

The **LEGEND**
of **GRAND LAKE**



by Joseph L. Wescott

THE LEGEND OF GRAND LAKE TO
BE RE-ENACTED JULY 29, 1959



Joseph L. Westcott
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Joseph L. Westcott



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Again reprinted in 1959 by the Sky-Hi News for the Grand Lake Woman's Club, commemorating Colorado's Centennial Rush to the Rockies.

The Legend of Grand Lake herewith is printed in its original poem form by The Sky-Hi News, a newspaper started in 1945, by E. C. Al Topel. Mention of these facts is made because of requests that the hand-down history of the story be preserved.

This version is taken from a pamphlet published January 26, 1926, by Fred H. Quincy, Salina, Kans., whose home is on the west lake-shore of Grand Lake. In issuing the pamphlet, Quincy had this to say in preface:

“Joseph L. Westcott, known to his friends as “Judge,” is credited with being the first permanent white settler at Grand Lake, Colorado, where he built his cabin on the west shore of the lake in 1867; he hunted, fished and trapped for a living and occasionally prospected for gold in the mountains and suffered many privations. Later he became the first Postmaster at Grand Lake; he died in the fall of 1914 and was one of the state's most picturesque pioneers.

“The events described in the following Legend were given to him by a very old Ute chief and with the aid of John Barbee, a prospector, was written in verse and first published in the Grand Lake Prospector, Vol. 1, No. 1, July 29, 1882 and is here reprinted from that paper.”

The Original Legend of Grand Lake

"White man pause and gaze around,
For we tread now on haunted ground!"
So said a chief to me one day,
As along the shore we wound our way.

"Tell me, chieftain," then I said,
"About this fight so fierce and red;
For I have often heard before
Of a desperate fight in the days of yore."

Silent awhile the chieftain stood,
He gazed awhile on lake and wood,
And then the deep stillness was broke,
And in mild tones these words he spoke:
"On the same ground where now we stand,
Once were encamped a happy band:
One hundred warriors as true and brave
As ever slept in a warrior's grave.
Squaws and papooses, eight score or more,
Were with us here on the sand shore,
Thirty-four years have sped away,
Since the close of that fatal day.
The noble leader of our band—
Bold Chief Chekiwow.

To man no braver heart was given;
No better soul ever reached heaven.
Many bright days we'd been camped here,
Without a thought of trouble or fear,
But the dark hour was near at hand—
The annihilation of our band.
When dark and dismal night set in,
There would arise a horrid din,
Ghosts and goblins gathered round,
And made night hideous with their sound.
Often some wild unearthly wail,
Borne on the Zephyrs of the gale,
Would wake us from our troubled rest,

And send a cold chill through each breast,
And from the lake so sold and deep,
Unearthly forms would upward leap,
Utter a cry of woe and pain,
Then dive into the deep again,
Such horrid sights our souls oppressed,
Such dismal sounds disturbed our rest,
Thus the dark hours wore away,
Until the dawn of that fatal day.
There never dawned a morn so bright,
Followed by such a dismal night,
Alas! how many of our brave band
Next morn will be in the Spiritland!

“I strolled to meet the evening breeze
That blew so fresh through the green trees,
And view the country far and night—
The mount, the vale, the woods, the sky.
But, hark! what means that low dull sound,
Slowly rolling along the ground
Is it loud thunder that I hear?
Or is a herd of elk or deer?
And hark! that rumbling sound again
Slowly rolling Oe'r the plain—
And now far away to the West,
I saw a storm cold's dismal crest,
And as I gazed, higher it grew,
Until the sun was hid from view.
A wild chaotic mass it seemed,
On every side bright lightning gleamed.
Chekiwow had given command
That every warrior of the band
Should arm and be prepared to fight,—
'For danger hovers round to-night!'
The whole heavens were overcast,
And nearer came the howling blast,—
And bright the forked lightning flashed,
And loud the deep-toned thunder crashed,
Now from afar came the grey wolf's howl,
And the dismal hoot of the big horned owl,
The panther's scream, the lion's roar,
Echoed-back from shore to shore,
The whole heavens overhead

Were one sea of pure blood red,
High in mid air engaged in strife,
Fiercely contending life against life,
Phantom warriors fought and fell,—
Plainly we heard each ghostly yell.
“An aged warrior shook his head,
In sorrowing tones these words he said:
“Such sights portend carnage and death;
The passing away of many a breath,
Among all traditions of our band.
There never was known through all our land
Such horrid sounds and ghastly sights,
As we have seen the past three night.”
“Dark, dismal night was setting in;
On every side arose a din.
The ghost’s wild shriek, the goblin’s wail
Was borne on the wings of the coming gale.
Those blood-red clouds have changed their hue
And dark as death appear to view,
The scouts and guards had all come in,—
Terrified by the dreadful din.

“But hark, another cry we hear,—
That fills our hearts with boding fear,
That well known cry so sharp and shrill,
Is the clear wild note of the whippoorwill.
Scarce had its echoes died away,
When in our front, a long array,
From every shrub and rock arose
The fierce Cheyennes and Arapahoes.
Then from each painted warrior’s throat
There issues forth a wild war note.
At the same time the drenching rain
Bursts madly over lake and plain,
An arrowy tempest spread around,—
Some struck the trees, the rocks and ground,
But others more true to their aim,
Stretched many bleeding on the plain.
On every side around about
Came the grey wolf’s howl and foemen’s shout.
Wilder grew the dreadful fight,
Still more dismal grew the night.

Full half a score of friends were slain
And twenty foes lay on the plain,
A fearful charge our foeman made,—
A wall of death their progress stayed,
The ground was strewed with mangled dead,
And back again they quickly sped.
Like lightning darting from on high—
Like meteor flashing through the sky,—
With bristling spear and wild war yell,
Full in their midst we fiercely fell,
Where'er our noble chieftain turned
The battle there more fiercely burned,
When he raised his battle-ax on high.
A painted foe was sure to die.
But fierce they fought, and fast they fell,
And still arose that wild war yell.
Both friends and foes were falling fast,
As thick as snow in a wintery blast,
But such vast odds must win at last.
We could not stem the dreadful blast—
We sped back to our post again,
Pursued by a most deadly rain.
An arrowy storm swept fiercely by
And many brave souls law down to die.
Full forty Utes were lying dead
And four score foemen's lives had sped.
(On logs and rafts, tied near at hand,
Our squaws and papooses had left the land
And were born away from this merciless shore,
Never on earth to be seen any more.)

“The foeman's Chief, Red Wolf by name,
A leader of gigantic fame,
Whose warlike form bore many a scar,
Received in many a bloody war,
It was his boast, no single foe
Could cope with him with spear or bow;
No human foe before him stood
But what he shed his foeman's blood.
That blood-stained chief that fearful night
Met Chekiwow in single fight.
Each chieftain stood transfixed, amazed:
Each at the other keenly gazed—

Then high aloft each waved his hand,
The battle ceased at their command,
Each poised spear was leveled low,
Lowered at once was each drawn bow.
Each chieftain clasped the other's hand
Before the eyes of all their band—
And then they spoke in accents low,
But what they said we will never know.
Then each drew forth his long, stiff bow—
Fixed to the string the barbed arrow.
The barbed shafts sped through the sky,
But from their shields passed harmless by.
Again, and still again they shot,
But their tough shields the missiles caught.
The useless bow was cast aside,
The fatal spear its place supplied,
The deadly blows flew thick and fast
As hailstones in the Autumn blast.
Blood flowed from many a gaping wound
And trickled slowly on the ground,
The cold sweat stood on Red Wolf's brow,
He met his match in Chekiwow.
At last with one dextrous stroke,
Red Wolf's spear was shattered and broke,
But Chekiwow, you all must know
Would never strike an unarmed foe.
He threw his spear against a rock,
And it was shattered by the shock.
Now each chieftain drew his knife
Continuing the deadly strife.
One last fierce thrust then Red Wolf made,
But Chekiwow the deathblow stayed;
His knife flashed like a flaming dart,
And pierced Red Wolf to the very heart.
Our foemen's chief tottered and fell,
Uttering one last dying yell.

“A moments silence reigned around.
Soon broke by a low murmuring sound
That murmur increased to a wail,
Soon followed by a howling gale,
“Avenge our gallant chief!” they cry,

'Great Chekiwow this night must die,
Black Bear, the second in command,
Is now the leader of the band.
'Exterminate this hostile hive!'
Leave not one single foe alive!
He cries in accents fierce and loud.
To his wild crew, his murderous crowd.
'Cast every spear, spring every bow,
'Gainst Chekiwow, and lay him low,—
For ere the dawn of another day
His soul from earth must pass away.

"Once more the deadly tempest roared,
Again a storm of arrows poured;
Against that single manly form
Showered this fearful battle storm.
We strove in vain our chief to save,
To shield him from a bloody grave,
But Chekiwow felt that death was nigh,
That ere the morning he must die.
He raised his battle ax on high,
And loudly rang his battle cry,
Upon our foemen's ranks he fell
Shouting the while his wild war yell.
His battle ax fell crashing down
Cleaving a foeman through the crown,
On right and left with giant force,
Bearing destruction in its course,
That gallant form was failing fast,
Those sinewy limbs must yield at last.
Weakened from many a ghastly wound,
Fainting he fell upon the ground.
But 'ere the spark of life had fled,
He rose up as if from the dead.
Once more he raised his ax on high,
Then rung his last fierce battle cry,
Down fell the ax with one last stroke,
That well-tried blade was shattered and broke.
Our chieftain fell to rise no more,
His life blood oozed from every pore.
Silent he lay upon the plain,
His blood mingled with foemen slain.

“When we beheld our leader fall,
A frenzied shout arose from all:
‘Save our brave chief from ruthless hands,
From the invaders of our land!’
Around our chieftain’s lifeless form,
Most fiercely raged the battle’s storm,
The wounded braves in death’s last throes,
Would cast the spear and speed the bow,
Our shattered ranks were fading fast
Before war’s wild and deadly blast,
We bore our chieftain’s form away,—
It was suicide to longer stay.
We laid him gently on the ground,—
In his last sleep deep and profound—
To slumber with his murdered band,

That perished for their native land.
“Once more were we engaged in strife,
Again to battle for our life.
With weakened hands and failing heart
We cast the poisoned spear and dart.
Eighty-five friends were lying dead,
The blood-stained earth was their lowly bed.
We all must perish here tonight,
Or save ourselves by instant flight.
A weak spot in our foemen’s ranks
Where death had played his wildest pranks,—
From where I stood I now espied.
Calling my comrades to my side,
I bade them quickly follow me,
And try to gain our liberty.
I raised my glittering blade on high—
Again burst forth our battle cry.
With a wild yell—a fearful bound—
My feet scarce seemed to touch the ground—
I broke their ranks and gained the wood,
And for a moment there I stood.
I saw my friends struggling for life
Against a host, in deadly strife.
At last they fell to rise no more,
Grim, ghastly piles of flesh and gore.
“To yonder rugged mountain side
With rapid pace I quickly hied,

Upon a beetling rock I stood,
Gazing upon the angry flood.
Between dark clouds the moon shone out,
Throwing its silvery light about.
The wind still blew with a sullen roar,
The angry waves still lashed the shore.
Far, far away I soon espied
The raft upon the angry tide,
Each moment some high angry wave,
Carried a victim to the grave.
I saw a giant wave arise,
Whose crest towered the skies,
Went thundering on upon its way
Like hungry wolves in search of prey.
And nearer, still nearer it came,
In pursuit of its human game,
The doomed ones saw that their hour was nigh
And in the deep they soon must lie.
The wave came down with a thundering sound
A cloud of spray was strewn around.
I heard a wail of fell despair,
Borne on upon the midnight air
Ah! what a sight now met my view—
The raft that bore that precious crew,
Was scattered in fragments far and wide—
Tossing upon the angry tide.
O'erwhelmed with sorrow, grief and woe—
To leave this world I long to go,
To join my friends in a land afar,
In their bright homes, some twinkling star!
But the Great Spirit wills it so
That I must tarry here below
To be a scourage to all our foes,
The wild Cheyennes and Arapahoes!

“From this dark scene I quickly turned!
With dire revenge my bosom burned!
With rapid steps I sped away
Where Black Eagle's band of warrior's lay.
Over rushing streams and mountains high,
With rapid steps I quickly fly.
And stopped not on my onward flight

Till dazzled by a camp-fire's light.
I reached their camp and gave a shout;
The warriors all came rushing out,
Around a camp-fire—flickering glare—
Full six score warriors gathered there,
Black Eagle spoke: 'What news bringest thou
From our good chieftain, Chekiwow'
Upon my haggard wounded face
Most direful tidings they could trace.
And when I told my dismal tale,
Each eye flashed fire, each cheek turned pale.
"Then from that fiery, warlike crowd
A fearful shout rose fierce and loud.
Revenge! to arms! to horse! they cried,
And for his steed each warrior hied.
A coal black steed Black Eagle strode—
And at their head this chieftain rode.
Onward we ride, over plains and hill,
Through rapid streams, and rippling rill,
And stopped not in our rapid flight
Till the first streak of morning light
When we drew nigh this blood stained place
We slackened in our rapid pace,
With poised spear and ready bow,
To charge upon a surprised foe.
But all in vain—our foes had fled,
Leaving behind their mangled dead,
To moulder and to rot away—
Or fatten birds and beasts of prey.

"When we drew nigh that field of dead,
Black Eagle bowed his stately head—
Before the martyred chief he stood
Gazing upon that field of blood.
Each warrior stood as still as death
Nor moved a hand, nor breathed a breath,
Till Black Eagle the silence broke—
In mournful tones these words he spoke
What God-like form is this I see?
Great Chekiwow? It cannot be!
He never slept when foes were nigh.
Or when the sun was in the sky.

A hostile chief invades our land
Backed by a fierce and warlike band.
Arise, great chief, Black Eagle calls
You to war! Up warriors all!
What! Slumbering still? No beating breath?
Alas! I know it must be death.
This mangled mass, this blood-stained clay,
That teemed with life but yesterday!
These coal-black eyes that beamed with light
Are now closed in eternal night.
Cursed be the hands that made these wounds
That spilled his life blood on the ground!
May they perish amid blood and groans,
Where wolves and crows may pick their bones
Unburied let their bodies rot,
And accursed forever be the spot!—
When the god of war, with his rattling car
Had rolled away to lands afar—
When peace and quiet reigned about,—
With laugh and song and merry shout,—
Oft have I seen amid the throng
This gallant chief moving along.
Among young and old, great and small,
He was the idol of them all.
There was not one soul of all our band,
But would have died at his command.
When the God of war came back again,
Bringing along his warrior train,
And when the war's wild and hoarse alarms,
Called her gallant sons to arms,
He was the first to draw the bow—
To stop the advance of the foe
The warriors followed where he led
Through streams of blood, and heaps of dead,
Here by the murdered chieftain's side,
And by his murdered band beside,
And by their souls that passed away
To their brightest homes of endless day,
And I swear by him that reigns on high,
In sleep to never close an eye—
Till avenged is your untimely fall
By the destruction of them all!

For not one soul of all that band
Shall ever reach their native land!
They all shall perish ere the sun
Three times its daily course has run!
Farewell, great chief, a last adieu,
The tribute that I render you:
A warrior's tear; and honored grave
Among the bravest of the brave!
"The chieftain ceased. Then to his band
That stood attentive near at hand;
'My braves, we now must speed away,
Here we must no longer delay
If we would avenge this warrior band
That perish here for their native land!
What sound is this my ears to greet
Like the trampling of horses feet?
And now I hear their distant hum,—
The balance of our band has come,
The cavalcade soon came in sight,
Their long sharp spears were gleaming bright,
When they drew nigh this battle ground,
Where the dead lay in heaps around,
The squaws joined in a wild death song,
As they came marching slow along;
Black Eagle waved aloft his hand—
Deep silence reigned through all the band.
He gave command in accents clear,
That everyone might plainly hear;
'Bury our chief in hallowed ground,
With all his warriors close around;
Also bury the foemen dead
With their chief, Red Wolf, at their head.
The time has come, we now must go
In pursuit of the allied foe.
To horse! my braves, mount and away—
Let's follow them without delay!'"
"Over mountain high and wooded hill—
Through grassy plain and rushing rill,
We never stopped in that mad chase,
Nor slackened in our headlong pace,
Flee, foemen, flee, and look not back,
The hounds of war are on your track!

Flee, foemen, flee from your dreadful doom,
For the grey wolves now will be your tomb!
All day we rode and night drew nigh.
The sun had set in the Western sky—
Its last faint rays of glimmering bright,
Tinged the peaks with a golden light.
The shades of night soon closed around.
And darkness settled on the ground.
We 'lighted from each weary steed.
For rest they were in sorest need.
A sheltered glade was soon espied;
In tall rank grass our steeds were tied.

“In council we gathered around
Seated upon the grassy ground.
Our Chief arose, and this he said:
'While yet the western sky was red
As yonder rugged mount we passed,
Far to the north my eyes I cast:
I saw the last of our foemen's train
Reach a small grove upon the plain.
Weary and worn they will remain
Until the sun illumines the plain,
Before the dawn of the day,
We must be up and on our way,
Singly, alone, I now will go
To view the position of the foe,
Let not a warrior leave this place
Till you again behold my face.
Like a myth he vanished away;
But how he went no one could say—
Whether through air or in the ground,
'Twas a mystery profound!
We all sat still in wondering mood—
The mystery none understood.
We were bewildered with surprise
When he arose before our eyes,
He smiled to see our wondering stare
As though he had fallen through the air,
But soon he spoke—and thus he said:
'Before the eastern sky is red,
We must all arm and speed away,

Before the dawning of the day,
And reach their camp ere the morning bright
Gilds the peaks with a golden light.
The foemen's camp I have espied,
And viewed it well on every side.
They all lie sleeping on the ground,
'Like logs of wood scattered around.
We soon were armed, marching along
As silent as ghostly throng,
At the first streak of morning light,
Our foemen's camp appeared in sight,
We were scarce forty yards away,—
And on the ground in silence lay.
Awaiting for the morning light
To guide our deadly shafts aright.

"Black Bear our foeman's chief awoke,
And to his nearest warrior spoke,
Saying: Arouse, we must away
And reach our home at the close of day!"
Not a soul either moved or spoke,—
So deep their sleep that none awoke,
'I will try some other means,' he said
'That will awake all but the dead.'
Then from his throat rang loud and high
Our foeman's dreadful battle cry
Each sleeping brave quickly awoke,—
That magic cry their slumbers broke,
The stars were all fading away
Before the monarch of the day.

"The time had come to begin the fight—
Between the morning and the night—
With a wild cry we all arose
Before the eyes of our startled foes.
In a loud voice Black Eagle cries,
While our foes stood with glaring eyes;
'Charge with the lance! on, on, my braves,
To Victory, or bloody graves!'
We charged with fury and with wrath,
Destruction followed in our path.
Brave Black Bear strove but in vain,
Their waning courage to regain;

He shouted to his warrior band,
To fight for life and native land.
In solid mass our foemen closed
On every side with lance opposed.
The battle then most fiercely raged.
And hand to hand we were engaged
Half of their force were already slain,
Their blood encrimsoning the plain.
Black Bear's seemed a charmed life;
Always amidst the deadliest strife;
Wherever the fight most fiercely raged,
There had to hand, he was engaged.
Each moment a wail of wild despair
Burst madly on the morning air.
As the sun climbed down the mountain grey,
The last foemen's soul had passed away.

“Black Eagle waved on high his hand
Calling the attention of his band;
'My gallant friend, great Chekiwow,
I have performed my solemn vow!
Not one of all this murderous train
Will ever reach their homes again!
Henceforth let this be haunted ground,
Where evil spirits may abound,
Let all the herbage fade away,
And this forest sink to decay!
Come crows and buzzards to the feast,
And hither come each carrion beast
From every side from near and far,
To the feast of the God of War!
Let poisoned lizards here abound,
And hissing serpents crawl around,
Let their bodies fester and rot,
And their ghosts forever haunt this spot
To forever bar the human race
From visiting this accursed place!’
Then turning his eyes toward the dead
In sorrowing tones, these words he said,
'Many a mother will grieve and mourn,
For her warrior son that will never return;
And many a maiden's cheek will pale
For her warrior lover that died on the trail.

And many a widow's heart will break.
For her warrior lord that died at the lake
The children will look for their sires in vain,
Whose forms they may never behold again!
Gather the trophies of the fight
We must be far ere the close of night.
Let us bear back our slaughtered braves
That they may sleep in honored graves,
Where Chekiwow and his warriors lay,
Near Grand Lake's shore, long leagues away.
The second day we returned again,
Bringing along our gallant slain,
To lay them in this hallowed ground,
With all the noble dead around.
Three hundred when the fight begun
Were marshaled at the set of sun—
But as the morning sun arose
Stark and stiff were three hundred foes.

"Since that dark night when the storm frowned,
And the night her mantle had thrown around,
The ghosts of the warriors slain,
Rise up from their graves again,
Again in battle line they stand,
The dead chief leading his command.
They then engage in deadly fight
And stop not till the morning light;
For at the first faint streak of day
These ghostly forms will fade away.

"Behold! these locks, now snowy white,
In one short hour were changed that night.
My time is short on earth below;—
To a happier home I soon must go;
No happy moments have I passed,
Since Chekiwow breathed his last.
Only when in the fight I stood,
My hands drenched in our foemen's blood!
Our chief, Black Eagle slumbers now,
With Glory's breath upon his brow,
He fell with many of his band,
Fighting for home and native land,
My time on earth will soon be passed,—
Each day I look to be my last,

I long to leave this cumbrous clay,
And speed afar to endless day!"
The chieftain ceased—his tale was told
Of scenes that happened in the days of old,
And when night settled on the lake and plain,
We had returned to our camp again.

From _____

To _____

