

Show Indians in Brussels

In the 1930s a group of Plains Indians visited Brussels. Decades later their valuables surfaced, forgotten in a basement. What happened to their owners? One man needed to know.

TEXT: DONALD FRAZIER



Sioux Indians take part in the Brussels custom of donating traditional dress to the statue of Manneken Pis.



On a windswept patch of prairie miles from the nearest paved road a tall, long-haired man in a Western-style fringed jacket stood at the front door of a small weather-beaten house. He waited for someone to answer, marveling at the chain of events that brought him from Belgium to the outback of one of the poorest Indian reservations in the United States. A collector of artifacts from the past of American West, he was used to unexpected journeys. But this one was different. Seeking the roots of his new collection of eagle feathers, beads and rawhide in this remote place, he was following their trail to the present.

His trove may be one of the finest, most credible collections of Lakota Sioux artifacts anywhere in the world. Everything from breastplates, moccasins, beaded vests, bracelets, war clubs, ornamental cuffs, war shirts, neckties, belts, bandanas, pipe bags, pendants, and so on. The war bonnets, with twin trains of red-tinged eagle feathers, must have looked quite flamboyant when their owner was streaking across the prairie on horseback. Vivid colors, original materials and techniques, and in near-perfect condition, without the marks of hard daily use seen in almost every other such collection. All of it exudes confidence, vigor, and a close bond with the symbols and purposes of Lakota tradition.

Owner of a gallery and shop in the medieval heart of Brussels, François Chladiuk certainly had the right connections to ferret out and buy this collection a few years ago. But how did it get to a forgotten basement in Brussels in the first place? How was it preserved in secrecy for the better part of a century, in perfect condition, as if waiting patiently for Chladiuk to bring it into the light? Most of all, what ever became of the families who made and used these things and returned to America, leaving the talismans of their culture behind?

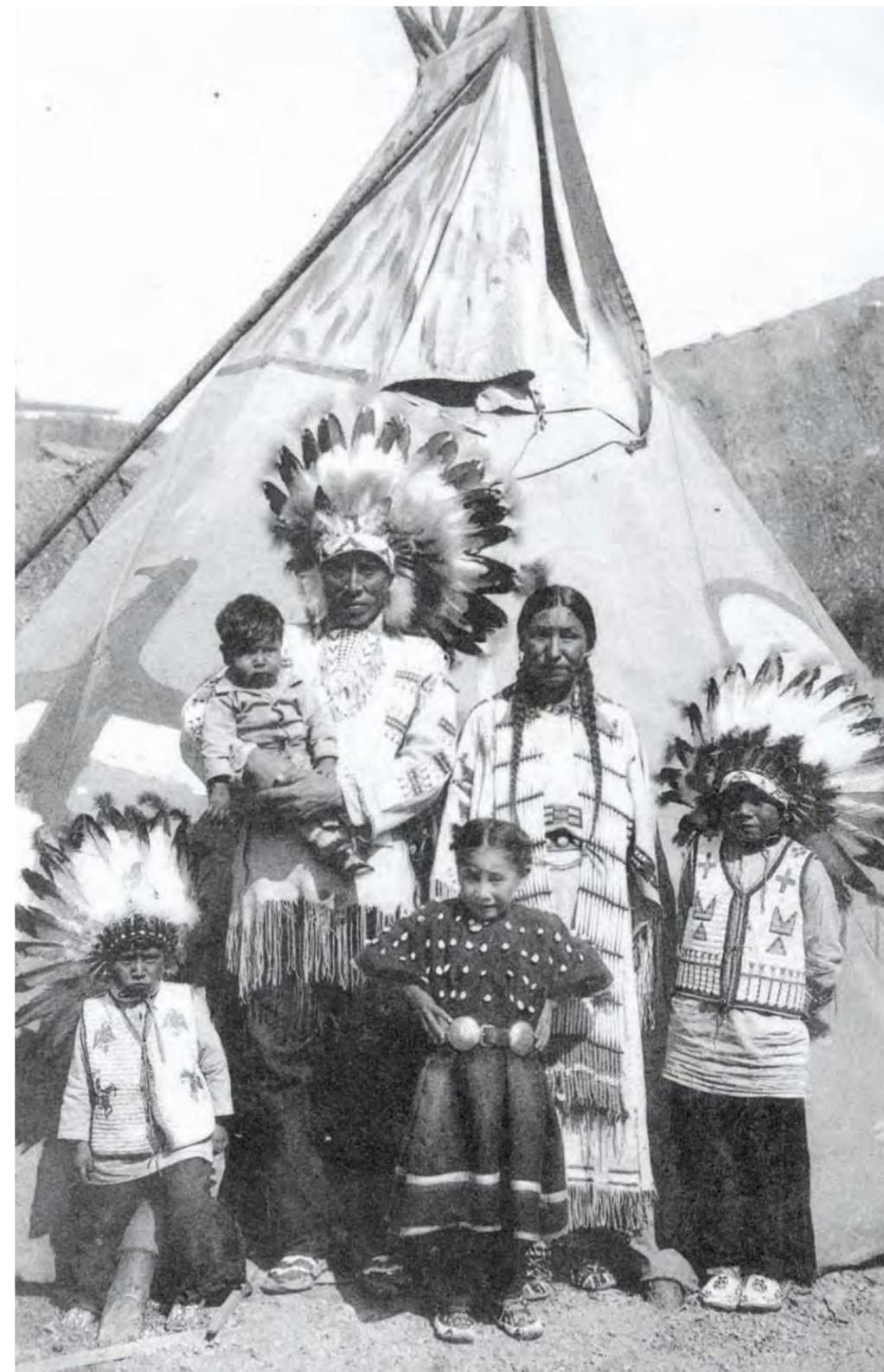


His search for answers brought him from the museums and antique dealers of central Brussels to Wyoming, Colorado and especially the Indian country of South Dakota. And it illuminated a chapter of the American West that has long been ignored and, in some ways, suppressed.

As soon as white Americans vanquished the frontier, they couldn't wait to relive it. Native American resistance to the invasion of their homeland has just concluded its final, violent but futile spasm. Starting in the late 1880s a series of Wild West shows proliferated, grand outdoor spectacles re-enacting scenes of frontier life that many people knew about only through dime store novels and lurid magazine articles. Roundups, stage coach attacks, the Pony Express, the Battle of the Little Big Horn, pony races, shooting exhibitions of shooting, roping and branding -- all played a part. Most of all, Americans wanted to lay eyes on the exotic characters making up the just-closed frontier. They wanted buffalos and bucking broncos. And they wanted to see real live cowboys and Indians for themselves, doing what they were famous for doing.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show gave them all of this. And its proprietor and entrepreneur William Frederick Cody was the real deal, a frontiersman himself. With a good reputation among the Indians, he had no problem recruiting dozens of them to perform in his elaborate pageants. For the Lakota Sioux, winning a gig in The Wild West Show was good source of income and a ticket to interesting and faraway places at a time when the new reservations were being overrun by government officials trying to keep them from revolting, and missionaries trying to

A beaded vest from the Brussels basement collection, above, is the same one worn by Francis Little Moon during the 1935 World's Fair, far right.



VEST OF LEATHER, FABRIC AND GLASS BEADS.
PHOTOS: CHLADIUK COLLECTION (ABOVE); KMKG (LEFT).



WAR SHIRT BELONGING TO CHARLY LITTLE BOY, MADE OF HIDE, HORSEHAIR, HUMAN HAIR, GLASS BEADS, FABRIC AND SHELLS. PHOTO: KMKG

convert them. Thanks in large part to their talent in riding, shooting and behaving with stagy ferocity, the show and its many knock-offs became sensations, playing to ever-larger crowds across the United States. But Americans had begun to tire of these spectacles by the time Cody died in 1917, so the shows increasingly toured Europe.

These Wild West shows had always figured large in Chladiuk's imagination. He had grown up playing cowboys and Indians, and later became a lifelong scholar and fan of all things Western. "Even when I was young my spirit felt more free when I was thinking about the West, he recalled. I always knew I would make my life around the West, and the things and people I imagined all of my life." And so did. His spacious pine-paneled Western Shop in Brussels stocks an impressive array of Western wear and jewelry. Chladiuk himself is a walking advertisement for his establishment, adorning his 6'5" frame with Western ties and cowboy boots every day of the year. (But refraining from the cowboy hat: "That would make me stand out too much!") A gallery as well, Western Shop also displays Chladiuk's collection of Western and Indian art and mementos including two saddles from the original Buffalo Bill Wild West Show.

Which is why, when a mysterious collection of odd artifacts found in a Brussels basement came onto the market in a 2005 estate sale, he got the call.

"I didn't know what to expect at first, but the moment I looked inside I knew this was something special," he recalls. Carefully packed away in mothballs but largely forgotten for decades, this lode of Plains Indians artifacts was the personal collection of a retired butcher, Auguste

From Colorado, where he cherishes his own collection of Western belt buckles, Donald Frazier writes for various magazines in Asia, Europe and North America.

Hermanns. As a boy, he met the troop of Show Indians while they camped out and performed at the 1935 World's Fair, and soon started hanging out with them. The Indians were taken by his friendship, when it was time to return to the reservation, they sold him everything they didn't want to carry. As the years passed he would occasionally take these items out to show them to visitors, but he would carefully put them back. He told nobody else about them.

Decades later their new owner faced one problem. The historical value of a collection like this needs a paper trail of ownership. There were receipts proving Hermanns had bought everything from a few families of the Lakota Sioux at their encampments. But specifically, from whom? And how do we know?

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This is an extremely important question. For historical collections, provenance is everything. It's the trail of documentation and verified circumstances proving what you say have is, indeed, what you have. No problem

for a famous painting that's been fawned over for centuries by everyone since the Borgias, each one leaving a record. But Native American art of that era is unsigned and executed in soft, natural materials. Determining its provenance is almost always impossible.

Chladiuk began to track down his collection's past from postcards documenting the Fair. "People here know what I'm looking for. I was looking specifically for Indians, and I found about nine postcards from the World's Fair." He and his son took high resolution digital photos of the old, crackling black and white photos, and on a computer screen zoomed in on the details. And then they saw her: a little girl wearing a beaded vest that was also in the collection. The more they looked, the more they spotted specific items in the collection, worn by Native Americans in their ad hoc village, or on the streets of Brussels amid throngs of appreciative onlookers. In one

especially remarkable photo, a group of Lakota in full regalia poses in the old quarter of Brussels in front of the famous Manneken Pis' statue. That piece of detective work gave Chladiuk all of the proof he needed.

An ensuing exhibit at the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels was a vast success, one of the largest of any displays of Native American regalia and objects in Europe according to its curator, Sergio Purini. "We can see in the workmanship, the techniques, and the motifs these artists were in a direct continuation of 19th century Lakota tradition." In the US, these items would have been lost, worn out, or destroyed. But thanks to Auguste Hermanns and his infatuation with the Indians he met at the World's Fair, the entire collection survived intact, preserved as if it were in a bank vault.

"To a historian, the most remarkable thing about this collection is that you can relate real things to real people," Purini says. "There are good Lakota collections elsewhere, but the credibility of this one, plus its quality, makes it unparalleled anywhere in the world."



But what of the families in the photos? He knew the names Little Elk, Spotted Owl, and especially Little Moon from receipts with the artifacts. But he needed real people to attach to those names, so he traveled to America with a documentary film crew to learn more about the Show Indians. Cameras whirring, he took up the trail in Denver, at the Buffalo Bill Museum, the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, and finally to Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, one of the poorest in the country.

Which brings Chladiuk to that house on the prairie, near the site of the famous Wounded Knee massacre. "In Pine Ridge they told us there was a Little Moon living in Wounded Knee. So we found an old man, Moses Little Moon. I showed him the picture from Brussels and asked 'Who are these people?' He pointed them out

by name: 'my father Joe and my mother Rose.'" The man named all of the children in the pictures, disappeared for a several minutes, and then came back with the only one of his family pictures to survive a fire. It matched the one Chladiuk brought from home.

Moses died soon thereafter, but his little brother Walter later filled in the rest of story. Belonging to the Show Indians gave his father's family membership in an elite group among the Lakota, the so-called Show Indians. Life on the reservation was hard, barely one step above starvation. But joining a Wild West show earned Joe Little Moon many things: a good salary, travel overseas, and a range of experiences inconceivable to people back on the reservation. Back at Pine Ridge, according to historian L.G. Moses, officials wanted

the Lakota to become wholly pacified Christian yeoman farmers instead of performers – albeit on marginal land that nobody else wanted. Upon moving back, they fell into the harsh realities of reservation life. Their adventures in

the capitals of the world were lost to history.

Taking stock of all of this, Chladiuk left Pine Ridge chastened by his glimpse of the Show Indians' fate. Despite the fame it has brought him, he decided his collection would not remain in Europe. He now sees himself as its custodian, and is seeking a home for it in the West where it can remind the descendants of the Show Indians of a time when their ancestors proudly carried the art and traditions of the Lakota Sioux to a world far beyond the reservation.

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A visitor of the 1935 World's Fair posing next to Gilbert Aloysius Little Moon on horseback, right, wearing a wrist band found in the collection, above.



COLLECTION OF WALTER LITTLE MOON (ABOVE); KMKMG (LEFT).