



*Benjamin Black Elk*

## *Dakota Images*

Seen through the camera viewfinders of thousands of visitors to Mount Rushmore, Benjamin Black Elk, dressed in traditional Sioux clothing, seemed to epitomize the popular image of the Sioux Indian. Those few visitors who also paused to talk with the man known as the "Fifth Face of Mount Rushmore" found an articulate spokesman working for the preservation of his heritage.

Benjamin Black Elk was born in 1899 at Manderson on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. One of several in a line to carry the family name, he was the son of Black Elk, the Oglala medicine man who was a cousin of Crazy Horse and fought with him at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. After attending Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania for a short time, Ben Black Elk returned to Manderson. He served as an interpreter when, in the early 1930s, John G. Neihardt conducted the interviews with his father that culminated in the book *Black Elk Speaks*. He later became a successful rancher in the area, winning awards for both crops and livestock.

In the last two decades of his life, Ben Black Elk became one of the most photographed men of all time. In the 1950s, he began twenty years of posing for summer tourists at Mount Rushmore, having his picture taken as often as five thousand times in one day. In 1962, he became the first person to appear on the initial live television broadcast transmitted from the United States to Europe via the Telstar satellite. He also had parts in several motion pictures, and after playing a major role in the 1963 production of *How the West Was Won*, he toured Europe promoting the film. Often accompanied by his wife, Pretty Leaf, he spent his winters making personal appearances and lecturing on Sioux Indian traditions. In 1968, he testified before the Senate Committee on Indian Education as a proponent for the teaching of Indian history to Indian children.

Benjamin Black Elk was seventy-four years old when he died on 22 February 1973 at Manderson.

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