

"I Have Spoken..."

1932 Tribute to Chief Plenty Coups Discovered

by John Faubion

If not for its historical significance, a document found in the archives of American sculptor Lawrence Tenney Stevens would be nothing special to look at; it's a standard-sized piece of aged, creased, rather plain business stationery. But the words typed upon it make it a beautiful discovery. They are the words spoken by Indian John Frost in Yellowstone National Park, outside of Cody, Wyoming, at the July 3, 1932, ceremony to name a mountain peak in honor of Chief Plentycoos (now spelled Plenty Coups).

There were three dedication ceremonies held that day. Earlier that year, in March, The United States Department of Agriculture announced that the U.S. Geographic Board "has approved the names, Cody, Arthur, and Plentycoos, for three peaks in the Absaroka range on the boundary between the Yellowstone National Park and the Shoshone National Forest." A committee in Cody, chaired by Thomas Molesworth, who had moved to Cody recently and started a furniture company, made arrangements for the dedication ceremonies and the culminating event of the day: the opening of the first sculpture show held at the Buffalo Bill Museum. The one-man show featured the work of Lawrence Tenney Stevens.

Stevens, who had been smitten with the Cody environs since his first visit in the spring of 1929, created large stone memorial tablets that were unveiled during the ceremonies. Each featured an incised-line portrait bust of the honoree: "Buffalo Bill" Cody for Cody Peak, President Chester A. Arthur for Arthur Peak, and Chief Plentycoos for Plentycoos Peak. The tablets were placed at roadside trailheads that offered park visitors the best view of each peak.

Of the peaks, a March 10, 1932, publicity release from Shoshone National Forest states: "The highest of these three was named in honor of Plentycoos, for many years chief of the Crow Indians. It has an elevation of 10,935 feet, and is located between Arthur and Atkins Peaks. Plentycoos died on March 4 at his home at Pryor, Montana, not knowing that this honor had been conferred upon him by the United States Government. He was a friend of the white man and did much to educate and advance his people. It is quite fitting that this peak, located in the region through which he and his ancestors had hunted for many years, should be his memorial."

It was also fitting that John Frost spoke at the Plentycoos Peak dedication ceremony. Born in 1872 to an English physician with a part-blood Indian wife, Frost was raised with an understanding of the white man and of the language and traditions of the Crow and Blackfoot tribes. By the age of 20, he was working as a scout and interpreter at Fort Custer near the Crow Agency (reservation) in Montana. (Fort Custer was built in 1877 shortly after Custer's Last Stand of June 25, 1876.) Frost's reputation as a trustworthy friend of the Crow earned him an invitation as an "honor guest" at the camp of Chief Plenty Coups in July of 1893. Plenty Coups took a liking to him and, over the years, increasingly relied upon him as interpreter and advisor. When selected to represent all American Indians at the November 11, 1921, ceremonial burial of the Unknown Soldier of World War I, Plenty Coups took Frost to Washington, D.C., with him.

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My Friends; I cannot find words to express our gratitude today for the honor you have shown our departed chief. You touch our hearts. If I could speak with the softness of the cooing of turtle doves and as beautifully as the canary sings, still I would be unable to express it. I can only say "Ah-hoe" Ah-hoe", meaning in our language "I am grateful with all my heart. You could not have chosen a more appropriate memorial than this peak which you have named after him. As you know we indians hold the mountains sacred and as a place of worship. In my boyhood days we were taught that the summit of the peaks were places for the great spirit only. So when a member of the tribe wished to worship he was prepared to ascend by being made to first go into a sweat tepee, then after coming out he was escorted to the creek where he took a bath and was then anointed with herbs. He then went up on the mountain to fast and pray to the Great Spirit to make of him a useful man to his tribe. It was in one of these fastings that Chief Plenty Coups was told in his dream to make peace. What we mean by peace is to live and let live and share with one another our worldly goods. Those of you who knew him know what he did toward peace in his life time. At the burial of the "Unknown Soldier" I was privileged to interpret for him and at that time he said "May the Great Spirit grant that this unknown son will not have given up his life in vain and may there be peace for all times hereafter"

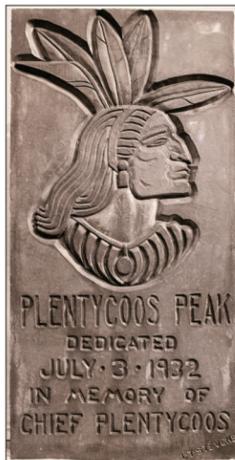
So today I pray that the Great Spirit will grant his prayer and may this peak which you have named for our chief be instrumental in bringing a relationship between the white race and the red man as beautiful and as fragrant as the flowers that grow on peak "Chief Plenty Coups". As pure as the crystal waters that flow from it; its morals as high as its summit, and as lasting as this peak.

I have spoken --- I thank you.

By John Frost, Indian.



Indian John Frost (center in dark suit) speaking at dedication of Plentycoos Peak, Yellowstone National Park, July, 3, 1932. The stone tablet (right of center) had not yet been permanently mounted at the site.



< One of three stone tablets carved and donated by Lawrence Tenney Stevens. Each was permanently mounted in concrete on a pedestal with a partial frame made of natural stones. Over the years, these tablets disappeared likely due to vandalism or theft. A surviving photo shows at least one of them was still in place in the late 1960s.

So how did the Plenty Coups document end up in the Lawrence Tenney Stevens archives? It is presumed that Frost made a gift of it to Stevens at the Yellowstone ceremony after reading from it. It is also presumed that Stevens was wearing his pale-green, western-styled, fringed leather vest at the time. Because, the document was found folded in one of its outer pockets where it remained, unnoticed, until recently.

The document, the vest, and photos of the 1932 ceremonies, will be displayed beginning May 6 through the fall at The Chief Plenty Coups Memorial State Park in Pryor, Montana (to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service). Park Ranger Aaron Kind is planning special events related to the exhibition and says: "It's amazing that the Chief's story is still being written 84 years after his death."

John Faubion has researched, written, and lectured about Lawrence Tenney Stevens since 1995. He was award-winning co-curator of a major 1996 Stevens retrospective exhibition at the Tempe Historical Museum in Arizona. His discoveries in the Stevens archives contributed to the preservation efforts of the 1936 Dallas Centennial Fair site, and led to the recreation of three of Stevens's monumental sculptures there. He is writing a book about Stevens and is planning related exhibitions for 2016 and beyond. He established the Western column in the Journal of the Print World and welcomes your feedback and suggestions for future articles. johnfaubion@basicisp.net