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## COMMENTARY

### In Memory of White Wolf's Child

AL JOHNSON

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#### PROLOGUE

Early in the summer of 1883, citizens of Lawrence, Kansas, proffered 280 acres of land to the United States government. The land was to be used to establish an industrial school for Indians. Plans for the school were drawn up under the supervision of Major James Haworth, superintendent of Indian schools. Accommodations for 350 students and scores of employees were to be provided. On 1 July 1884, the three main buildings were nearing completion according to plans and specifications. However, the final completion of the buildings was delayed, and Major Haworth requested that no children be brought to Haskell until the school was ready. He was concerned that removing the children from their camps to the unfinished school would present a clear danger to them due to the unusually hot summer that Lawrence was experiencing in 1884. Major Haworth suggested that the children should not be collected until the fall—perhaps in October, perhaps later. His suggestion was ignored. In early September, twelve Ponca children were brought to Haskell. On 16 September, eight Ottawa children took up residence at the school. On the 18th,

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more children—this time twenty-one Pawnee—arrived, and on the 21st of the same month, forty-two Cheyenne and thirty-six Arapaho children were brought to the grounds of Haskell Institute. When the influx of children was complete by 1 January 1885, 280 Indian children had been brought to Haskell.

Major Haworth's admonition not to bring the children to Haskell until the facility was complete would prove to be a deadly premonition. An unusually hot summer became an unusually cool and wet fall, which ultimately evolved into a brutal winter. Building delays, shortages of funds, inadequate water supply and sewer system, and poor planning by the architects all prolonged the completion of the interior of the buildings. There was no steam heating, and cistern construction was postponed indefinitely. Many of the Indian children, now far from home and afraid, became ill. First with colds and coughs, then severe congestion of the lungs, and then an epidemic of pneumonia. Between 1884 and 1889, fifty-two children died. The causes of death included pneumonia, malaria, diphtheria, and malnutrition. Ultimately, more than one hundred children would be laid to rest in the Haskell cemetery, which itself now serves as one of the most poignant reminders of the failed acculturation policies of the United States government. Sadly, the total number of children who died and were buried at Haskell will never be known, as evidence of additional burials continues to be found.

The first death to occur among the children was a six-month-old Cheyenne boy whose headstone says only "Harry White Wolf—Died November 13, 1884—Age 6 months." The report of the secretary of the interior from 1885 makes note of his death, listing his name as White Wolf's child. That same report also suggests that, if the tribes had selected "healthier children," the deaths would not have occurred!

This young Cheyenne baby, as much as any figure in the history of the Indian struggle in post-European contact America, personifies the tragic loss of innocence and the unrelenting assault on the dignity of Indian people in this nineteenth-century American holocaust.

I was drawn to the grave of White Wolf's child over and over again, often spending several hours at a time in the quiet of the Haskell cemetery. It was during my last visit that I wrote the following eulogy to remember the young child laid in his grave so many years before. Subsequently, I was invited to read the remembrance while standing at the grave of White Wolf's child. It

was one of the most moving experiences of my life. Although I no longer live in Lawrence, I am told that, every year in May, when the names of the children who sleep in the hillside of the Haskell cemetery and who died so young and so far from home are read, so too is this remembrance of the young Cheyenne boy.

### EULOGY

He might have grown to be as tall as the trees  
With his eyes uplifted to the brilliance of the sun

He might have drawn comfort from the mystery of the stars

He might have heard the singing of the rain and the sound of the thunder as it seemed to echo forever in a land where he knew he belonged

He might have put his foot to the ground and felt the earth to his spine and seen the lightning careen through the heavens

He might have seen the innocence and dignity in the eyes of his children

He might have seen the dance of geometry in the midst of nature

He might have known that the mountains were the source of the strength in his arms

He might have understood the peace that comes of silence and the exquisite fragility of the life around him

He might have seen the changing of the seasons and reveled in the amber of autumnal air and in the immense rebirth of spring

And he might have seen the years of his life gather in his face as he prepared to return to the earth which was his mother

But he did not see and hear and know these things

And he did not grow as tall as the trees

For the child that would become the man was stolen from the earth

And laid stock still in his house of dust before his days numbered two hundred

And now the sound of his weeping reverberates in the chord of our memory

And our grieving for this child is immense

And we cannot give back to him what we stole from him

And the shame we feel will never go out of our lives

For this child remains, he remembers and he waits