

## PLAINS INDIANS SHIELDS: A KIOWA MISCELLANY by Ronald McCoy

Before their confinement to reservations, Plains Indian warriors carried painted buffalo hide shields into combat. These shields helped to ward off blows from clubs, lances, and arrows, and also served as mantles of supernatural protection.



*Kiowa Warrior White Horse holding his shield, photographed near Anadarko, Oklahoma by James Mooney about 1891. See also page 7. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.*

This esoteric attribute emanated from a warrior's personal, spiritually revelatory experience during a vision or dream, when mystical forces came into play and offered

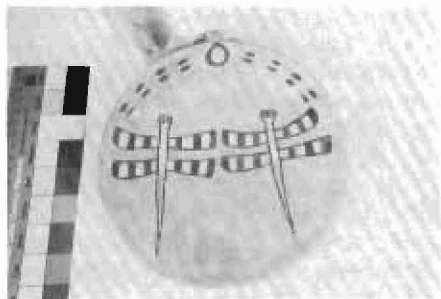
spiritual assistance. These forces of a supernatural power, often called Medicine, were represented in designs painted on a shield's surface and in such attachments as feathers, roots, and stuffed animals. Images of fast-darting dragon flies appear on some shields; so, too, depictions of buffalo, bear, elk, and horses, powerful and respected creatures all. Zigzag lightning streaks and circles brought enemies up against the destructive power of thunder and hail. Pendants of feathers added to a shield's effectiveness: an owl's imparted that bird's remarkable night vision, a golden eagle's inspired courage, a swift-flying hawk's made a warrior difficult to strike in combat. Braided sweetgrass, the fragrant incense of many Plains Indian ceremonies, combined with such exotica as weasel skins, stuffed flickers, deer hooves, and buckskin pouches containing personal charms, also found places on shields.



*Model of a Kiowa Bird Shield, made for James Mooney c. 1904. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.*

With Medicine, a warrior went into battle fully armed; without it, he was stripped of advantage. During the Plains

Indian Wars of the 1860s and 1870s guns' shield-shattering effects convinced many combatants they were better off leaving their heavy shields at home. Still, they used the Medicine attached to those shields--animal skins, feathers, and buckskin cover--fastening it in their hair, around their necks, or in horses' manes. The existence of miniature shields, about six inches in diameter--fixed to a man's scalp lock or worn as a necklace--and the use of buckskin capes painted with the shield designs, demonstrate that it was not the physical shield but the spiritual shield warriors turned to in time of need.

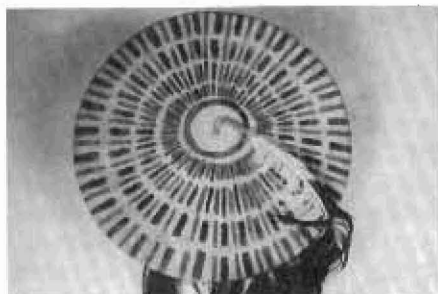


*Model of Dragonfly Shield owned by Rough Bull, an Arikara who lived with the Kiowas until his death around 1830. Model made for James Mooney c. 1904. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution*

Little reliable information about shields' origins, symbolism, and attendant ritual survived the cultural dislocation of the Plains Indian Wars, though at least one comprehensive study of this arcane subject was undertaken. Between 1891-1906, James Mooney, a gifted ethnologist for the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology, immersed himself in exhaustive fieldwork among the Kiowas and closely related Kiowa-Apaches in Oklahoma. Once the Kiowas reigned supreme in South Dakota's Black Hills. Then the Cheyennes pushed them out and the Kiowas moved onto the Southern Plains. The Kiowas and Kiowa-Apaches roamed across parts of Texas and

Oklahoma, up into Kansas, raiding deep into Mexico and westward into New Mexico. From their ranks came such luminaries as Satank and Satanta, both legendary leaders of the elite ten-member Koitsenko (Real Dogs) warrior society. During the Plains Indian Wars, these people combined with the Comanches and formed a barrier across the southern and central Great Plains in response to the United States' westward drive.

Mooney achieved the primary goal of his investigations among the Kiowas and Kiowa-Apaches early on, with the Smithsonian's publication in 1898 of his *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians*. Merging oral history and pictographic chronicles with documentary sources, he constructed an admirably well-rounded tribal portrait, a tour de force which remains a classic.



*Model of buckskin cover for shield owned by Kiowa warrior Under the Mountain, who was killed in Texas in 1859. Model collected by James Mooney c. 1904. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.*

Along the way, Mooney became fascinated with Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache painted tipis and shields. As far as shields in particular were concerned, Mooney wrote: "There were formerly about fifty shield patterns used in the two tribes, and all the warriors carrying shields of the same pattern constituted a close brotherhood, with similar war cries, body paint, and ceremonial taboos and regulations." He hoped to write a study of

Kiowa heraldry but this project remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1921. Mooney's fieldnotes and nearly two hundred miniature models of Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache shields--made by tribesmen intimately familiar with their sacred symbolic values--were deposited in the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History and at the National Anthropological Archives and largely forgotten. This documentary information and the accompanying material artifacts so laboriously amassed by James Mooney are currently being subjected to systematic examination. Although in its preliminary phases, this examination already reveals that Mooney left a rich portrait of the once-vibrant Plains Indian shield complex as it existed among the Kiowa and Kiowa-Apaches. The purpose of this article is to highlight this fact through the presentation of a miscellany of information about Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache shields from the work now in progress.

#### *How the Kiowas First Obtained Shields*

Aged Kiowa informants drew from the rich tradition of tribal legend when telling Mooney the story of how their people first acquired shields. One cold winter, they said, when the snow was deep, the members of a Kiowa camp went out on a buffalo hunt. They left a young fellow named Poor Sore-Eyed Boy behind, alone with his grandmother. Since there was no meat in their tipi, Poor Sore-Eyed Boy and his grandmother left their lodge and headed off toward where the people were killing buffalo. They hoped in this way to get some meat but in the end obtained only a little and even that tasted bad. On the way back to their tipi, the pair came to a place where there was no snow on the ground. Poor Sore-Eyed Boy looked at the area and decided this marked the spot where a bear must have slept.

"Grandmother," he said, "I will sleep

here."

"I won't let you," she protested.

"I'm poor and can't see good," Poor Sore-Eyed Boy replied. "If I grow up, there's no way I can help you. It's better that I die here."

Finally, his grandmother left and Poor Sore-Eyed Boy fell asleep. That night, he heard a terrible noise and awoke. The noise came toward him and when Poor Sore-Eyed Boy looked he saw it was a rock.

"This is my place," said Rock. "Let me get to my place."

"You can kill me if you want," answered Poor Sore-Eyed Boy. "But I'm not getting up."

Rock and Poor Sore-Eyed Boy argued and at last Rock said, "If you'll give me my place back, I'll give you Medicine for your protection."

Poor Sore-Eyed Boy accepted the offer of Rock, who gave him the first shield. Some of the Kiowas said the shield Rock gave Poor Sore-Eyed Boy was painted red all over. When he went to war, Poor Sore-Eyed Boy painted his body red and carried a red-painted stick to which was attached a hand strap, like on a quirt, and buffalo hooves. He was often hit by enemies' arrows but they always fell away without hurting him. With that shield, Poor Sore-Eyed Boy became a great warrior and a powerful man.

#### *White-Faced Bull Gets a Shield*

Mooney's informants also told him what happened when White-Faced Bull, who died around 1840 or 1850, ascended a mountain in search of supernatural assistance. There an unseen spirit spoke to him. "I will help you," said the spirit. "Come and we will give you a shield to help you through life."

Looking about, White-Faced Bull saw a flock of many different kinds of birds. As he watched, the birds were suddenly transformed into a group of warriors on

horseback. The warriors, clad in elegant clothes, wore beautiful paint and warbonnets. When they started riding by him slowly in single file, White-Faced Bull saw that they carried magnificent shields. The spirit voice spoke again to White-Faced Bull. "Don't take any of these shields," the spirit advised. "Wait for the last one, which is the best."

After the first group of warriors passed, White-Faced Bull saw four more men riding toward him. Again the spirit-voice spoke. "Take one of these shields," it said.

So White-Faced Bull took the last shield. It was painted yellow with a light blue center and twenty-four small green spots separated from the yellow field by a heavy black circle. White-Faced Bull also obtained the feathered lance case carried by the mystery rider as well as the painted design he wore.

#### *Some Shield Taboos*

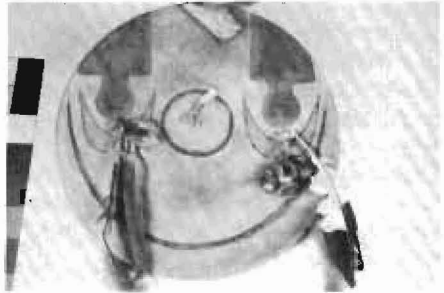
Numerous taboos were associated with Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache shields. Owners of some shields could not eat tripe. Others foreswore heart. Some refused to consume food touched by metal. Timber Mountain always went into battle barefoot. Meat served to White-Faced Bull needed to be lifted from the pot with a buffalo rib. White-Faced Bull was also required to hold his pipe in his left hand and all those with whom he smoked imitated the action. This meant White-Faced Bull could not enjoy a smoke with the owner of a Bird Shield inspired by the vision of Fair-Haired Old Man, since a Bird Shield owner had to hold his pipe with both hands.

#### *The Origin of the Buffalo Shield*

The depth characteristic of much of Mooney's research is indicated by some of the information he obtained concerning the Buffalo Shield. His source in this instance was One Who Carries A Buffalo's

Lower Leg. Born around 1816, he was the oldest man in the tribe.

According to One Who Carries A Buffalo's Lower Leg, some time in the late 18th century a pair of Kiowa women escaped from their Pawnee captors. Chased by a bear, they arrived at a large rock, next to which stood a tree. One of the women climbed the tree but the other, known as Buffalo Old Woman, clambered on top of the rock. Then a bear came and ate the woman in the tree. He was unable to reach Buffalo Old Woman, who escaped that night.



*Model for cover of Kiowa shield owned by Timber Mountain, who first used this design in 1862. Model made for James Mooney c. 1904. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.*

As Buffalo Old Woman was making her way back to the Kiowas a rainstorm struck and she found shelter inside the carcass of a buffalo bull. There, she slept. And it was while she was asleep that the buffalo spirit told her about the Buffalo Shield and its strong Medicine. (This crawling-inside-the-buffalo-and-receiving-a-dream motif was probably relatively widespread among Plains Indian tribes, hardly surprising given the critical role the buffalo herds played in group survival. For example, William Wildschut reported a similar occurrence associated with a Crow warrior. Indeed, Mooney learned of another Kiowa named Bird Chief who in 1852 at the age of about nineteen also found shelter in a buffalo's carcass and

received advice from the animal's spirit).

The day after her encounter with the buffalo spirit, Buffalo Old Woman arrived home and told her husband about the Buffalo Shield. Because she was a woman she could not use the Buffalo Shield for herself. Instead, she guided her husband as he made seven shields and then painted them herself. The men for whom the first Buffalo Shields were made had sons, and so they made additional shields.

There were more Buffalo Shields among the Kiowas than any other kind. This was because anyone who owned a Buffalo Shield could make one for his son or some other young man who paid for it. Eventually, at least twenty-seven Buffalo Shields existed, and while at least a dozen could be accounted for in 1867, only a single example survived among the Kiowas in Mooney's day.

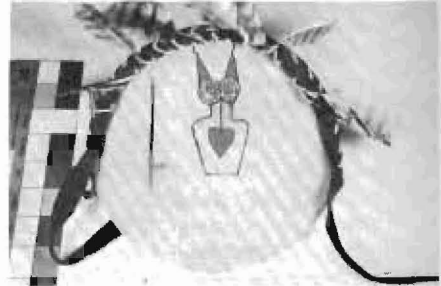
Buffalo Shields existed in various patterns. A blue center might signify a buffalo wallow. Short red lines might evoke the idea of the earth plowed up by animals' hooves. A yellow border could represent the dust that rose in the air when a bull shook itself. However they differed from one another, all Buffalo Shields boasted pendants of buffalo hair and Roughleg Hawk feathers.

### *Buffalo Dreamers*

Warriors who owned Buffalo Shields were also Buffalo Dreamers, healers who specialized in treating gunshot or arrow wounds; all Kiowa war parties were supposed to be accompanied by at least one Buffalo Dreamer. This power did not come to a warrior just because he owned a Buffalo Shield but when an opportunity arose for him to learn about it by watching Buffalo Dreamers working their cure on a wounded comrade. Then, he lit a pipe, went into the tipi where the healing ceremony took place, and offered the pipe to the Buffalo Dreamers. After swallowing blood from the wounded man's

body--which, an oldtimer assured Mooney, tasted "sweet as sugar"--the initiate dreamed about the Buffalo Medicine.

Before going into battle it was customary for each shield owner to make his war cries and perform the other ceremonial actions prescribed for invoking the Medicine power associated with his



*Model of shield owned by Kiowa visionary Screaming on High (Marnande), who died during his imprisonment in Florida in 1875. Model made for James Mooney c. 1904. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.*

shield; customary, too, that warriors who were associated with one another by virtue of the fact that each owned the same type of shield made Medicine together. Nearly every kind of shield had its own distinctive war cry. Warriors carrying Buffalo Shields, for example, entered the fray grunting like buffalo bulls, precisely the sound they uttered while doctoring someone. Buffalo Dreamers wore a special headdress, a cap made of the hair buffalo shed in spring, painted red; red-streaked chicken hawk feathers were attached to this cap, which the Buffalo Dreamer carried inside his shield until just before going into battle, when he put it on. This was the time he painted the left side of his head and body red, coating the other half with white paint made of mud mixed with roots. His face was smeared brown-red, with a bright red spot on the forehead and white spots along his chin.

A Buffalo Dreamer was not allowed to place the horn, hoof, or tail of a

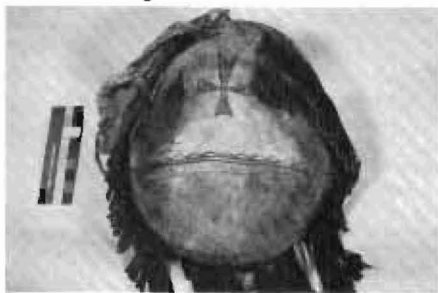
buffalo into a fire, and guests adhered to this restriction while in his lodge. No bones should be broken near the Buffalo Shield warrior while he doctored a wounded man. Buffalo Dreamers could not eat raw meat nor any from the wounded part of an animal. No animal's limbs could be broken in the tipi where a Buffalo Shield owner lived and he was prohibited from putting tipi pegs into a fire.

#### *Ceremonial Transfer of the Buffalo Shield*

When a shield owner died his shield might be placed under his head and buried with him. Often, though, as he grew older, a Buffalo Dreamer might decide to pass his shield on to another warrior, someone who had discreetly expressed a desire to join the brotherhood. This was typically his own son.

The would-be initiate went to the Buffalo Shield owner's tipi, entered the lodge, lit a pipe and gave it to his host, who stated the shield's price: often some blankets and four or five horses. Sometimes the Buffalo Dreamer instructed his visitor to take the Buffalo Shield to a remote mountain or other solitary place and fast for four days. When the supplicant went to sleep, he placed the shield under his head so he would dream about Buffalo Medicine. Upon returning to the village the warrior built a Buffalo Medicine Sweatlodge. (A sweatlodge was an igloo-like steambath in which men sat around a pit. Rocks were heated outside the sweatlodge, then piled in the pit and sprinkled from time to time with water. These structures played a key role in many Plains Indian ceremonies.) In the case of the Buffalo Medicine Sweatlodge of the Kiowas, the initiate made the hut by bending seventeen wooden poles over and covering them with buffalo robes; he covered the dirt floor with fragrant sage and hung a buffalo hide with the head and horns intact over the doorway.

The candidate for admission to the ranks of Buffalo Dreamers went among the tribe, notifying people of his intentions and gathering up Buffalo Shields. After taking the shields from their tripods he stacked them outside the Buffalo Medicine Sweathouse, then entered the ceremonial enclosure with the oldest Buffalo Dreamer and lit a fire in the pit. The supplicant then brought the Buffalo Shields to the sweatlodge. After pretending to enter three times and going inside on the fourth attempt he laid the shields on top of one another, right-side-up, opposite the doorway. Then the Buffalo Dreamer whose shield the candidate desired approached the sweatlodge, feigning entrance three times before venturing inside on his fourth attempt and sitting next to the shields. The remaining Buffalo Dreamers entered the same way and sat in a circle facing the door.



*Cow shield owned by Kiowa warrior White Horse. The Maltese cross motif at the top represents the Morning Star. Collected from White Horse by James Mooney in 1891. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.*

The Buffalo Dreamers called to the candidate waiting outside, who entered the sweatlodge with charcoal for the fire and approached the owner of the Buffalo Shield he desired. In front of the shield owner a pipe rested on the ground. The man who wanted the Buffalo Shield lit it. He offered the pipe to the sun, earth, and four winds, after which it was passed from man to man. The candidate then left the

lodge and went to the fire outside, where he used long sticks to retrieve heated stones, passing them through the door to the Buffalo Dreamers, who sat inside the sweatlodge, praying for him and singing Buffalo Songs. Meanwhile, the seeker of the Buffalo Shield remained outside, fasting until the ceremony's completion, which would require as much as an entire day. At the ritual's conclusion the Buffalo Dreamer who gave up his shield took the horses and blankets proffered by the recipient, depositing most of the blankets on the prairie as a gift to the Great Mystery; sometimes one or more of the horses would be tied to a tree and left there to die as a sacrifice.

When a Buffalo Dreamer died, his shield was buried with him unless it had already been given away. If the Buffalo Shield was buried with its owner and his son later wanted it, he went into the mountains alone or to his father's grave. There he kept vigil, fasting for four days. Upon returning to his people he approached the Buffalo Dreamers and told them he wanted his father's shield. They then gathered together in council

and made their comrade's son his own Buffalo Shield.

Through accounts such as these, James Mooney's notes provide a window onto the Plains Indian shield complex, a vista fundamentally alien to those who confined the Plains Indian peoples to reservations. Over the years, young Kiowas were subjected to indoctrination at missions and the government's schools. Along the way, the shield complex was largely forgotten, just one more aspect of a dim past.

But the fact remains that for Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache warriors the blessings flowing to them through shield Medicine were perceived to be just as real, fully as efficacious, as any benefit accruing to Hebrews from the Ark of the Covenant, to Christians bathing at Lourdes, Hindus flocking to the banks of the Ganges, or Islam's adherents making pilgrimage to Mecca. The sooner that fact is acknowledged, the sooner we will attain a more complete knowledge of and appreciation for one of the most poorly-known yet powerful aspects of America's Plains Indian heritage.

#### *Recommended Reading*

- Paul Dyck, "The Plains Shield," *American Indian Art Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1975, 34-41.
- Michael Kan and William Wierzbowski, "Notes on an Important Southern Cheyenne Shield," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, Vol. 57, No. 3, 1979, 123-125.
- Ronald McCoy, "Circles of Power," *Plateau*, Vol. 44, No. 4, The Museum of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff, 1984.
- William Wildschut, "Crow Indian Medicine Bundles," John C. Ewers, ed., *Contributions from the Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation*, New York, 1975.
- Clark Wissler, "Some Protective Designs of the Dakota," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, No. 1, Pt. 2, New York, 1907.

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