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STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: *Black Elk Speaks*

Chapter 2: “Early Boyhood”

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Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

Summary:

Proclaiming that he is a Lakota of the Ogalala (Oglala) band, Black Elk reviews his lineage. Born on December 1863, he is a second cousin of Crazy Horse. He mentions that his father was seriously injured in the Fetterman Fight of 1866 (The Battle of the Hundred Slain). Black Elk remembers this fight as a “bad dream.” Once he grew older, he better understood the Wasichus—their insatiable hunger for gold, their lies, and their desire to destroy Indian culture. Fire Thunder then describes the deceptive strategy used to defeat Fetterman and his troopers. Black Elk admits that he doesn’t so much remember the fight as he remembers the fear he experienced because of it—though his fear abated as he played with other boys his age. The innocence of childhood gave way, however, to intruding reality once again when the Wagon Box Fight of 1867 occurred (The Attacking of the Wagons). After Fire Thunder summarizes this fight, Standing Bear, a close friend of Black Elk, tells of the accidental death of High Shirt’s mother. The summer following the Wagon Box Fight was a time of peace and happiness—though Black Elk adds that this good time ended when the Wasichus broke their promises. Black Elk believes this was the summer when he heard a kingbird say that a sacred voice was calling him—an intimation of his great vision to come.

Study questions:

1. Why does Black Elk declare, "I am a Lakota of the Ogalala [Oglala] Band"? Does this declaration reveal anything about his character? His relationship to his people?
2. Who was Crazy Horse? Why does Black Elk tell his listener that he and Crazy Horse were second cousins?
3. What injury did Black Elk's father incur in the Fetterman Fight (Battle of the Hundred Slain)? Approximately when did Black Elk's father die? Why is this date significant?
4. What did Black Elk fear about the Wasichus?
5. What is being revealed about Black Elk when he asked his grandfather about the Wasichus?
6. Locate the Madison Fork (River) on a map. According to Black Elk, why did the Wasichus invade this area?
7. Black Elk describes a Golden Age in which all forms of life lived together. Who are the relatives he has in mind?
8. Describe the dream of Drinks Water.
9. According to Black Elk, who was the "great chief" of the people?
10. Briefly describe the strategy used to defeat the whites in the Fetterman Fight. See the speech by Fire Thunder.
11. Black Elk says that he remembers experiencing this emotion, in particular, at the time of the Fetterman Fight. Name this emotion.
12. A medicine man named Creeping helped to cure Black Elk's band of a certain problem. Identify that problem.
13. Describe the defensive strategy of the Wasichus during the Wagon Box Fight of 1867.
14. This person says he has been a friend of Black Elk since boyhood. Name this person.
15. What were the terms of the treaty made with Red Cloud at Fort Laramie?
16. What kind of bird spoke to Black Elk?
17. At the time, why didn't Black Elk share his vision of the voice calling him?

Suggested prompts for student writing:

1. Perhaps the dominant emotion experienced by Black Elk, especially early in his life, was fear. Write a paragraph in which you examine the reasons why Black Elk's fear was a logical reaction to the cultural or historical conditions of his life. In other words, explain why he was so fearful as a child.
2. Discuss Black Elk's pride in his lineage.
3. In the incident involving the kingbird, Black Elk heard a voice calling him. What quality or qualities of Black Elk did this vision suggest?
4. In many cultures, childhood games are often a way to prepare for adulthood. In this regard, discuss the games played by the boys when the Lakotas were camping on the Rosebud. How did these games (and their consequences) help Lakota boys to become Lakota men?
5. Look up some reliable information on either the Fetterman Fight of 1866 or the Wagon Box Fight of 1867. Then answer this question: Is Fire Thunder's account of these battles (chose one) historically accurate? Write a comparison essay.