Peace Medals and the Great Father

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Glimpses

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By Mark Thiel

the Great Father

From colonial times through the 19th century English, Spanish, French, and Russian governments and trading companies often gave silver "peace medals" to tribal leaders as symbols of allegiance. These medals bore the likeness of the ruling monarchs and became popular in the business of empire-building to both native and European leaders.

Soon after achieving its independence, the United States recognized that North American Indian leaders coveted peace medals and adopted the distribution of these tokens as part of its diplomatic protocols. From George Washington (1789-1797) to Benjamin Harrison (1889-1893), the U.S. Mint struck a new series.

Figure A (above): The Sioux Delegation to Washington, D.C. from Dakota Territory photographed by the Studio of Charles Milton Bell, 1891. Row one, left to right: High Hawk, Fire Lightning, Little Wound, Two Strike, Young-Man-Afraid-of-His-Horses, Spotted Elk, and Big Road. Middle row, left to right: F.D. Lewis, He Dog, Spotted Horse, American Horse, Major George Sword of Pine Ridge Reservation Indian Police, Louis Shangrau, and Bat Pourier (interpreter). Back row, left to right: Zaphier [Zephier?], Hump, High Pipe, Fast Thunder, Reverend Charles S. Cook, and P.T. Johnson.

Courtesy Marquette University digital collections and the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records.
ries of silver peace medals for each presidential administration. The face featured an engraved likeness of the current “Great Father” or President whereas the verso on most contained the motto “Peace and Friendship” with clasped hands and a crossed pipe and tomahawk. Tribal leaders received the medals at treaty signings, visits by government officials, and at White House visits to the President in Washington, D.C.

For 20 years beginning in 1873, the Studio of Charles Milton Bell in Washington, D.C., photographed many of the native visitors to the White House who often dressed in their full ceremonial attire. Among them was this Sioux Delegation (Figure A) and Left Hand, an Otoe leader (Figure B). Other studios near Indian Country also photographed delegations as this Osage Delegation (Figure D) that presumably was traveling either to or from a visit to Washington.

By the 20th century, political realities had changed. Subordinate federal officials now represented the Presi-
Figure D (left): The Osage Delegation photographed by the Studio of Prettyman and Cornish, Arkansas City, Kansas, ca. 1891. Courtesy Marquette University digital collections and the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records.

Figure E (below): Among these elders gathered on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana, ca. 1930, note the peace medal worn by the man to the left. Photographed by Reverend Michael J. Halligan, ca. 1930. Courtesy Marquette University digital collections and the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records.
dent and peace medals were no longer given. But the medals received previously remained cherished possessions as evidenced by the photographs of distinguished elders (Figure E) and those descended from them (Figure C). Furthermore, the ceremony and gift exchange reminiscent of past White House visits continued to occur on rare occasions as in the giving of this pipe to a presidential representative (Figure F).

**For Further Study**


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