

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

Signs

By: Jim Taylor

They had made camp nearly a week before. The old men said the signs were good for this place. There was an abundance of water, firewood and game. The grass was still green even though it was late in the season. The tipis had been set up in order and the camp had taken on the bustle of a village. Hunting parties had been sent out into the surrounding plains and much meat had been taken. Hides were being tanned, the women singing as they worked. In and around the tipis the children ran and laughed and played. The signs had been right. This was a good camp.

Plans were being made for a dance to thank the Great Spirit for supplying the tribe with such a bountiful harvest, but one morning the people awoke to a strange sight. In the east the sun was blood-red and strange clouds were swirling about even though there was no apparent wind blowing. The old men could not remember ever having seen such a thing. Scouts were sent to the east to check the countryside, if perhaps a fire was sweeping the country or to see if they could tell what was occurring. One by one the scouts reported back that the further east they went the stranger the sky became until, overcome by feelings of impending evil, they turned and came back to the camp.

All that day dark clouds raced across the sky from east to west, in contradiction of the normal flow of the winds. Thunders were heard, strange long deep and distant. The young children hung on their mother's skirts and babies whimpered in the tipis. The warriors were restless while the old men gathered to pray and seek counsel. That night the tribe huddled close as the old men sat around the fire chanting and praying. Suddenly one of the elders leaped to his feet, crying, "AIEEE!" and standing suddenly still, he began to weep.

"What is it grandfather?" the younger men asked. For a time the old man stood there, tears running down his face, and then he said, "The Father in heaven is sad. Something is happening that I do not understand. But I know He is sad. I feel it."

A feeling of dread quickly spread through the people. Even the dogs, many of which had been quietly whining, became quiet. If the Great Spirit was sad, who knew what could happen? Fear began to grow.

That night the old men stayed around the fire, singing, praying and imploring for help. In the tipis there was little sleep. Normally a happy people, the whole tribe were affected by the atmosphere of uncertainty. Sometime after the moon had risen there was a very loud clap of thunder from the sky that shook the very land. All the people were awake and outside of their tipis almost

instantly. What was happening?

Then, about an hour before dawn, the moon and the stars disappeared! Blackness descended upon the camp. Even the campfire did not give out its normal glow; the light acting like it was having a hard time penetrating the darkness. Babies cried, dogs whimpered and young men found themselves shaking. The unknown was stalking the land. The thick darkness persisted until well after the time the sun should have risen. It was a darkness that could almost be felt. And then, without warning, the earth heaved and shook. Women screamed in terror. The ground seemed alive as it rolled and shook. Men fell to the earth looking for something solid to hang on to.

And as suddenly as it had come, it stopped. Almost at that same instant the darkness was gone! There was no fading from darkness to light. One moment it was as dark as the inside of a cave and the next moment it was bright. Everyone stood blinking in the light, frightened, wondering what would come next, but somehow thankful that the hated darkness was gone, glad that the sun was shining.

But what a strange day! No birds were singing. In fact, no birds were flying. The normal noises of the prairie were nowhere to be heard. A dreadful silence hung on the land, making the people almost afraid to speak out loud. The old man who had spoken at the first now stood sobbing by the campfire. The entire camp came around him, wondering. Slowly he began to speak, his words broken by the deep sobbing that moved his entire body. "The chief is dead," he said.

"Grandfather," one of the men asked, "How can that be? The chief is sitting here by the fire." "Not our chief." the old man replied. "The Great Chief of the whole earth has died." Voices murmured through the crowd, wondering, questioning. How could such a thing be? "He is dead." was all the old man would say when he was questioned further and this brought great sadness to the tribe. What would happen to the earth if the Great Chief of the Earth was dead?

The next several days went by slowly. Strange days. No wind blew. No birds were seen flying or heard singing. No game was seen on the prairie. No clouds were seen in the sky and the sun did not seem to shine with its full strength. At night the stars were dim and the moon did not give off its normal light. It was as if the earth were holding its breath.

Late one night, on the third evening since the old man had announced the Chief's death, about the time that most of the tribe would be sleeping in their tipis, a brilliant light rose up over the horizon to the east and spread across the night sky to the west! The people had never before seen such a light display. The light awoke those who were asleep. The colors were brilliant, gold and green and red and blue, deep and rich. And sounds! It sounded like thousands of

people singing ... far off though not faint. It was the sound of happiness. And though the sight was strange it did not bring fear to the hearts of the people. Instead they felt a wonderful kind of joy! Rushing to the campfire they found the elder standing with his arms upraised and tears running down his face. "Grandfather! Grandfather!" they cried, "What is it?" Smiling, laughing, he shouted, "HE'S ALIVE! HE'S ALIVE!" "Who?" they all questioned, "Who is alive?" and the old man answered, "THE CHIEF OF THE WHOLE EARTH! HE'S ALIVE!"

Wondering they crowded around the old man. How could such a thing be? It was never heard that one returned from the dead! How could the Chief of the Whole Earth who had died, now return from the dead? It was a great mystery. But ... SOMETHING had happened! They could feel it and see it. The stars were brighter than they had ever been before. They had all seen the strange light and heard the sounds of singing from the skies. Something HAD happened! The oppressive darkness, the horrible stillness of the last few days was gone! "Tell us about it grandfather. Please." they requested of the old man.

"All I know is what I have seen," said the old man. "The Great Chief died, but He is now alive again. I have seen the signs." The people stood, listening respectfully. "What does it mean, Grandfather?" one of the young men asked. "It means life for the earth. It means life for the tribes," the old man replied. "More than that I do not know."

The people stayed around the fire until late in the night, talking and discussing all the strange events of the last week. Eventually they drifted off to their beds and their sleep was more restful than it had been for some time. In the morning the birds were flying and singing, animals were seen on the prairie, clouds were soaring in the skies again and a gentle breeze was blowing.

They remained camped there on the prairie for another week until the old men felt it was time to move. As they packed to leave all the people agreed, this was sacred ground. While they would never camp there again, they would visit it every season from then on, remembering the time of signs. Offerings of thanksgiving to the Great Spirit would be made. Maybe a sacred dance would be held.

Stories of the strange days and nights would be told around the campfires of succeeding generations and speculation about what it all meant would consume hours of conversation. Who knew? Perhaps one day someone would come who could explain it all? Until that time, they would remember.

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