



Holy Rosary Mission
Pine Ridge, South Dakota

Christmas '39

Dear Mr. Briscoll,

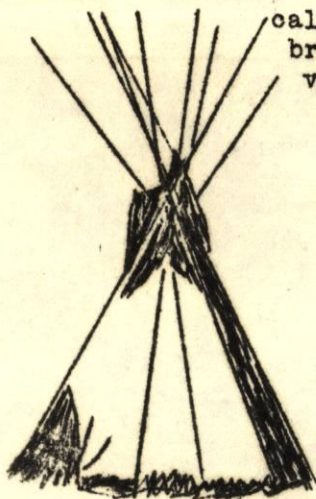
The Moon of Popping Trees finds me still living in the land of log cabins. After a year and a half on the last frontier, during which time I have not seen a streetcar nor ridden in an elevator, I am beginning to feel as Western as Wild Bill Hickock and other such notables whose Colts and Winchesters echoed through the Black Hills in the gold stamped days of '76.

In the Moon Of Making Fat (June) I drifted down across the border into the white man's town of Chadron. The first time in many months I had left the reservation. Deadwood Dick clinking long rowled spurs and toting a pair of heavy six guns would feel no more out of place wandering along the Perisphere walk of the New York's World Fair than I did when I exchanged the creek of saddle leather and the thunder of hoofs for the rattle of traffic and the rumble of Chicago and North Western locomotives.



Instead of sun-bleached, one room log cabins lost on vast stretches of shifting sand, or hidden in twisting draws, were neat bungalows and painted cottages. But the strangest of all were the Wasichus (white men). They all looked sick. Ten months of bronzed Sioux made the palefaces appear as though they had just seen the ghost of Crazy Horse stalking the man who stabbed him in the back.

The two hours spent in the gasoline scented atmosphere were crowded with new, yet old sensations. I was just about adjusting myself to paved streets and grass lawns when it was time to head north for the Indian country, 4,500 square miles of tumbled hills, frowning buttes, and cactus studded plain modernized to the extent of a small drug store tossed on the north side of the dusty street which trails through Pine Ridge.



But all this was last summer when struggling calves bellowed as hot, smoking irons singed hair and sank brands. The warm, lazy days that trailed over the Panhandle vanished with the tepees pitched around the Pine Ridge Sun Dance amphiteater.

Now the Ice King reigns. Blustering winds leaping down from mile high Harney Peak waltz across the white frozen stretches of the reservation, and shriek with glee as they pry icy fingers into the chinks in the mud mortar between the logs of Indian cabins. North of my window where the curve of the hill draws a long line against the night, long tongues of cold quiver skywards licking the feet of the Great Bear as he dances high above the glow of the Northern Lights. Along White Clay Creek giant cottonwoods pop as the midnight frost splits their gnarled trunks.

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The effect of the cold weather on the young Sioux is amusing. Ordinarily the Sioux are of calm and deliberate stride. Even the welcome beckoning of the dinner bell fails to bring them on the run. They walk to meals with the placid dignity of Lord Chancellor. These crisp mornings, however, with Jack Frost nipping all lagers, put some speed into the line. Though here I must add that sub-zero weather at this three thousand foot altitude is not uncomfortable, provided there is no breeze, but when the wind whistles around the corner, button up your overcoat, and keep moving.

Since fur coats and heated cars are things lacking to most Sioux, they confine their activities and winter trips as much as they can. On chill evenings you will find the Black Feather family circled around the pot bellied, cast-iron stove which squats in the center of the dirt floored cabin. The ruddy light winking from the stove through the open grate chasing phantom shadows across the chubby face of the baby slumbering in a canvas cradle swung from the timbered ceiling by four stout wires.

Night and bedtime in my dormitory of sixty five braves see the lads preparing for sleep like a grizzly settling down for the winter. With great care Everett Broken Rope tucks the end and sides of his heavy army blankets under the tick he filled with straw fresh from the rye field in the Moon When Calves Grow Hair (September). These wintry nights make one value a good warm mattress almost as much as the sack of Bull Durham whose strings always dangle from the shirt pocket of every true son of the prairie. Nothing like a good, hand-rolled cigarette to smoke away your troubles by day, and a warm bed in which to nestle at night as you dream wonderful dreams; dreams of broad rimmed, 10-gallon Cheyenne hats, high heeled boots, and silver spurs gleaming in huge arcs as snorting broncs sunfish before corrals of rail squatters.



When the distant, rhythmic yapping of the coyotes echo in the starry splendor of early Christmas morn, I would like to swing astride a color splashed pinto and streamline through the night with the speed of St. Nick and his famous reindeers, so that I might draw rein before your door at dawn to wish you a Very Merry Christmas.

John M. Scott, Jr.

