

My Visit to See the Strip of Skin

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There are times in the research process when answering one question triggers a spate of additional questions. Standing in an electronically locked and slightly cooled storage room in the basement of the North Dakota State Museum and looking at a strip of human leather, I experienced one of those times. Was this piece of skin really from Isaiah Dorman's back? Was it a token of respect taken by someone who knew him? Was it sacred in a way similar to the skin offerings given by Lakota? Or, was its collection more like taking a scalp? How could one prove that it was actually human skin? Why had it been tanned? Should leather be repatriated in the same way that human bones are returned and reburied?

As I gazed at the 16 x 2¼ inch dark brown strip of leather, I immediately thought of human leather lampshades of the Holocaust, then just as quickly of the hair, bone and skin relics of Catholic saints. Preserving human remains seemed closely reminiscent of ingesting them, a practice I knew was part of native Northwest Coast as well as New Guinea cultures. A quick review of the literature added examples of human leather slippers made for the aristocracy during the French revolution and books bound in human skin in 17th-century England. Simon Harrison recently argued that the practice of collecting “commemorative objects of human skin” in Europe as well as indigenous North America became in the American West part of a “shared universe of cultural symbolism” that combined “metaphors or models of violent power relationships” and “conceptions of the relationship between humans and . . . animals,” differing only in whether the opposing social units were divided by race, class or tribal membership.¹

I began the quest to find the strip of skin supposedly cut from Isaiah Dorman's back when I read of its existence in the September 25, 1950 issue of *The Bismarck Tribune*.² A brief front page report of the death of Samuel King noted that he was the son of Isaiah Dorman, “famed negro scout and interpreter who was killed at the battle of the Little Big Horn.” The report went on to state that Dorman had “lived with the Indians and was respected by them. When squaws found his body on the battlefield, they cut long strips of skin from the back to save as memory tokens of their friend. A strip of Isaiah's skin is on display at the state historical society's museum.”

There were inaccuracies in the report. King was not Dorman's son, although he was his grandson. Also, the “memory token,” as the news writer dubbed it, had never been publically displayed at the museum. Alan Woolworth, reminiscing about the earliest years of his career as an archaeologist in North Dakota, noted that

I became familiar with the outstanding Burdick Collection of Teton Lakota Sioux Indian ethnological materials. This great collection had been gathered in the late 1920s and 1930s from Sioux Indian reservations in North and South Dakota and was invaluable for exhibits and scholarly study. . . One striking item in it was a small strip of dried black human skin allegedly from the body of Isaiah Dorman, a colored man who had married into a Lakota band and who was said to have died

in the Little Big Horn battle. Eventually, this great collection was donated to the State Historical Society.³

This piece of leather was originally part of a group of objects loaned to the North Dakota State Museum by Eugene Burdick, son of Usher Burdick who was the author of *Last Battle of the Sioux Nation*.⁴ Russell Reid, the Museum curator who recorded the loan, noted on the accession card that a “small strip of negro skin” was accepted on Sept. 13, 1932. Reid went on to describe the gift as “supposed to be a strip of skin taken from the negro Issaih [sic] who was killed while serving in the Custer battle June 25, 1876 under Major Reno. It is claimed by the Indians that they took a strip of his skin and had it tanned as a souvenir. Secured from one of the hostile Sioux Indians who took part in the Custer campaign, Bridger, S.D.”⁵ At a later date the typed entry was amended in ink to “attributed to” and “Iziah, interpreter.” The final notation on the accession card was handwritten in ink: “donated 12/22/86.”

Mark Halvorson, Curator of Collections Research, told me that when he was first employed at the North Dakota State Museum 25 years ago, he found the leather strip stored flat in a drawer that also contained other flat items such as calendars. Over the years he endeavored to “handle objects with respect and dignity” as part of his professional responsibility as a “mere steward of the past.” He updated the descriptive language of the accession record for the piece of leather and saw to its proper storage. Although it is not possible to know whether or not it is human skin or from Dorman, in the absence of information to the contrary, it must be treated as if it were. It is now recorded as “Description: narrow strip Ha Sapa,” “Material: Leather” and “Made: Native American.”⁶

I accompanied Halvorson to the special storage room where sacred bundles as well as human and animal remains are currently stored. No photographs are allowed, but with gloved hands, Halvorson removed the strip from its drawer and placed it on top of the cabinet so that I could observe it closely. It had a ¼ inch straight-cut hole at one end, possibly made to hold the strip in place while it was scraped and tanned. There were two indented creases that appeared to be consistent with folding the strip in order to place it in a narrow 5-inch bag or other container.

Halvorson also showed me the itemized list prepared by Burdick in December 1932 and attached as part of the loan contract with the museum. The leather was itemized as “Small strip of Negro Skin” with an insurance value of \$5.00.⁷ A penciled notation, probably included at a later date, added, “From Isaiah, Interpreter with Reno, 1876.” Although the person who sold the leather to Burdick was not recorded, other items collected the same day, September 11, 1932, and in the same place, Bridger, SD, were described as purchased from Afraid of Lightning.⁸ Halvorson and I concluded that it was probable that the strip of human leather purported to be from Isaiah Dorman’s body was also sold by Afraid of Lightning to Burdick that day.

Afraid of Lightning received his name from his parents-in-law whose 19-year-old son, Afraid of Lightning, was killed in 1890 at Wounded Knee. James Afraid of Lightning was born on the Rosebud Reservation, ca. 1871,⁹ the son of Blue Hatchet and Iron Antelope. He attended Carlisle Indian School in PA, married White Eagle Woman (aka Sarah, daughter of Bull Man and Julia The Earth) in 1890 and died in 1944.¹⁰ In 1893, he returned with his wife’s family to the Cheyenne River Reservation where they had lived with Big Foot’s band before 1890. The

community, called Bridger by English-speakers, came to be known as Takini, “come back to life,” because many survivors of the Wounded Knee massacre returned.

Afraid of Lightning was five years old in 1876 so probably was not the person who cut a piece of skin from Dorman’s back. However, his wife’s father, Bull Man, and grandfather, Sitting Eagle, both fought at the Greasy Grass.¹¹

Dorman died in the bottoms, between the timber and the Little Bighorn river, when Reno and his troops rushed toward the high ground during the first minutes of the battle on June 25, 1876. George Herendeen, a civilian scout stranded in the timber, was interviewed by Walter Mason Camp who wrote in his notes that Herendeen saw Dorman shot in the legs and said that another “man on Reno’s battlefield on bottoms had strips of skin cut out of his body.”¹² A letter from Henry Bones to Camp in 1911 described Dorman’s body as looking “as though it went through a hash machine.”¹³ Earl A. Brininstool also remembered that Dorman had been “badly cut and slashed.”¹⁴

Dorman’s skin was cut. Body parts as well as clothing and other items were taken from the field of battle. Dorman’s descendants judged the taking of a strip of skin as an act of respect. A piece of leather was sold to Eugene Burdick and is now stored at the North Dakota State Museum. Beyond those known facts, many questions remain.

¹ Simon Harrison, *Dark Trophies: Hunting and the Enemy Body in Modern War*, Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, 2012, p. 47.

² Anonymous, “Token,” *The Bismarck Tribune*, Bismarck, ND, September 25, 1950, Vol. 77, no. 226, p. 1, col. 1.

³ Alan R. Woolworth, “Adventures of a Plains Anthropologist,” *Plains Anthropologist* 51:200:657 (2006).

⁴ Usher Burdick, *Last Battle of the Sioux Nation: Battle of the Little Bighorn, Montana, 1876*, Fargo, ND: Worzalla Publishing Co., 1929.

⁵ Original accession card was shown to me by Mark Halvorson, Curator of Collections Research, North Dakota State Museum, on July 16, 2014, Bismarck, ND.

⁶ North Dakota State Museum, 1986.00234: Material, Worked, Updated 12-05-2013.

⁷ The "income-value" of \$5 in 1932 would be approximately \$557.00 in 2013, according to Samuel H. Williamson, "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1774 to present," MeasuringWorth.com, accessed July 2014.

⁸ For example, Burdick also purchased an elk horn saddle used at the Little Bighorn battle from Afraid of Lightning, Bridger, SD, on September 11, 1932, loaned it to the ND State Museum on September 13, 1932 and donated it in December 1986.

⁹ Rosebud Indian Census, 1887, entry for Blue Tomahawk, living with wife, 16 year-old son and two daughters. Afraid of Lightning had his two sisters with him on the 1894 Cheyenne River Indian Census. Ancestry.com accessed July 2014.

¹⁰ Ziebach County Historical Society, *South Dakota's Ziebach County, History of the Prairie*, Dupree, SD: Ziebach Historical Society, 1982, p. 71.

¹¹ Gary and Joy Gilbert, "Warrior List." FriendsLittleBighorn.com, accessed July 2014.

¹² *Walter Mason Camp Papers (WMC)*, Brigham Young University (BYU), Mss 57, Box 3, f 3.

¹³ *WMC*, BYU, Mss 57, Box 1A, f 18.

¹⁴ Earl A. Brininstool, *A Trooper with Custer: and other historic incidents of the battle of the Little Big Horn*, Columbus, OH: Hunter-Trader-Trapper Co., 1926, 2nd edition, p. 50.