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EARLY LIFE

THE NORTH AMERICAN GREAT PLAINS ENDURE AS A BREATHTAKING, postcard-perfect scene of boundless prairie covered with a blanket of undulating grasses that extends without interruption to the horizon.

Meandering waterways hidden within verdant recesses and guarded by majestic cottonwoods create life-giving oases. The sky—by day the brilliance of a blue jay's tail feathers and an inky-black dome of pulsating star masses at night—can be overwhelming in its dominance. Spectacular showers of gold and red and pink explode each evening when the sun yields to the earth's rotation. These thousands of square miles, rich with esthetically appealing natural assets, provide a home to an abundance of wildlife.

The character of this land, however, can transform in the blink of an eye from one of benevolent beauty to that of a cruel adversary. Within its disposition exists the propensity to terrify and destroy.

Sudden, blinding dust storms or devastating tornadoes can carve paths of destruction across the vulnerable earth. Torrential cloud-bursts can swamp the land in a matter of minutes and unleash hailstones the size of a man's fist. Storms that dump an avalanche of snow are often accompanied by bitter, barbed-wire blasts of frigid air that lower the chill factor below human endurance. Dryness and heat can combine to roast the earth to the brink of mummification and wilt the most hardy crop. And the wind—the wind is in motion to some degree most of time, inciting near madness in a person as it interminably roars across the barren flatland.

People who choose to take up residence in this forbidding land are obliged to adapt to its temperament and harsh climate. This is not the sort of place on which mankind can impose its will and hope to survive.¹

Yet there was an ancient race of man known as Native Americans that migrated to this land of vivid contrast and extreme weather and became its first inhabitants. Although existence at times presented extreme hardships and challenges, these people roamed this majestic realm in relative freedom and from its unspoiled wellspring invented ways to develop a unique lifestyle of self-sufficiency. One Native American tribe that learned to thrive on the Great Plains was called the *Cheyennes*.

In the winter months, the various bands of Cheyennes sought refuge for their camps in tree-sheltered valleys and rarely ventured any distance from those places. They survived on food that had been preserved and stored during the hunting and harvesting seasons and trusted that it would sustain them until the spring thaw.

These people never stayed for any length of time at one particular campsite during the summer season. Their prime motivation for frequently moving was the need to follow the buffalo and other game herds. Also, they moved from place to place as each offered up its harvest of edible roots and vegetables or wild fruits and berries. Another reason for this nomadic lifestyle was that the resources in one area could not support a village and a sizable pony herd for very long.

Commonly, each Cheyenne band traveled over a traditional route or trail, arriving at approximately the same hunting, harvesting, and gathering times and places from year to year. This seasonal route was occasionally altered, due to the presence of stronger enemies or if game herds shifted from their usual habitat, but otherwise the bands' movements were predictable.

No matter the location of the Cheyenne camp, the bleached-white, buffalo-hide lodges, or tepees, could be found arranged in a circle, broken only by an opening that faced the rising sun, with water and timber close by. Daily camp life was also structured, and each person abided by long-standing rituals of proper etiquette.

Accordingly, the day that Black Kettle was born would have been like any other in the Cheyenne camp.

At first light the women began their daily chores by visiting the nearby stream and filling containers with fresh water—they believed that yesterday's water was dead, and the Cheyennes would drink only living water. The water-bearers wore dresses, or smocks, that fell to midway between the knee and the ankle, with capelike sleeves that hung loosely around the elbows. These everyday work clothes, designed with freedom of movement in mind, had been handmade from the skins of

deer, elk, or antelope and were quite plain. On ceremonial occasions, however, the women adorned themselves in skin garments decorated with colorful beads, bells, porcupine quills, and perhaps teeth from an elk.²

When the first golden rays of the sun spread across the land, the men and the boys, with toddlers in tow, straggled to the stream and, regardless of the weather, washed away all sickness and were made hardy and healthy with a morning bath. Upon completion of this ritual, the male members of the tribe returned to their lodges and without fail pulled on their breechcloths—those scanty pieces of animal skin that covered their loins and hips. Custom dictated that a man would lose his manhood if he did not wear his precious breechcloth. Boys, as soon as they could walk, wrapped around their tiny waists the string to which the breechcloth would someday be attached.³

The camp was bustling with activity by the time the sun peeked above the horizon. Women, assisted by daughters and other female members of the extended family, attended to the morning meal, their cooking pots hanging over smoking fires, the pleasant aromas teasing the men, who chatted nearby while anxiously waiting to be fed. Boys rode out to drive the pony herd toward fresh grazing grass and selected certain mounts—usually the war horses—to be tied in front of lodges, in the event that they might be needed at a moment's notice.

While families settled in to eat breakfast, the Crier strolled through the camp, beginning at the opening of the circle, and announced the news of the day. In a loud voice, repeating his words as he moved along, he relayed orders from the chiefs, perhaps about how long the camp would remain in that place, to notify everyone that a certain soldier band planned a dance for that evening, or to mention items that had been lost or found. Most anticipated were the latest tidings of a personal nature—possibly about a child having been born during the night or the previous day. In this manner, the camp had been informed about the birth of Black Kettle.⁴

With breakfast completed, a number of the men readied their horses and weapons and rode out to hunt. Cheyenne men were exclusively big game hunters, favoring buffalo, antelope, deer, elk, and wild sheep, in that order. Wolves and foxes were hunted only for their fur, and other smaller animals were usually ignored by the men. Small game, however, was hunted by the boys as a learning exercise.

Men who chose to remain in camp that day gathered around lodges or under shade trees to smoke and gossip, while repairing a

bow, fashioning a pipe, making arrows, or working on some other necessary implement. The older men entertained the workers by recounting tales of tribal history, contacts with neighboring tribes or the white man, and other notable events, both real and mysterious, which were discussed and debated for hours.⁵

Several curious boys could be found sitting at a respectful distance, listening to the grown-ups talk. Most of the boys, however, assembled in small groups to engage in various spirited activities. Swimming was a favorite, as were running foot races, wrestling, practicing with bow and arrows, riding ponies, throwing sticks at targets, and other games that symbolized their status as warriors-in-training.⁶

The unmarried young men did not normally participate in the morning discussions with their elders or play with the boys, choosing instead to devote considerable time to improving their personal appearance. Each morning they painstakingly plucked every visible strand of hair from their faces and eyebrows and patiently combed and braided their long hair. They finally dressed in their finest clothing, perhaps wearing their "war shirts," which fell to the knees and may have been ornamented with beads or quills or, more commonly among the Cheyennes, with colorful designs and dark-green fringes. Afterward, they paraded around the camp for everyone—particularly the young ladies of courting age—to see and admire.⁷

Cheyennes were not hasty about getting married, and the formal courtship process could extend for as long as four or five years. When a female child reached puberty, she was initiated into womanhood by a ceremony, usually performed by her grandmother, and no longer talked to her older brothers or associated with the boys in her age group. At that time she began receiving instructions from her mother regarding proper conduct with respect to relationships. Premarital sex was strictly forbidden among the Cheyennes, and a young lady who brazenly flirted with a potential suitor was considered immoral. George Grinnell states:

The women of the Cheyennes are famous among all western tribes for their chastity. In old times it was most unusual for a girl to be seduced, and she who had yielded was disgraced forever. The matter at once became known, and she was taunted with it wherever she went. It was never forgotten. No young man would marry her.⁸

A young man courted the girl of his choice with such romantic acts as playing his flute for her, which was thought to be a means of

casting a love spell over a reluctant maiden; whistling at her from a distance; and eventually lingering near her lodge for a chance to speak with her when she returned from her chores.

When a match had been made, an elderly relative of the young man would discuss the marriage arrangement with the girl's father, which might include gifts of horses and other valuable items. If the young woman's family approved of the union, family members would send presents to the young man and, if well-to-do, would perhaps also give the daughter horses to serve as her dowry. The young lovers would be married several days later, in what was often an elaborate ceremony with gifts and food. The groom occasionally carried the bride on a blanket to his father's lodge, which was where the couple would reside until the two constructed their own home.⁹

The primary responsibility of a Cheyenne man was to provide food and other material needs for his family. The men were also obliged to protect their wives and children, as well as the collective interests of the tribe, from any outside threat. The noted anthropology professor Dr. E. Adamson Hoebel here describes the typical Cheyenne man:

Reserved and dignified, the mature adult Cheyenne male moves with a quiet sense of self-assurance. He speaks fluently, but never carelessly. He is careful of the sensibilities of others and is kindly and generous. He is slow to anger and strives to suppress his feelings, if aggravated. Towards his enemies he feels no merciful compunctions, and the more aggressive he is, the better. He is neither flighty nor dour. Usually quiet, he has a lightly displayed sense of humor. His thinking is rationalistic to a high degree and yet colored with mysticism. His ego is strong and not easily threatened. He is serene and composed, secure in his social position, capable of warm social relations.

Cheyenne women exhibited many of the same characteristics as the men but were more artistically creative. The woman was by all means accomplished in domestic relations and was expected to care for the children and perform every household duty. Contrary to the customs of some Plains tribes, the relationship between the Cheyenne husband and the wife was an equal partnership—the women were not considered chattels—and most marriages endured for life. Women were the rulers of the camp and, although not permitted to participate in tribal councils, made their wishes known through their husbands, who obediently acted on any request, whether with respect to the tribe or to the family.¹⁰

While the men pursued their morning endeavors, the women, assisted by the older girls, resumed their daily housekeeping routine. With babies on cradle-boards and toddlers close by, they might prepare or sew skins for clothing or a new lodge, pound berries for use in pemmican, or decorate robes—usually in the company of friends. Women who had decorated at least thirty robes without assistance were highly respected and were initiated into a quilling society, which permitted them to learn certain ceremonies and work on ceremonial robes, lodges, and other special items.¹¹

At some point during the morning, small parties of women and girls ventured off into the hills to gather firewood, berries, or roots. Their basic tool was the dibble, or digging stick, which was given to them by the Great Medicine Spirit. This was a time of laughter and merriment for the women, who viewed the work not as a tiresome chore but as an outing, an opportunity to discuss camp news, gossip, and engage in practical jokes.

Occasionally, men or boys charged out of camp on horseback to “attack” the women and the girls who were returning with their bundles of roots or berries. The men attempted to “count coup,” touch their “enemy,” while their intended victims pelted them. Any man struck by a thrown missile was eliminated from the game, and only a man who had distinguished himself in warfare was permitted to actually capture any roots or berries for himself.¹²

By midday, as the sun beat down on the camp, most people sought refuge inside their lodges to escape the heat. Later in the afternoon, men who had gone out hunting rode back into camp. They dismounted in front of their lodges, handed over their kill to the women for washing and preparing, and then relaxed, perhaps gathering here and there to boast about their hunting skills, pass along information, or speculate about the location and the availability of game.¹³

The camp came alive once more when the sun began its descent. Daily tasks were set aside in favor of leisurely and festive amusements. Preparation for the evening meal commenced, fires were ablaze, and children could be seen scurrying around the circle of lodges with invitations to guests for dinner. The boys drove the horses in to a safe, fresh grazing area, while turning out other mounts for the night.

Eventually, the sound of music and drumming could be heard, and people of all ages wandered around the camp to share a feast, attend a social dance, play games, court that special young woman, gamble, or simply enjoy the companionship of their fellow tribe members. Story-

telling was a big part of the evening, as certain men known for their talent to entertain with tales drew audiences to their lodges. This bustle of activity was punctuated by frequent shouts and laughter, combined with the incidental whinny of a horse, the bark of a dog, or the howl of a distant coyote. Some people might choose to seek solitude, perhaps by chanting a prayer to the spirits or playing a flute on a nearby hill. For several hours, illuminated by the comforting glow of huge bonfires, the camp celebrated the simple pleasures of a satisfying lifestyle.

One by one, the fires burned down, the music faded away, and visitors drifted back to their own lodges. The camp gradually became silent, and another harmonious day for the Cheyennes came to an end. The people slept with the knowledge that scouts, known as “wolves,” were patrolling the vicinity of the village and would alert them to any potential danger, such as an approaching enemy.¹⁴

This was the traditional daily routine that greeted the entrance of Black Kettle into the world. The exact day and the year that the old Crier carried the announcement of Black Kettle’s birth throughout the Cheyenne camp, however, is unknown.

Reference works, such as encyclopedias and biographical dictionaries, cite Black Kettle’s date of birth as somewhere between the years 1803 and 1807, yet fail to note any sources from which this information was derived. Most researchers have chosen one of those dates—mainly, 1803—to incorporate into the text of books when relating later events in the life of Black Kettle. This date may or may not be accurate.¹⁵

Edward Wynkoop, an Indian agent who was intimately acquainted with Black Kettle, said in an 1868 address to the United States Indian Commission: “I would state that Black Kettle was 56 years of age at the time of his death.” If that was true, Black Kettle, who died in 1868, would have been born in the year 1812.¹⁶

Another interesting—and perhaps a more credible—source about Black Kettle’s later life is the reminiscences of George Bent, an educated half-Cheyenne, half-white man who married the chief’s niece. Bent stated in his memoirs that Black Kettle was sixty-seven years old when he died, which would mean that he had been born in 1801.¹⁷

Another matter of mystery has been Black Kettle’s family heritage. The first official record of a Cheyenne chief by the name of “Black Kettle” came in 1860 at Fort Wise, when Commissioner A. B. Greenwood entertained a number of Cheyenne chiefs in treaty negotiations.

By that time, Black Kettle was certainly middle-aged or older and, inasmuch as the Cheyennes did not maintain written documentation of births, deaths, or marriages, rather relying on oral tradition, there can be no way in which to research his family tree, other than by the later memories and the hearsay of those who were acquainted with him.

George Bent noted that Black Kettle was the son of Swift Hawk Lying Down, who was never a chief. Bent also listed two brothers, Gentle Horse and Wolf, and one sister, Wind Woman.¹⁸

The woman said to have been Black Kettle's sister, Wind Woman, told George Bird Grinnell in 1913 that the name of their father, who died young, was Hawk—perhaps a shortened version of Swift Hawk Lying Down.¹⁹

Grinnell also had been informed by Wolf Chief, a Cheyenne who supplied much relevant information over the years, that Black Kettle's father was Hawk Stretched Out and his mother, Sparrow Hawk Woman or Little Brown-Back Hawk Woman. Black Kettle was said to be the oldest child, followed by Gentle Horse, Wind Woman, and Stone Teeth.²⁰

Major General William S. Harney mentioned at the Medicine Lodge Treaty council in 1867 that he had first encountered Black Kettle in 1825 at the mouth of the Teton River. Harney told reporters that Black Kettle was the son of High Back Wolf, who was a chief.²¹

This claim by Harney was supported by the Indian agent Edward Wynkoop to the United States Indian Commission when he said, "He [Black Kettle] was the son of High Back Wolf, once a principal chief of the Cheyenne nation, and the particular friend of Gen. Harney, who many years ago took considerable interest in the boy Black Kettle. Upon the death of High Back Wolf, his son Black Kettle succeeded him."²²

Chief High Back Wolf, however, was a prominent figure and the subject of much documentation throughout Cheyenne history of the mid-1850s. No mention has been made in various reliable sources that would indicate that Black Kettle was in any manner related to this chief. In addition, Black Kettle himself became a chief while High Back Wolf was still alive. The Harney-Wynkoop account likely suffers from either poor translation or perhaps a well-meaning but baseless attempt by one or both of the men to elevate Black Kettle to tribal "royalty" status by birth. It is also doubtful that a young, obscure warrior such as Black Kettle would have been brought to the attention of General Harney as early as 1825.²³

The location where Black Kettle was born in the early 1800s is also a matter of speculation, but the approximate vicinity can be determined by tracing the movements of his tribe.

The origin of these native people with Algonquin roots cannot be accurately documented, but it is believed that they once lived north of the Great Lakes in southern Canada. By 1673, according to a map attributed to the French-Canadian explorer Louis Joliet, the Cheyennes were occupying permanent villages along the upper Mississippi River—on the present-day Wisconsin side, across the border from present-day Minnesota. Within ten years, the tribe had relocated to the western reaches of the Minnesota River valley, where tribe members farmed, hunted, gathered wild rice, and fashioned pottery.²⁴

During this period of time, the tribe that called itself *Tsistsistas*, meaning “beautiful people” or “the People,” received another name. The Sioux, a neighboring tribe, called these beautiful people *Shai ena*, which means “red talkers” or “people of a different speech.” Over time, other tribes and the white man would corrupt the words from the Siouan language, and as a result the *Tsistsistas* became commonly known as the *Cheyennes*.²⁵

By the late 1600s, constant warfare with the more aggressive Minnesota tribes—the Sioux and the Ojibway (also known as the Chippewa)—convinced the People, the Cheyennes, to move westward into present-day North Dakota, where they established a principal village of about seventy lodges on the Sheyenne River, twelve miles southeast of present-day Lisbon. Evidence reveals that the Cheyennes remained concerned about their powerful adversaries and fortified their villages in the event of an attack. They lived in earthen lodges that measured forty feet in diameter and continued to practice their age-old agrarian lifestyle—with one exception.²⁶

The Cheyennes, perhaps informed by friendly neighbors, became aware of great herds of buffalo that roamed on the plains to the west. The newcomers quickly learned that this shaggy beast was a dependable source for nearly every item required for basic survival needs and could also provide luxuries that offered a higher standard of living.

During the early nineteenth century, Great Plains buffalo herds were estimated to total upward of 75 to 100 million, an impressive figure when one considers that each animal weighed around a ton, with most bulls tipping the scale at a ton and a half. Nowhere else in the annals of food resources can such an infinite provider of sustenance be documented.

There has been a continuing debate about whether the by-products derived from the buffalo were vital to the health and the welfare of the average Plains Indian. Granted, there was an abundance of other wild game, and these animals were assuredly part of the menu and the wardrobe. But the native tribes could sustain a thriving self-sufficiency by ingeniously utilizing every portion of the buffalo but the bellow.

The most obvious, and important, benefit was food. The buffalo was truly a four-legged commissary. The muscle was high in protein, and other parts supplied more than the daily requirements of vitamins and minerals. What was not readily consumed could be preserved for the long winter months. One manner of preservation was by simply drying the meat under the sun; another was by pounding berries and other fruit into the dried meat to create pemmican—a treat that provided every element necessary for a balanced diet.

Within the village proper, the first items to catch the eye were the lodges, which were constructed mainly from tanned buffalo hides. Inside the lodges were warm coats and sleeping robes, also fashioned from those hairy hides, and summer blankets made soft by scraping off the hair and tanning both sides. Dressed hides were also sewn into shirts, leggings, moccasins, carrying bags, and women's dresses, as well as into drums and shields.

Green skins provided serviceable kettles for drinking and cooking. Horns were used for ladles, spoons, cups, and other containers. Bones could be carved into arrowheads, spear tips, or needles. Hooves were boiled down to make glue for many applications. Buffalo hair was braided into ropes and pony reins. Bull boats to traverse rivers were made water-tight with stretched hides. Sinew became bowstrings. Skin became battle shields. Axes and hoes were made from shoulder blades, sledge runners from ribs, and paint from blood. Hair was used to stuff pillows. Fly swatters and whisk brooms were made from the tails. The black beard became an ornament to adorn clothing. Primitive toys, including baby rattles, were constructed from various parts. And the list goes on and on.²⁷

In the early days, however, the Cheyennes were without horses and conducted winter buffalo hunts on foot, with participation by every able-bodied person in the tribe—men, women, and children—as well as dogs. The hunting party first sought an ideal location, then surrounded an isolated herd of buffalo and with the assistance of the dogs drove the herd into deep drifts. While the animals struggled to escape

the hindering snow, the men dashed up close and shot as many as possible with arrows. The buffalo were butchered, and the meat dragged home in bundles attached by thongs to the dogs' necks. In other instances, the tribe was known to drive a herd over a cliff, then the hunters would take what they could carry and leave the remainder behind to feed the wolves and other scavengers that followed the hunt.²⁸

Sometime after 1750, during their stay in these permanent settlements on the Sheyenne River, the People were introduced for the first time to the horse, an event that changed their way of life forever. The sturdy descendants of horses that had been brought to the continent by the Spanish in the early 1500s were plentiful and easily captured and tamed. The animals required little attention, for they were accustomed to providing for themselves and possessed excellent endurance. Best of all, mounted Cheyennes could now more effectively hunt buffalo, whenever and wherever they desired, and could transport larger quantities back to camp. In addition, it was much easier to move the village with beasts of burden to carry the load.

Although the tribe continued to raise corn and other vegetables, this newfound mobility marked the beginning of a transformation. From that point on, the Cheyennes would depend less on agriculture for subsistence, in favor of the buffalo.²⁹

Between 1770 and 1790, the Cheyennes, perhaps due to an attack on their village by the Chippewa, migrated westward to establish residence on the Missouri River near the present-day boundary of North and South Dakota. One village of earthen lodges located on Porcupine Creek was reportedly larger than any had been on the Sheyenne River. During this time, the People became friendly with the Arikaras, the Hidatsas, and the Mandans, and intermarried with these neighboring tribes.³⁰

One particular group of nomadic people, known as the Sutaio, or singularly Suhtai, also called the "Buffalo People," had been an enemy of the Cheyennes for many years. Following one great battle, however, the two tribes held a parley. At that time, it was discovered that they spoke a similar language—Sutaio was a more guttural dialect that sounded "funny" to the Cheyennes. In addition, both of them had Algonquin roots and believed that they had common ancestors. This realization encouraged the two tribes to make a lasting peace. One faction of the Sutaio then headed north and was never heard from

again. Another group remained with the Cheyennes and was gradually incorporated into the tribe. This faction, however, may have remained distinct and might not have camped within the Cheyenne village until the mid-1860s.³¹

This was an important event, because according to his sister, Wind Woman—as well as to George Bent—Black Kettle was born into the Sutaio faction of the tribe. His father and mother, although their names cannot be confirmed, were assuredly both full-blooded Suhtai. Perhaps this fact alone dispels any notion that Black Kettle was the son of High Back Wolf, who from all indications was a Cheyenne and likely would have been born before the Sutaio joined the People.³²

In addition to being the tribe into which Black Kettle was born, the Sutaio people brought with them rich traditions that were shared with the Cheyennes and that influenced the lifestyle of the tribe forever. The People were introduced to such ceremonies as the Sacred Buffalo Hat, the Sun Dance, the Sweat Lodge, and other rituals pertaining to the buffalo, which would become an important part of their cultural identity and religion.³³

It was during the latter half of the eighteenth century, perhaps partly due to the influence of the Sutaio, that the Cheyennes completed their transition from planters to archetypical nomadic Plains buffalo hunters. Villages and crops were abandoned, and individual bands could be found wandering over a vast territory that extended from west of the Black Hills to the Missouri River on the east, and south as far as the Arkansas River. Another factor for this gradual withdrawal to the south was likely the emergence of the Lakota Sioux, known as the Invited, a tribe that had recently arrived on the Great Plains from Minnesota and was aggressively establishing its own territory.³⁴

Although the People had encountered French trappers and traders traveling through their territory over the years, the first historical documentation of contact with whites came in October 1804, when Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, as representatives of President Thomas Jefferson, were visiting the Arikaras and happened upon two nearby Cheyenne villages. Then, in August 1806, Lewis reported entering a Cheyenne camp that consisted of 120 lodges. Later, the chief of another village initially refused Clark's offer of an American medal, stating, "He knew that the white people were all medicine [sic] and that he was afraid of the medal or any thing that white people gave them." The chief, who was finally persuaded to accept the medal, also

admitted that he had no grievance with the white man and that his only enemy was the Sioux.

Lewis and Clark drew a map showing that the Cheyennes at this point in history were the dominant tribe living in the vicinity of the Black Hills, having earlier driven out the Kiowas. This mountainous wilderness area, which presents a striking contrast to the monotonous flatland of the plains, is located along the Dakota-Wyoming border and runs roughly one hundred miles from north to south and sixty miles east to west. The various Cheyenne bands did not necessarily reside within the Black Hills but roamed separately over a vast area that formed a rough semicircle to the east, the west, and the south. It would have been here, certainly within sight of the Black Hills, that Black Kettle was born.³⁵

Knowledge of the exact date and the place of Black Kettle's birth, or the family into which he was born, is not necessary to understand his childhood experiences.

The Cheyennes cherished their children—to the extent that youngsters were never punished but rather were gently scolded and shown proper behavior by example and patient guidance. The birth of a male child in particular was cause for celebration. From birth until perhaps the age of five or six, Black Kettle (*Mo-ta-vato*, *Moketavato*, or *Mokata-va-tah*, in Cheyenne) was called by a pet name, some term of endearment, then received a more permanent name—as well as a nickname by which he was commonly called. Children were usually named by a relative and almost always after a paternal family member.³⁶

Black Kettle was wrapped snugly in blankets and carried around in his mother's arms until he developed enough strength to be safely laced onto a baby-board, or cradle-board. He spent most of his infancy strapped to this convenient device, which, when leaned against the side of the lodge or hung from a lodge pole, permitted him to watch his mother as she went about her daily chores. When the camp moved, the cradle-board was attached to his mother's back or onto a saddle or a travois pole.³⁷

Black Kettle's umbilical cord, when it had dried and fallen off, was beaded into the shape of a turtle and placed with him inside his cradle-board to ward off evil spirits. A fake beaded umbilical cord was put on the outside of the cradle-board, which was intended to fool evil spirits. This same procedure was employed for the umbilical cords of girls, except that a lizard was fashioned, rather than a turtle.³⁸

Black Kettle was doted upon by his mother. She spent countless hours playing with him and from the earliest age also taught him his first behavioral lesson, that of self-control. Crying babies were quickly quieted or taken out of the lodge, away from camp, so as not to disturb anyone. This was particularly important at night, to avoid alerting enemies to the camp's location. This education in showing self-effacement while in the presence of adults or elders remained with Black Kettle throughout his youth.³⁹

Black Kettle had his ears pierced when he was between three and six months old, most likely during a Sun Dance or another important ceremony. This ritual, which was performed by a noted warrior who was rewarded by the father for his service, symbolized a lightning strike that was said to make the child invulnerable when someday he went into battle.⁴⁰

Black Kettle's formative years were relatively carefree but were filled with purpose. He engaged in playful endeavors, much as today's children do—digging in the dirt, casually throwing rocks or sticks at targets, wrestling, fishing, swimming, sledding down snowy hills, all the while watching and emulating older boys and men. In the case of a Cheyenne child, these activities extended to serious, competitive practice with bows and arrows, stalking birds and wild game, and contests that taught him how to attack an enemy, as well as how to repulse an attack. Boys learned to ride ponies almost from the moment they could walk and by the age of seven or eight were accomplished riders who were trusted to help manage the tribe's pony herd.

At about the age of twelve, Black Kettle's training became more formal. His father, uncles, and grandfathers instructed him in the ways of a man, emphasizing the attributes of bravery in battle and the skills of hunting. The relationship between the generations was that of pupil and student—and the student had already learned to be deferential.

The child was told about his status within the tribe, how he must always obey commands without question, and about the need for humility and for living in harmony with fellow Cheyennes. The punishment for violating rules or engaging in improper conduct would not be physical but instead would be ridicule from other warriors, a most humiliating penalty. Professor Adamson Hoebel states that Cheyenne children were constantly urged by their elders:

Be brave, be honest, be virtuous, be industrious, be generous, do not quarrel! If you do not do these things, people will talk about you in the camp;

they will not respect you; you will be shamed. If you listen to this advice you will grow up to be a good man, and you will amount to something.⁴¹

Black Kettle was taught from the earliest age that religion embraced every aspect of his daily life, from hunting and warfare to personal relationships. He learned about Maheo, the All Father, the Great Spirit or God, who created the earth—which was called Our Grandmother—and every living thing above and below. Maheo also created Maheyuno, the four Sacred Persons, who guarded the four corners of the universe; Esseneta’he, who lived in the southeast, where the sun rises, and who originated light and life itself; Onxsovon, of the northwest, who symbolized the beauty and the perfection of the setting sun; Sovota, who dwelled in the southwest and provided warmth and rain to nourish Grandmother Earth; and Notamota, who lived in the northeast and brought stormy weather, blizzards, disease, and death. Each Sacred Person was represented in ornamentation by a different color—Esseneta’he by white; Onxsovon by golden yellow, the color of the sunset; Sovota by red; and Notamota by black.⁴²

Black Kettle came to understand that he possessed a spirit or a soul, known as the Ma’tasooma, which would depart his body at the moment of his death and soar across the Milky Way Galaxy to Maheo, where he would be reunited with those who had already passed away. Se’han was a place much like the white man’s heaven, where he would ride the fastest ponies through great herds of buffalo and want for absolutely nothing. There was no alternative, for hell did not exist in the hereafter but could be found here on earth by experiencing ridicule or even banishment from the tribe if a warrior brought shame upon himself and did not display the honorable character traits that were expected of him throughout his life. Suicide would banish the spirit into darkness, to wander forever off the path of the Milky Way.⁴³

Black Kettle also learned that Maheo had created Maiyun, the Sacred Powers, which served the Sacred Persons. Heammawihio, or Wise One Above, and Ahtunowihio, whose domain was below the earth, could appear as some bird or animal that lived on the earth. These beneficial powers, which provided such necessities as food, shelter, and clothing, were expressed through various sacred ceremonies and the possession of venerated objects.⁴⁴

The most important Cheyenne ceremony was the Sacred Arrow Renewal, a four-day observance that took place roughly at the time of the summer solstice, but not necessarily on a regular basis. It was held

most often when warriors were killed in battle or was invoked as a manner in which to end some hardship that had befallen the People. The arrows were also renewed if one Cheyenne happened to kill another Cheyenne. In this instance, blood would appear on the Sacred Arrow points, which required renewal.

This rite centered around four Sacred Arrows—two painted for hunting and two for battle. These arrows were a supernatural gift given by Maheo to Sweet Medicine, a Cheyenne ancestral hero, when he journeyed to a cave near Bear Butte, an extinct volcano on the northern fringe of the Black Hills. The two hunting arrows, when pointed at animals, would render them helpless and thereby easily killed. The two war arrows were carried into battle by a trusted warrior, who rode ahead of the others and pointed the arrows at an enemy prior to the attack. This act would blind and confuse the enemy and ensure success in the ensuing battle.

The Sacred Arrows, therefore, were the People's greatest protection against starvation and defeat by an enemy and were kept in a bundle with other sacred objects that symbolized the collective existence of the Cheyenne tribe.

Arrow Renewal was a time of feasting, singing, curing the sick, renewing old acquaintances, and perhaps repairing or making new battle shields—punctuated by solemn rituals. The ceremony to renew the power of the arrows also served to renew the Cheyennes as a nation, for the arrows were the embodiment of the tribal soul.⁴⁵

The other important fetish, a sacred symbol of great power, was the Buffalo or Medicine Hat. This hat, made from fur taken from a buffalo's head, with the horns still attached, and decorated with blue beads, had been the property of the Sutaio tribe. An honored member of that tribe was always designated as the keeper of the hat. The Sacred Hat Lodge in which it was kept was considered a sanctuary, a place where people spoke in hushed tones and children were forbidden to approach.

The Medicine Hat held great power over the health and the welfare of the tribe, assuring that food, shelter, and clothing would be plentiful, especially with respect to successful buffalo hunting, the staple of Cheyenne subsistence. It was displayed during Sacred Arrow Renewal ceremonies or when needed to ward off diseases—for its primary purpose was to foster health and healing—and was worn into battle by a trusted warrior only when the entire tribe went to war.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most fascinating ceremony to Black Kettle and the other youngsters was the Sun Dance, known to the People as the Medicine Lodge, or “new-life-lodge.” This ritual, which was common to most Plains tribes, was held for eight days once a year, usually when the tribe gathered for the summer buffalo hunt. The Sun Dance was performed as a supernatural way to seek power from the spirits for the purpose of reviving and renewing Grandmother Earth’s resources and restoring harmony among all of her inhabitants. This ceremony of rebirth was a ceremonial time for the tribe, accompanied by dances, feasts, and the exchanging of gifts.

The most memorable and spectacular part of the ritual, however, was performed by warriors who suspended themselves from poles by two ropes fastened into gashes in their chests. This form of voluntary self-torture, according to George Bird Grinnell, was “a sacrifice of self to bring good fortune or to avert misfortune in the future.” The sacrificer remained attached to the ropes, dancing while fastened to the pole, possibly throughout the night, until his skin was torn loose and he fell to the ground. If he managed to hang through the entire night, the medicine man would cut the flesh to end his ordeal.⁴⁷

The Massaum ceremony, which was also shown to Sweet Medicine on his sacred journey, was an amusing hunting ritual performed by men who dressed and acted like various animals. These actors were then “hunted” by members of the Bowstring Society, who, much to the delight of the onlookers, humorously stalked their prey.

Black Kettle had watched as his father and the other men showed respect and asked for protection and blessings from the Sacred Persons, as well as from Maheo, by smoking the sacred pipe, fasting, and praying and through various personal sacrifices and ceremonial sweats. The sacred pipe, when smoked, was the link between man and nature and the supreme deity. The Cheyennes addressed their sacred spirits, Maiyun and Maheyuno—as well as Maheo—asking that their prayers be heard. They began the ritual by pointing their pipes first to the sky, then to Grandmother Earth, and to the four directions—east, south, west, and north.

Also, Cheyenne shamans were always available, when needed, to perform healing rituals that required the use of animal parts and medicinal plants and minerals.⁴⁸

An important rite of passage came when Black Kettle was permitted to accompany the men on his first controlled buffalo hunt. He had

been schooled in every aspect of the hunt, the habits of the buffalo, how to ride and shoot, and how to obey orders from the leader, which would increase his chances of success. If he happened to kill a calf, it would be cause for great celebration, perhaps even a feast, and his father would boast about the son's prospects of becoming a capable warrior.

Within a year or two after his first buffalo hunt, Black Kettle's final step in becoming a man was much more dangerous—his first war party. Beforehand, he was reminded of the importance of fighting with bravery and of not necessarily killing an enemy but trying to count coup. This practice of touching an enemy with a lance known as a coup stick or with his bare hand was considered the bravest feat a warrior could achieve. He could also hope to capture a weapon or a shield or perhaps even take a scalp, items that could be displayed later at a victory ceremony. In most cases, however, the young man would be given the duty of holding the horses for the older warriors.⁴⁹

Young Black Kettle was keenly aware that the benefits of becoming a successful warrior, whether from hunting or from raiding an enemy, meant prestige for himself and his family, material wealth, and a voice at tribal councils. He was now prepared to demonstrate that he had learned his lessons well and was anxious to show the prowess, the determination, and the courage required to become a respected Cheyenne warrior.