ERNE LAPointe, a great-grandson of Sitting Bull, was born on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. He is a Sun Dancer who lives the traditional way of the Lakota and follows the rules of the sacred pipe. LaPointe and his wife, Sonja, live in South Dakota.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON AN ICONIC LEGEND

Ernie LaPointe, a great-grandson of Sitting Bull, reveals family stories that illustrate the famous leader’s life and death in ways that will alter the commonly held knowledge of the Lakota chief. This is a touching, poignant oral history put to paper in a Native American voice.

Never before has the story of Sitting Bull been written and published by a lineal descendant. In Sitting Bull: His Life and Legacy, Ernie LaPointe, a great-grandson of the famous Hunkpapa Lakota chief, presents the family tales and memories told to him about his great-grandfather. LaPointe not only recounts the rich oral history of his family—the stories of Sitting Bull’s childhood, his reputation as a fierce warrior, his growth into a sage and devoted leader of his people, and the betrayal that led to his murder—but also explains what it means to be Lakota in the time of Sitting Bull and now.

In many ways the oral history differs from what has become the standard and widely accepted biography of Sitting Bull. LaPointe explains the discrepancies, how they occurred, and why he wants to tell his story of Tȟatȟáŋka Iyóta. This book is powerful. It is a story of Native American history, told by a Native American, for all people to better understand a culture, a leader, and a man.
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INTRODUCTION

My name is Ernie LaPointe, and my Lakota name is Kangi Sie (Crowfoot). I am one of the four great-grandchildren of Sitting Bull (Tatanka Iyotake). I am writing this book from the family stories—traditional oral history—told to me, my older sister Marlene Andersen, a niece, and a nephew by my mother, Angelique Spotted Horse LaPointe. This book is not a complete biography because I am only retelling the stories my mother told of my great-grandfather. My niece and nephew have made the journey to the Spirit World, and my sister Marlene has given me her power of attorney to settle issues pertaining to our great-grandfather. We are the lineal descendants of Sitting Bull.

The Lakota people believe the number four is sacred in all things. We have pursued four ways of establishing our lineage to Sitting Bull because our family ties are sacred. The first path is through the oral history that is retold in this book. The second is through the paper trail—legal documents, land allotments, enrollment records, birth records, and other tribal documentation. We have used this information to create a thorough, well-documented family tree. The third is through sacred ceremonies when the Spirit of our great-grandfather recognized us as his grandchildren during a repatriation
ceremony for his leggings and lock of hair. The fourth will be through DNA, the modern concept of identifying relatives from the genetic codes of human beings from the past and present. The DNA testing is currently underway by a specialist in Denmark who primarily focuses on ancient DNA. The testing is difficult because the lock of hair was chemically treated for museum preservation purposes. We expect to have the results of this testing by the end of 2009. It is important that this lineage be understood and acknowledged because that is what establishes the truth in our stories of Tatanka Iyotake.

My goal is to enlighten all people about the real Sitting Bull. It has been difficult to attempt this delicate journey of putting the oral stories told to me by my mother into a written biography because these stories of our great-grandfather’s history are in Lakota, and it is not easy to translate these words into the American written language. I wrote this book in the third person, in the same fashion as the oral history was told to me. I use the name Tatanka Iyotake to identify my great-grandfather because that was his name, Buffalo Bull Who Sits Down. I feel the name given to him by the white Americans did not truly identify the real Tatanka Iyotake. Sitting Bull does not mean Buffalo Bull Who Sits Down.

There have been many stories written about our great-grandfather and movies made about him and his life, but the irony of it all is that none of it is particularly accurate. The first person to write anything about our great-grandfather was a man named Walter Campbell, who used the pen name of Stanley Vestal. He came to the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in the late 1920s and early 1930s because it was assumed, then as well as now, that all of Sitting Bull’s relatives lived there. This was not and is not true. He interviewed the betrayers and murderers of our great-grandfather. Sitting Bull’s nephew, One Bull, and One Bull’s daughter, Cecilia, were the main sources of information along with Bull Head and Eugene Little Soldier—not to be confused with Sitting Bull’s stepson, Henry Little Soldier. It seems that Cecilia was the one who described her father as being Sitting Bull’s adopted son. Tatanka Iyotake never adopted One Bull because Lakota do not adopt blood relatives. An adoption is a choice, and both sides have to agree on taking the other as a relative. If you are already related, this cannot happen. Vestal wrote a book based on these interviews titled Sitting Bull, Champion of the Sioux.

The only writer who made an attempt to interview the blood relatives at the Pine River Reservation was Walter Camp, but he died before he was able to publish his book about the Indian Wars. Walter Camp also visited Sitting Bull’s nephew, White Bull, on the Cheyenne River Reservation and learned about Sitting Bull’s daughter, Standing Holy, who was the only living child in 1912. Why Vestal never came to Pine Ridge to talk to Standing Holy or her half-brothers, John Sitting Bull (Refuses Them) and Henry Little Soldier is not known. Maybe he was not told about them, or maybe he chose to ignore them.

Stanley Vestal’s work and his archived interviews have become the basis for many other books, some more scholarly than others. The historians, scholars, and authors treat Vestal’s work as true and accurate, and very few have sought to investigate what the descendants know about Tatanka Iyotake. My mother was afraid to tell the story because many times when she mentioned her relationship to Tatanka Iyotake, the daughters of One Bull came to threaten her. At one time my mother was attacked by one of One Bull’s daughters in the streets.
of Rapid City, South Dakota. As a young boy of about five years old, I was shocked to see how violent these women behaved. I am ready to tell the story now because the story needs to be told.

I think it is time that we natives tell our own stories. Our culture and our history have to be told by us. We lived it, and continue to live it, and I think the anthropologists and white authors have run blindly through our ancestors’ legacy and our culture for far too long.

Ho Hetchetu Yelo, Pilamaya Pelo, Ernie LaPointe

The life of this Lakota Sundancer began back in 1831. This is when the Bad Bow band of the Hunkpapa tribe of the Tiatunwa Lakota Nation was camped on the banks of the Elk River, now known as the Yellowstone River, in Montana. Tiatunwa means “Looking for a Homesite.” These people traveled over vast areas, pursuing the buffalo and roaming freely through immense open territories. The whites mispronounced their name and called them “Teton.”

The child was the second of four children born to Her Holy Door Woman and Returns Again, and was to be their only son. His older sister was Good Feather Woman, while his younger twin sisters were called Twin Woman and Brown Shawl Woman.

Returns Again was very proud of his newborn son and gave the infant his childhood name, Jumping Badger. In the Lakota culture, the young boy received his first name from something his father had seen or experienced. His adult name was given to acknowledge a noteworthy deed he accomplished in his adolescence or adulthood.

Jumping Badger was different from the other boys his age. Where
In agreeing to teach Jumping Badger, Four Horns also agreed to take the boy into his own household. For the rest of his childhood, Jumping Badger would live with his uncle, following him and learning from him all the knowledge he would need to be a good Lakota man.

When Jumping Badger was about seven years old, he had already made a bow with some arrows. With patience and a lot of hard work, he managed to fashion one perfect arrow, getting it balanced and true. This was a real accomplishment for a seven-year-old, and the boy was pleased and proud of his good arrow.

In the Bad Bow band there was one man who was a gifted bow and arrow maker. One day he set a test for all the young boys of the band who were between the ages of six and ten years old. He asked them to go hunting and bring him a beautiful bird. He told the boys that he would give a fine bow and arrows with a quiver to the first one who brought him such a bird.

The boys went in different directions, hunting earnestly for the most beautiful bird in the whole area. Jumping Badger hunted too, rejecting bird after bird as being not beautiful enough. Finally he spotted a Bullock Oriole sitting at the top of a tree. At last, he thought, a truly beautiful bird! He took careful aim.

Another young boy, coming from a different direction, saw the same bird. As Jumping Badger analyzed the situation, this boy immediately shot an arrow at the oriole. He missed, and his arrow got tangled in the branches near the top of the tree. The boy was disappointed about missing the bird and very sad about losing his best arrow.

Jumping Badger, who hadn’t even got his chance to shoot at the bird, still volunteered to help by trying to shoot the boy’s arrow out of the tree. He was successful in knocking the arrow down, but when
Jumping Badger advised Jumping Badger to be very careful, as this was his first hunt, and not to get caught in the center of the herd.

Jumping Badger proceeded to ride right into the middle of the herd with his arrow fitted into the bow. He went after a big buffalo bull. His shot was true and he felled the big bull. The rest of the herd spooked and ran away, fortunately not trampling Jumping Badger in their panic.

Four Horns was angry but also proud of his nephew. He asked Jumping Badger why he chose this particular big bull when there was a cow closer to the edge of the herd he could have taken. The boy replied that he had seen the cow, but he also saw her calf. If he had taken the cow, her calf would surely have perished as well.

The compassion of his young nephew amazed Four Horns. He instructed Jumping Badger to eat a portion of the liver of the buffalo. The liver, which filters toxins from the body, is the most polluted part of the animal. Eating the liver was a way to thank the Spirit of the buffalo for giving his life so the people could survive. Then Four Horns told the young boy to get his mother and relatives to help in preparing the meat.

Jumping Badger rode fast to his mother’s tipi and asked her to bring her sharp knives and all the relatives for the preparing of the meat. As she collected her skinning and butchering tools, Jumping Badger gave his mother yet another reason to be proud of him. He took her outside and quietly indicated a nearby tipi where a widow lived with her two children. He told his mother to cut some of the choice portions of the meat and give them to the widow. Since she had no one to provide for herself and her children, this was his way of contributing to their welfare. Jumping Badger had just exhibited his compassion and generosity, and he was only ten years old.
The STRONG HEART SOCIETY

As young men became recognized as warriors, they were chosen by the various men’s societies to become new members. These groups of men consisted of all the adult males responsible for protecting and providing for the people. While the white culture has called these “warrior societies,” in fact they were much more than that. Each group of men shared a sense of identity and a larger responsibility toward the whole group that went far beyond a purely military definition. A man had to prove his worth to be invited to join such a society. Once he was a member, his ongoing behavior reflected back on all the others. This meant that members of the societies were bound to uphold the honor of the group in war and in peace.

Tatanka Iyotake was invited to become a member of the Strong Heart Society. The Strong Heart Society was the most prestigious of the warrior societies within the Hunkpapa Nation, consisting of around fifty of the bravest and most compassionate warriors of the Hunkpapa tribe. Not only were they the protectors of the people, but they were also providers and caretakers for the needy and orphans.

Within the Strong Heart Society there were two warriors chosen to be sash bearers. These two warriors pledged to ride into battle and stake their sashes to the ground and fight until victory or death. They remained staked to the ground until another member of the society released them. Tatanka Iyotake became one of the sash bearers at the age of seventeen.

The Strong Heart Society warriors had been looking for a Crow camp. They were planning on taking horses, and when some scouts came back to report a Crow camp not far from where they were, they decided to surprise them under cover of darkness. The Lakota were successful and took many horses; but the Crow were in pursuit, so the Lakota warriors decided to stop and face the enemy.

The Crows did not expect to find the Hunkpapa waiting for them as they came over a rise. Even though they were surprised, three of the Crow warriors charged daringly into the Hunkpapa ranks. One of the Crow counted coup on two Lakota, while the second Crow warrior fired his rifle and killed a Lakota warrior. A Hunkpapa warrior rode out to challenge the third Crow. This Lakota warrior dismounted his horse and shouted, “I am Tatanka Iyotake, and I have come to fight!”

Tatanka Iyotake’s reputation as a great warrior had not spread across the land yet, but the Crow warrior would have noticed this Lakota warrior’s attire. He wore a regal headdress which featured blackened buffalo horns with the hair still attached. He had a red woolen sash adorned with eagle feathers draped over his shoulder. The Crows had heard of such warriors and of their bravery. The Crow warrior knew he was facing a sash bearer from the Strong Heart Society.

Just the knowledge of who he faced would be chilling, but the Crow warriors were also brave. The challenged Crow warrior dismounted
his horse and started running toward the Strong Heart warrior. Now the Lakota warrior had a chance to observe his Crow opponent. His style of regalia identified him as a chief.

The Crow chief was carrying a flintlock rifle and the distance between the two warriors was closing fast. The Crow suddenly dropped to one knee and raised his rifle. Tatanka Iyotake dropped to the ground and took shelter behind his shield. The Crow fired and his ball hit the shield. It ricocheted and struck Tatanka Iyotake in the left foot.

Tatanka Iyotake dropped his shield, took aim, and shot the Crow in the chest. He limped over to the Crow chief and slipped his knife into the Crow’s heart. The powers associated with the chief were, through this act, transferred to the victor. The rest of the Lakota warriors then attacked the other Crow and scattered them into a full retreat.

This second wound to his left foot did not heal properly, and for the rest of his life Tatanka Iyotake walked with a limp. The limp did not hamper his abilities, as he could still run fast, but it served as a constant reminder to others of his bravery and courage.

By the time he was in his midtwenties, Tatanka Iyotake had been elected to be a leader of the Strong Heart Society. He formed within the Strong Heart Society a sub-group consisting of an alliance of volunteer warriors that held their meetings and council at midnight. This alliance was the Midnight Strong Heart Society. It was most uncommon to choose someone so young to hold a leadership position, but Tatanka Iyotake elevated the position to greater heights and did not disappoint those who chose him.

The historical accounts of the death of Tatanka Iyotake present us with a narrative that flows smoothly from point to point, often glossing over some glaring discrepancies. These accounts are from a single source: Stanley Vestal (Walter Campbell), who, in 1930, came to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation to look for descendents of Tatanka Iyotake. Wanting to write a biography of Tatanka Iyotake, he interviewed One Bull. The accounts provided by One Bull are not accurate. One Bull adopted Walter Campbell as his son so Campbell would not doubt his story.

To make their father more credible, One Bull’s daughters fabricated the story that he was adopted as a son by Tatanka Iyotake through the Hunkayapi Ceremony. No Lakota person would go through the Hunkayapi Ceremony with a person who is already a blood relative. Tatanka Iyotake had acted as a mentor to his sister’s son in the same way that his father’s brother Four Horns had taught him.

Stanley Vestal never spoke to any of the direct descendents of Tatanka Iyotake. Vestal believed the words of One Bull and penned
the book *Sitting Bull, Champion of the Sioux* from One Bull’s accounts. Every book author and historian since that time has treated this novel as an historical document, but in reality, it is a work of fiction.

However, the story of the death of Tatanka Iyotake, written by and from the point of view of non-Lakota, does not correspond to the reports of three eyewitnesses to the event. These witnesses were the children of Tatanka Iyotake, who were present when their father was murdered.

Ernie LaPointe’s mother learned these stories from her mother, Standing Holy, and from her uncles, John Sitting Bull and Henry Little Soldier. Standing Holy was the youngest daughter of Tatanka Iyotake and Seen by Her Nation Woman. John Sitting Bull, whose Lakota name was Refuses Them, was a deaf-mute and was the son of Seen by Her Nation Woman. Henry Little Soldier was the son of Four Robes Woman. Seen by Her Nation Woman and Four Robes Woman had both been married to Bear Louse before they married Tatanka Iyotake, and each had a son from their first marriage. Tatanka Iyotake treated the boys as his own. They were present when Tatanka Iyotake was murdered on the morning of December 15, 1890. Their story is quite different from the One Bull version.

All accounts agree that forty-three Metal Breasts (Indian police) came to the sleeping camp of Tatanka Iyotake in the early morning hours of December 15. From that point on, however, the accounts diverge. Some of the more dramatic reports say that the police burst into the cabin and forced Tatanka Iyotake from his bed, then dragged the naked elder out into the yard. Since it was a December winter morning, this seems highly unlikely.

Instead, according to his stepsons, the police knocked on the door and asked him to come outdoors. They waited for him while he got dressed, putting on his shirt and leggings. In support of this, the Smithsonian Institution has just returned to Ernie LaPointe (in December 2007) the leggings taken off the corpse of Tatanka Iyotake.

Inside the cabin were Tatanka Iyotake’s wives and children, including his two stepsons and his son Crowfoot. Crowfoot was a young man of seventeen at that time, not a fourteen-year-old boy, as is often reported. When Tatanka Iyotake walked toward the door of the cabin, Crowfoot also jumped up and picked up his weapon. He told his father he would protect him. “I will stand with you.”

At the door, Tatanka Iyotake paused, then turned around and sang a farewell song to his family. He sang, “I am a man and wherever I lie is my own.”

To his family, he spoke his last words to them; it was in the form of his death song. As he turned and stepped out the door, Crowfoot walked behind him carrying his weapon. Those inside the cabin said it seemed like forever when gunfire erupted. Tatanka Iyotake fell in front of the door, and a few seconds later Crowfoot fell next to his father. Six Silent Eaters of the Midnight Strong Heart Society died along with their friend, chief, and Sundancer that cold December morning.

Here is a final discrepancy in the story. Many reports, especially those of the surviving Indian police, said that Crowfoot was hiding under a bed in the cabin. The police hauled him out, crying and pleading for his life. Bull Head, the leader of the Indian police ordered Crowfoot’s death, and his police officers killed the boy. This is similar to the fabricated story of Tatanka Iyotake dragged naked into his yard; it seeks to humiliate the memory of his son.

Crowfoot died outside the cabin. There was a crying child present, but it was twelve-year-old William. His older half-brother, Crowfoot,
Crowfoot 1883

had already died with his father. It is not too hard to understand why the boy was afraid for his life. The other story is a complete fabrication.

The immediate family members were all horrified witnesses to the death of Tatanka Iyotake. As the United States Army unit assigned to back up the Indian police moved into the camp, the family and other residents fled for their lives. Now there was not only the Metal Breasts to fear, but also the soldiers. Tatanka Iyotake’s two wives, Seen by Her Nation and Four Robes, took their five children and Tatanka Iyotake’s oldest daughter, Many Horses, and headed south. The children included Tatanka Iyotake’s stepsons, John Sitting Bull (Refuses Them) and Henry Little Soldier. Tatanka Iyotake’s biological children were Standing Holy (Mary Sitting Bull), daughter of Seen by Her Nation, as well as Lodge in Sight (Lizzie Sitting Bull) and Runs Away From (William Sitting Bull), children of Four Robes.

As they fled across the Grand River, the family and about 200 other members of the camp were intercepted by Army forces, which were sent in pursuit. They were put under protective custody at Fort Yates. The males ranging from sixteen to fifty years of age were incarcerated at Fort Sully until the spring of 1891. McLaughlin feared the Strong Heart Society, and he assumed these males were part of the society and would retaliate for the death of Tatanka Iyotake.

Even the Army had been a bit surprised at the intensity of the reaction by the other Hunkpapa against Tatanka Iyotake’s family. Many of the people were angry because their loved ones had died in the process of arresting Tatanka Iyotake. In one case, a father and son fought against each other—the son on the side of the police and the father with his old friend, the chief. By this time, many of the Hunkpapa had relented to the demands of McLaughlin and wanted
to be “good Indians.” They had adopted Christianity and the followed the white man’s way. Tatanka Iyotake opposed the white man’s way of life. He and his followers wanted to be left alone to live the old way. This rift within the Hunkpapa was devastating. It is more than a little ironic that the United States Army became the guardians of the family of one of their most steadfast opponents, protecting them from their own people.