

# Autobiography of Poor Wolf, Head Soldier of the Hidatsa or Gros Ventre Tribe

Collected by C. L. Hall



I was born on the Knife River in the middle of the three **Gros Ventre [Hidatsa] villages** near the mouth of that stream. The chief of this middle village was the Road Maker. His father's name was Buffalo-Hide-Tent. The Road Maker was my mother's brother.

He was born 142 or 143 years ago. I have kept a record and know this. The Road Maker died when he was seventy-eight years old. My father died the same year. I was then twenty-two years old. The Road Maker was seventy-eight. That was about sixty-four or sixty-five years ago. My father was a little the younger of two. He died in the winter, and the Road Maker died the summer before, when the cherries were ripe.

When I was a child of five winters, perhaps only four, I prayed to the spirits of animals, to the stars, the sun, and the moon. My words were not many, but I prayed. I was afraid of the enemy in the dark. My father had heard of the white man's God through a trader but nothing clearly. We sometimes prayed to the white man's God who made us and could make us grow.

We had female divinities above, and we prayed to the four winds, and to the earth that makes the corn grow. There are many songs concerning these things, some of the songs speak of the different colored flowers. These things were taught for a great price, by the priests of the tribe.

When I was about five winters old a white chief visited our village on the Knife River. He said the Gros Ventres should obey the Great Father, and consider their hunting grounds as extending from Devils Lake to the Yellowstone River. I remember saying to my father: Will I be a white man now? And my father said, Yes. That was seventy-seven years ago, and I have been a friend to the whites ever since.

These men had eight boats. They were drawn by ropes that the men pulled. They were soldiers with stripes on their breasts and arms. They returned downstream from the neighborhood of the Knife.

One of the men in this company came to the Gros Ventre village just below the mouth of the Knife, where we were, and painted a picture of my uncle **The Road Maker**, the chief of our village. (Poor Wolf has a carefully preserved water color done by some amateur painter. It is in a little nest or round frame, covered with a cracked glass, and ornamented with some brass beaded tacks, and hung up by a piece of raw hide. With the picture he had preserved the scalp locks of his father and younger brother.)



**Figure 1.** This photograph of Poor Wolf and his granddaughter is undated, but perhaps was taken around 1900. From an article by Charles L. Hall, "Poor Wolf: How an Indian Found God." (SAHRL 870.2P792)

When I was seventeen years of age I had the smallpox. I was left alone in a lodge, helpless, weak, and my eyes nearly closed. A bear came in and walked up to where I was lying. He sat down with his back pressed against me, and began to scratch his breast with his forepaws. By and by he got up and walked out of the lodge. Was I dreaming or had it really happened? While I was thinking it over the bear returned, and while I trembled for fear, went through the same motions again, and then went off, leaving me unharmed. I thought surely the bear has had mercy on me. When my father came again we talked it over and agreed that the bear had pitied me. After that I worshipped the bear, and in the dance I wore anklets of bear's teeth.

When I was nineteen or twenty years of age, I went fasting for twenty days. I would not eat anything nor smoke for four days. On the fifth day I would eat a little, and then fast again. My mother and friends would try to have me give up, but I persisted. I cried during this time, and then, for a year after, though I did not fast I kept crying. After this I was



**Figure 2.** This portrait of Poor Wolf is based on a 1910 photograph, taken when he was eighty-nine years old. His tattoos remain clearly visible. (Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society)

tattooed on my arms and neck and other places on my body. This was done with great ceremony. Song was used in the performance. They would sing: Let his body be pictured, his face, his spirit also, and O! White Father in heaven, and ye four winds, make him blue. Let him not be bitten by rattle snakes. It was thought that the tattooing would give courage and afford protection; one would not be struck by bullets. One could suck out snake poison without harm. This last I did not like to try, but my father assured me it could be done. The tattooing left me sore—swollen and itching. After a while I moved about slowly and painfully, and ate a little. I was rubbed with grease and then the sores healed and the blue patterns came out. In tattooing, five little sharp, instruments were fastened side by side. They were like needles, and pricked painfully into the flesh.

At the Knife River a party of Sioux once attacked us in the winter. The Gros Ventres were running away. I walked right up to the Sioux who were on horseback. They ran. Then two of them came against me on foot. They shot at me, but the bullets struck my beaded shirt and did no harm. I was then twenty-one years of age.

When I was twenty-four I came to the **old Fort Berthold village**. There they built a trading post. There were fifty warriors and fifty adults and children in the party. We put up a palisade round the post. We drew the logs with lariats of raw hide over our shoulders. We left the Knife because timber was scarce there and the Sioux were plenty. The Blackfeet (Hidu-sidi) also were troublesome.

There is a bluff in the “Six-Mile-Creek,” near the present stageroad crossing where they used to go to catch eagles. There my father used to worship when he was on such a hunt. They came from Knife River at that time. I once caught twelve eagles on one hunt. Three in one day was the most I ever caught. On another hunt I got seven. There are very strict rules for eagle hunting, but I did not think them correct and did not observe them all. One rule was that the successful hunter should return to camp with his eagles crying. I came back happy. If I cried over my success, I thought the eagles would not



**Figure 3. Detail of a pictograph probably made by Poor Wolf about 1900.** The canvas, of unbleached muslin, is about three feet by fourteen feet. On it are drawn images of the warrior exploits of Poor Wolf and his friends. Pictographs serve as autobiographical statements similar to the written text. In this image Poor Wolf's tattoos, which cover his right arm and chest, are clearly visible. Poor Wolf is carrying a coup stick in his right hand and wearing on his head a porcupine and deer hair roach, symbol of the Kit Fox Society, a warrior society for young men. That the Dakota (Sioux) warrior who has fallen to Poor Wolf was a successful fighter can be determined by the number of horsetracks painted on his legs—each indicates a successful horse raid. Both warriors are carrying flintlock rifles, which by the late 1830s were beginning to be replaced by percussion cap rifles. The s-shaped piece on the front of the Dakota warrior's rifle is the brass side-plate that indicates the weapon is a Northwest trade rifle. (SHSND 943)

like it. If they cried because they did not catch an eagle, the rope might hear and help the next time. They prayed to the rope with which they caught the eagles. This was made of the fibre of a plant found in the woods. Two leaders of an eagle hunt wear eagle feathers round their necks, and sing songs in the night. There are other rules, but I liked to go about the business in my own way. I have an eagle claw tattooed on my right hand. My uncle put it on so that I could grab a Sioux.

Once one hundred warriors of us were out on a trip, and got very hungry. I had a piece of fat buffalo meat that I had hidden and carried along. This I roasted and gave to them and so kept them from starving. In consequence one of the warriors gave me my name **"Poor Wolf."** The warrior who



**Figure 4. Eagle-trapping pits**, like those where Poor Wolf would have gone to catch eagles, are still visible in western North Dakota. They are shallow, oval depressions (lower left) often found near the edge of upland bluffs. Eagles, like other raptors, follow the air-current updrafts in search of prey. Eagles are still seen in this upland location in Mercer County. (Courtesy of Paul Picha, State Historical Society of North Dakota)

gave the name had taken part in a sun dance. He had continued dancing four days till all the others had stopped, and then kept on four days more. Then he had a dream and saw a wolf that told him he would have a long life. So he gave the name of Poor, i.e. Lean Wolf to me, because I had saved his life. Once when I first got a wagon and a span of mules, I hauled wood all winter for the people in our village who had no horses. One summer I killed buffalo when they were scarce, and brought in and divided the meat to the whole tribe. That same year I brought in two more pony loads of meat. I was alone. Once I gave away my meat and all my things, a nice horse, a war bonnet, a red blanket, a whet stone, a knife and sheath. I now enjoy thinking of these things.

Forty-four years ago when the Sioux made their last attack on the old Fort Berthold village, I was sick upriver at our winter camp. The Sioux came from Poplar River and also from Standing Rock. They burnt a large part of the village, including my house, my big bell, and other things. They got some of the stores out of the **cache hole**. Pierre Garreau was in the village, and some of the Indians from the winter quarters had gone down to the



**Figure 5.** Eagle feathers had and still have great ceremonial and religious significance for Poor Wolf's people. They frequently were used in headdresses like the one Poor Wolf is wearing in this photograph. (SHSND A1486)

village, and they helped defend the trader's corral, and block house. At this time Pierre scalped the Sioux whose body he hauled up from under the projecting upper story of the block house by a noose. After the fight Old Knife, a Crow Indian, and a Sioux man living among us went as far as the Knife River and found two dead Sioux. These they scalped, and then returned having seen no more of the enemy. I was never wounded in a fight.

In the old time we had plenty to eat by hunting, but now we have cattle and big horses. In the old time there were many enemies everywhere, but now we are safe in any place. In the old time we prayed to everything, and dreamed, and conjured, and got horses for pay. Now we know that this is wrong, yet in that time we thought about what was right and wrong. We thought that a murderer or one who killed himself could not be in the happy place.

Before I was baptized I threw away all my mysterious things (fetishes, charms, amulets, etc.). (Poor Wolf was baptized and united with a Christian church, May 28, 1893, at Fort Berthold, and has since been faithful and, until he became blind and hard of hearing, was active in leading his people to the Christ.)

I had a dried turtle shell, a muskrat skin, a mink skin, red mussels, a crane's head, and otter skin—six things, besides peppermint and other herbs. For these, and the songs and so forth connected with them, I paid eighty buffalo hides, besides guns, ponies, etc. I keep the turtle shell and the mussels yet, because they belong to my father; but I do not worship them. At one time, I paid one hundred and eighty buffalo hides, ten of which were decorated with porcupine work, and knives, and ponies, for a bear's arm, a crane's head, and owl's head, a buffalo skull, and a sweet-grass braid that represented a snake with two heads. There were other things. The long hair of the buffalo near the jaw, owl's claws, and an image of an owl in buffalo hair. Such things were used at the buffalo dance for conjuring. These things give the strength of the buffalo in fighting with the enemy. They



**Figure 6. Two Hearts, a Hidatsa warrior and friend of Poor Wolf, is depicted by Poor Wolf on a horse-raiding expedition in 1864. Almost forty years later, Poor Wolf vividly remembers the dog, whose barking endangered the raiders, and the beauty of the stallion Two Hearts is about to cut loose. (SHSND 943)**

also bring the buffalo when food is scarce. They also cure wounds. There is also corn in the ear, and in a basket; red foxes, swift foxes, arrowheads, and things to make the wind blow right. Such things as these I took out on to a hill talked to them, saying, "I do not need you any more," and threw them to the winds. For doing so, Crow's Breast, the Gros Ventre chief, called me a fool.

(Addressing a younger man who had become a Christian, he said): I am very old and am waiting to go above, but you are young yet. Persevere in the way of God. So many of our young men are given up to the old dances and vices. (In this strain the old man talked at length to his friend at breakfast, after the usual blessing had been asked.)

*(Recorded for the Historical Society of North Dakota by C. L. Hall, August 13th, 1906.)*

---

## About the Editor

Poor Wolf (Tsesha-Hadhadish) was born about 1820 in the Awaxawi village on the Knife River and lived through a tumultuous era for the Hidatsa people. Poor Wolf survived the 1837 smallpox epidemic as a young warrior, was present at the signing of the Fort Laramie Treaty, and later visited Washington, D.C. He died in 1916. In the early 1900s, he told Rev. Charles L. Hall detailed stories from his life. Hall (1847-1940), a Congregational minister, and his wife Emma arrived at Fort Berthold in 1876 as missionaries to the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara people, serving until their retirement in 1922. At Like-A-Fishhook village and later in Elbowoods, Hall was known as Ho Washte, or Good Voice, for his love of singing.

---

Originally published in the *Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota* Vol.I: 439-443 (1906).