

Long Lost “Caller of the Game” Robe

“Rediscovered” at Smithsonian

The Cheyenne were very probably among the several tribes that used the Vore Site, but the evidence is all circumstantial. No one who actually observed the great hunts survived long enough to testify or record them. However, in the 1920's, William Wildschut, an anthropologist working for the Heye Museum (precursor of the Smithsonian's Museum of the American Indian—NMAI), collected a buffalo robe on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana. The robe was adorned with a number of symbols rendered in red paint. A prominent Cheyenne elder named, “Limpy” told Wildshut about the origin and use of the robe and what the symbols represented.

In summary, Limpy said that the robe had belonged to a Cheyenne shaman referred to as “The Caller of the Game”. As the name implies, “The Caller” was credited with the power to encourage bison to come and give their lives and flesh to their two-legged kin, the Cheyenne. According to Limpy, the robe's cyphers came to The Caller in a dream and they symbolic depict a “natural pit” used as buffalo jump in the Black Hills. There are also symbols representing buffalo tracks, drivelines, the moon and stars and a cyclone that The Caller believed created the circular pit. The Vore Site is the only natural pit in the Black Hills region known to have been used as a buffalo jump and is almost certainly the feature represented on the hide. The robe was considered to have great power and was used in important ceremonies such as the Sun Dance as well those that preceded communal hunts like those at the VBJ.

The only formal reference to The Caller's robe was contained in a short report in a 1926 ethnographic publication called, *Indian Notes*. The *Notes* article featured a diagram (shown below) of the robe that showed the painted symbols. The figures were numbered and their meaning, as reported by Limpy, were included.

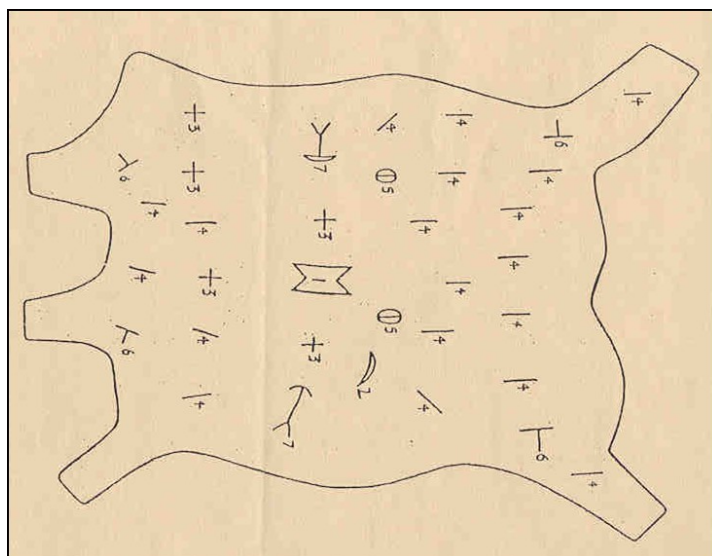


Diagram of Caller of the Game's robe from *Indian Notes*, 1926

For over 60 years, the brief narrative and diagram were the only reference to the robe. Dr. Charles Reher and Gene Gade of the Vore Buffalo Jump Foundation both made attempts in the 1990's to verify the existence of the robe and to possibly obtain a good photograph of the actual item. However, robe was an obscure artifact among thousands in storage in a Heye Museum facility in the Bronx borough of New York City. The new Smithsonian NMAI in Washington D.C. was not yet open. There were references to various buffalo robes in the inventory, but nobody at the institution could verify the existence of The Caller's robe.

This winter, Gade renewed his request for information about the robe and got a positive response from curators at the NMAI. After several weeks of searching, they found the robe and sent a photo. The painted symbols are difficult to see, but there is no doubt that the actual Caller's robe has been located. A better photo is pending and the Smithsonian has suggested the possibility of obtaining the actual robe on loan. At this point the VBJF cannot protect and display such a precious artifact, but it is exciting to learn for certain that it still exists!



Actual photo of the Caller of the Game's robe courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C.

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