

## APPENDIX 7 : JOHN WILSON, THE REVEALER OF PEYOTE

Written by Weston La Barre

Saturday, 15 January 2011 00:00 - Last Updated Saturday, 22 January 2011 13:06

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The life and career of a remarkable individual were successively involved in the several traditions of the Ghost Dance, mescalism, old Algonquian shamanistic "shooting" cere, monies and finally peyotism. Both for its intrinsic interest and its historical significance we give here in some detail the life of this man. Wilson appears first as a leader in the Ghost Dance movement of the 1890's. Mooney' writes :

The principal leader of the Ghost dance among the Caddo is Nlshldintii, "Moon Head," known to the whites as John Wilson. Although considered a Caddo, and speaking only that language,<sup>2</sup> he is very much of a mixture, being half Delaware, one-fourth Caddo, and one-fourth French. One of his grandfathers was a Frenchman. As the Caddo lived originally in Louisiana, there is a considerable mixture of French blood among them, which manifests itself in his case in a fairly heavy beard. He is about 50 years of age [in 1892—.93], rather tall and well built, and wears his hair at full length flowing loosely over his shoulders. With a good head and strong, intelligent features, he presents the appearance of a natural leader . . . . He was one of the first Caddo to go into a trance, the occasion being the great Ghost dance held by the Arapaho and Cheyenne near Darlington agency, at which Sitting Bull presided, in the fall of 1890. On his return to consciousness he had wonderful things to tell of his experiences in the spirit world, composed a new song, and from that time became the high priest of the Caddo dance. Since then his trances have been frequent, both in and out of the Ghost dance, and in addition to his leadership in this connection he assumes the occult powers and authority of a great medicine-man, all the powers claimed by him being freely conceded by his people.

Captain Scott, who visited the Caddo in 1890-91 during the period of their greatest excitement about the Ghost Dance, also met Wilson, of whom he writes:<sup>8</sup>

John Wilson, a Caddo man of much prominence, was especially affected [by the Ghost Dance], performing a series of gyrations that were most remarkable. At all hours of the day and night his cry could be heard all over camp, and when found he would be dancing in the ring, possibly upon one foot, with his eyes closed and the forefinger of his right hand pointed upward, or in some other ridiculous posture. Upon being asked his reasons for assuming these attitudes he replied that he could not help it; that it came over him just like cramps.

Wilson soon became a well-known doctor in this connection. Scott continues:

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John Wilson had progressed finely, and was now a full-fledged doctor, a healer of diseases, and a finder of stolen property through supernatural means. One day, while we were in the tent, a Wichita woman entered, led by the spirit. It was explained to us that she did not even know who lived there, but some force she could not account for brought her. Having stated her case to John, he went off into a fit of the jerks, in which his spirit went up and saw "his father" (i.e., God), and who directed him how to cure this woman. When he came to, he explained the cure to her, and sent her away rejoicing. Soon afterwards a Keechei man came in, who was blind of one eye, and who desired to have the vision restored. John again consulted his father, who informed him that nothing could be done for that eye because that man held aloof from the dance.

When Mooney visited the Caddo on Sugar Creek late in 1895,

John Wilson came down from his own camp to explain his part in the Ghost dance. He wore a wide-brim hat, with his hair flowing down to his shoulders, and on his breast, suspended from a cord, about his neck, was a curious amulet consisting of the polished end of a buffalo horn, surmounted by a circlet of downy red feathers, within another circle of badger and owl claws. He explained that this was the source of his prophetic and clairvoyant inspiration. The buffalo horn was "God's heart," the red feathers contained his own heart,<sup>4</sup> and the circle of claws represented the world. When he prayed for help, his heart communed with "God's heart," and he learned what he wished to know. He had much to say also of the moon. Sometimes in his trances he went to the moon and the moon taught him secrets . . . He claimed an intimate acquaintance with the other world and asserted positively that he could tell me "just what heaven is like." Another man who accompanied him had a yellow sun with green rays painted on his forehead, with an elaborate rayed crescent in green, red, and yellow on his chin, and wore a necklace from which depended a crucifix and a brass clockwheel, the latter, as he stated, representing the sun.

On entering the room where I sat awaiting him, Nishkiantii approached and performed mystic passes in front of my face with his hands, after the manner of the hypnotist priests in the Ghost dance, blowing upon me the while, as he afterward explained to blow evil things away from me, before beginning to talk on religious subjects. . . .<sup>5</sup> Laying one hand on my head, and grasping my own hand with the other, he prayed silently for some time with bowed head, and then lifting his hand from my head, he passed it over my face, down my shoulder and arm to the hand, which he grasped and pressed slightly, and then released the fingers with a graceful upward sweep. <sup>6</sup>

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A curious mixture of Caddoan (?) mescalism, Ghost Dance, Delaware "shooting" ceremonies and early peyotism occurred among the Shawnee when Wilson came to them about 1889. The Quapaw were being taught the Ghost Dance, in which a small water drum was used to accompany the circling of the dancers, alternately men and women. Wilson showed them how to swallow mescal beans, and also how to "shoot" them into a person so that he or she would fall down. Then he doctored the person with peyote to bring him back to consciousness. A number of tribes were involved in these doings, according to Mrs. Voegelin, the Shawnee, Delaware, Mohawk, Peoria, Caddo (?), Quapaw, Iowa and Oto. Gradually, however, Wilson turned from the Ghost Dance to peyote. Already in Mooney's time he was "prominent in the mescal [i.e., peyote] rite, which has recently come to his tribe [the Caddo] from the Kiowa and Comanche."

Both mescalism and the Ghost Dance, in his person, have traceable influence upon peyotism. This syncretism of cultures in one personality is of considerable interest.

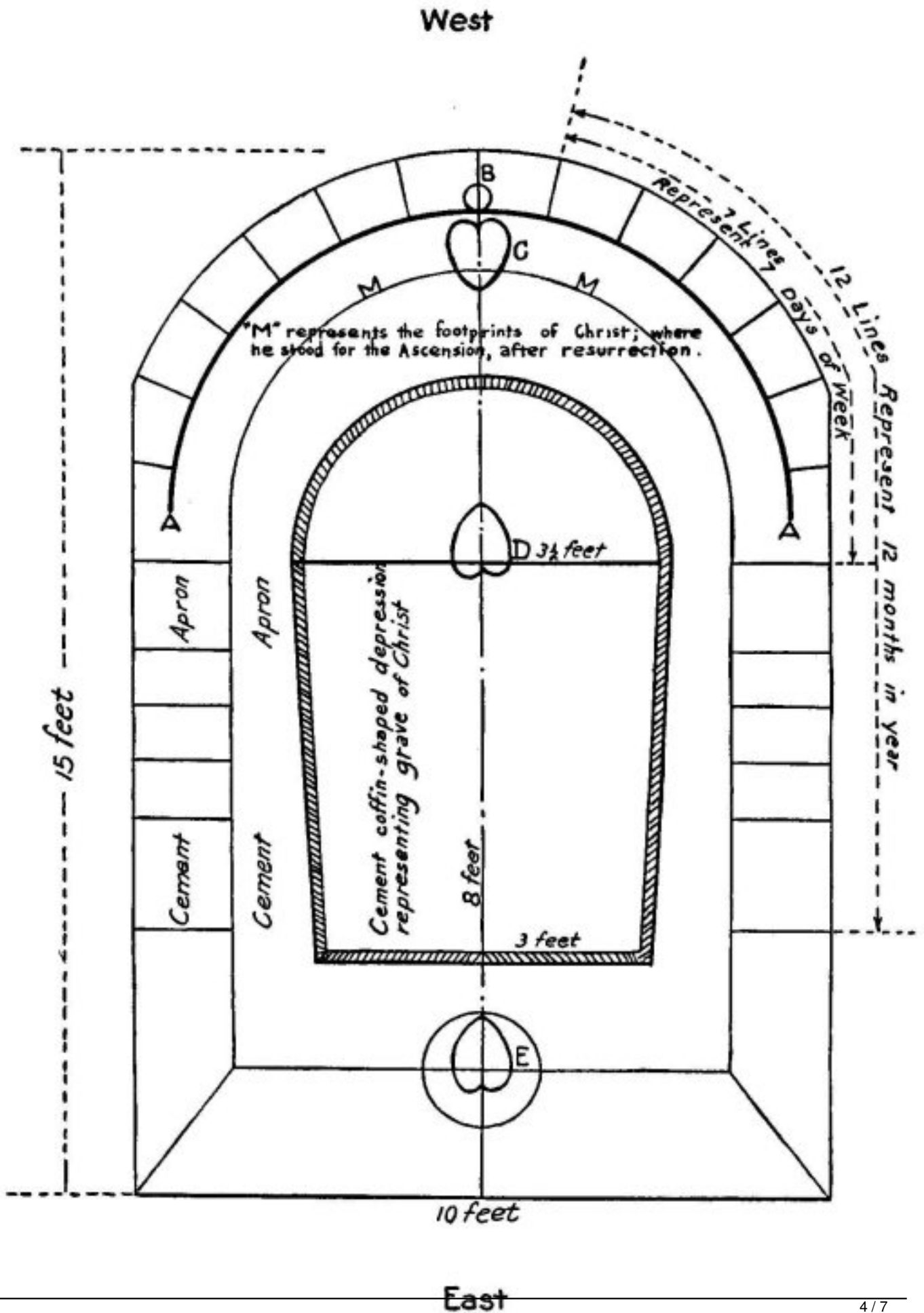
Before Wilson had quite reached the age of forty, he had lived the life of an ordinary Indian of Oklahoma. He was addicted to moderate drinking. He frequented the social dances and gambling gatherings usual among reservation groups of his type. He had participated likewise in the contemporary religious ceremonies performed by the Delaware. . . . As a vagrant, not however in the condemning sense of the term, he had wandered as most Oklahoma Indians do, from tribe to tribe and inevitably also among the whites experiencing the wide range of personal and social contacts which might be inferred from the statement. Anderson states, in short, that his uncle had lived a sinful life but adds in effect that he had not been guilty of any major offences. He was married to a woman of Delaware and Caddo descent and had an adopted son, Black Wolf, reputed to be also part Delaware part Caddo, and who is still living (1932) and carrying out Wilson's teachings and ministrations.

About this time he attended a Comanche dance, where a Comanche man presented him with a peyote button and told him to give it a trial—which he did in an unusually thorough manner. Speck continues:

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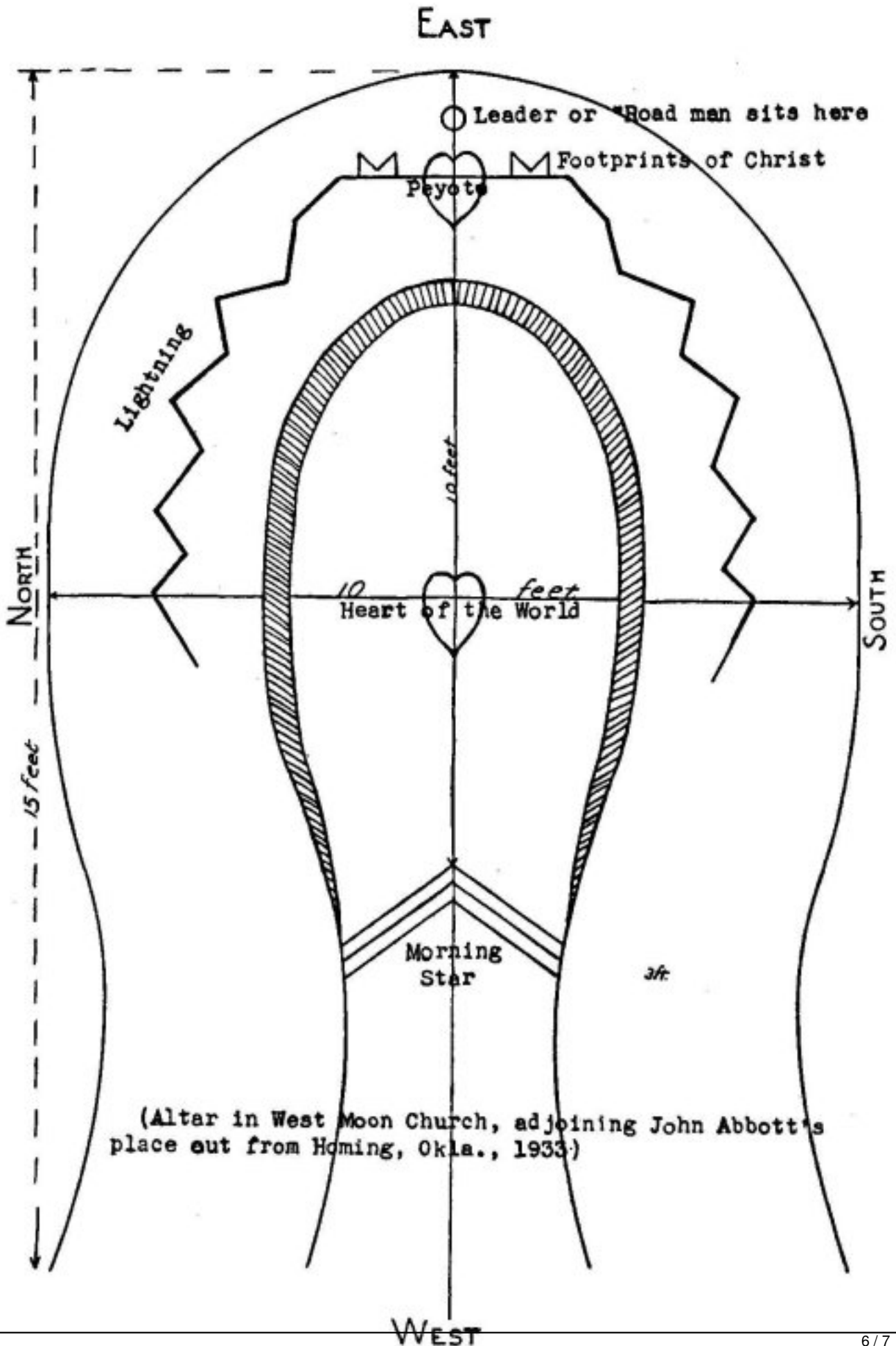
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