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The Illustrated American and the Lakota Ghost Dance

Karen Bearor
The ceremonial dance contemporary reporters dubbed the ghost dance has inspired shelves of books and hundreds of articles, both popular and scholarly. Called the spirit dance by the Lakota, it was part of a revivalist and millennialist movement sweeping through Native American tribes in the West in the late 1880s and early 1890s. As such, it remains cemented in the country’s collective consciousness by its association with the Wounded Knee Massacre on December 29, 1890, that inglorious symbol for both the end of the Indian wars and the failure of governmental and reformist policies.

Exaggerated news accounts appearing in regional and national newspapers contributed to the hysteria resulting in the tragedy at Wounded Knee. Reporters variously described an “uprising,” an “outbreak,” and a “war.” “It was none of these—except in the columns of the contemporary press,” declared Elmo Watson, the first scholar to look more closely at the sensationalized coverage, with its lurid headlines, hyperbolic reporting, and sometimes invented “news.”¹ Decades later, William S. E. Coleman, a Drake University professor of theatre arts, inserted excerpts from these news accounts into the running narrative of his Voices of Wounded Knee (2000). More recently, Rani-Henrik Andersson, a Finnish specialist in North American studies, chronicled coverage by the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune, Harper’s Weekly, the Omaha Daily Bee, and the Yankton Press and Dakotan in a chapter of his Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890 (2008). However, scholars have yet to examine the images accompanying these accounts with the same scrutiny. Apart from Frederic Remington’s art for Harper’s Weekly (see Figure 1), few of these illustrations have been discussed at all, and those only in isolation.

Lost, then, are the interpretive frames for these images. Today’s readers, seeing the images divorced from their original layouts, lack a means to determine how individual newspapers defined or constructed the controversy across a series of issues or within a single number. Missing, too, are the correspondents’ stated (or perhaps latent) agendas, which might inflect their readers’ interpretations of the artwork. Out of context, the images lack indices of facticity—those means by

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which newspapers sought to secure readers’ confidence in the veracity of what they see. Sketches made “on-the-spot” were often more convincing than blurred or staged photographs, but accompanying captions and reporters’ accounts supplied necessary perspective.

A chronicling of multiple images, akin to what Andersson did with news accounts, is beyond the scope of this paper. Three major illustrated weeklies—Harper’s Weekly, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, and the Illustrated American—covered events while daily papers occasionally ran images as well. Reproductions in the Illustrated American, though, are worth examining in some detail. Less familiar than the reporting in either Harper’s Weekly or Frank Leslie’s, the Illustrated American’s coverage of the messiah religion and the ghost dance movement was limited to a handful of illustrated articles in December 1890 and January 1891. Further, we know the anonymous “special correspondent” to be archeologist-anthropologist Warren King Moorehead. Thus, one can speculate about his point of view and how this might have affected the selection of images. As I will demonstrate, the program that publisher Lorillard Spencer and managing editor Maurice Meyer Minton established for the Illustrated American also combined to set a particular tone for the articles appearing in its pages. This tone differed substantially
from those of competing illustrated weeklies despite overlapping coverage and sentiments. Moorehead’s academic writing style and Minton’s disarming editorial comments contrasted sharply with the more inflammatory writing of the daily press, Harper’s, and Frank Leslie’s. As I argue here, this framing, along with Moorehead’s reformist sympathies, allowed the images appearing with his articles to be interpreted less as a call to arms than as a call for greater cultural understanding of the Lakota, even if his ultimate goal was their assimilation.

To better understand the Illustrated American’s engagement with the issues surrounding the messiah religion, a brief background is necessary regarding the magazine and the respective roles of the federal government and reformists in their attempts to manage Native Americans, especially the Lakota. A short introduction to the messiah religion precedes biographical information on Moorehead and a discussion of his articles for the news magazine and their illustrations.

In March 1890 Theatre Magazine trumpeted the recent birth of the weekly Illustrated American, whose first issue hit newsstands February 22: “The Illustrated American burst upon an unsuspecting public [three weeks ago] with a glory that has never before been equaled in illustrated journalism. It purposes to give pictorially the news of the world; photograph men, manners and things, and to explore into obscure places for interesting facts. It is printed on heavy plate paper and has a wealth of superb engravings in each number. The expense of this enterprise must be simply enormous.” Indeed, Moorehead recalled in 1901 that Minton “was trying to establish a high-class weekly magazine. It spent thousands of dollars on every issue.” The Illustrated American soon advertised itself as “the handsomest news-magazine in the world.”

The brains behind the Illustrated American was Minton, as Moorehead’s comment suggests and as Theatre Magazine made more explicit: “The Illustrated American has been in his [Minton’s] mind five years, and its development now, with plenty of money behind it, ought to be a very delightful experience.” Minton was already a well-known New York journalist and theater critic. He came from an old and socially prominent New York family. His father, Charles A. Minton, had been a stockbroker and, for more than a decade before his death in 1886, the financial editor of the New York Herald. Following his father into the newspaper business, Maurice Minton published the Town from 1882 to 1883. He had been sporting and dramatic editor of the New York Evening Telegram, 1884–86, and the managing editor of the New York Herald, 1886–89. Beginning in 1880, he had also published The List, an annual directory of social information on three to four thousand members of New York’s high society.

The money behind the Illustrated American came from Spencer, proprietor and president. He was the great-grandson of Ambrose Spencer, Chief Justice of the New York Supreme Court, 1819–23. From one of the wealthiest families in New York, Spencer would also serve as
commissioner from Rhode Island for the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. As for the other officers, the treasurer was Minton’s brother John Mc-
Kim Minton, formerly a stock and oil broker in partnership with an-
other brother, Charles T. Minton. (McKim Minton married the sister of
DeLancey Nicoll, who would be elected district attorney for New York
County with the support of Tammany Hall in 1890.) Andrew H. Mickle,
secretary, shared the name of his grandfather, a tobacco merchant and
former mayor of New York, 1846–47.4

With its first issue, the Illustrated American identified itself as
a cross between a daily newspaper and a periodical, with a goal of
rivaling the most artistic periodicals in Europe. With offices in New
York, Chicago, and, later, Paris, the publication was “designed for the
home,” “absolutely unsectarian,” and “free from political discussions
and heavy debates.” Its halftone photographs and artwork were to be
“the picturesque chronicling of contemporaneous history; events of na-
tional and international which will be represented with a fidelity to
detail and with a perfection of artistic treatment which will make The
Illustrated American a revelation of heretofore untried possibilities in
pictorial literature.” Its format was based on that of The Graphic, an
illustrated weekly founded in England by social reformer William Lu-
sdon Thomas, whose issues were twenty-four pages imperial folio. After
subscriber complaints that the Illustrated American was too cumber-
some, its size was reduced and its pages increased to sixty-four with
the October 4, 1890 issue, when its circulation was estimated to be fifty
thousand. The news magazine subsequently touted “more pictures and
reading-matter than any four illustrated weeklies” in its advertising. Its
articles covered current events, the arts, literature, exotic locales, dog
and horse shows, chess, and fashion. Photo stories opened doors to
the luxurious interiors of the finest homes in New York.5 Its format, its
content, and its ten-dollar annual subscription price, a large sum for
the time, clearly targeted a genteel and cosmopolitan readership.

Editorials repeatedly stated the magazine was nonsectarian. Mint-
ton asserted that the Illustrated American merely wanted to see the
best party and the best men rule the country. Yet the news magazine’s
positions on political issues were consistently Democratic. That crit-
ics perceived this as true is evidenced by the need for Minton—who
would become, with Tammany Hall support, a powerful figure in the
Democratic Party in New York late in the decade—to defend the organ’s
neutrality in a November 1890 editorial.6 Nevertheless, the magazine
did not remain neutral with respect to circumstances surrounding
Wounded Knee. Indeed, the magazine ultimately took a leading role in
seeking reform of the federal Office of Indian Affairs.

In 1849 the OIA, created by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun in
1824, moved from the War Department to the newly created Depart-
ment of the Interior. Nevertheless, enforcement of policies and defense
of settlers still fell to the War Department, creating constant friction
between the two agencies and touching off a long-lasting and bitter feud over whether the military or civilians should handle Indian affairs.

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, a series of acts had led to the forced removal of Native Americans to the West and created reservations in Indian Territory (modern Oklahoma). More reservations resulted from treaties signed in 1868. Congress had set up an Indian Peace Commission in 1867 to “remove all just causes of complaint” by Native Americans, to protect people and property along the path of the transcontinental railroad, then under construction, and to “insure civilization for the Indians and peace and safety for the whites.” The commission also established “districts” for all Native Americans not already living on reservations. Its 1868 report stressed the need for educating Indian children in English to effect their “civilization,” as well as civilian, rather than military, interactions with native peoples. With these policies enacted, the treaty signed by the Lakota at Fort Laramie that year created the Great Sioux Reservation, encompassing roughly sixty million acres in parts of modern South Dakota, Wyoming, and Nebraska. The treaty also secured the Black Hills as sacred Lakota land, off limits for settlement or exploitation by others.7

Corruption within the OIA caused incoming President Grant to set up major reforms, as well. Before taking office, he began to draft his “Peace Policy.” In January 1869, he met with groups of Quakers. Believing his military background might cause him to support restoring the OIA to the War Department, they proposed that he replace corrupt civilian agents with religious men. Grant agreed, and men nominated by Quakers, Methodists, Catholics, and members of other religious denominations began to oversee the Indian agencies, educate the children, and spread Christianity. Grant also created an all-volunteer civilian Board of Indian Commissioners—inevitably peopled by East Coast Protestant philanthropists. This board supervised purchases of OIA supplies (to cut out fraud), advised the OIA, and served as a liaison between the government and the public. Unfortunately, none of these steps ended corruption or spoils-systems appointments to army posts and reservations.8

The general sentiment among government officials and the philanthropists advising them was the need to assimilate Native Americans within the general population. For them, Native Americans, like former slaves, needed to become citizens, and well-intentioned but disastrous humanitarian efforts often were the response. With one bill after another, Congress sought to erode tribal unity and dismantle communal property. For example, with the 1871 Indian Appropriation Act, Congress declared that no tribe or nation would be recognized as a sovereign power with which the federal government could make a treaty. All future Indian policies would be enacted by statute or executive order. The effect of this act was that Native Americans became wards of the government, which in turn accepted responsibility for their welfare as
individuals, rather than as tribal entities. In essence, the act also nullified enforcement of preexisting treaties.

This act also opened the door for opportunists. The rich timber of the Black Hills became a siren’s call for loggers, and the shapes of the mountains themselves suggested their geological potential for mineral deposits. Accompanied by miners seeking gold, General George A. Custer led an expedition into the region in 1874. News of the discovery of the precious metal attracted more prospectors, who then demanded protection from the outraged Lakota. Failing to negotiate some settlement with the Lakota, the federal government launched what would be called the Great Sioux War of 1876–77. This resulted famously in the death of Custer at the Little Bighorn and the eventual surrender of the Lakota, along with more than seven million acres of their sacred Black Hills, now opened to miners and homesteaders. It also made household names of Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Short Bull, Crazy Horse, then-Colonel Nelson A. Miles, and the Seventh Cavalry.

More reservation land was lost with the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887. This act, proposed by Senator Henry Laurens Dawes, chair of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, divided tribal lands into parcels allotted to individuals. Parcels granted to most allottees were, however, inadequate for economic viability, particularly in semi-arid regions like the Dakotas. Since reservations invariably exceeded the land apportioned to qualifying residents in size, each contained vast tracts of “surplus” land. The Dawes Act provided for such land to be returned to the public domain, thus allowing for its sale to homesteaders and developers. How quickly settlers populated the Black Hills and the surplus lands can be determined by a one-page illustrated story in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper on November 1, 1890, enticing tourists to visit the resort-filled mountains. Accompanying photographs identify scenic views, noteworthy geological monuments, and a railroad capable of carrying large numbers of people, suggested by a crowd of visiting journalists (see Figure 2).

Henry Dawes intended his act to be a means of “civilizing” Native Americans by making farmers of them. He regularly attended annual meetings of assimilationist reformers at Lake Mohonk, a resort on the Hudson River just west of New Paltz, New York. Quaker Albert Smiley, a member of the all-volunteer Board of Indian Commissioners, and his twin, Alfred, built the resort and hosted the conferences organized by the Indian Rights Association from 1883 to 1916. Founded in December 1882 by Herbert Welsh, a Philadelphia artist and social reformer, and Henry Pancoast, a lawyer, the IRA was arguably the most influential Indian reform group of its time. Welsh used his connections at Harper’s Weekly and the New York Times to help publicize the organization’s efforts. Charles C. Painter, an abolitionist and Congregationalist minister, was the IRA’s principal investigator and Washington lobbyist, as well as liaison with the Board of Indian Commissioners and
Figure 2. "Black Hills, An El Dorado of Health, Wealth, and Picturesque Scenery," from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, November 1, 1890.
the OIA. Among the IRA's members were Alice Fletcher, ethnologist for the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard, General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, founder of the Hampton Normal School in Virginia, and Captain Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Later, Warren Moorehead would be an active member.

The IRA laid out its political program in a series of resolutions at its second annual meeting in 1884. The first stated that organizing Native Americans into tribes was the most serious hindrance to their civilization. The IRA would support all efforts to break up tribal organizations. Their second resolution was that all Native Americans should hold their land in severalty allotments. In that regard, members supported a severalty bill submitted by Richard Coke, former governor and now senator of Texas, but this bill would die in Congress. They also discussed Dawes's Sioux Bill, which would open large tracts of the reservation to "white settlement" to integrate cultures and remove any tribal "hindrance of progress." As Dawes would point out at the 1886 conference, he had been trying to pass an allotment bill for five or six years. His success came four months later, in part through Painter's lobbying efforts. The IRA considered this a major victory in its struggles to promote Indian individualism over tribalism. The group also favored a Christian education, a legal system based on a code of law comparable to that under which its own members lived, and a gradual decrease in government rations. It firmly opposed Indian participation in Wild West shows for their corrupting influence and perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Ironically, the events among the Lakota leading up to the Wounded Knee Massacre failed to gain the IRA's attention until November 1890.⁹

In 1889 the Lakota lost almost half of their remaining land under a new treaty, and the balance was subdivided into six separate reservations, including the Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Cheyenne River, and Standing Rock agencies. A wide corridor of public land now separated the northern and southern reservations. Within weeks they received additional news that Congress was drastically cutting their rations. Already nearing starvation and feeling betrayed yet again, the Lakota suffered epidemics of measles and influenza during the winter of 1889–90. The following summer, their meager crops dried up in a drought, and rations were cut once more because of downward-revised census figures. Yet sometime in 1889 they had heard from the Arapaho news of an Indian messiah in Nevada. That fall they sent a delegation there to confirm the rumors; members of the delegation returned in April or May 1890. Of these, Kicking Bear had become a follower of Wovoka (Jack Wilson), the Northern Paiute holy man who had founded the new religion. Kicking Bear was an Oglala from Pine Ridge who had joined his wife's Minneconjou band, led by Spotted Elk (Big Foot), at Cheyenne River. Traveling with Kicking Bear had been Short Bull, a Brulé from Rosebud, who was equally ardent in his devotion to this new re-
ligion. The two became the leaders of the ghost dance religion among the Lakota. Another member of the delegation had been Porcupine, a Northern Cheyenne. 10

As Andersson has pointed out, the delegates' accounts of the ghost dance differed somewhat from the doctrine preached by Wovoka. The Lakota identified Wovoka as the messiah, although others understood him to be a holy man, a messenger. Wovoka had taught that the white races would be wiped from the earth at the dawn of the new world, when herds of buffalo would be replenished and the burdens of the unchosen life on reservations would be lifted. This new dawning was to occur as early as spring 1891. War was unnecessary with the new world so near, so Native Americans should live harmoniously with the whites, whom the messiah himself would punish. Some Lakota doubtless took more hostile attitudes when agents outlawed the dances and the military arrived. The delegates, however, did not talk about war against the whites.11

To the ghost dance, the Lakota also added elements based on their own traditions. They painted their faces red, a sacred color, with added symbols for the dance. (The press would misinterpret this as war paint.) Participants encircled a sacred tree, similar to the tree for the outlawed sun dance. The tree was the point at which dancers could reunite with the souls of dead relatives, thus it became a symbol for the Lakota themselves and the rebirth of their own culture. By mid-fall, the men wore “spirit shirts” of buckskin or white muslin while women usually wore muslin dresses, sometimes made from flour sacks. Both the shirts and the dresses bore sacred symbols, such as crescent moons, stars, crosses, and birds. Dancers affixed eagle feathers to their garments and their hair. At some point after the military arrived at Pine Ridge in November 1890, the Lakota came to believe, possibly through the teachings of Short Bull, that this clothing was impervious to bullets or other weapons. 12

Although the Lakota danced throughout the summer of 1890, almost no news of this activity hit eastern papers until the end of September, and not until October did anything appear in the Illustrated American. Its articles did little to prepare the reader for what would come later although two focused on the corrupting influence of Wild West shows. Each appeared in the regular editorial section, “Current Comments,” so presumably Minton wrote them. A lighthearted piece about how four performers from Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show outwitted a cardsharp in Jersey City appeared in the issue for October 11. Two short articles followed the next week. One made reference to Secretary of the Interior John Noble’s directive forbidding permits for Native Americans to travel with Wild West shows. Noble was responding to varied reports—some anecdotal, some tangible—regarding abuse, disease, deaths, gambling, and drunkenness among the Lakota traveling with Cody. The Illustrated American’s report applauds the efforts of James R. O’Beirne, Assistant Commissioner of Immigration for
New York, and Father Francis M. Craft, a Lakota-speaking Catholic missionary, for bringing these issues to the secretary’s attention. Not mentioned in the article, but a significant player in these events nevertheless, was Thomas J. Morgan, commissioner of Indian affairs, whom Noble charged with investigating the treatment of the performers.  

The second article on October 18, written in a flippant tone, reports that the Apache in Indian Territory were “bathing daily”—all five thousand of them—in preparation for the arrival of the Great Medicine Man. Minton was responding to the exaggerated sense of danger expressed in a telegraph bearing the news. This was undoubtedly the same report from a Seventh Cavalry officer that was the source for reports appearing on September 26 and 27 in the Chicago Tribune and Washington Post, respectively. Minton expresses seriousness only in considering a potential outbreak of violence among the Apache when garrisons, as he indicates, were already filled to capacity. This last was an oblique reference to the most recent Apache war, which had resulted in Geronimo’s 1886 surrender to now-General Miles and subsequent imprisonment in Florida, along with his followers. Minton downplays the underlying message of the telegraph, that a large ghost dance had been held in September at the South Canadian River in what is now central Oklahoma, about two miles below the Darlington Indian Agency and its Mennonite mission. An estimated three thousand Arapaho, Cheyenne, Caddo, Wichita, Kiowa, and Apache, not five thousand, had met nightly for about two weeks for the largest dance ever held among the Arapaho and Cheyenne.  

Ironically, as newspapers around the country began to focus heavily on the so-called messiah craze during November, particularly as it became clear that the phenomenon now involved Sitting Bull, the Illustrated American published nothing. This does not mean, though, that Minton lacked interest in what was going on. Indeed, quite the opposite was true. That month, Warren Moorehead responded to an open letter from Thomas Wilson, Curator of Prehistoric Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution, and from publishers, and he presented himself to Spencer and Minton. They met for two hours. That same night, Moorehead left for Pine Ridge, packing several loaded cameras Minton provided and carte blanche assurances for his expenses.  

The twenty-four-year-old Moorehead had already made a name for himself as an “ambitious avocational archaeologist,” in historian J. Conor Burns’ words. Independently wealthy, Moorehead had never completed college but had been entranced with mound-digging since his childhood in Ohio, and he had already amassed a large collection of artifacts. Having tried unsuccessfully to get a job with the Smithsonian Bureau of Ethnology in 1885, he worked from 1886–89 at his own expense at the mounds and earthworks in southern Ohio. During this period, he published numerous articles on his fieldwork and loaned his collection of artifacts to the Cincinnati Centennial Exposition in 1888. In 1890 he was made a fellow of American Association for the
Advancement of Science for his accomplishments in archaeology. He also worked as Wilson’s assistant at the Smithsonian from 1888–90. Moorehead proudly indicates his affiliation with the Smithsonian on the title page of his 1890 novel Wanneta, the Sioux. This masks the fact that he remained sensitive throughout his life for being continually rebuffed by scientists with finer educational credentials who considered him unsuitable for jobs he coveted. Perhaps because of his own background, he sought, in addition to scholarly journals, several popular outlets for his writings, those that might interest amateur archaeologists. For this, too, he was criticized. Magazine editor and Indian rights activist Charles F. Lummis, for instance, attacked Moorehead’s later association with the Illustrated American when it sponsored his expedition to the southwest to explore the cliff-dweller cultures in Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah. The expedition was to document and assemble artifacts to be displayed by the news magazine at the Chicago World’s Fair. Moorehead published the results in fourteen articles in the news magazine in 1892, about which Lummis sniffed, “The Illustrated American was not a scientific paper—even in paper science.” Yet it was Moorehead’s dual interests in science and educating nonscientists that made him the ideal correspondent for the Illustrated American. He had been in contact for some months with George E. Bartlett, US Deputy Marshal for the Dakota Territory, as he and Bartlett were collaborating on a popular history of the Black Hills. Not only had Bartlett lived in the Dakota Territory for most of his life, but he had led miners into the Black Hills, ridden for the pony express, scouted on behalf of the military, and owned a trading post at Wounded Knee for several years. He was also furnishing Moorehead with information for a popular book on the Lakota—presumably Wanneta, the Sioux. In February 1890, Moorehead went west to meet with Bartlett, who took him to Pine Ridge. This trip preceded the ghost dances.

The fictional Wanneta, wife of warrior Strong Heart, is the instrument of peace between the Lakota and General Custer in the pre-Little Big Horn era. We gain some insight into Moorehead’s assimilationist beliefs by the fact that Wanneta is able to help bring about this peace because she had been to school in the East. Yet Moorehead ends the novel with the plea to “let us leave Wanneta and Strong Heart in their happiness and the Sioux nation in peace.” This line winks at readers who knew of the battles to come, but it registers with profound irony against the events he would cover in November. Bartlett had sent Moorehead word that month that the Lakota were starving and agitated, so the former Smithsonian ethnologist was ready to respond when the opportunity presented itself.

Although unattributed, Moorehead wrote “The Red Christ,” appearing in the December 13 issue of Illustrated American. This would be the first of five articles on the Lakota that he submitted, the last four of which would be submitted unsigned under the byline of “special correspondent” on site at Pine Ridge. A sixth article covered his circula-
tion of a petition drafted by the news magazine, calling for reform of the OIA. Moorehead presumably selected the images for this first article as he was directly involved in securing photographs and the sketches on which engravings were based for the subsequent ones.

Setting the stage for Moorehead’s piece, Minton provided a short editorial for the December 13 issue, in which his political beliefs regarding the so-called “Indian problem” were now taking greater shape within the news magazine. Here, he is dismissive of the messiah religion, but this is preamble to his criticism of the mistreatment of the Indians. He remarks that a few years earlier such build-up of military strength in the region would have prompted the Indians to take to the warpath “under the impression that they had the choice between being killed while fighting and being killed while not fighting.” By some chance, he notes, this ending had not yet occurred, but “such blundering as marks our dealings with Indians must inevitably lead to warfare.”

Moorehead’s “The Red Christ” is not based upon any experience at Pine Ridge, despite his earlier visit with Bartlett. Instead, it is a patchwork quilt of material, often quoted verbatim, without attribution, having largely appeared in newspapers the previous month. In contrast to many of these earlier reports, which sought to sensationalize accounts of the messiah religion, Moorehead intends to educate the reader, placing these unfamiliar beliefs within an anthropological context or comparing them to Christian religious practices. For example, he contrasts Christian ministers meeting to discuss their faith with “calm abstraction,” awaiting the coming of their messiah with tranquility, with “savages [who] exhausted themselves with the ghost-dance, seeking to hasten” their messiah’s coming. Following this is a page-long history of messiah predictions among Native Americans, with most space given over to a history of Tecumseh, the famed Shawnee leader from the Ohio River valley who had sided with the British in the War of 1812. To anchor the story in current events, Moorehead makes an analogy between Tecumseh’s brother’s trances and “Kicking Horse’s” vision, as reported in some papers. The New York Times did not carry this story, but a possible source was an article in the Chicago Daily Tribune on October 29. The story, printed there and elsewhere that day, incorrectly identifies Kicking Bear, the Oglala delegate to Nevada, and Moorehead made the same error.

Moorehead recites the accounts of visions reported by each of the main leaders of the ghost dance. In addition to Kicking Bear’s, he adds Short Bull’s vision of Christ from the November 16 New York Times, followed by Porcupine’s. While Moorehead’s source for the last is unclear, the origin of the story goes back to a letter of June 25, 1890 from Brigadier General Thomas H. Ruger to the adjutant general of the US Army. Attached was a “Statement of the Cheyenne Porcupine of Meeting with the New Christ,” recorded by First Lieutenant S. C. Robertson on June 15.
Figure 3. Henry Hobart Nichols, *Dance of the Nahikāi*, appearing as *Navajo Fire-Dance* in the *Illustrated American*, December 13, 1890.

Figure 4. Henry Hobart Nichols, *Navajo Fire Dance*, from *Illustrated American*, December 13, 1890.
Moorehead makes a curious decision resulting from the need to show an image of some dance in the article while lacking any of the ghost dance. He identifies the unrelated Navajo fire dance as being “typical” of ceremonial dances during which warriors exhibit their “manly qualities” or holy men their recondite knowledge. The ghost dance was implicitly such a dance. With this tenuous link, he turns to the Navajo fire dance as described by Washington Matthews, an army surgeon, in his “The Mountain Chant: A Navajo Ceremony,” part of the fifth annual report of the Smithsonian’s Bureau of Ethnology for 1883-84. Moorehead includes two images, both identified as the “Navajo Fire-Dance.” The direct source for each is the American Architect and Building News, which had carried Sylvester Baxter’s review of the bureau’s annual report in its April 12, 1890 issue. There, each of Henry Hobart Nichols’ engravings was reproduced, one with the caption “A Navajo Dance” and one with “Navajo Fire-Dance” (see Figure 3 and 4). According to Baxter, each had appeared as full-page illustrations in the annual report as both were “particularly admirable in their presentation of the wild scenes, so full of action, with effects of intense fire-light.” The problem for Moorehead was that only one of the images represented the fire dance. The other, according to Baxter, was the dance of the Nahikai, which is how the image appears in the report. Nevertheless, Moorehead lifts the descriptions of each dance from Baxter’s review and indicates both as representing the fire dance.23

As if in justification for substituting images of an unrelated dance by an equally unrelated Native American culture, Moorehead explains that the ghost dance is “less picturesque than the fire-dance.” but it is also more exciting and more exhausting. Not having seen the dance, he includes descriptions taken from the November 16 and November 22 editions of the New York Times. Male and female dancers form a circle around the sacred tree and move with a slow step from right to left while singing the new songs taught to them. As the dance proceeds, individuals break out of the circle and stagger about in trance-like states. The ceremony lasts from sunset to sunrise without stop, such that participants sometimes fall exhausted to the ground. From the November 22 news account comes the following details: dancers wear cotton robes “pinned at the breast and drawn over the head in the form of a hood” while medicine men carry sticks “with handles shaped like snakes.” This description alone spawned some of the most lurid images of the ghost dance appearing in illustrated newspapers and juvenile literature (see Figure 5).24

Moorehead’s next article, written in December at Pine Ridge before the Wounded Knee Massacre, appeared in print afterwards. This, his first report as “special correspondent,” reads as history rather than current events, beginning with the title, “Sioux on the War-Path.” Yet his politics emerge, and his remarks undoubtedly hit home in the aftermath of the battle. “Someone,” he writes, “is responsible for the spread-
ing of the ‘Indian scare’ throughout the country, the consequences of which have been the concentrating of troops, great alarm on the part of settlers, and the foolish flight of the Sioux.” He points out that no harm had come to a single person until the time of Sitting Bull’s arrest and that the majority of agency employees and army officers agree that the lack of food had been the major cause of Lakota disaffection. Between accounts of soldiers’ living conditions and his own travel to Pine Ridge, Moorehead returns to these points. Turning his attention to correspondents for other papers, he reports that even those knowing the Lakota best were uncertain of the location of Two Strike’s camp of “hostiles.” He questions how readers can believe accounts from correspondents who wrote as though they knew. He also records a situation in which journalists concocted a story about sixty Indians being killed in a battle that did not happen just because they needed to report something on a slow day. After thus discrediting his competition, he promises more articles from Pine Ridge.25

“Sioux on the War-Path” is illustrated with several photographs of members of the cavalry and how they lived as well as individual portraits of Lakota men. Engravings of Indian police and Lakota tepees by “C. V.” and “Hancka,” respectively, appear at the beginning and end of the article. These engravers were not at Pine Ridge. As Moorehead would later write, there were no artists at the agency until after the battle of Wounded Knee—an oblique reference to Frederic Remington’s return although the artist had been at Pine Ridge with General Miles
in late October. Moorehead also identified himself as the only person, apart from officials, who had both an interpreter (Bartlett) and a photographer. However, sometimes neither he nor his photographer could visit a site in safety. Thus, in the case of a whole-page engraving of Two Strike’s stronghold, scout Louis Shangreau helped Bartlett make the drawing upon which the engraving was based. Moorehead’s article is followed by two short pieces, one on General Miles and one on Sitting Bull’s death. These may have been written by Minton. Moorehead’s next article is his most significant. “Ghost-Dances in the West,” published in the January 17, 1891 issue, recounts in greater detail the performance of the ghost dance, adding to his earlier descriptions details about the building and use of the sweat lodges. Here he indicates that the sweat lodges were erected in order to prepare young men for the dance. Just weeks later, in the American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal, he would clarify that point, saying that all participants went through this purification ritual. This distinction is critical in that the depiction of the dance illustrating the article—the only representation of the ghost dance to appear in the Illustrated American—shows only men dancing (see Figure 6). While the caption says that the image was based upon a sketch made by Bartlett, the engraver, “C. V.” clearly interprets the image based upon Moorehead’s account. The dancers wear breech-clouts only, as though they emerged from the sweat lodge without putting on their spirit shirts, and they dance around a spirit pole in a high-stepping fashion resembling familiar depictions of war dances. Perhaps C. V. was indebted for inspiration to the image of the
Navajo fire dance, whose figures were similarly attired. In the artist’s favor, though, the figures are unarmed, they are surrounded by seated onlookers, and they do not turn and scowl menacingly at the reader. Yet this image, as false as it is, gains authenticity by Moorehead’s academic style and by his inclusion of a discussion of the songs of the dance, complete with musical staves, treble clefs, and key indicators. Complementary illustrations by C. V. and Hancka show an Indian family before a tepee, a settlement at White Clay Creek, women constructing a sweat lodge with farm buildings behind them, “friendlies” getting their supplies at the agency, and a number of Lakota gathered for a group portrait outside the agency store. These images suggest a people partially “civilized,” which effect mitigates against taking the ghost dance image as too warlike. Yet the depiction pales in accuracy to Remington’s image, published in Harper’s Weekly six weeks earlier and based upon his personal observation of a ghost dance.27

In “Ghost-Dances in the West,” Moorehead places much of the blame for the problems at Pine Ridge on Agent Hugh Gallagher, who did not call upon the military to help him stop the ghost dances before the situation got out of hand. He is surprisingly sympathetic to Agent Daniel Royer, who was the “home rule” spoils-system appointee most contemporaries charged with inexperience and incompetence. Moorehead also blames over-zealous philanthropists, the presence of three religious denominations warring against one another, and the rushing of troops to the agency without holding some council with the dancers. More than this, he emphasizes the issue of starvation and broken promises on the part of the government.28

The next article, “Why Indians Fight,” subtitled “A Startling Story of Famine and Fraud,” lays out the same complaints although Moorehead is more sympathetic to Gallagher here. The final paragraph implores Congress and the citizens of the country to take immediate action for the education and sustenance of the Native Americans. For Moorehead, the cause of all the problems ultimately boiled down to politics. These sentiments were in accord with Minton’s. The latter wrote a short editorial piece for the same issue, noting that the previous week the news magazine had run an open letter to Congress demanding an official investigation. “The Illustrated American was satisfied that in no other way could legislation be obtained against the infamies of the Indian agents. ... The Indian agent, as he exists to-day, must go. He is the creature of ‘politics.’ Without fitness or knowledge, he is sent to administer the affairs of a race with which he has no sympathy, and of which he has no understanding. ... We have no hesitation in believing that this petition ... will rouse Congress to action.”29

“Why Indians Fight,” in the January 24 issue, has no accompanying illustrations, and it may have been written after Moorehead’s return from Pine Ridge. He had been forced to leave under threat of arrest by Brigadier General John Brooke on December 28, the day before the Wounded Knee Massacre, for being active in the Indian camps,
for having expressed his views to officers and civilians, and for having published articles denouncing the treatment of the Lakota.

The next week saw the publication of his “Sioux Women at Home,” an afterthought of an article covering the daily lives of the women. Only half of the text was devoted to this anthropological exercise, though, as Moorehead turns his attention to the petition, to which numerous signatures were already appended. He makes note of the tragedy of Wounded Knee, and he calls for the transfer of Indian affairs from the Department of the Interior to the War Department.30

Moorehead’s final contribution to this series of articles was “Masking the Frauds.” It concerns his circulating the Illustrated American’s petition against the OIA in Washington, DC. Copies had been mailed to all legislators and posted in public buildings around the city. Moorehead sought signatures from former colleagues at the Smithsonian, Major John Wesley Powell, head of the Geological Survey, as well as Thomas J. Morgan, Commissioner of Indian Affairs.31 Years later, Moorehead recalled that he circulated the petition in Washington under Minton’s orders. He found the work unpleasant, leaving him with no desire to lobby again.

Minton made repeated calls for reform and kept the petition alive in the pages of the Illustrated American for some weeks. A year later, he issued another call to arms. Addressing Democratic representatives in Congress, he reminded them of the news magazine’s earlier exposure of “the iniquitous treatment of the Sioux” and the petition sent to Washington to urge reform. “Nothing was done.” He asked if President Benjamin Harrison was concealing the corruption within the OIA, and he urged General Miles to tell what he learned during the suppression of the ghost dance excitement as his testimony would surely furnish the material to begin a fruitful investigation.32

Minton would soon leave the Illustrated American, and he ultimately became known as a powerful “candidate maker” within the Democratic Party in New York. Moorehead recycled the text and illustrations for his articles in other publications into the twentieth century. He regretted the ways in which the ghost dance was “debauched into a money-making scheme” in Wild West shows. Particularly after his appointment by President Theodore Roosevelt as a member of the Board of Indian Commissioners in 1909, he became active in the IRA. He remained on the board until it was dissolved in 1933. He worked tirelessly to oppose corrupt field agents and to improve the lives of Native Americans, never losing sight of his desire to see them progress toward “civilization” and full citizenship.33

The two men’s legacy with respect to the ghost dance movement, however, was a series of editorials and articles that countered the hyperbolic tone of news reports and accompanying images appearing in the rest of the illustrated press during the winter of 1890–91. While one can readily fault Moorehead’s methods and inaccuracies, as well as
the news magazine’s failure to provide a more faithful representation of the ghost dance, the intent was to educate with the authority of an ethnographic specialist. This frame provided a different context than other illustrated sources for interpreting the imagery. As with virtually everything published on the ghost dance, though, their articles and illustrations were recycled in contemporary books rushed to press to capitalize on the phenomenon. The most notable of these was James P. Boyd’s *Recent Indian Wars, Under the Lead of Sitting Bull and Other Chiefs; With a Full Account of the Messiah Craze, and Ghost Dances*, published in 1891. Taken out of context, their work, and that of the artists working with them, served different purposes. Yet Minton’s and Moorehead’s agendas intersected to provide readers with a different point of view, even if that perspective proved as damaging in the end to Lakota culture.

**NOTES**

1. Elmo Scott Watson, “The Last Indian War, 1890–91—A Study of Newspaper Jingoism,” *Journalism Quarterly* 20 (September 1943): 205. Aspects of this paper originated in research I did for a graduate seminar conducted by Richard Saunders at the University of Texas at Austin in the early 1980s. I presented papers with related content at the College Art Association Annual Conference, February 1992; Third International Congress, International Association of Word and Image Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, August 1993; and the Nineteenth-Century Studies Association Annual Meeting, April 2008.


of the year, the officers’ names would not appear in the magazine; only Maurice Minton’s name would appear, as editor.

5. Quotations from Illustrated American, February 22, 1890. 2, 3, 10, as quoted in Harris, 4: “To Our Friends, Patrons, and Admirers,” Illustrated American, October 4, 1890).


27. “Ghost-Dances in the West,” *Illustrated American*, January 17, 1891. Moorehead recycled this image to illustrate future accounts of the ghost dance, even when he clearly indicated that women participated. See, for example, his “Field Diary,” 18–19.

28. “Ghost-Dances in the West,” 333.


