Sarah McGee

Title: “The Ghost Dance: Cultural Preserver and Doctrine of Peace”
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Sarah McGee graduated from Northrop High School here in Fort Wayne and has attended IPFW ever since. She just joined the History Department this year and this will be her first time speaking at a conference. She has always been interested in Native American history and this interest is what led her to do research on the topic of the Ghost Dance.

Abstract

This paper discusses the religious and cultural phenomenon of late 1880s and early 1890s, known as the Ghost Dance Movement. It shows that this movement was not simply a violent revolt promoted by fanatic Native American medicine men, as some newspapers of the time reported, nor were its teachings and doctrines of an inherently violent nature. Rather, it was a movement founded on a religious doctrine which arose in response to the degradation of traditional western tribal cultures. The movement promoted a peaceful co-existence with white men, and provided a source of hope for an otherwise hopeless people. The devastation created by the government’s overall attitude towards Native Americans, the Dawes Act of 1887, and the loss of the great buffalo herds created the need for a message of hope among the Native American population. The Ghost Dance met this need by providing them with the hope that what they had once held sacred would again be restored. This explains why the movement gained such popularity and spread among so many different tribes despite their varying cultures and languages. Much of the media at the time portrayed the movement as being one of violent revolt and warfare on the part of the Native Americans, despite the fact that the central doctrine of the Ghost Dance was actually one of peace. This is shown with a discussion of the Ghost Dance prophet, Wovoka, and the teachings of his central doctrine which openly called for the Native Americans to make an effort to cause no problems with the white population. This is also shown through the examination of firsthand accounts made by settlers and government agents, including the Acting Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.