

Delta Sources and Resources

Museum of Native American History
202 SW “O” Street
Bentonville, Arkansas 72712
by Charlotte Buchanan-Yale

Bentonville Arkansas is the hometown to the Museum of Native American History. The museum has received national press coverage as a “do not miss it” regional attraction in Northwest Arkansas. Since the 2009 grand opening of its redesigned building, this sleeping giant of a museum has worked tirelessly and quietly behind the scenes building and complementing its world class collection.

For those who have not visited this amazing attraction in their own backyard or those planning a trip to Northwest Arkansas, directions to the MONAH will take you through a residential neighborhood three minutes from the historic Bentonville Square and just ten minutes from the Crystal Bridges Art Museum. Your GPS will not mention that a full-sized Native American tepee marks the spot of a topnotch museum of Native American history and art. Just past the museum’s great doors, guests are greeted by a 12,000-year-old Woolly Mammoth skeleton, 12 feet high and 17 feet long, that sets the pace for a grand ride through time as visitors envision Native Americans who would have hunted this creature some 14,000 years ago.

Welcome to the vision of David Bogle. His mission in creating the museum is to give visitors a deeper sense of how Native Americans lived. And it is impossible not to come away with a new appreciation for the estimated 20 to 60 million people who were native to North America when the first Europeans reached its shores.

The Museum of Native American History is more than a Bentonville treasure. It is a national repository that honors the lives and cul-

tures of the first Americans. While many museums have a small room dedicated to Native American art and artifacts, few other museums besides the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian showcase the entire story in such an elaborate fashion. MONAH is a bridge connecting the layers of time to our past, present, and future in its well orchestrated layout. It inspires and challenges the many generations of guests who walk through its Grand doors to connect with their own ancestors. For the museum staff, many of the people who visit the museum hold another piece to the puzzle with their stories or quests for missing links to their heritage.

Visitors are given portable handheld audio wands at no charge at the front desk. The simplicity of the audio wands allows for a self guided tour for each guest’s individual interests. By pressing the numbers that correspond to the artifacts on display, guests are able to pick and choose what they want to learn about in their visits as they circle through the museum’s displays, from the Paleo-Indians over 10,000 years ago to the Reservation Period of the early 1900s.

MONAH’s newest art acquisition, The Wajaje Lakota Winter Count is one of the finest of the extant examples, and the fourth oldest record still in existence, of more than 100 known winter counts, many of which survive only in written form. The Wajaje Winter Count is the only winter count known of the Wajaje Lakota people whose history it records, beginning in 1758-59 and continuing until 1885-86. This Winter Count is a relatively new discovery for scholars of Native American history.

A winter count is a calendar and historical record used by the Plains tribes, primarily the Sioux. Every drawing or glyph represents a significant event that took place each year. The Wajaje Winter Count provides the early history

of the Southern Teton Lakota tribes. In terms of American History, the winter count records of the Yanktonais and Lakota are invaluable because they chronicle the memories of the only eye witnesses to early events on the High Plains. Historians, climatologists, epidemiologists, demographers, and astronomers may all explore these unique documents for information that is available in no other form.

Originally tanned leather, either buffalo or elk robe, was the material on which the chronicles were inscribed, but when the large game animals of the Plains were wiped out by encroaching Euro-Americans, and as new materials—cloth, paper, watercolor paints, inks, graphite and colored pencils—became available to the Lakota, an early project in many tribal groups was to transfer their important chronicles onto these newer materials. For this reason,

many surviving winter counts are drawn on muslin cloth, others on loose paper, or in ledger books.

The winter counts were in the care of the designated band historian, The Keeper. At the time of the first snow fall each winter, a council of tribal leaders would assemble, discuss events of the previous year, then select the most important one for the Keeper to add to their winter count. Later still, elderly Keepers or their family members were interviewed, and brief descriptive sentences for each year in the record might be written out in longhand, or typed. The majority of the records which have survived are in the latter form, a modern equivalent of the ancient winter recitations, which were simply spoken to an audience.

If the leather robe on which the winter count was inscribed became damaged or worn,

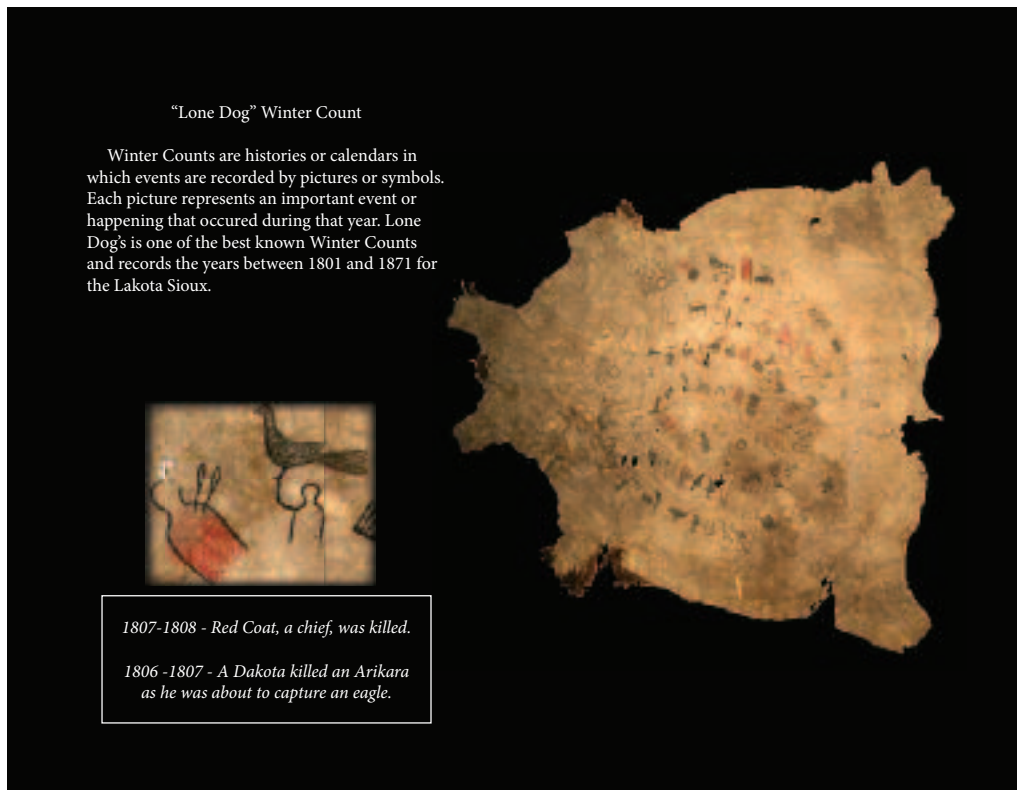


The Museum of Native American History, Bentonville, Arkansas
Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Native American History

the record was transferred to another robe and preserved. When a particular band separated, a member of the departing group might apprentice himself to his band's Keeper; his apprenticeship often included hunting to provide food for the Keeper's family, much like a college student paying tuition today, and he thereby earned the right to be taught the band's history. When the apprentice memorized the chronicle and inscribed its events on a robe of his own, he would be qualified to become the keeper of the record for his own group. It is likely that this is the manner in which close variants of tribal records arose. When a Winter Count Keeper died, a successor—often a son, or other relative—assumed the responsibility, and continued adding glyphs to the record. It is apparent that

several Keepers contributed to a chronicle. The Wajaje Lakota Winter count now joins MONAH's permanent art collection with Lone Dog's Winter Count (1800-01 to 1870-71) on buffalo hide. The artist of the Wajaje Winter Count is unknown.

The Museum of Native American History is open Monday through Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Admission is free. Museum staff can be reached via phone at (479) 273-2456 or (479) 981-1135 and by email at monah202@gmail.com. Additional information can be found on the museum's website: www.monah.com. ▲▼▲



Lone Dog's Winter Count
Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Native American History