

*"I am here on my own ground and I will never go back.
You may kill me here, but you cannot make me go back."*

Those words were uttered in 1879 by the Indian Chief, Dull Knife. He spoke not only for himself, but on behalf of his people, the northern Cheyenne. This heroic figure, of Native American history, has been immortalized on canvas in *Dull Knife's Defiance* (Figure 1) by Ernest L. Blumenshein.²

Ernest L. Blumenshein was born in Pittsburgh in 1874. He studied both music and art on the east coast and in Paris. He began to pursue seriously an education and career in art in 1893 at the Cincinnati Academy of Art, under the instruction of Fernand Lungren. Mr Lungren, an illustrator, painted scenes of the American West when Blumenshein came under his direction. Subsequently, Blumenshein would pursue a career in illustration, eventually to replace the latter as a master in capturing the west on canvas.³

Illustration was not only a relatively easy way for an artist to make money, but for Blumenshein a means of independence from a father who desired his son to pursue a career in music.⁴ In April of 1896, Blumenshein signed a contract with *Scribners*, beginning his long affiliation with the magazine.⁵ Blumenshein's assignments were not limited to *Scribners*, but included works for *McClures Magazine* as well. On December 20, 1897 he was commissioned by *McClures* to illustrate a story on the Pima Reservation of southern Arizona. This was the first experience Blumenshein had with Papago Indians and the first Indian ceremony he witnessed.⁶ Following his visit, in early 1898, Blumenshein painted *Dull Knife's Defiance*. The small monochromatic work was intended for an illustration but never used. It holds no relation to the visit to the Pima reservation and the ceremony witnessed there. However, the clarity and sensitivity in depiction of Dull Knife and his accompanying tribesman, can be linked to this first-hand experience with Native American culture.



It is unknown for which article the painting was intended. One possibility is an article entitled, "General Custer's Last Fight as seen by Two Moon" published in *McClures* in September 1898.⁷ Another illustration by Blumenschein, *We Circled all around Him*, was used. This work was a full page illustration. In conjunction with hundreds of works done by Blumenschein and intended for magazine reproduction, it is also monochromatic.

Two Moon was a northern Cheyenne Indian chief who took part in Custer's last fight. The incident he describes in the *McClures* article and the depiction of Dull Knife do not coincide; however the article may have been intended to extend its scope to the entire plight of the northern Cheyenne. No other article published at the time comes close to the subject, suggesting that the article for which it was intended remained unpublished.

Dull Knife's Defiance is a depiction of the northern Cheyenne Indian Chief during the tribe's negotiations with the United States Government in 1879. The northern Cheyenne were forcefully being removed from their beloved and sacred homeland and relocated in the south on a reservation with their kinsmen the southern Cheyenne. The Cheyenne had been in constant conflict with the U.S. Government for the past decade. The northern Cheyenne played but a secondary role in these conflicts allying themselves with the Sioux. They joined the Sioux in the Black Hills council of September 20, 1875 in attempts to keep gold seeking prospectors out of the Black Hills portion of the reservation.⁸ This led to a battle with General Crook and ultimately the Custer engagement.

The final conflict of the northern Cheyenne was the battle of the "Little Muddy." On November 25, 1876 Colonel R.S. Mackenzie, with nearly two thousand troops, engaged the Cheyenne on Crazy Woman Creek, Wyoming. The attack at daybreak was a complete surprise. The Cheyenne rushed from their beds practically naked. It was so severely cold that several children froze to death. It was the worst defeat suffered by the Cheyenne.⁹

On August 5, 1877 they were taken to the Arapaho-Cheyenne reservation. A few days later the southern Cheyenne invited their northern kinsmen to a welcoming feast. It was quickly evident to the newcomers that something was terribly wrong. All their hosts could offer was a watery soup. There was no wild game, or clear water. The air was filled with mosquitos and flying dust and the humid climate produced disease. The northerners found these conditions unlivable and wished to return to their homeland.

The northern Cheyenne felt they had seen enough.¹⁰ Dull Knife pleaded with the officials to let him and his

Figure 1. Ernest L. Blumenschein, *Dull Knife's Defiance*, 1898, oil on canvas. Arizona State University Art Museum. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Orme Lewis.

people go home. Permission was denied, resulting in a desperate attempt at escape and the ultimate capture of the remaining northern Cheyenne at Fort Robinson in Nebraska. Once again they expressed their desire to stay in the north, but on January 3, 1879 word arrived at Fort Robinson, from the War Department, for Dull Knife's Cheyenne to be sent back.

It is from this period of desperation that *Dull Knife's Defiance* is derived. Centered on the canvas is the strong and noble figure of the defiant Dull Knife. He stands in profile with his arms crossed and his weight shifted to his front foot. The profile is sharp and clear, made even more pronounced by the usage of a thin line of black serving as a contour. It is further heightened by its juxtaposition against a stream of light which illuminates the wall directly behind him. The profile is not only clear, but stalwart. The face, in addition to the stance, aids one in understanding the character of the great Indian Chief.

To the right of the canvas are two seated members of Dull Knife's tribe. These figures rest upon a narrow blanket and appear to watch their leader questioningly. They lean towards each other with a suggestion of conference. Perhaps these tribesmen were not as anxious to risk their lives as Dull Knife. History does indicate that there were members of the northern Cheyenne who relinquished their land with far less of a challenge. In contrast, there were others who did not find Dull Knife's words to be strong enough and proposed to choose another to speak on their behalf.¹²

This division is suggested by the diagonal crack in the wall behind the two native Americans. Although in profile, the eyes of the leader shift over his shoulder and at the seated tribesmen. He was aware that he was not wholeheartedly supported.

The figure farthest in the background and shrouded in deep shadows is a cowboy. He stands to the left of Dull Knife. His stance is relaxed and arrogant. This suggests that he is not a mere spectator, but at the very least, a supporter of the U.S. Government's decision to relocate the northern Cheyenne. As noted, he is cast in deep shadows which does not allow for careful detail or overt attention. Like the U.S. Government in matters concerning the American Indians, this figure, no matter how obscured, stands firmly in the background. The U.S. Government, although vague and unjust in its negotiations and demands, was ever present. The viewer is able to distinguish the figures of Dull Knife and his tribesmen with ease, but this elusive figure demands more concentration. The shadows that surround

him pique one's curiosity. It is not merely a well executed figure of a cowboy, but an image of deceit. The figures represented do not merely comprise a well balanced and pleasing composition, but personify the passions and positions existing during that period of Indian and United States History.

Later in his career Blumenshein became interested in and absorbed Cubism, Expressionism, and Impressionism. He became interested in distorting colors and forms in the efforts to evoke an emotional response from his viewers.¹³ Nevertheless, *Dull Knife's Defiance* is a precursor to the abstract sensitivity evoked by Blumenshein in his later depictions of Native Americans. He seemed to truly understand Dull Knife, immortalizing him and his words.¹⁴