

**Louis Warren**

## **A Hole in the Dream: The 1890 Ghost Dance and the Making of Modern America**

This book explores the environmental context and meanings of the Ghost Dance, a pan-Indian religious movement that swept reservations of the West. The bulk of Ghost Dance scholarship focuses on its culminating tragedy, the near annihilation of a village of Minneconjou Sioux by the U.S. Seventh Cavalry at South Dakota's Wounded Knee Creek in December 1890. With rare exceptions, the shadow of this bloody climax has turned the Ghost Dance into a tragedy of doomed primitivism. For numerous authors and filmmakers, no other event has so usefully signaled the closing of the frontier.<sup>1</sup>

The central premise of *A Hole in the Dream* is that the Ghost Dance is better understood as the dawn of the twentieth century. Its modern relevance becomes apparent when we locate it in its place of origin—not the Great Plains but the Great Basin, and specifically Nevada. The most arid and desolate landscape in North America, occupying fully one-sixth of the lower 48 states, the Great Basin was home to Indian religious traditions of earthly renewal that incorporated Christian thought beginning as early as the 1830s. Nevada, which occupies some of the least hospitable of this inhospitable terrain, was the birthplace of Jack Wilson (or Wovoka), the Northern Paiute ranch hand who became the prophet of the 1890 dance. After entering the union in 1864 on the heels of massive silver discoveries, by 1890 Nevada was in crisis. This economic and environmental emergency was partly an expression of sparse natural resources and aridity, which proved insurmountable obstacles for American settlers who sought to domesticate it.

Nevada's crisis became the crucible of Jack Wilson's prophecy. He proselytized a new code of living—do not lie, do not steal, remain at peace, and go to work—that would cause Christ to return as an Indian and the earth to be enlarged and renewed. In various ways his message reached far-flung Indian peoples who sent acolytes to learn the teachings and spread the word to their own reservations.

By putting Wilson's vision in its proper context, we begin to see that the emergency the Ghost Dance addressed was not merely the loss of Indian autonomy (which happened when Wilson was a child), but the failure of American development to generate well-being in ways that had been promised (which was the dominant reality of Wilson's working experience). A long-overlooked component of Wilson's vision emphasized dutiful work, a teaching that echoed Protestant sermons of the day (some of which Wilson had attended in the town of Mason). Although different Indian groups turned the dance to different ends, and some 30 tribes across the West ultimately participated, Ghost Dance enthusiasm correlated strongly with drought and economic decline, which troubled much of the West in this period. In this sense, the Ghost Dance was less a marker for frontier's end than a post-frontier phenomenon, one that incorporated elements of so-called "revitalization movements" with a reform vision akin to contemporary Protestant revivals to address a fading American economy.

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<sup>1</sup> Any list of exceptions would include Greg Smoak, *Ghost Dances and Identity: Prophetic Religion and American Indian Ethnogenesis in the Nineteenth Century* (UC Press, 2008) and Alice Beck Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1989).

In fact, Wilson's vision was as political as it was spiritual, and in ways long overlooked by scholars, the prophet hoped to influence American leaders. Moreover, Nevada's crisis gave birth to new political formulations among non-Indians, too. In much of the West, the 1880s and '90s were years of drought and economic turmoil. Although expanding settlements led the US Census Bureau to announce the end of the frontier in 1890, the severe drought that followed actually reduced population to frontier levels in various western states. Amidst this crisis other millenarian movements, and political movements with a millenarian appeal, assumed salience. Among these was the "irrigation crusade." Although this effort took shape over decades, with input from many sources, in the latter 1880s its point of origin was Nevada. It was Nevada's US Senator William Stewart who secured funding for an 1889 federal survey of Nevada's rivers in hopes of creating new, large-scale irrigation projects to expand arable lands of the Silver State. One of their first stops was the headwaters of the Walker River, the very place where Jack Wilson was entranced by his vision of the earth renewed. It was Nevada's congressman, Francis Newlands, who in the early 1890s began drafting legislation, the Newlands Reclamation Act, which created the US Bureau of Reclamation. The first project taken up under the new law was the diversion of the Truckee River into the plains of the Carson Sink, immediately north of Walker River and Jack Wilson's home.

The new irrigation effort combined technocratic measures to re-create frontier abundance by watering arid lands, partly to forestall Populist and leftist agitation, which in the eyes of nervous elites threatened to upend the republic. But the scientists and engineers who envisioned a desert undone by networks of canals were also galvanized by a Biblical call to reclaim the garden from the wilderness. Indeed, the "irrigation crusade" was at least as millenarian as it was mechanistic. Its overly ambitious goals seldom inspired scrutiny, in part because "to make the garden bloom as the rose," a phrase taken from the Book of Ruth, was so unquestionable a goal in Victorian America.

These competing but connected visions of earthly renewal, with their mix of political and religious inspirations and goals, linked Indians and non-Indians across the interior West in the 1890s. Exploring how Jack Wilson conceived of the prophecy and how Indians came to believe it or not (and it bears repeating that only a minority ever joined the faithful), raise questions of what, exactly, religious belief can imply about its larger historical context. What does the emergence of this new religious belief tell us about the contours and development of the American Gilded Age and the Far West? What does it tell us about modern economies, indigenous religion, and arid environments? And how are the co-eval prophecies of Ghost Dance and reclaimed desert connected? By exploring the Ghost Dance as a modern movement that sought to reconcile the faithful to wage work and as one of a number of American efforts to renew and restore the earth, this book re-writes the supposed end of the frontier and the dawn of the twentieth century in ways that give these long-ago events new relevance and meaning for our own era.