enochs, 22.
7. Michael Flecky, *Photo Album, St. Francis Mission, School and Community, 1886-1976*. Rosebud Educational Society, 1976), 9.
8. Victor Douville, *Buechel Memorial Lakota Museum*, (St. Francis, SD: Little Sioux Press, 1973), 17.
9. Kieswetter, 16.
10. Joseph Karol, preface to *Lakota-English Dictionary* by Eugene Buechel. (Pine Ridge, S.D.: Red Cloud Indian School, 1983).
11. Kieswetter, 16.
12. David Gates, "A Genuine Cook's Tour." *Newsweek* (7 Oct. 2002), 72.
13. Flecky, 13.
14. Raymond J. DeMallie, ed. *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt*. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1984), 296.
15. Josef Büchel, letter to the author, 14 Nov. 2002.
16. De Mallie, 251.
17. De Mallie, 8.
18. Steltenkamp, 185.
19. *Ibid.*, 53.
20. DeMallie, 26.
21. Steltenkamp, 58.
22. Enochs, 91.
23. Paul Manhart, ed., *Lakota Tales and Texts*, (St. Louis, MO: Johu Swift Co, 1978), 2.
24. Rolie, 18.
25. Gill, Joseph, letter to the author, 13 Nov. 2002.
26. *Ibid.*
27. William Moore, "Black Eagle on Sioux Syntax," *Jesuit Missions* (Nov. 1939), 262.
28. James Green, Adjunct Professor of Lakota, South Dakota State University, personal interview, 11 Oct. 2002.
29. Paul Manhart, letter to the author, Nov. 10, 2002.
30. Eugene Buechel, *A Grammar of Lakota*, (St. Francis, S.D.: Saint Francis Mission, 1939), iv.
31. Franz Boas and Ella Deloria, *Dakota Grammar*. (New York: Columbia University, 1939), 2.

32. Steltenkamp, 64.
33. Doll, foreword to *Crying for a Vision: A Rosebud Sioux Trilogy 1886-1976*.
34. Ibid.
35. Dilwyn J. Rogers. *Lakota Names and Traditional Uses of Native Plants by Sicangu (Brule) People in the Rosebud Area, South Dakota*. (St. Francis, SD: Rosebud Educational Society, 1980), viii.
36. Gill