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A COMPANION TO  
CUSTER AND THE  
LITTLE BIGHORN CAMPAIGN

EDITED BY  
Brad D. Lookingbill

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*A Companion to Custer and the Little  
Bighorn Campaign*

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# A COMPANION TO CUSTER AND THE LITTLE BIGHORN CAMPAIGN

*Edited by*

Brad D. Lookingbill

WILEY Blackwell

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# Contents

List of Illustrations	viii
Notes on Contributors	x
Acknowledgments	xiv
Introduction	1
<i>Brad D. Lookingbill</i>	
 <b>Part I The Indians of the Northern Plains</b>	 <b>11</b>
1 The Lakota Sioux	13
<i>Rani-Henrik Andersson</i>	
2 The Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho	34
<i>Leo KILLSBACK</i>	
3 Patriot Chiefs	54
<i>Kurt Windisch</i>	
4 The Native Way of War	74
<i>Daniel Sauerwein</i>	
5 Auxiliaries and Scouts	92
<i>Adam R. Hodge</i>	
 <b>Part II The US Army in the Western Territories</b>	 <b>111</b>
6 The Policies of War and Peace	113
<i>Bill Carney</i>	
7 Forts on the Northern Plains	130
<i>Janne Lahti</i>	

8	Army Life <i>Robin S. Conner</i>	148
9	Women and Dependents <i>Shannon D. Smith</i>	170
10	Technology and Tactics <i>Andrew J. Forney</i>	188
<b>Part III The Making of George Armstrong Custer</b>		<b>209</b>
11	A Young General <i>Mark Ehlers</i>	211
12	Commander in the West <i>Jeff Broome</i>	229
13	The 7th Cavalry <i>John R. Dreyer</i>	246
14	Elizabeth Bacon Custer <i>Tonia M. Compton</i>	264
<b>Part IV Into the Valley</b>		<b>283</b>
15	The Convergence <i>Debra J. Sheffer</i>	285
16	The Reno-Benteen Site <i>Wesley Moody III</i>	302
17	Custer's Fight <i>Bob Reece</i>	318
18	The Aftermath <i>Alan M. Anderson</i>	341
<b>Part V The Last Stand of Myth and Memory</b>		<b>367</b>
19	Native Traditions <i>Carole A. Barrett</i>	369
20	The Press <i>Hugh J. Reilly</i>	387
21	Popular Culture <i>Rebecca S. Wingo</i>	404
22	Reenacting the Battle <i>Jeremy M. Johnston</i>	423

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23	The Legacy of Archaeology <i>Douglas D. Scott</i>	445
24	A National Monument <i>Douglas Seefeldt and Jason A. Heppler</i>	462
25	The Battle of History <i>Michael Welsh</i>	485
	Index	505

# List of Illustrations

## *Between Parts IV and V*

Figure 1	Major General George Armstrong Custer, 1865. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.	360
Figure 2	Sitting Bull, 1884. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.	360
Figure 3	Victim of Indians, 1869–1878. Record Group 57: Records of the US Geological Survey, 1839–2008, National Archives.	361
Figure 4	Map of the Great Sioux War, from <i>Cavalier in Buckskin</i> , by Robert M. Utley. Copyright 1988 University of Oklahoma Press. Reproduced with permission.	362
Figure 5	Red Horse pictographic account of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, 1881. Manuscript 2367-a, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution (NMNH-2367A_08569200).	363
Figure 6	Otto Becker, <i>Custer's Last Fight</i> , 1896, chromolithograph based on Cassilly Adams's painting. Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.	363
Figure 7	<i>Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World</i> , 1898. Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming. James Wojtowicz Collection, MS327. OS2.07.001.	364
Figure 8	Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior.	365

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*In Chapter 24*

- Figure 9    Relative frequency word trends for the most frequent words in the entire corpus, when compared to the rest of the corpus. Visualization generated by Voyant Tools.    473
- Figure 10   Distinctive words are computed based on their raw frequency and unique appearance in each of the texts. Visualization generated by Voyant Tools.    474

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# Introduction

*Brad D. Lookingbill*

Americans made 1876 the “Year of a Hundred Years.” The anniversary of the Declaration of Independence inspired centennial celebrations and patriotic parades around the country. The United States International Exhibition, which was hosted in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, touted a “Century of Progress.” An inventor named Alexander Graham Bell patented a device called the telephone. Adolphus Busch, a brewer, began marketing a lager known as Budweiser. Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was published and quickly became a literary classic. Owing to a wave of immigration, the population of the United States surged to 46 million. Colorado became the 38th state to join the union. Railroad corporations operated 35,000 miles of tracks across the continent. However, graft, scandals, and partisanship in Washington DC contributed to a pervasive sense of malaise. The sniping of the presidential election exacerbated the sectional tensions between the North and the South. As the Reconstruction Era closed, an anxious generation entered the Gilded Age. The lingering effects of an economic depression left unemployment high. Rapid and sweeping changes in America stirred some to question whether or not, indeed, all were “created equal.”

Americans read newspaper headlines about the Indian Wars that seemed to never end. The US Army conducted a military campaign against the Lakota Sioux and their Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho allies. Government officials intended to acquire what the Lakota called the *Paha Sapa*, or the Black Hills, where previous military expeditions had confirmed the presence of gold. Irrespective of the promises made to the Lakota in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, Congress demanded that they sell their hunting lands. President Ulysses S. Grant, whose administration was mired in charges of

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corruption, announced that any Indians off the reservation would be considered “hostile.” The commander of the Division of the Missouri, General Philip H. Sheridan, authorized a three-pronged offensive for chastising them. One column, led by General George Crook, marched north from Fort Fetterman on the Platte River. Under Colonel John Gibbon, another column headed east from Fort Ellis in the Montana Territory. The third column, commanded by General Alfred Terry, moved westward from Fort Abraham Lincoln in the Dakota Territory.

American soldiers in the Centennial Campaign converged upon the followers of Sitting Bull, a powerful holy man and charismatic Lakota leader. Joined by Crazy Horse and Gall, he denounced the *wasichus*, or greedy people, encroaching upon Native American homelands. His prophetic visions foretold of an impending attack by mounted bluecoats followed by their ultimate demise. The coalition of Lakota and Cheyenne bands grew stronger, for they believed that their reckless foes possessed no ears for listening. Defying the edicts of distant authorities, warriors abandoned the federal agencies to participate in “Sitting Bull’s War.” In mid-June, Crazy Horse surprised Crook’s column in the Battle of the Rosebud. Crook fell back to Goose Creek, while the Indians headed toward a stream that the Lakota called the Greasy Grass. Maps labeled it the Little Bighorn River, where as many as 7,000 Indians camped along the west bank.

Without knowing the exact location of Sitting Bull’s camp, General Terry commanded 925 officers and men along the Yellowstone River (Hedren 2011, 97). He ordered Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, a 36-year old brevetted general with a reputation for Indian fighting, to lead the 7th Cavalry on a reconnaissance mission near the Rosebud River. He expected the 12 companies under Custer’s command to enter the valley of the Little Bighorn from the south, as he and Gibbon entered with the main columns from the north. Once the Army’s Indian scouts located the trail to the secluded campsite, he anticipated little more than a “mop-up” type of operation. Whatever the intent, his orders to Custer also provided a great deal of latitude in regard to military actions when engaging with the enemy.

Custer marched an eager contingent through a divide in the Wolf Mountains to a lookout point known as the Crow’s Nest. They included 31 officers, 566 enlisted men, 35 Indian scouts, as well as civilians and quartermaster employees. Recent immigrants comprised much of the rank and file. Private Charles Windolph later recalled their morale: “You were part of a proud outfit that had a fighting reputation, and you were ready for a fight or a frolic” (Utley 1988, 168).

At high noon on Sunday, June 25, the 7th Cavalry approached the Little Bighorn. Like most cavalymen, Custer believed that the Indians would not stand and fight. The military problem, he assumed, would be catching, gathering, and escorting them to the federal agencies. Because he feared that his command had been spotted and that Sitting Bull’s camp had begun

to disperse, he chose to attack in broad daylight rather than to wait another day. He hastened to cut off the escape route of the women and children while forcing a decisive battle in the valley before Terry arrived. Upon assigning one company to guard the pack train that carried rations and extra ammunition, he reformed the rest of the troopers into three battalions.

Major Marcus Reno commanded a small battalion with three companies, which hit the camp on the south end. Instead of charging to drive the Lakota and Cheyenne northward, the troopers dismounted for a skirmish. The blue line soon faltered in the exchange of fire, though men made a stand in the timber along a bend in the Little Bighorn. A headlong rush across the river followed, in which scores perished before scrambling up the heights on the other side.

Maneuvering on the far left flank, Captain Frederick Benteen commanded another small battalion with three companies. After briefly scouting for satellite villages up the valley, he crossed over several bluffs before turning back. He never reached the river. He returned to the heights in time to find Reno and his troops rattled. The fog of war contributed to confusion and disarray. What followed was a failed attempt by one company to reunite with Custer beyond Weir Point with the entire group lagging behind. Forced to retreat by pursuing Indians, officers ordered the companies to entrench – on what would later be named Reno Hill – where they would lay besieged for 24 hours.

With five companies at his side, Custer personally led the largest battalion toward the north end of the camp. He committed a cardinal error, for he failed to gather sufficient intelligence about enemy numbers and their disposition below Battle Ridge. His preference for mobility convinced him to leave the Gatling guns behind. Not inclined to flee, the Lakota and Cheyenne surged forward in a combative mood. “This is a good day to die; follow me,” shouted Low Dog, a Lakota leader (Michno 1997, 163). The small teams assaulted the encircled force and seized the initiative with at least a ten to one advantage. The soldiers carried single-shot Springfield Model 1873 carbines, but the warriors fired muzzle-loaders and Sharps carbines. A few employed Winchester and Henry lever-action repeaters as well. Many brought traditional weapons such as bows and arrows, which permitted plunging fire over obstacles and into ravines. Within an hour, the fighting in Deep Ravine and on Last Stand Hill ended.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn ended in a disaster for the 7th Cavalry. Amid the dust and smoke, the “hostiles” slipped away the day after. Terry’s column entered the ghastly battlefield on the morning of June 27. Soldiers soon encountered a handful of survivors with Reno and Benteen, but the dead and wounded lay everywhere. Along the bluffs and coulees, they found motionless bodies stripped of clothing. Some were scalped or mutilated beyond recognition. The naked corpse of Custer revealed bullet wounds to the chest and to the head. While the exact number of Lakota and Cheyenne casualties remains uncertain, the Army lost 263 killed and

59 wounded in action (Gray 1976, 182). After burying the dead, Terry steered the column back to the Yellowstone. The wounded received medical care at Fort Abraham Lincoln.

Thanks to telegraph lines and printing presses, millions read the sensational news about the Battle of the Little Bighorn that summer. With the Centennial Campaign in jeopardy, Sheridan launched a punitive expedition against the Indians of the Great Plains. Crook conducted the "Horsemeat March," which included the Battle of Slim Buttes on September 9 and 10. The Dull Knife Fight occurred on November 25 along the Red Fork of the Powder River, where Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie assailed the camp of a Cheyenne party. As more regiments funneled into the war zone, close to 9,000 soldiers battered the crumbling coalition.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn unleashed the wrath of the bureaucrats as well. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, John Q. Smith, threatened to withhold rations unless the Lakota relented. Based upon the recommendations of the Manypenny Commission, Congress seized millions of acres west of the 103rd meridian and annexed the Black Hills.

"Sitting Bull's War" ended within a year. Although the Lakota and Cheyenne scattered, Colonel Nelson A. Miles pursued them during a winter campaign. He attempted to negotiate an end to the fighting near the Tongue River, but his Crow scouts attacked a party of Sioux on their way to the council. He marched his regulars to the foothills of the Wolf Mountains, establishing a defensive perimeter on a ridge line. On January 8, 1877, Crazy Horse charged in a futile effort. Miles skillfully shifted his reserves and ordered an advance, which secured a vital ridge for a successful artillery barrage in the Battle of the Wolf Mountains. Crazy Horse withdrew from the field of battle, as weather conditions worsened. Demoralized Indians began dispersing or submitting to federal authorities. Crazy Horse surrendered in early May and was detained at Camp Robinson, where four months later he died from a bayonetting in the back. Dismounted and disarmed, most of the "hostiles" capitulated.

The United States made certain that the Indians of the Great Plains never regained their power. The buffalo herds dwindled to less than a few hundred head, as indigenous communities grew dependent upon the federal government for subsistence. Sitting Bull and about 2,000 followers sought sanctuary in British Canada but eventually returned to Fort Buford. He announced: "I wish it to be remembered that I was the last man of my tribe to surrender my rifle" (Utley 1993, 232). William "Buffalo Bill" Cody invited him to travel with his spectacular Wild West show, which included a "Custer's Last Stand" reenactment. Advertisements heralded the Lakota leader as the "Napoleon of the West." In fact, the brother of a soldier slain at the Little Bighorn attacked him during an appearance in Pennsylvania. While living on a reservation in South Dakota, Sitting Bull was killed by Indian police during an arrest attempt in 1890.

Sitting Bull's death was a catalyst for the Battle of Wounded Knee, in which the 7th Cavalry massacred hundreds of Lakota Ghost Dancers – men, women, and children. In the wake of the carnage, the federal government deemed it the last battle of the Indian Wars. Stories circulated thereafter that the air was filled with the soldiers' cries of "Remember Custer."

Americans tend to remember the Indian Wars as a clash of cultures. Yet the Battle of the Little Bighorn constitutes a peculiar story about the military conquest of North America, because everything about it is out of order. The mythical roles in the frontier epic are reversed. Romance turns to tragedy, as the guardians of civilization fall to the forces of savagery in "Custer's Last Stand." The most significant event of the Centennial Campaign is not a great victory but a stunning defeat for the United States. The Army loses, while the Indians win. On one bloody Sunday in 1876, the world seems to turn upside down. In other words, a "relatively minor series of events became a critical moment in American history" (Buchholtz 2012, 2).

I first heard the story of the Little Bighorn in my boyhood, or at least that is how I remember it now. The perusal of an absent father's vinyl record collection introduced me to an album by the "man in black." It was Johnny Cash's *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian*, which included a song titled "Custer." My turntable spun a fascinating yet cautionary tale:

General Custer come in pumpin' when the men were out a huntin'  
 But the General he don't ride well anymore  
 With victories he was swimmin' he killed children dogs and women  
 And the General he don't ride well anymore....  
 Twelve thousand warriors waited they were unanticipated  
 And the General he don't ride well anymore  
 It's not called an Indian victory but a bloody massacre  
 And the General he don't ride well anymore  
 There might have been more enthusin' if us Indians had been losin'  
 But the General he don't ride well anymore.

(D'Ambrosio 2009, 172–173).

Penned by activist Peter La Farge, the 1964 recording mixed elements of the folk tradition with country humor. It was Americana. I wanted to know more about Custer's day of doom.

Cheyenne, Oklahoma, is a long way from the Little Bighorn, though I remember field trips to the site for the Battle of the Washita. The 7th Cavalry once attacked the Indians along the river, which unbeknown to me occurred nearly eight years before the Centennial Campaign. Walking the dusty trails below a barren ridge, I imagined incorrectly that the General met his fate on that ground. My mistaken impression about the location of "Custer's Last Stand" was corrected a few years later by the 1970 film, *Little Big Man*, even if it perplexed me in other ways. A librarian introduced me to books about the Indian Wars by Walter S. Campbell,

who wrote under the pen name of Stanley Vestal. Eventually, I visited the Little Bighorn in Montana as an adult and took my own children to see the Black Hills in South Dakota.

My interest in warriors and soldiers drove me to become a historian. While completing a textbook on the American military, I desired to let the General speak to me directly. I turned to primary sources, which included a series of articles by Custer that initially appeared in the *Galaxy* magazine. His written testimony on Indian fighting evolved into a published memoir, *My Life on the Plains*, shortly before his death. Following the trails of other historians, I scanned the recollections from the 1879 Reno Court of Inquiry and Walter Camp's notes on the "Custer Fight." I also sought Lakota and Cheyenne pictographs of military action, which curator Herman J. Viola has collected for *Little Bighorn Remembered* (1999). The partial and fragmentary evidence evokes the eternal questions that have fueled scholarly controversies for years: How many Indians fought? What were their dispositions? Did they outgun the soldiers? What did the Indian scouts see and do? Did Custer disobey Terry's orders? What was he thinking? Was he forsaken by Reno and Benteen? Who was responsible for the General's death? The more historians know about what happened on the battlefield, though, the less we seem to agree.

As literary scholar Hayden White noted, historians always have problems with the transitions in the histories of their subjects (White 2010, 305). Of course, every critical moment is transitional at some level. It insinuates the end of one period in history, or at least the beginning of the end. It includes what happens *between* two periods, that is, an instance of time that something becomes something other than what it had been. However approached in the past, a turning point is something that is difficult to represent in narrative form. It is the instant that the "living" of one historical reality become the "dead" of another. It is too fraught with "great mysteries" to be explained easily in scientific language. In other words, historians must tolerate ambiguity to tell the story of the Little Bighorn.

Like many famous events, the Battle of the Little Bighorn signifies different things to different people. No single battle in the Indian Wars has generated so much curiosity and speculation. It ranks as the worst military defeat of the Army in the American West, yet it provides a high-water mark for Lakota and Cheyenne resistance on the Great Plains. It is a monumental battle, no less compelling than the fights at Bunker Hill, New Orleans, the Alamo, Gettysburg, or Pearl Harbor. Also called the Battle of Greasy Grass, it epitomizes the ways in which individuals make history. The command decisions – especially those made by Custer – have prompted conjecture, inquiry, and debate. Although the General may be remembered by many as a gallant hero on Last Stand Hill, the Centennial Campaign also has become a potent symbol for national sins. The Little Bighorn is a place of endless contradictions.

Not until 1991 did the site obtain its present name of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. It spans just over 765 acres, making it one of the smallest units administered by the National Park Service. At least 300,000 tourists visit the windswept ravines and ridges each year. They pass through the Crow Indian Reservation, pause at the Custer National Cemetery, and gaze upon the Indian Memorial. They enter the visitor center, where they peruse the shelves for books that tell them about a clash of cultures. Now more than ever, they need a tool that helps them to burrow into the historiography that frames the scholarly controversies.

With as many as 8,500 books, periodicals, and magazines on the subject by 2014, it is altogether fitting to wonder: What more can be said about the Little Bighorn? Historiography well illustrates an eruption in knowledge over the years, but a comprehensive examination of the scholarship indicates that major problems remain. Traditional scholars of the military campaign accentuate non-Indian casualties, communication lapses, and leadership blunders. More recent accounts underscore Native American perspectives, which suggest that the warriors encountered by the soldiers were as highly skilled as they were. Forensic and archaeological evidence has greatly enriched interpretations of the written and oral testimony. The folklore and memorabilia arising from the battlefield are still treasured by Custer buffs, even if some academicians view them with scorn. What might be helpful going forward is a “must-have” compendium that takes the full measure of the scholarship.

Adhering to the format of the *Companions to American History* series, I hope to give the reader of this volume an orientation to the Battle of the Little Bighorn. My introduction provides a short narrative of the Centennial Campaign, grounded in the latest scholarship and focused on what historian Brian W. Dippie once called “a Last Stand for all of yesterday” (Dippie 1976, 144). My objective is to make all the chapters accessible to the non-specialist, while also engaging experts seeking a concise but accurate accounting of the literature. What follows are 25 scholarly essays that offer detailed historiographical treatments of diverse topics.

Part I, “The Indians of the Northern Plains,” covers the histories of the Lakota and the Northern Cheyenne. In addition to the pantheon of Indian leaders, it also considers the role of Indian scouts and auxiliaries. Part II, “The US Army in the Western Territories,” deals with the deployment of the armed forces. Broadly speaking, these essays contemplate the long struggle over the land west of the Mississippi River.

Part III, “The Making of George Armstrong Custer” features essays about the central character of the battle. Since his death in 1876, the General has remained one of the most controversial figures in American history. The widowed Elizabeth Bacon Custer, who was known as Libbie, worked vigorously to memorialize the life of what otherwise might have been another forgotten casualty of the Indian Wars.

The pivotal section, Part IV, “Into the Valley,” focuses on battlefield maneuvering. Meeting along the Little Bighorn, the soldiers and the warriors confronted each other across a space that extended for more than 14 square miles in all. These essays recognize Indian in addition to non-Indian perspectives on the combat operations near the river.

The final section, Part V, includes essays about “The Last Stand of Myth and Memory.” The bloodshed at the Little Bighorn seemed to launch the dead into immortality. Ever since the public first learned about the outcome, the renderings that appeared in poems, novels, paintings, movies, and other ephemera conveyed remarkable aspects of Americana. Generation after generation has been inspired by the all-too-human sacrifices on the battlefield, where individuals transformed a venerated landscape into sacred ground.

Given the extensive literature on the subject, *A Companion to Custer and the Little Bighorn Campaign* provides an essential and authoritative overview of the scholarship that has shaped our present knowledge. This single volume explores a broad range of themes, making it a valuable guidebook for graduate students and professional researchers. It will enhance the reference collections of academic and public libraries. Military experts will want it on their shelves, especially those studying unconventional warfare. New historians as well as old ones will use it to revisit the grand narratives about the clash of cultures. Above all, it will appeal to any reader who is interested in the General, the Little Bighorn, or the Indian Wars.

The Centennial Campaign was a turning point in American history, which teaches lessons that each generation must learn anew. It is a microcosm for all Americans to understand who we are, where we have been, when we acted, what we did, and why it still matters. Its combatants left us a momentous battle for the ages.

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Part I

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THE INDIANS OF THE NORTHERN PLAINS



# Chapter One

## THE LAKOTA SIOUX

*Rani-Henrik Andersson*

According to Lakota mythology, long before humans were born, different powers and creatures struggled to exercise control or influence over the cosmos. As a result they created the Sun, the Moon, and Mother Earth. Once the four winds, each with its own task, were born, the directions and most important powers of the world were set. Eventually the godlike creatures grew tired of each other and sent Iktomi (trickster) to find people. At that time people lived underground together with the buffalo in a state of chaos. That is why the people were also called *Pte oyate*, the Buffalo People. According to some versions of the story, the people and the buffalo emerged from beneath the earth together.

After emerging from the earth, the people and the buffalo did not get along. The buffalo were dreadful creatures, and people were afraid of them. The people had no food, and the buffalo did not agree to be eaten. According to Lakota myths, a strange contest took place in those early times: Animals raced around the sacred Black Hills (*Hesapa*) to decide who was the most important. The bison seemed to be in clear lead. Just as the end of the race was near, it turned out that a small bird had sat on the bison's shoulders and flew across the finish line. Because the bird, like the human being, is one of the two-legged creatures (*hununpa*) of the earth, it meant that human beings also got credit for the victory. As a result, humans received the right to use animals as sustenance. Hence, the human beings were *wakan akan-tula*, "things on top" (Walker 1991, 68–74).

Thus, in the beginning, there was disharmony between humans, animals, and superhuman elements. Then the mythical White Buffalo Woman

(*Wohpe/Ptesawin*) came to resolve the conflict. The story is central to the Lakota belief system and encompasses abundant symbolism. There are multiple versions of the story, but the main idea remains: When the woman turns into a buffalo, she creates a connection between the buffalo and the human, and the human and the *Wakan Tanka*. The White Buffalo Woman is a link between *Wakan Tanka* and humans. In the myth, the woman calls the Lakotas her relatives, saying that she was their sister and at the same time was one with them. When the woman brought the Lakotas the sacred pipe, she gave them the foundation of their religious ceremonies. The pipe symbolizes the universe, and the fire in the bowl is the symbolic center of the universe, serving as a direct link, prayer, to *Wakan Tanka*. In addition to the pipe, the buffalo, or symbolism related to it, is an integral part of religious rituals and rites. In her great generosity, the woman gave the Lakotas seven sacred ceremonies that were to ensure that the buffalo would fill the earth and the Lakota nation would thrive.

This is how the Lakotas placed human beings and animals as part of the Creation. In the Lakota view, the world was an entity, and human beings were part of it. They did not make a distinction between the supernatural and the natural world. Although some things were beyond human understanding, they were a natural part of the world; they were *wakan*. *Wakan* can be understood as a mystic power that consists of everything that cannot be comprehended. Everything in the world originated from this power that was everywhere. Animals, rivers, lakes, plants, even people, were *wakan*, or they had a *wakan* power. Together, the world's *wakan* powers formed *Wakan Tanka*, the mystic power of the universe, which can also be described with the words sacred or sacredness. Western conception might characterize *Wakan Tanka* as a godlike being, but the Lakotas do not view *Wakan Tanka* as a single being but as a power that encompasses everything living and inanimate, visible and invisible.

The most comprehensive sources for understanding Lakota beliefs, myths, and stories are materials collected by James Walker in the early twentieth century and published in *Lakota Myth* (1983) and *Lakota Belief and Ritual* (1991). Another important source is *Dakota Texts* (2006) by Ella Deloria. The latest publications on Lakota myths are *Lakota Legends and Myths: Native American Oral Traditions Recorded by Marie L. McLaughlin and Zitkala-Sa* (2009) and *The Sons of the Wind: The Sacred Stories of the Lakota* (Dooling 2000). Excellent studies on Lakota religious thought are *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation* (DeMallie & Parks 1987), *Oglala Religion* (Powers 1977), and a summary by Raymond J. DeMallie (2001b). Black Elk, a famed Oglala medicine man, provides us with the most comprehensive insider view on Lakota religion in John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (1961) and *The Sixth Grandfather* (DeMallie 1985). Joseph Epes Brown's *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (1989) gives additional information on Lakota religious ceremonies.

Lakota mythology explains Lakota origins and their relationship with the universe. Understanding Lakota views is instrumental in seeking an interpretation of Lakota behavior. For example, in 1890 a religion known as the Ghost Dance promised the return of the buffalo by dancing a certain dance. By then the buffalo was almost hunted to extinction by the whites. For the Lakotas the buffalo had symbolically returned to the earth from where they had once originated. When the new religion, which the Lakotas called *wanagi wachipi kin*, the Spirit Dance, told that the buffalo would again emerge from the earth, this was natural for the Lakotas. And so was meeting with the spirits of the departed during the dance ceremonies. For the whites both ideas were ridiculous and even dangerous. The new religious ceremonies had to be stopped, which eventually led to the Wounded Knee massacre in December 1890 (see DeMallie 1993; Andersson 2008).

### The Lakotas

Until the eighteenth century, the Lakotas and other Siouan groups lived in present-day Minnesota and Wisconsin. In the mid-eighteenth century, the first groups of Sioux crossed the Missouri River and settled permanently on the western plains. Gradually, more Sioux moved to the plains, and by the early nineteenth century they had become a typical hunting tribe of the plains.

The first white accounts of Sioux Indians are from the 1640s, when fur trappers and explorers Jean Nicolle and Paul LeJeune met some Sioux on the upper Missouri. Most early explorers described the Sioux as proud, honest, and noble-looking people, who took great honor in war. Early missionaries, mostly Jesuits, compared the Sioux with the Iroquois, who were the strongest and most warlike of the eastern Indians. Many travelers described the Sioux with respect mixed with fear, while they used words that are rarely seen in their depictions of other Indians. The early white reports are fragmented and mostly deal with the Eastern Sioux. By the late eighteenth century more trappers, traders, explorers, and artists ventured beyond the Missouri River, providing us with a fuller description of the Western Sioux, the Lakota. Perhaps the most detailed accounts come from Jean Baptiste Truteau and Pierre-Antoine Tabeau. Artists like George Catlin have preserved information on clothing and other ethnographic data from the early nineteenth century. The most comprehensive ethnographic account of the Sioux from the earlier part of the century is Edwin Denig's *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri* (1961). Denig gathered material for his book for more than 20 years starting in the 1830s. His work is still considered to be one of the classics in Native American studies (see DeMallie 1975; DeMallie & Parks 2003; DeMallie 2001a, 718–722). An interesting early nineteenth-century description comes from the explorers Meriwether

Lewis and William Clark, who described the Sioux as “the vilest miscreants of the savage race.” The Lakotas were the only tribe with whom they nearly had a serious engagement during their two-year trek across the continent. Still, they too describe them as “stout and bold looking people” (Bergon 1989, 40; Ostler 2004, 13–21).

Neighboring tribes of the Sioux called them *nadowessiwak*, “little snakes.” Sometimes the word has also been translated as “enemy.” In any case, the French turned this Ojibwa word into *Sioux*, which is still the collective term used for these tribes.

The Sioux, however, were and are not a unified nation but a loose group known as the Seven Council Fires, *Ochethi šakowin*. The Seven Council Fires is the mythological origin of all the Sioux people. According to the Sioux, seven tribes formed a fire of seven councils in ancient times. The tribes drifted apart so that each tribe selected its own leaders and living areas, but they maintained relations with each other.

This relationship is most clearly seen in the Sioux language, which has three dialects, Dakhóta, Nakhóta and Lakhóta. People speaking different dialects can understand each other. The Dakhóta-speaking Santees, Yanktons, and Yanktonais form the eastern branch of the Sioux. Traditionally, it has been assumed that the Yanktons and the Yanktonai speak Nakhóta, but the latest linguistic and anthropological studies show that Nakhóta is rather spoken by distinct relatives of the Sioux, the Assiniboiné Indians of Montana, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Lakhóta is spoken by the western branch of the Sioux, the Lakotas (*lakhota*). The Lakotas are also known by the name Teton, coming from the Lakota word *thithunwan* (“dwellers on the plains”). The Lakotas are divided into seven tribes (*oyate*), the Oglalas, Hunkpapas, Minneconjous, Brulés, Two Kettles, Sans Arcs, and Black Feet (DeMallie 2001a, 718–722).

By 1825, the Lakotas had occupied an area ranging from the Missouri River west to the Black Hills, and from the southern parts of North Dakota to south of the Platte River in Nebraska. They pushed away the Kiowa, Arikara, and Crow tribes, establishing their status as the strongest tribe of the northern plains during the first decades of the nineteenth century. This was due to the overpowering numbers of the Lakotas as well as to illnesses that devastated other tribes in the region.

Sedentary tribes like the Pawnees and Mandans suffered severely from new illnesses brought by the whites. The Lakotas, who were constantly moving in small bands, were not as affected. Lakota wintercounts, nevertheless, record winters when illnesses struck the Lakotas (Walker 1982). Still, their population grew from approximately 4,000–8,000 at the end of the eighteenth century to 25,000 by the 1820s. The figures are, however, slightly misleading, as early nineteenth-century white observers were unable to recognize all the Lakotas, while the largest figures probably include individuals from other Sioux tribes.

Much of the information on the earliest period and early migration comes from these relatively sparse notes, making it difficult to conclusively determine early Lakota migration patterns. The most thorough analysis can be found in DeMallie (2001a, 718–722, 727–734). Other recent works include Jeffrey Ostler’s *The Plains Sioux and US Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* (2004, 21–28) and *The Lakotas and the Black Hills* (2010, 5–27). Older, still valuable studies include George E. Hyde’s *Red Cloud’s Folk* (1975) and *Spotted Tail’s Folk* (1961), and Richard White’s insightful article “The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the 18th and 19th Centuries” (1978).

### “Where do they all come from?”

Lakota–white relations were relatively peaceful until the 1840s. In the early 1850s, the annual report of the Secretary of War stated that Lakota attacks on the whites were “rare occasions.” Their relations with the United States mostly involved trade, and the network of trading posts expanded to the Lakota territory in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Groups of Lakotas signed a treaty with US representatives to regulate trade in 1815. The Lakotas brought the whites buffalo hides and fur, and the whites paid with their own products, such as knives, kettles, and whisky (DeMallie 2001a, 719–722; DeMallie 2001b 794–795; Ostler 2010, 28–38).

The Lakotas quickly became dependent on white supplies. Already in the 1820s, witnesses reported whiskey-induced disagreements and even bloody fights amongst the Lakotas. The most famous one took place in 1841, when the young aspiring Red Cloud (Mahpiya Luta) killed Bull Bear (Mato Tatanka), the most famous Oglala chief of the time. One wintercount recorded it as the year “they killed each other while drinking.” This event led to the division of the Oglalas and the creation of friction between the supporters of the two parties of the clash. The controversy strongly affected the Lakotas until the 1890s and can still be sensed today. This incident was also reported by Francis Parkman, who spent a summer among the Oglalas in the 1840s while traveling on the newly opened Oregon Trail. Parkman’s *Oregon Trail* (1991) includes valuable information on the Lakota and their country (Olson 1965, 19–22; Walker 1982, 139–140; Parkman 1991, 138–139; Paul 1997, 64–70; Larson 1997, 58–61).

In the 1840s, the whites opened a path from the Missouri River to Oregon and California. The Oregon Trail passed through the southern hunting grounds of the Lakotas. The United States sent troops to secure the passage of the travelers, and in 1845 the first soldiers broke into Lakota territory in the Platte River valley. To protect the trail the government also established forts. They bought several bases from the American Fur Company, which had established a wide trading post network to support its

fur trade. The most famous of these trading posts is Fort Laramie in southeastern Wyoming, acquired in 1849. Fort Laramie quickly became the main military base on the southern Lakota lands, although it also remained a center of trade. In 1851, the federal government invited Indians to Fort Laramie to negotiate a permanent peace on the northern Plains. The official desire to reach an agreement was understandable, as warfare was one of the cornerstones of Plains Indian life. Various warrior groups were constantly on the move on the Plains, and their aims were often unclear to whites (DeMallie 2001a, 732–734; DeMallie 2001b, 795–796; Ostler 2004, 28–39).

### Warfare on the Northern Plains

Warfare was a normal state of affairs for the Lakotas. Warfare was seasonal and focused on summer months, as wintertime fighting was difficult for practical reasons. Sometimes war had a broader, political, or land ownership-related reason. On those occasions, large, well-organized campaigns took place, involving hundreds of men. Such campaigns required careful planning, and warrior groups and societies had different tasks depending on their role in the society. Most of the warfare, however, occurred between small groups, and the main goal was to demonstrate courage or to capture horses. One of the earliest accounts of Lakota warfare was written by Jean Baptiste Truteau in the 1790s (cited in DeMallie & Parks 2003). Francis Parkman (1991, 110–253) also commented on Oglala warfare, noting that they had difficulties deciding over common goals.

Bravery was one of the most significant virtues of a Lakota man. Only accomplishment in battle and personal courage brought a man the kind of prestige that he could rise to leadership. The most important way to demonstrate valor was through counting coup. Counting coup did not only entail killing an enemy. The most valuable coup was won by touching a living enemy and leaving him alive. Touching a dead enemy also awarded coup, and up to four men could gain coup by touching an enemy body. Scalping the opponent was a common mark of victory. One of the most famous Lakota leaders, Red Cloud, is known to have collected 80 coups. Biographies of him include James C. Olson's *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (1965), George Hyde's *Red Cloud's Folk* (1975), Robert W. Larson's *Red Cloud: Warrior-Statesman of the Oglala Lakota* (1997), and R. Eli Paul's *Autobiography of Red Cloud: War Leader of the Oglalas* (1997). These works also discuss Oglala history at length.

The fact that a warrior could show his bravery in many ways affected Lakota war strategy against both rival Indians and the whites. Often the Lakotas failed to present a unified resistance or launch a surprise attack when young men did not heed the advice of their leaders in search of brave

deeds. Many of the most famous Lakota leaders earned their reputation in intertribal warfare. In addition to Red Cloud, Spotted Tail (Šinte Gleška), Crazy Horse (Thašunke Witko), Hump (Cankahu), Gall (Phizi), and Sitting Bull (Tatanka Iyotake) were known for bravery as young men, and their reputation grew fighting against the whites.

Although intertribal warfare often was about showing bravery, it was very real and very violent. Sometimes historians have romanticized Indian warfare, undermining its political and economic impact. While touching a living enemy was honorable and an integral part of Plains Indian warfare, warriors aimed to cause maximum destruction. Warfare had wider political and economic implications. Financial reasons played a role, and particularly the accumulation of horses and the access to trading routes were key aspects of war. Gaining new land for hunting and horse pasturing generated aggressive “politics of expansion,” which led to a domino effect, when tribes took turns in forcing weaker neighbors out of their way (Hassrick 1964, 76–100; White 1978, 321–343; DeMallie 2001b, 794–795; DeMallie & Parks 2003, 66–76; Ostler 2004, 21–24).

### **Peace on the Northern Plains?**

The aim of US officials to achieve permanent peace among the Plains Indian tribes while securing national interests was ambitious, to say the least. Yet the 1851 negotiations near Fort Laramie attracted over 10,000 Indians from various tribes, such as the Crow, Pawnee, Arikara, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Lakota. After big promises, gifts, and food, the US representatives reported that a satisfactory agreement had been made. Representatives of the tribes had signed a treaty that guaranteed peace. The Indians promised not to attack the settlers. They also permitted the government to establish forts and bases on their lands, and most importantly, agreed not to fight against each other. The federal government could let out a sigh of relief and send more settlers on their way.

From the Indian point of view, the deal was not as simple. Firstly, many did not understand the contents of the agreement. The ability and will of interpreters can be contested, and words on paper did not mean much to Indians at that point in time. They hardly knew they had agreed not to fight each other. In fact, the Lakotas and the Crows continued their skirmishes as if no treaty had been made (DeMallie 2001b, 794–795).

A greater problem for the Indians was the article that appropriated certain areas for certain tribes. These were not actual reservations but hunting grounds the government had allocated to each tribe. Such division of lands was unnecessary from the Indian perspective: they were accustomed to following game wherever they wanted. Although there had always been some neutral grounds between the tribes, such drawing of borders did not

correspond to the realities of life on the Plains. Soon after the signing of the treaty, the Oglalas living south of the Platte River heard that they no longer had the right to be in the area. As a result, the Lakotas took over big areas of land from the Crows, extending their power to the Bighorn Mountains. They viewed this as a replacement for the land lost south of the Platte River.

Clearly, the 1851 agreement meant something else to the Indians than to the federal government. White settlers were allowed to travel in relative peace, partly because the government had promised annuities in addition to blankets, kettles, and flour as compensation for peace. The Lakotas remember 1851 as *Wakpamni tanka*, “the year of the great distribution” (Walker 1982, 141). Part of the Lakotas soon began to live permanently near Fort Laramie in order to have access to the “easy” and prosperous life of the whites. These Indians were soon named *wagluhe*, “the loafers.” Although most of the Lakotas lived far from the fort until the mid-1870s, they gradually grew dependent on the annuities. This dependency caused a lot of division within the Lakotas in the 1860s and 1870s.

As the southern Lakotas, mostly the Oglalas and Brulés, were more frequently in contact with whites along the Oregon Trail and by Fort Laramie, whites were penetrating Lakota lands also in the North. Several military bases were built on the banks of the Missouri River in the Dakota Territory, so that Lakota lands were soon surrounded by a chain of forts. The northern Lakotas such as the Hunkpapa, Minneconjou, and Sans Arcs were suspicious of the forts. Trade in the region was busy, but many of the northern forts became targets of outright attacks. The northern Lakotas were not as friendly toward the whites as their southern relatives.

Recently scholars have sought to understand the Lakota point of view to the early American encroachment on their lands as well as to the ensuing hostilities between the whites and the Lakotas. The Lakotas are no longer considered as passive onlookers but rather as active participants, who tried to adapt to the new circumstances by, for example, adopting new trading patterns, alliances, and even leadership structures. At the same time, scholars like Jeffrey Ostler have placed the Lakota experiences in a wider economic, political, and imperialist framework (Ostler 2004). These approaches can result in a more nuanced understanding of Lakota–US relations in the nineteenth century.

### Lakhota Oyate – Lakota Society

Plains Indian societies were typically quite flexible, which has made it difficult for scholars to fully analyze, for example, Lakota society. The best primary sources are James R. Walker, *Lakota Society* (1982) and Clark Wissler, “Societies and Ceremonial Associations in the Oglala Division of the Teton-Dakota” (1912). Valuable information on Lakota culture is also

in *Teton Dakota: Ethnology and History* (1937) by John C. Ewers. A good source that includes terms on kinship and descriptions of social life can be found in *Waterlily* (1988), Ella C. Deloria's famous novel. Important works for understanding Lakota society, culture, and kinship are the memoirs of Luther Standing Bear, *My People the Sioux* (1975) and *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1978), Royal B. Hassrick, *The Sioux* (1964), Raymond J. DeMallie, "Kinship and Biology in Sioux Culture" (1994), Catherine Price, *The Oglala People 1841–1879: A Political History* (1996), and Guy Gibbon, *The Sioux: The Dakota and Lakota Nations* (2003). In "Teton" (2001b) Professor DeMallie makes a modern, thorough analysis of the subject. The following is based primarily on these sources.

The Lakotas had different leaders for different situations and tasks. Similarly, the structure of the entire society depended on the situation. The basic unit of the society was *thiyošpaye* that is best translated as an extended family or lodge group. Smaller units were nuclear families, *tiwahe*, with a man, his wives, and children. *Thiyošpaye* might include various close relatives, so its size ranged from 10 people up to 150.

Each *thiyošpaye* had its own chief, *itancan*. They did not, however, have total authority. Individuals could generally make their own decisions. Anybody could, for example, gather a small group of people and go on a raid. He was followed, if he was seen as a worthy example. A larger unit than the *thiyošpaye* was the subtribe or band, consisting of several *thiyošpaye*. Bands, in turn, formed a larger entity, *oyate*, which best corresponds to "tribe."

There were seven tribes of the Lakotas: the Hunkpapa, Oglala, Minneconjou, Brulé, Sans Arc, Two Kettles, and Black Feet. The Lakota society quickly reacted to changes; people would move from one *thiyošpaye* to another, and new groups were constantly formed under the direction of strong leaders. However, the number of the main tribes of the Lakotas has remained the same. This structure of seven tribes was best visible during big community gatherings. Each tribe and band would have its own place around the great camp circle (*hochoka*), which symbolized the Lakota alliance (*olakhota*). Inside, the sacred circle (*changleška wakan*) was untouchable. In the middle of the circle was the great soldiers' or council lodge, *thiyothi*, where all the main meetings were held. Around the circle, the Hunkpapas would always be located on either side of the "doorway" *hunkpa*. Other tribes in the order of importance would set up their tipis around the circle.

In addition, each band and even family had its place within their own camp circle inside the great camp circle. The camp circle was very important to the Lakotas. Inside, everything was Lakota. Outside was the hostile world. The Lakotas viewed any Indian who was not Lakota as a potential enemy, *thoka*. Other Indians were called *ikcewichaša*, "common men," and they were related as enemies, *thokakichiyapi*. Sometimes the Lakotas might, however, make peace with other Indians. The tribe then became a part of

the Lakota alliance, *lakholkichiyapi*, as happened with the Cheyennes and Arapahos.

Whites were not originally in the enemy category. They were called *wašicu*, deriving from their mystic powers, mainly powerful firearms. At first the word referred to a particular kind of guardian spirits, usually associated with war. Later, when whites turned out to be mortal, the religious connotation of the word disappeared.

Although there were strict rules for big camp circles, all Lakota camps were built circularly whenever possible, whether they were made up of one *thiyošpaye* or an entire subtribe. On the other hand, especially during wintertime, camps were quite informally located along rivers. The camp itself was called *wicothi*, “the place where people live.” The significance of the camp circle materialized in the leadership structure of the society. Depending on times and situations, leadership transferred from the leader of a single *thiyošpaye* to men’s warrior societies (*akichita okholakichiye*), or during war, to the war chief (*blotahunka*). During large gatherings, when many tribes convened within one camp circle, the council of chiefs (*naca omniciye*) had the highest decision-making power. The council of chiefs consisted of esteemed men, who were too old to actively serve as hunters or warriors. The council selected men to carry out various tasks in the camp and on hunting or war raids.

The council selected advisors (*wakicunza*), who served as links between chiefs and the people and guided the camp’s moves. Other important leaders chosen by the council were the shirt wearers or “praiseworthy men” (*wichasa yatapika*). They were younger men who had succeeded in war and hunting and were known for their bravery. They were highly esteemed and were expected to fully serve their people with strict discipline and immaculate behavior. The leaders were collectively known as the “leading men,” *wichasa ithankan*. Thus, the Lakotas never identified only one chief with sole responsibility for making decisions. Power and authority as well as leadership tasks were divided between individuals and groups depending on the situation.

Decision-making always required the approval of all chiefs, and finding a solution suitable for all took a long time. Giving speeches was considered a valuable skill. Men known as good speakers might speak for hours. Negotiations with the whites also took a long time, which sometimes made white negotiators not only confused but also aggravated.

Membership in a society was important. Some of the Lakota societies were mostly clubs established for social purposes, which allowed men to bond. They would sing, dance, and tell stories of war or hunting.

Warrior societies, on the other hand, were more solemn communities. Membership was based on merit, and not everyone could join. Visions entitled membership in a particular society. Oglala warrior societies are most extensively studied and the fullest accounts can be found in Wissler (1912)

and DeMallie (2001b). Oglala warrior societies were Crow Owners (*kangi yuha*), Badgers (*ixoka*), Kit Foxes (*tokala*), Brave Hearts (*chante tinza*), Plain Lance Owners (*sotka yuha*), and Packs White (*wicinska*).

Membership in the *sotka yuha* was a particular sign of bravery. Members of the society fastened themselves to the ground in front of the enemy with a lance, preventing them from escaping. Each society had its own special garment, and warriors painted their skin with symbols of their society. Members of Kit Foxes, for example, used a headdress made of wolf skin. Around their neck they wore a fox skin with the head on the front and the tail in the back. They also had an otter skin headband with a coyote jawbone painted blue or red. Crow Owners carried a stuffed crow around their neck.

New warrior societies were created regularly. The most famous of these “new” societies is the Hunkpapa Silent Eaters (*ainila wotapi*). Sitting Bull is said to be its founder, and its name relates to its members convening secretly during the night to discuss tribal affairs but initially dining in complete silence. The society had considerable power, probably because its members consisted of Sitting Bull’s followers. A man could simultaneously be a member of many societies, and Sitting Bull is known to have had an influential position in several societies.

Women also had societies, involving crafts, singing, or dancing. They were more informal than men’s societies, but they too gave women the opportunity to compete in different skills. The most prestigious women’s society was Owns Alone (Lakota name not known), whose members only had intercourse with their own husbands. Another important women’s society was *katela*. Its members had lost their husbands in war. Women also had significant dream societies, in which all society members had seen the same animal in a vision.

### Great Trouble Coming

In the late summer of 1854, a small group of Lakotas had set up camp near the Oregon Trail in Nebraska. As usual, they traded with the whites in the nearby Fort Laramie and with the immigrants on the Oregon Trail. One day a caravan of Mormons passed along the Oregon Trail. As usual, they left behind all kinds of goods that the Lakotas could use. This time, a runaway cow wandered to the Lakota camp. The Lakotas were short on food, as there were no buffalo in the area, and annuities had not arrived. Thus, one Lakota shot the cow.

The Mormons rushed over to Fort Laramie, reporting that the Lakotas had stolen the cow. The Lakotas agreed to give a few horses to replace the cow, but they were also requested to turn in the man who shot the cow. Otherwise soldiers would come to the camp to get him.

The Lakotas prepared for the arrival of soldiers. Chief Conquering Bear (Matho Wayuhi) rode to meet the soldiers waving a white flag, trying to convince them that there was no reason for violence. Suddenly, a series of shots were fired, and the chief fell to the ground mortally wounded. Lakota warriors opened fire on the soldiers, and after a while the commanding officer Lieutenant John L. Grattan and all of his men were dead.

After the Grattan fight, several skirmishes took place between the United States and the Lakotas, including the infamous massacre of Indians at Blue Water Creek in September 1855. Still, the Lakotas sought to retain peace with the whites. The number of immigrants, however, grew continuously, causing bigger problems for the Lakotas (Hyde 1961, 68–72; Ostler 2004, 40–44; Ostler 2010, 42–46).

In 1862 explorers found gold on the upper Missouri. Although it was not on Lakota land, diggers traveled through northern Lakota hunting grounds to get to the fields. In 1862 alone, 500–600 gold-miners traveled through Hunkpapa lands. Hunkpapas made several attacks against the whites.

A big shift in Lakota views toward the whites occurred around this time. In 1857 the Lakotas held a great council, where they discussed new strategies to confront the growing white demands. Although approaches varied, they decided that white encroachments had to be stopped, the Black Hills should be protected, yet trade and accepting annuities should continue. As long as the Lakotas did not consider the whites a threat, they classified them differently than Indians. All other Indian tribes were enemies, *thoka*, but whites were just *wašicu*. In 1864, just before the first big battles, the Lakotas decided that killing whites would bring similar honor as killing traditional enemies. The whites also became *thoka* (Hyde 1961, 90; Utley 1994, 46; Bray 2006, 53–56; DeMallie & Parks 2003; Ostler 2010, 46–51).

Unknown to the Lakotas, a new Indian policy was emerging in the mid-1860s. Several religious and humanitarian groups in eastern cities took interest in the Indians. These Friends of the Indian believed that the best way to suppress the “savage” was to demonstrate the superiority of the white man’s way through gifts and friendship. The aim was to gradually direct the Indians to give up their cultures and traditional ways of life.

President Ulysses S. Grant adopted these ideas in his Indian policy. Known as Grant’s Peace Policy, he sought to end the wars with Indians. Key elements included moving the Indians on to reservations, educating and civilizing them, and encouraging assimilation (see Prucha 1986).

The Lakotas witnessed the new policy in the summer of 1866, when representatives of the federal government came to Fort Laramie to call the Lakotas to negotiations. They presented a draft agreement, which stated that the government would be allowed to build roads through Lakota hunting grounds. The treaty also demanded that the Lakotas give up warfare against whites and Indians alike. The Lakotas agreeing to settle down and start farming would receive 10,000 dollars a year for 20 years.

A similar treaty was presented to the Lakotas further north in Fort Sully, where the Hunkpapas led by Sitting Bull refused to negotiate. At Fort Laramie, Red Cloud, one of the Oglala chiefs, eventually arrived. Negotiations, however, stalled immediately, when the Lakotas found out that a military detachment was on its way to establish forts along the Bozeman Trail.

The enraged Lakotas walked out of the negotiations. This was the beginning of a war that is best known by the name given by whites: Red Cloud's War. Studies focusing on Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, or Sitting Bull also deal extensively with this period of Lakota history and explore all the skirmishes and battles of the two-year war. Some Lakota accounts are included in all of these works, but more interesting Lakota eyewitness accounts can be found, for example, in Eleanor Hinman, "Oglala Sources on the Life of Crazy Horse" (1976), Richard Jensen, *Voices of the American West: The Indian Interviews of Eli S. Ricker, 1903–1919* (2006), and White Bull's memoirs (Vestal 1984; Howard 1998). Several Indian accounts are included in *Black Elk Speaks* (Neihardt 1961) and in *The Sixth Grandfather* (DeMallie 1985), which places these narratives in historical context.

The Lakotas and Cheyennes initiated attacks all along the Bozeman Trail. In July 1866, Colonel Carrington nevertheless began the construction of a new fort, Fort Phil Kearny, along Little Piney River. Shortly thereafter another fort, Fort C. F. Smith, was completed in Montana.

The Lakotas and their allies controlled the Bozeman Trail and attacked both civilian and military caravans. The number of Lakotas, including their allies, rose during 1864–1865 to as many as 8,000 people. Their faith in their own strength undoubtedly grew, as they were able to control the situation from far within their territory, the Black Hills and Powder River country. By the fall of 1866, travel on the Bozeman Trail was practically stalled, and Carrington's forts were left without supplies. In December 1866, the Lakotas managed to destroy Lieutenant William J. Fetterman's troops to the last man. Fighting along the Bozeman trail continued throughout the spring and summer of 1867.

Feeling powerful, the Lakotas announced that they would not negotiate until all white forts on Lakota lands had been abandoned. Red Cloud requested that all forts along the Bozeman Trail be evacuated. At the same time, he wished that the eventual peace treaty would last forever.

On July 29, 1868, soldiers abandoned Fort C. F. Smith, and Fort Phil Kearny and Fort Reno were abandoned a month later. The Lakotas had seized victory. The 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie established the Great Sioux Reservation that included the Powder River country and the sacred Black Hills. Whites were not to enter these lands without Lakota permission. Indians were also granted the right to hunt on the off-reservation "unceded territory." The Lakotas agreed to maintain peace in exchange for annuities (DeMallie & Deloria 1999).

Thousands of “free” Lakotas, however, remained outside the reservation, and they wanted nothing to do with whites. This group mostly consisted of northern Lakotas, Hunkpapas, Minneconjous, Itazipcos, O’ohenunpas, and Sihasapas, although hundreds of Oglalas and Brulés joined them. Their most important leaders were Hunkpapas Sitting Bull and Gall as well as the Oglala Crazy Horse. Red Cloud and Spotted Tail, for example, were leading those trying to adapt to reservation life.

Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, like Red Cloud, are the most studied Lakota leaders. An early biography of Sitting Bull was written by Willis Fletcher Johnson titled *The Red Record of the Sioux: Life of Sitting Bull and History of the Indian War of 1890–1891* (1891). The best known biographer is Walter S. Campbell, who wrote *Sitting Bull: The Champion of the Sioux* (1989) under the pen name Stanley Vestal. A modern, excellent work is Robert M. Utley’s *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (1994). Mari Sandoz published the biography *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas* in 1942. In many ways, despite some evident errors, this book is still one of the most readable and fascinating Crazy Horse biographies. Perhaps the most complete is Kingsley M. Bray’s *Crazy Horse: A Lakota Life* (2006). In *The Killing of Crazy Horse* (2011), Thomas Powers seeks to analyze the circumstances surrounding Crazy Horse’s death, but also deals extensively with his life story. Joseph Marshall III brings another interesting voice to the studies of Crazy Horse’s life in *The Journey of Crazy Horse: A Lakota History* (2005). Gall, on the other hand, has remained relatively unknown until Robert W. Larson’s biography *Gall: Lakota Warchief* (2009).

It was clear that the Fort Laramie treaty had divided the Lakotas into reservation Indians and free Lakotas. Clear differences began to appear between the groups, when some were in constant contact with, or dependent on, whites, while others continued the traditional lifestyle. In the beginning, reservation life was not very restricted, and even Red Cloud did not immediately settle on to his new Indian agency. Excellent studies of life on the reservation include works such as *Red Cloud’s Folk* (Hyde 1975) and *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Olson 1965). Valuable information is included in the memoirs of the Indian Agents. Agent Valentine T. McGillicuddy, who had a long power struggle on Pine Ridge Reservation with Red Cloud, tells his story in *McGillicuddy, Agent: A Biography of Dr. Valentine McGillicuddy*, which was published by his wife Julia (1941). On Standing Rock Reservation Agent James McLaughlin had a similar struggle with Sitting Bull. His book *My Friend the Indian* (1889/1910), like McGillicuddy’s, gives a first-hand albeit a biased look on reservation life. There would still be a need for new studies focusing on the ways in which the Lakotas sought to adapt to life on reservations.

During the early 1870s, incidents between the Lakotas and the whites increased. The railroad approached northern Lakota lands, and pioneers in

Montana and Wyoming grew more eager to take over Lakota lands. Rumors of gold in the Bighorn Mountains and Black Hills added to their interest.

In 1874, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer led a “scientific” expedition to the Black Hills to verify the rumors. His group included a journalist, who reported that there was more gold than anyone could imagine. The situation was ready to explode. Custer’s discovery started the chain of events that led to the Little Bighorn Battle and ultimately to the surrender of the Lakota people.

The federal government struggled to keep its promise to prevent white exploration of the Black Hills. Several battles occurred in 1874, and at the same time the Lakotas fought the Crows in the west along the Powder and Yellowstone Rivers. This distressed the white settlers in the Northern Plains, who wrote to Washington, claiming the area was controlled by Sitting Bull and his wild Indians. In reality, the Lakotas rarely went near white towns. The issue escalated in 1875, when the United States tried to purchase the Black Hills, and the Lakotas refused to give up their sacred mountains. Lakota accounts of the negotiations can be found, for example, in *The Sixth Grandfather* and *Voices of the American West: The Indian Interviews of Eli S. Ricker, 1903–1919*. The government had to find a reason to wage war, and the unrest proved an easy excuse. The Lakotas were given an ultimatum: they should arrive at their agencies by January 31, 1876. All others would be classified as hostile and at war against the United States.

The Indians thought the request was ridiculous. They were not at war, and returning to the agency in the middle of winter was nearly impossible. Their concept of time did not include exact dates, and they were content with promising a return sometime in the spring. The Lakotas may have thought the ultimatum senseless, but the United States now had an excuse to treat them as enemies. The Lakotas had not obeyed the orders, though the ultimate goal was to steal the Black Hills (Olson 1965, 199–216; DeMallie 1985, 162–173; Lazarus 1991, 80–83; Ostler 2004, 60–62).

During the spring and summer of 1876, an increasing number of Lakotas arrived in Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse’s camp in the Powder River country. According to some estimates, there were 7,000–8,000 people in the camp in June. It was a time of happiness in the free Lakota camp. The Indians believed in their power and were prepared to protect their lands.

On June 17, 1876, the Lakotas almost succeeded in surprising General George Cook’s troops by the Rosebud River, but Crow and Shoshone scouts spotted the Lakotas and alerted the US soldiers. This resulted in a full-day battle, in which fortune shifted between the Lakotas and the soldiers. Both the Army and the Indians left the scene believing they had been victorious. After the Rosebud battle, the Lakotas set up camp along the Little Bighorn River in Montana. The camp was big enough to span several miles along the river.

As the Army converged on the Indians, Colonel Custer led his 7th Cavalry up the Little Bighorn River. On June 22, Custer searched for signs of the Indian camp. He did not find the camp itself but discovered signs of its existence. Custer's scouts warned him that the camp seemed to be a very large one. On June 25, scouts announced they saw a large camp in the horizon. At first Custer planned an attack for the next day, but he feared the Indians would notice him and escape, which led him to decide to attack the same day. He did not heed his scouts' warnings that such a large camp should not be attacked. The 7th Cavalry started preparations for attack in the early hours of June 25, 1876, which ended in disaster for Custer and many of his men.

In the last 20 years, a number of Indian accounts of the battle and the events leading to it have been gathered and published. Works such as *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat* (Michno 1997), *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight: New Sources on Indian-Military History* (Hardorff 1997), *Indian Views of the Custer Fight: A Source Book* (Hardorff 2005), and *The Day when the World Ended at Little Bighorn: A Lakota History* (Marshall 2008), among others, reveal a picture of dramatic hand to hand fighting, chaos, and extraordinary leadership qualities by men like Crazy Horse, Gall, and White Bull. By their own example these men led the Lakota charge against the cavalry. Even young men like Black Elk, about 14 or 15 at the time, participated in the fighting. Gall noted that the smoke and dust made the day look like night and impaired his ability to see the soldiers while riding over them. White Bull, who claimed to be Custer's slayer, also said that he was counting coup left and right that day (Howard 1998, 51–62; see also Miller 1963; Viola 1999; Marquis 2003).

While Crazy Horse led the fighting, Sitting Bull remained in the camp, directing the safe withdrawal of women and children. He may have participated in the battle in the very beginning, stepping back as it proceeded. This led the whites to accuse him of cowardice. Even some historians have accepted this as fact, failing to see that in 1876 Sitting Bull was over 40 years old and his role was to lead his people with advice and intelligent decisions. Nevertheless, the perception of Sitting Bull's cowardice lived on in the white imagination. Despite the misunderstanding, he soon became known as the conqueror of Custer (Johnson 1891, 178–179; McLaughlin 1989, 215–222, 406–417; see Vestal 1989; Utley 1994).

On that June day, the US Army suffered its greatest loss in its wars against Plains Indians. A few days before the battle, Sitting Bull had seen a vision during a sun dance, in which soldiers fell head-first into the Lakota camp. This had been interpreted as the Lakotas winning a great victory. Sitting Bull's prophecy had come to pass. The importance of Sitting Bull's vision should not be overlooked. For the Lakotas, the Sun Dance was one of the most important religious ceremonies along with the vision quest (*hanblech-eyapi*). As a medicine man Sitting Bull was known to be very powerful, and

his visions often came true. At Little Bighorn, Sitting Bull showed his powers once again (see DeMallie 1985; Vestal 1989; Utley 1994).

Custer's fate caused unparalleled turbulence among the whites. The Army was furious, and the press soon published sensational stories of the massacre committed by bloodthirsty savages. Although the Indians were the main culprits in the catastrophe, the press soon began to search for other felons. Custer's doom shook the United States as well as the authorities of Indian policy. The biggest blame, however, was put on the Army and Custer himself. He was said to have underestimated Indian power and neglected his duty. This also created the myth that Sitting Bull and other Indian "generals" beat the Army with brilliant tactics and leadership skills. According to some rumors, Sitting Bull had graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point (Johnson 1891). The myth of the Little Bighorn assumed a life of its own.

### Conclusion

The United States took action against the Lakotas and their allies after the battle of Little Bighorn. The Army quickly received reinforcements, and the Indians were compelled to surrender during a winter campaign. The federal government also turned its attention to the Lakotas residing on reservations. During the previous summer, officials had been forced to give up the purchase of Black Hills, when a sufficient number of signatures had not been gathered. This time the government was set on succeeding, regardless of Lakota demands or the 1868 treaty promises. Pressure from the government quickly brought results, and the Lakotas soon signed an agreement in which they surrendered the Black Hills to the United States (see, e.g., Olson 1965; Hyde 1961; Hyde 1975; Ostler 2010).

Several fights occurred between the Lakotas and the Army during the winter of 1876–1877. To General Miles's surprise, Sitting Bull wanted to negotiate, and one day the soldiers found his message. Written in English, it requested the soldiers to leave Sitting Bull's lands. He announced that he never wanted to fight against the whites; he only wanted to live peacefully and to hunt freely on his own lands. If the whites, however, would not leave, he would fight again (Vestal 1989, 181–230; Utley 1994, 165–210; Ostler 2004, 64–82).

The winter was severe on the Lakotas. Generals Crook and Miles continuously harassed them. Although the Army was better equipped and more strongly manned, it was unable to give the final blow. Both parties suffered minor losses. The continuous fighting nevertheless weakened the Lakotas, because the Army destroyed many winter camps, driving the Indians into freezing weather without food or supplies. Hunting was unsuccessful during the harsh winter, leaving several families demoralized and malnourished.

Gradually small groups of Lakotas surrendered, and in the spring of 1877 Crazy Horse gave up fighting. Sitting Bull and more than 200 Lakotas fled to Canada, where they remained until 1881 (see DeMallie 1985, 197–207; DeMallie 1993, 329–332; Ostler 2004, 77–105; Bray 2006, 253–390). The Great Sioux Wars were over.

The Indian Wars were over by 1890, but interest in them captured attention for years to come. Throughout the twentieth century, Indian Wars were featured in literature, film, television, magazines, journals, books, and other forms of cultural production. They gave rise to many legends and myths of the American West. The Little Bighorn battle was not an exception; on the contrary, it is a prime example of a historical event that has taken a life of its own. Stories, legends, heroes, and villains emerged from the fighting that took place on that battlefield in 1876.

In recent years, a more balanced account of the Lakota Sioux in the controversial battle has been achieved through cross-disciplinary approaches. Scholars from many fields, like anthropology, history, ethnohistory, archeology, and even biology have provided readers with a better understanding of what Little Bighorn represented to the various parties involved. This development is poignantly presented by the history of the naming of the battlefield, which has been under the administration of the National Park Service since 1940. In 1886, the battlefield and adjoining cemetery were designated as the National Cemetery of Custer's Battlefield Reservation. In 1946, it became the Custer Battlefield National Monument. In 1991, it became Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. In the beginning, the battlefield mostly displayed the heroics of the 7th Cavalry but neglected the Indian points of view. In recent years, a new monument for Indian casualties has been created. Today, native accounts are an integral part of the story presented to tourists.

Perhaps a more balanced understanding of Little Bighorn has been achieved, but there is still more to be seen from the Lakota point of view. Historians still do not have a clear understanding of how the Lakotas tried to change their leadership and other social structures to confront the threats to their homeland. There are fragments of information that show that the Lakotas were not merely passive onlookers but active participants in the events that reached a culmination point at Little Bighorn in 1876 and Wounded Knee in 1890. To reach a more profound understanding of Lakota culture, resistance, and survival, we need to dig deeper into cross-disciplinary approaches and revisit archival sources that can give us new insights into Lakota memories and history. Therefore, books such as *Voices of the American West* by Richard Jensen (2006) and the recently published *Witness: A Hunkpapha Historian's Strong Heart Song of the Lakotas* by Josephine Waggoner (2014) are extremely valuable. They make rare archival sources with Lakota voices available to all, thus enriching everyone's understanding of the past.

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## Chapter Two

# THE NORTHERN CHEYENNE AND ARAPAHO

*Leo Killsback*

In this chapter, I detail the events that led up to the conflict known as the so-called “Great Sioux War of 1876,” emphasizing the roles of the Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho. Most existing scholarship and ethnographic work focusing on this era has emphasized rather short events that occurred in relatively small geographic areas in comparison to the length of time that Indians had been around and how much land they held in stewardship. There are few accounts that have been recorded and interpreted from the Indian perspective, and those that do exist are not necessarily valued and very little attention is given to them. The writings of Joseph Marshall III provide much insight using an Indian historical paradigm, even if his writings would not necessarily be classified as academic works. Nonetheless, Marshall provides a much needed voice. Indian authors of the past like Charles Eastman, Luther Standing Bear, and Zitkala-Ša, also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, laid the foundation to present the Indian side of the story, which is so often desired, especially by today’s standards of scholarship. Their legacies should be honored, and I anticipate that their works will gain more momentum as today’s burgeoning Indian scholars seek to rewrite and reclaim their people’s histories.

Throughout the development of the discipline or genre of Plains Indian history, there have been numerous attempts to emphasize the Indian perspective. The most notable works that have followed this paradigm have come from James Mooney, George Bird Grinnell, E. Adamson Hoebel, and Karl Llewellyn. Linguist Rodolphe Petter recorded the Cheyenne language in written form, but also provided commentary from his informants in his

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1126-page dictionary. Such sources have been valuable for Cheyenne scholarship, especially Cheyennes who had neither the funding nor privilege to access such material until the modern technological age.

Second-generation scholars, that is those who built their careers and based their scholarship on the works of the aforementioned ethnographers, generally approached Plains Indian history from a military history paradigm. This approach, though effective in recounting specific events relying on journals, government documents, and other military type records, is quite ineffective in revealing a complete history and culture of Indians. The most notable include Gregory Michno, Jerome Greene, Stan Hoig, Robert Utley, and Herman Viola. Although most works from this genre of history provide a fair and balanced view of history, sometimes privileging the Indian voice over whites, the military-based approach forces Indian history into a category that does not necessarily represent the history of a people. On the other hand, scholarly works like those of John Moore, which come from an anthropological perspective, may inadvertently force scholars to perceive Indians as primitive and sub-human subjects, whose voices and interpretations are not only of lesser value but appear less significant.

Another genre of Plains Indian history also exists and can be represented by Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. The approach of Brown's work represents the conscious effort to place greater value of the Indian voice in the Indian story of the colonization of their lands. Despite the criticism of being too one-sided, Brown's work should be perceived as the much needed alternative to the one-sided history that has dominated. Some scholarship from this type of approach can be quite effective, but can sometimes generate works that defy reality or ineffectively propagate assumptions of Indian superiority or supernaturalism. Such criticism has been aimed at the scholarship of Peter Powell. This approach does not necessarily tell a complete story and could potentially turn non-Indians off to the so-called Indian perspective.

Today, more scholars and the general public have gained an appreciation for the shared history of American Indians and whites, especially when discussing the Plains Indian Wars. Unfortunately, few Indian scholars exist to participate in the rewriting of Indian history. Among these few are folks like myself, who sincerely wish to provide an accurate and fair history, while remaining loyal to traditional codes of secrecy. Such challenges must be mastered, especially if we want our voices to be heard, while connecting modern struggles to historical injustice. This is one of several foundations of American Indian studies. I personally found the ethnographic work of Margot Liberty and John Stands In Timber to be quite effective in telling the Cheyenne story from a Cheyenne perspective. Their work should be honored as an effective model for collaboration, especially between Indian historical informants and mainstream white academics. Probably most notable is the scholarship of Thomas B. Marquis. I have relied on his work

on numerous occasions and commend his approach to simply act as the recorder, organizer, and editor of his informants' stories. Few scholars utilize the same approach. Unfortunately, Marquis's work has not received as much appreciation as others. I anticipate that this trend will change.

My approach to history, as an Indian academic, has been influenced by my upbringing on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, where traditional storytelling and ceremonial practices survive. Unlike popular belief, which assumes that Indians no longer carry an oral tradition, the language and oral tradition of my people persists. This does not mean that the Cheyenne traditional ways are not under threat from modern influences. Our memories are also preserved in the land and places as well as the seasons and time of the day. Simply put, storytellers can easily access information given at certain times and if they are at certain places. To tell our story here, I will begin by exploring the pre-contact world of the Great Plains from the Indian perspective, highlighting the legacy of the coalition that fought against invasion.

The Tséhestáno (Cheyenne Nation) were comprised of ten mobile bands, whose traditional homelands were bordered to the north by the Missouri River and to the south by the Arkansas River. By 1680 the nation's presence, along with their Lakota allies, extended into parts of modern Canada, in the southwest in New Mexico, and as far east as the Mississippi River (Grinnell 1972a). By 1750, the Tséhestáno had grown into a powerful nation with the political sophistication that rivaled any European government of that time and possessed the military might that matched their white neighbors to the east. By the time the United States declared independence from British rule in 1776, the Tséhestáno had already matured into a sophisticated society that surpassed their American neighbors in fairness, justice, humanity, and ecological consciousness. The Tséhestáno engaged in intertribal relations or what can be appropriately defined as international diplomacy, since Indian tribes were nations, comprised of people who shared a unique language and culture, living in defined territory under one government. The Tséhestáno, the Arapaho, and seven bands of Lakota Nation established the strongest political and military presence on the Great Plains, but their white neighbors posed a great threat to their homelands and traditional way of life.

US President Thomas Jefferson commissioned a convoy led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to proclaim authority over lands of the Louisiana Purchase. In 1806, Clark accurately reported the "Chyennes" as a "nation" and as the principal inhabitants of the "black mountains," but he underestimated their population and their autonomous presence on the Great Plains. Neither the President nor his explorers understood that the Tséhestáno had already endured nearly 1000 years of nation-building. The false claim to Cheyenne lands only initiated incessant conflict, violence, deception, and assimilation, which would nearly destroy the Tséhestáno in

a relentless effort to remove them from their beloved Black Hills. In 1876, one hundred years after the fledgling United States won independence and after numerous failed attempts of diplomacy, the conflict between the two nations escalated as one tried to annihilate the other through military action. The Little Bighorn campaign represents the pinnacle of the invasion and colonization of Indian lands, but it did not singlehandedly destroy the Tséhestáno. This conflict was one of numerous assaults on the Cheyenne way of life; all would inevitably affect generations of Cheyennes through the modern era. The Tséhestáno has endured, and its legacy and their story has yet to gain respect in the modern world.

### **Customary International Law on the Plains**

In 1805, William Clark reported in his journals that the Sioux had “no fixed laws, but what is brought on by custom, and all the other nations have no other laws” (Moulton 2005). His assessment was quite inaccurate, but set the stage for nearly 80 years of unfair dealings, trickery, and injustice. The indigenous people of the Great Plains were not unpredictable and unintelligent “savages” as assumed by popular perception. Long before the arrival of European Americans, guilds of spiritual leaders gained knowledge from nature through careful observation, as well as the understanding of the flaws and the potential of the human spirit. Over the course of hundreds of years, leaders from these guilds or societies were instrumental in developing ceremonies, social customs, and most importantly, government systems and effective nation-building practices. The Cheyenne developed a very sophisticated way of living under laws and customs that honored their existence on earth, with nature, and among other humans. Whites of the past either ignored or misunderstood such ways, devaluing them as superstitious paganism.

The Tséhestáno thrived on foundations of humanity and sustained itself by an annual ceremonial cycle that honored the delicate relationship between humans and nature (Dorsey 1905). The Tséhestáno employed a unique way of living, which protected itself with four warrior societies and maintained self-governance utilizing the Council of Forty-four Chiefs. Leaders lived under strict principles rooted in traditional laws, while citizens honored “sacred laws” to maintain balance between nature and themselves. They valued the spiritual relationships that humans have with one another, even the relationships between their nation and others. Unlike popular belief, which assumes that Indians had neither laws nor etiquette in international diplomacy, nations frequently sought and secured peace with enemies and eventually attempted to do the same with whites by employing the same customary international laws when signing treaties. Unfortunately, whites did not respect traditional Plains Indian peacemaking and even failed

to honor treaties. The fundamental differences between the Plains Indians and the United States were rooted in their international policies. While the Indians remained inclusive by “making relatives” in peacemaking, the whites could hardly fathom the idea of accepting Indian nations as equals, let alone Indians as relatives who shared an earthly existence.

The Tséhéstáno was an autonomous entity with the full capacity to declare war and build alliances with other Indian nations. The Cheyenne-Arapaho alliance was solidified long before the arrival of whites, but peacemaking between Indian nations is not a popular subject among the mainstream studies of history, since intertribal wars have been exploited to rationalize the inhumane acts of violence that whites committed against Indians when confiscating their land. There are significant differences between the Indian and white practices of international laws, especially when it came to territory. Each Indian nation held particular lands, and each had the inherent right to defend them against intrusion. Imaginary boundary lines did not define territories; instead, natural features divided lands. Wooden Leg, a Northern Cheyenne, described his homeland:

Our tribe during my growing years moved here and there throughout the region between the Black Hills and the Bighorn mountains and Bighorn River. We never went north of the Elk river (the Yellowstone) except on two occasions when some of the tribe went across for only a few days each time. The places of crossing were just above and just below the mouth of the Bighorn. (Marquis 1962, 18)

The centers of nations were typically located at sacred sites. Indians honored such places as the birthplace of their nation’s history, culture, and ways of life. Like Mount Sinai for the Christian faith, Nówávóse (Bear Butte) was the center of the Tséhéstáno and birthplace of the Cheyenne way of living. Just as Moses returned with the Ten Commandments, the prophet Motsé’éóeve (Sweet Medicine) brought the Cheyenne the Maahótse (Medicine Arrows) and the four sacred laws, which prohibited lying, cheating, incest, and intratribal murder (Mann 1997; Fisher 1939). Sacred mountains like Nówávóse were perceived as monuments of a nation’s independence, similar to the acropolis in Greek civilization. The surrounding lands were also of great spiritual and cultural significance, revered as holy lands and utilized for hunting, farming, and ceremonial practices. For the Cheyenne, the Mo’óhtávo’honáéva (Black Hills) was their Garden of Eden, valued as their place of creation, the source of all life, and the paradise gifted from the supreme supernatural being, Ma’xema’hēō’e (Great Medicine). Few other tribes held the same spiritual reverence, but nearly every surrounding nation respected the inherent sacredness of the hills. The Cheyennes held the Mo’óhtávo’honáéva in exclusivity as their homeland, and no other nation could make that assertion, even allies.

A fundamental principle of Plains Indians international law was that each respected each other's boundaries and were conscious that if they intruded onto another nation's land, they could be met with violence. Wooden Leg attested:

Only one time was the camp circle made west of the Bighorn river. We considered that country as belonging to the Crows. Our war parties went there, but our campings were eastward from this stream. I do not know why we crossed to that side on this occasion. We had been having a series of ceremonial dances at successive camping places, and it may be that this invasion of Crow land was intended as a challenge. (Marquis 1962, 18–19)

An accepted practice among the Plains Indians, which was not necessarily a full declaration of war, was for warriors to engage worthy enemies. When warriors deliberately encroached onto enemy lands, they invited conflict, which resulted in skirmishes.

### The Art of War

Unlike popular belief, which pays no credit to the sophistication of Indian warfare, fights among Plains Indians were primarily for sport. Each combatant adhered to the unspoken but universally accepted laws of the warrior. Such laws were similar to the etiquette of the knights' codes of chivalry during the Middle Ages in Europe. However, since Indian warriors served no monarch and their warrior ways involved a high degree of spiritual development, their warrior code was more akin to bushido, the ways of the Japanese samurai.

The Cheyenne warrior code can be traced to one origin story, which is proof that their war customs were practiced long before the arrival of horses and guns. The story reveals the foundations of the warrior ways: honor, humility, and discipline. One day a man from another people became unreasonably angry. He was powerful and could not be subdued. Motsé'éóeve, the leader of the Cheyennes, heard of this person and wanted to meet the warrior named Vóetséna'e (Lime). He carried a red club and possessed a power that allowed him to heal from cuts and gashes. Even if a limb was cut off, Vóetséna'e could heal himself, but only if his family brought him and his limb back to the river. Vóetséna'e was waiting, painted and dressed in his best clothing, ready to fight as Motsé'éóeve approached. Motsé'éóeve was armed with an obsidian sword and possessed a power to heal from broken bones and internal bleeding, but only if his people covered him with a buffalo robe. He humbly announced: "My friend, today we wish to know each other better by fighting. You can know me better, by killing me, or I can know you."

The two medicine men fought each other; each repeatedly fell from the blows of the other's weapon. What began as a showdown between two warriors ended as a stalemate. Motsé'éóeve proclaimed: "My friend, you must have come to imitate me. I came to save the people hereafter in this world. I know one trick. You shall know it today." Then he sang a song and a thunderstorm with violent rain came over his opponent. Vóetséna'e did not move and proclaimed, "I know this trick too." He also sang a song but a blizzard appeared with freezing winds and thick snow above Motsé'éóeve. For four days, the lands were covered with rain and snow, while the earth was shaken with thunder and lightning. Neither man budged. On the last day, Motsé'éóeve decided to end the fight before any of his people were killed. "This time I might kill my own people. So I must stop," he said. He then surrendered to Vóetséna'e, but Vóetséna'e was no longer a braggart. Instead he announced, "I have truly met my match in life, and he knows me better than anyone and won because he stopped when I did not." From then on Vóetséna'e worked and prayed to regain his spirit by changing his crude ways (Moore 1987, 109–113). He no longer caused pain and suffering among his people. The two peoples secured peace with a grand feast and celebration. The story was told to boys, so they matured into respectable and honorable warriors on and off the battlefield.

The warrior societies of the Cheyenne were, without a doubt, institutions of military nobility and specifically designed for young men to gain notoriety for their bravery, athleticism, discipline, and displays of physical gallantry. Warriors were primarily burdened with the responsibilities to protect and serve their nation, but in fights their goals were to earn individual triumph and honor. From the introduction of the horse until the wars with whites, every Indian nation honored and accepted the unwritten laws of the warrior. The core of this warrior etiquette was peace as noted by Wooden Leg:

Yet every Indian who might prosper in any way was expected to hold himself always willing to share and desirous of sharing his prosperity with his fellows, with all friendly people, even with avowed enemies if such should come peaceably and should be in want. A first principle of Indian conduct was: Be generous to all Indians. (Marquis 1962, 159)

Friendly conduct was demanded of all warriors since a nation could unexpectedly choose to negotiate peace and build alliances, instead of pursuing a fight.

The Cheyenne called all indigenous peoples of the known lands *xamaevo'êstaneo'o*, which means "ordinary, original people." *Nótseo'o* were non-citizens and applied especially to those from enemy tribes. *Néstaxeo'o* were "allies," who secured long-lasting, formal peace agreements with the nation, and who also established cultural and spiritual relationships with the

Cheyenne people. All xamaevo'èstaneo'o, even enemies, were respected in Plains Indian international laws of war, and all were expected to follow the etiquette. Failure to adhere to laws could lead to the outlawing of an entire nation, as they could be labeled as unreasonable, irrational, or unworthy of common respect. Breaches of international laws were rare, but violations were identifiable practices of deception, the failure to keep a peace agreement, the failure to treat visiting and peaceful Indians friendly, and in extreme cases, acts of inhumanity through the mass murdering of innocent women and children, which was relatively unheard of until the wars with whites.

The art of war on the Plains was refined throughout the years, but despite the introduction of rifles, the Cheyenne and other nations held fast to the honorable customs of war. Warfare was a ceremonial act since it was a deliberate imbalance or disruption of peace and could potentially lead to full-scale conflicts between nations. Any engagements required the approval of high officials, like chiefs or spiritual leaders. A warrior or society had to petition to organize an attack by "offering the pipe" (Grinnell 1972b; Hyde and Lottinville 1968). If, and only if, the high officials approved their petition, then warriors could begin their war expedition, but they also had to adhere to the instructions from their superiors and follow numerous rules while on their journey, immediately before, during, and after their fight. One common law prevented the leaders of war parties from cooking or handling meat, because the blood or flesh of animals could compromise any war medicine. Sometimes the society would select one or several of their society sisters to accompany them on the expedition to prepare meals and to nurse injured warriors following a fray. These warrior women also engaged in warfare, earning the same honors and spoils of war as their brothers. Male warriors were bound from any profanity or discussions about sex while on their journey; they could not even talk about their wives or girlfriends back home. This was out of respect for their sisters, but also because vulgarity could negate war medicine (Marquis 1976, 64).

Preparation for battle was equivalent to preparation for death, since it was always a possible outcome. A warrior took his time to look his finest and performed a number of rituals to prepare his mind, body, and spirit in case he should die a glorious death. Dying in battle was considered the pinnacle of the human experience, but it was not the goal of warriors, who were determined to demonstrate courage and discipline in the heat of battle. Surrender was never an option and completely went against the warrior ways. Counting coup was the highest form of war, because it required much skill and bravery. Coups were achieved when striking or unhorsing an enemy or taking property in the heat of battle. Cheyenne warriors immediately announced such accomplishments so others could witness their feat (Marquis 1976, 64). The best warriors had no fear of death.

Killing an enemy was never an objective, but if a warrior killed another, he had to endure a cleansing ceremony before returning home. Shooting

an enemy from a distance with an arrow or bullet was considered cowardice and in some cases dishonorable, especially if the enemy was unaware of the shooter's presence. In the event that two warring parties met on the battlefield and the fighting became heightened to the point where both inflicted numerous casualties, the winning party would withdraw and allow for the enemy survivors to collect their dead and return home. It was expected that the losers would tell of their defeat and never attempt to challenge the winners again. Plains Indians rarely fought to annihilate their enemies; to do so would be a violation of international laws of war and warrant aggressive retaliation.

Probably the most important law of war among the Plains Indians was to treat prisoners with respect. Children were considered especially sacred and treated as future relatives, as Iron Teeth Woman explained: "Indians did not kill each other's women and children. They captured them, to add them to the tribe of the captors" (Marquis 1978, 60). Captive children belonged to their captors but could be given to other families, especially those that lost members in war. Women were not to be mistreated or sexually abused by their captors, because they were to become members of the nation as wives, sisters, cousins, mothers, or daughters. Mistreatment was disgraceful and hazardous to the future of adoptees, their families, and the community. Grown men, on the other hand, were considered combatants and never taken as prisoners.

Although rare, conflicts between two nations escalated into full-scale military affronts, where one would declare war on the other. The Cheyenne pursued such assaults under dire circumstances, typically when one of four laws of war were broken by an enemy: if a chief or a prominent warrior was unfairly killed; if innocent women and children were slaughtered indiscriminately; if a war party was completely annihilated; or if a formal peace agreement was deliberately broken. Decrees of war were called "moving the arrows" and could only come from the Arrow Keeper, who was the caretaker of the Maahótse, and after the annual Maahéome (Arrow Renewal) ceremony. In such cases, the nation would take a year to prepare for an assault on an enemy nation. This allowed for chiefs to send messengers to offer the pipe and formally ask other nations to join in the fight. The entire nation would then move their camp as described by Bent:

These fights in which the entire Cheyenne tribe took part with the women, children, and old men formed up in a circle in the rear to watch the battle, were very formal affairs and full of ceremonies. In fact they were modeled on the old-time battles in which everyone fought on foot and the medicine men used magic to strike the enemy helpless and make their own warriors invulnerable. In these formal engagements the Cheyennes were drawn up in two divisions; in front of the first wing the Medicine Arrows were carried, and in front of the other the sacred Buffalo Cap. These two great medicines

protected all who were behind them from wounds and death and rendered the enemy in front helpless. In such a fight a medicine man was always selected to carry the Medicine Arrows tied to the end of a lance. (Hyde and Lottinville 1968, 50)

The entire nation camped a short distance from their foe. All able-bodied adults were expected to fight (Grinnell 1983). First the warriors attacked, and afterward the women entered the camp on foot to kill any remaining adult men and women. They were typically the first to claim children, horses, and other spoils. The entire affair was ritualized not only to unify the nation but also to ensure that the attack was successful.

The Tséhestáno moved the Arrows six times: against the Shoshone in 1817; the Crows in 1820; the Pawnee in 1830; a Kiowa-Comanche-Apache coalition in 1838; the Shoshone in 1843; and against the Pawnee in 1853. Not every move was successful, but each move typically led to a peace agreement between the warring nations. The most successful peace agreement was with the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache in 1840, which was never broken. Unfortunately, a Pawnee-Cheyenne peace agreement could never be reached, because the Pawnee captured the Medicine Arrows in 1830 and never returned them. Both nations tried to reach a resolution in 1835, but the Pawnee only returned one of the four arrows. The Cheyenne recovered another arrow in 1837 from their allies, the Brulé Sioux, after they captured a Pawnee village, but the failure of the Pawnee to return the other arrows only prolonged and fueled bitterness. The Pawnee and Cheyenne would not reach a peace until both were confined to reservations. Today I have the privilege of having several Pawnee friends, with whom I periodically discuss this history, as modern warriors upholding the ancient codes of honor and humility.

Intertribal Plains Indian Wars were not politically driven, nor were they racially charged where one nation believed themselves superior over another. Although conflicts escalated, the violence never reached a point where a nation lost its humanity and completely disregarded the universally accepted codes of war. Peace was always an option and the typical end result. Enemies were potential allies and captives were potential relatives. If done wholeheartedly, under the sacred laws of the peace pipe and according to international customary law, the truces lasted into perpetuity.

### Peacemaking

Another body of supreme international laws was dedicated to peacemaking. The universal symbol of truth was the peace pipe, which was customarily made with a red pipestone bowl and a stem of cedar. Indians held different types of pipes that served different purposes, and the peacemaking pipes

held by chiefs were of particular significance since they were the instruments that could unify nations by “the making of relatives” (Brown 1989). The pipe was the best method in preventing deception between Indian nations, because nearly every one revered it as sacred (Williams 1997). Breaking an oath endorsed by a ceremonial pipe was punishable by death, either in war or by the supernatural powers.

The Cheyenne had a legacy of peacemaking dating back to 1600, since the Tséhestáno actually comprised two formerly distinct nations, the Só'tao'o and the Tsétséhestaestse. The two united in the Black Hills when they came upon one another and realized that they understood each other's language (Mooney 1905; Grinnell 1972a). After the leaders smoked and agreed to peace, the people initiated a customary unification process. They exchanged gifts and hosted a feast that included a grand celebration with singing and dancing. Eventually, the story of unification became part of the oral tradition, and each nation shared their ceremonies. The united Cheyenne Nation employed the same methods when making peace with other nations, not limiting unifications to political and military alliances but extending unity into the cultural and ceremonial practices.

The Cheyenne-Arapaho unification followed the same pattern. During the mid-1600s, a small group of Cheyenne warriors in the Black Hills traveled from their camp to Nówávóse. They sat under a blue sky filled with fluffy white clouds to have a smoking circle, when one of them noticed a stranger walking toward them from the south. When he arrived, he spoke in a language that was similar to Cheyenne but unintelligible. The warriors invited him to join them in their smoking circle. The man kindly agreed and sat to smoke. The stranger pulled out a pipe with a black stone bowl and motioned that he had no tobacco (Stands In Timber & Liberty 1998; Grinnell 1972a).

The warriors grew interested in the stranger and his pipe, and they were equally interested in the stranger's story. He told the Cheyennes that he came from a people of the “clouds.” The Cheyennes believed him to be a man of stature, probably a chief, so they called him Hetanevö'e, which translates “man-cloud.” The stranger gave the Cheyennes some of his cedar and told them how the supernatural powers taught his people to use it in a ceremonial manner. The warriors in return gave the stranger some of their sacred sage and told them how their prophet, Motsé'éóeve, taught them to use the plant. From that day the Cheyennes called the Arapaho Váno'étaneo'o (sage people), and this first meeting eventually led to the unification of the Cheyenne and Arapaho. When the warriors returned to their camp, they told the chiefs of their experience, who were pleased with the conduct of the young men. The chiefs decided that the nation would seek out the Váno'étaneo'o to formalize a long-lasting peace agreement and unification sanctioned by the Arrows and Buffalo Hat, which was from then on demanded by traditional Cheyenne laws in peacemaking.

The two nations met and exchanged gifts of food and clothing, and all of the old men of the Arapaho received fine buffalo robes. The Cheyenne chiefs sat with the Arapaho leaders to smoke, and the chiefs honored their new allies by hosting a sun dance in which the Arapaho were invited to participate. The Arapaho then came to practice their own version of the sun dance (Dorsey 1903). The exchange of ceremonial practices signifies that peacemaking was not a simple matter and required the cooperation and willingness of consenting parties. Afterward, the unification became part of the oral tradition to ensure that the relationship was carried into later generations. Such peacemaking shows the commitments of each party to secure enduring peace.

The Arapaho remained the closest allies to the Cheyenne, periodically reuniting to participate in ceremonies. Because of their smaller population, the Arapaho benefited greatly from the alliance and are credited for introducing horses to the nation through trade. Bands of Arapaho joined the Cheyenne on communal hunts and in other capacities related to international diplomacy; they primarily acted as intermediaries for enemies that sought proposals of peace. The two never broke their peace, even during and long after the wars with whites. The Arapaho were also militarily incorporated with the Cheyenne and joined them when they moved the arrows against enemies. By the 1700s, the Cheyennes offered the pipe to ally with the Mandan and Ree nations, which were primarily trade partners. In 1760, the Cheyenne Nation united with the Oglala Lakota, who entered Cheyenne territory from the east as horseless, half-starved hunters, deprived of their homelands (Stands In Timber & Liberty 1998; Grinnell 1972a). The Cheyenne soon allied with the Hunkpapa Lakota Oglala. The caretakers of the two covenants blessed the unifications, which is why each nation practiced the sun dance.

Two years after the Cheyennes moved the arrows against the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache coalition in 1838, the coalition petitioned for peace with the Cheyenne-Arapaho alliance. In 1840, a ceremonial peacemaking camp was set up for all parties to come together so the leaders could discuss the long-term conditions of peace. Under the leadership of Cheyenne Chief High Backed Wolf, the head chiefs representing the consenting nations ceremonially smoked and declared that all military engagements between all nations would cease. War expeditions against one another would neither be petitioned nor sanctioned. Following the ceremony the people feasted and exchanged gifts to solidify the unification of the citizenry. They sang and danced to celebrate the unification in the customary manner, and the peace was never broken between all participating nations (Grinnell 1983).

The Crow were one nation that could not sustain a long-lasting peace with the Cheyenne, especially since they annihilated a party of 32 Cheyenne Bowstring Warriors in 1819. The massacre led to the successful move a year

later, upon which the Cheyenne captured the Crow village and adopted numerous captives. Years later, the Cheyennes captured another Crow village but violated international law by killing some of the adopted captives. The violence was considered unjust, unlawful, and unrighteous. It was in complete violation of Cheyenne traditional law, because the adoptees were accepted as Cheyennes and protected by the sacred law preventing intratribal murder. In 1827, the Crow and Cheyenne sought a peace agreement, petitioned by a Crow chief through Arapaho intermediaries. The Crows planned an ambush, but the Arapaho and Gros Ventre warned the Cheyenne of the Crow chief's plans, thus preventing entrapment and massacre (Hyde and Lottinville 1968). The entire affair was a violation of Plains Indian etiquette, since the Crow chief deceived the consenting Cheyennes under the guise of negotiating peace.

As the years progressed, the fights ensued. Each nation became equally responsible for continuing the conflict, even after formally agreeing to peace by signing the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty. The Cheyenne reached their tipping point, when the Crow sided with the United States to confiscate traditional Cheyenne homelands and their sacred Black Hills. The war of 1876 was the final culmination of the conflict, even though the Crow scouts did not necessarily represent their entire nation. Bitterness prevailed years after the Little Bighorn Battle, which Wooden Leg expressed at the 30-year anniversary:

Their actions made me angry. I let loose my tongue: You – Crows – you are like children. All Crows are babies. You are not brave. You never helped us to fight against the white people. You helped them in fighting against us. You were afraid, so you joined yourselves to the soldiers. You are not Indians. (Marquis 1962, 354–355)

The Northern Cheyenne and Crow Nations eventually secured a long-lasting peace, and today both honor their indigenous pasts and share the challenges of living in their lands now colonized and dominated by whites and white culture. Both continue to struggle to hold on to their traditions, to protect their indigenous identities, and to remember the old ways of living on the Plains. I have personally made many Crow friends. Some have become relatives, and we, as descendants of great warriors, frequently discuss both the struggles and advantages of our current time.

### **War and Peace with Whites**

The Cheyenne and Arapaho employed their customary peacemaking practices when dealing with the United States, eventually signing the Friendship Treaty in 1825. This treaty was the first of several agreements between the

Tséhéstáno and the federal government, but its primary purpose was merely to place the Cheyenne within the “territorial limits of the United States.” The United States had made yet broken numerous treaties with eastern Indian nations, which became their common practice. Plains Indians were the next to fall victim to the same diplomatic deception, which was comparatively unknown in their international relations.

Chief High Backed Wolf was the Sweet Medicine Chief, the primary leader, at the time of the 1825 treaty, but the entire Council of Forty-four Chiefs had to agree to its conditions. We can only assume that the first treaty between the United States and the Tséhéstáno went according to customary Cheyenne law. As history shows, this agreement unfortunately represents the first of numerous failed attempts at peace. While the Plains Indian nations prioritized peace, the United States could neither adequately educate nor control its citizens with respect to treaty provisions. Beginning in 1842, the unpredictability and impulsiveness of white immigrants on the Oregon Trail led to the complete deterioration of any agreements made between the federal government and Plains Indian nations. The California gold rush brought hordes of emigrants, who indiscriminately killed herds of bison and infected entire villages with exotic diseases. By 1849, the Cheyenne and Arapaho had lost nearly half of their population to cholera and smallpox (Mooney 1905).

In 1851, the United States embarked on a new treaty commission at Fort Laramie to secure peace and to designate lands for the Lakota, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Crow, Assiniboiné, Gros Ventre, Mandan, and Arikara. Nearly 10,000 Indians arrived, including the Cheyenne people, who referred to the meeting as “The Big Issue” (Stands In Timber & Liberty 1998, 161). In accordance with the traditional international customs of peace among the Plains Indians, the US representatives formally and ceremonially agreed to the conditions of the treaty. The Cheyennes blessed the agreement with the caretakers of the two sacred covenants. Their lands were clearly defined by boundaries and comprised 51 million acres of their traditional homeland, which included half of the current state of Colorado and parts of Wyoming, Kansas, and Nebraska. This was the only agreement that was secured in the customary fashion, and the United States still could not uphold its terms and provisions.

Despite popular culture, which often portrays the arrival of the first whites to Indian country as adventurous, heroic, and courageous, the Indians’ first encounters with whites were quite the opposite. Most, if not all, who first entered Indian lands held racist views toward Indians, but they themselves were of the uncultured, unsophisticated lower class of their society. Many were impoverished gold-seekers. Hotheaded soldiers of an underdeveloped US military protected the settlers; both were destined to violate not only the sophisticated Plains Indian laws of war and peace but also the laws of their own nation.

The first major incident occurred in 1854 near Fort Laramie, when a settler wanted reparations for the killing of his stray ox. His complaints led to the killing of a Lakota Chief Whirling Bear and the immediate retaliation from a Miniconjou-Brulé-Oglala coalition. The Indians annihilated Lieutenant J. L. Grattan and all of his soldiers.

The second incident occurred in 1856 near the Platte Bridge, where four young Northern Cheyenne warriors found some stray horses. Afterward, a white man claimed them and accused the boys of thievery. When they peaceably returned the animals, two were captured and imprisoned, the third was shot dead, but Little Wolf successfully escaped and ran away. He would become one of the nation's greatest leaders (Killsback 2011). After he returned to his camp, the people deserted, fully aware of the impulsiveness of white soldiers, who arrived later and burned the entire village. Although the three young warriors were the only casualties of this Platte Bridge incident, it represents the first assault on the Cheyenne and the beginning of a 20-year war.

Later that same year, a party of Northern Cheyenne came across a wagon. Some warriors asked for tobacco, but the white people were frightened and shot an Indian. A Cheyenne returned an arrow wounding a passenger. When the wagon returned to Fort Kearny, the passengers embellished the attack. The US Army sent out the First Cavalry to pursue the Indians, eventually killing six and burning their camp. The whites earned reputations among the Cheyenne as erratic cowards, instigators, and liars, unable to uphold the peace agreement and undisciplined in the art of war. In fact, Plains Indians believed that white warfare was not an art at all, and assumed that all soldiers were "outright murderers" (Marquis 1976, 71).

In 1859, gold was found in the Rocky Mountains, and a much larger rush of whites flooded treaty-protected lands. Thousands of white men and a few women poured into Indian lands to found towns like Denver. Most were unaccustomed to the Great Plains. Bent described the newcomers:

Old Cheyenne men have told me, the Indians found many a white man wandering about, temporarily insane from hunger and thirst. The Indians took them to their camps and fed them. They did not understand this rush of white men and thought the whites were crazy. (Hyde and Lottinville 1968, 106–107)

Within a year the gold-seekers left with little success but returned in 1860 in greater hordes. Government officials then began an aggressive push to force all Indians onto small reservations.

The entire Great Plains was Indian land and held by indigenous peoples since time immemorial, yet whites believed that within a few generations Indians would be annihilated. Genocide may have been highly anticipated and even favored by some of the whites, but it simply was not

going to happen. The whites had already revealed their fighting nature, and the Indians still held the upper hand in warfare. The Indians responded with sincere diplomacy, yet the United States continued to disregard the traditional manner of treaty making.

This led to a swindle in 1861. That year, Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders, without following traditional law, signed a treaty at Fort Wise forfeiting huge tracts of land, which reduced their reservation to less than 5% of the lands secured ten years earlier. This treaty severed the Cheyenne and Arapaho southern bands from their northern brethren, and the swindle inevitably led to more violent conflict with whites.

All Cheyennes refused to recognize the 1861 treaty, and the following years would prove to be devastating. Conflict with whites escalated and led to the atrocities at Sand Creek in 1864. The complete disregard for Indians and their customary international laws proved that the United States had neither the desire nor the capability for fairly dealing with the Cheyenne. Fundamental differences in culture, spirituality, and political structures also contributed to dysfunction and allowed for the short-term goals of the few whites in power to capitalize on Indian losses. The Indian rules of war changed significantly, since violence was the only language whites seemed to understand. The Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho, especially the legendary Dog Soldiers, fought valiantly to defend their homelands, to protect their buffalo herds, and to survive amidst the invading whites and their diseases. They were successful to some extent, but Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders reluctantly resorted to signing the Fort Sully Treaty of 1865 and the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867, ceding more land and agreeing to the reservation life. In 1869, after the Washita massacre of 1868, Custer met with Cheyenne leaders in the Medicine Arrow lodge and smoked with the keeper, Stone Forehead, promising to never fight the Cheyennes. His fate was sealed by his own promise.

To the north, the Cheyenne-Arapaho-Lakota alliance was fending off white gold-seekers on the newly cut Bozeman Trail, "the thieves' road." After the alliance subdued the United States at the decisive Fetterman Fight in 1866, the trail was abandoned. The Indians burned the forts built on traditional lands. The United States negotiated for peace and eventually designated Indian lands in the notorious Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. The Great Sioux Reservation comprised of 25 million acres, half of the current state of South Dakota, and included unceded hunting territories in parts of Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska, and North Dakota. Later that year, the Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho signed a different treaty under the same commission but were without a designated reservation. According to their treaty, they could either reside with their southern relatives in the reservation designated in the Medicine Lodge Treaty or with their Lakota allies in lands designated by their 1868 treaty. Without question, they chose their homelands in the Black Hills.

Unfortunately, history repeated itself when white gold-seekers and the US Army trespassed and violated the treaty. In 1875, government officials scrambled to acquire the necessary signatures of three-fourths of the adult male population in an attempt to purchase the lands. They failed, and the Black Hills were thus stolen. Any Indians who opposed the invasion were labeled as “hostile” and deemed threats to the establishment that hypocritically promoted fairness, freedom, and justice. The first victims of this thievery and lies were the Northern Cheyennes at Two Moons’ camp. On the morning of March 17, 1876, Colonel Joseph Reynolds attacked the peaceful camp, forcing the Indians, primarily women and children, to weather sub-zero temperatures. The soldiers captured their horses and burned their entire village, including food stores, robes, and everything of value. The Great Cheyenne War of 1876 began, but it was just the second coming of familiar foes in a conflict that actually began 20 years earlier.

The United States and its citizenry had demonstrated disrespect and contradiction in dealing with the Cheyenne-Arapaho coalition. The international customary diplomatic practices of the whites were unpredictable, as they could easily change their mind and disregard any promises as they saw fit. While the Indians remained disciplined in their international customary practices of peace, the United States had proven that they valued trickery over honesty and treachery over fairness. The Indians endured the brunt of the violence. The United States earned a reputation as a nation of liars and thieves, and killing the invaders was not only fair and just, it was demanded according to Plains Indian international customary law. Cheyennes believe that Custer deserved his death, since he failed to keep his pipe oath (Marquis 1962, 322).

## Conclusion

The war against the Cheyenne endured longer than any other conflict in American history. It resulted in the destruction of numerous villages beginning with the first attacks in 1856, through Sand Creek in 1864, and ending with the killing of Chief Dull Knife’s people at Fort Robinson in 1879. Even if the Cheyennes were not the most hated, they suffered and lost more at the hands of whites than any other nation (Liberty 2006). Numerous men, women, and children fell victim to the violence, yet our ancestors are still accused of being the aggressors and labeled as savages. It was the whites who invaded our homelands and who were dishonest, unfair, unjust, and inhumane in their dealings with a people who sincerely sought peace.

In 1884, the Tongue River Reservation was established by executive order, which is now known as the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation. In 1946, the Indian Claims Commission was established to hear the claims of Indian tribes against the United States for grievances and broken treaties.

In 1951 the Northern Cheyenne, the Northern Arapaho, and the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes sued the federal government for stolen lands from the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty. In 1963, they were awarded a judgment of \$23,500,000. After offsets, the Northern Cheyenne were awarded \$4,360,886, while the Northern Arapaho were awarded \$3,230,000. The settlement stipulated that all other claims against the United States were to cease, involving the mishandling of tribal funds and records; the unfair payments to enter into tribal lands; the trespass of whites from 1851 to 1868 and the destruction of buffalo, game, timber, and grass on treaty lands; and the dishonorable acts committed by the United States, including delayed treaty annuities, the loss of life and property, causing poverty and hunger, and the forced removal of Northern Cheyenne to Oklahoma. The 1963 settlement proved to be another trick played by the ever so cunning white man. Where is the justice?

No amount of money can replace stolen lands, which remain as the record of the Cheyenne legacy and unfortunately the evidence of American atrocity. Justice has yet to be realized, as the truth continues to be suppressed or ignored. The Northern Cheyenne have never given up their claim to the sacred Black Hills: not through treaty, nor in settlement. Today their claim stands firm. On December 16, 2012, President Obama announced his support for the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which states in article 10:

Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. No relocation shall take place without the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option of return. (United Nations 2008)

The “option of return” is becoming a reality as expressed by James Anaya, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, who stated in 2012: “The restoration of lands should be put on the table, as indeed it already is.” Currently, the US Department of Interior and the Oglala Sioux Tribe are working together to establish the first tribally run National Park in the stolen lands (*Democracy Now* 2012). Perhaps this is the first step toward reconciliation and justice.

The Cheyenne Nation was born out of the sacred Black Hills, from which they learned the teachings of Mother Earth. Our ancestors held and cared for these lands for thousands of years. Today Cheyennes continue to make annual pilgrimages to the sacred lands, to camp and hold ceremonies as their ancestors. Without a doubt, as long as we hold on to our spiritual ways, we can care for these lands for another thousand years into the future, with or without the presence of the United States.

Traditional Cheyenne believe the war against them finally ended when two young boys, Head Chief and Young Mule, faced the gunfire of white

soldiers for the last time in 1890, the same year as the Wounded Knee Massacre. I believe the war continues since the citizens of Northern Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Lakota nations continue to fall victim to racism, humiliation, deception, and the unseen powers of white privilege and mental colonialism in our own homelands. How alien and unwelcome we feel in the lands of our forefathers, as we are sometimes judged as radicals, labeled unreasonable, or devalued as savages when all we want is to simply practice our culture, speak our language, and tell the truth. We remain the evidence of the lies, so let the land remain as the record of our people, their legacy, and of what it truly means to be free. We desire to be treated with the respect and dignity that is so easily afforded to everyone else. Nearly 200 years since the Friendship Treaty of 1825, perhaps a sincere friendship can be achieved, and we can begin new practices of peace, instead of relying on old ones.

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## Chapter Three

### PATRIOT CHIEFS

*Kurt Windisch*

On June 25, 1876, a coalition of Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors celebrated America's upcoming centennial birthday by handing the United States military perhaps the most embarrassing defeat in its history. Earlier that afternoon, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and 647 men from the 7th Cavalry guided their horses toward the Little Bighorn River, where approximately 1,800 Indian warriors stood ready to defend their homeland against an invasion by an enemy force (Utley 1993, 142).

Most of the books on the battle have focused on Custer, Marcus Reno, and Frederick Benteen, while Indian leaders like Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Gall – the commanders of perhaps the largest body of Indian warriors ever assembled (Marshall 2007, 35) – were relegated to secondary importance. That pattern has changed, however, as increasing racial tolerance has fostered new respect for contemporary Indian sources and oral tradition, which has presented researchers with fresh opportunities to examine the role Native Americans played in the conflict. A closer look at the lives of these important native leaders is essential to reorient the analysis of the Battle of the Little Bighorn away from a trite obsession with Custer toward a more balanced and nuanced approach about what this battle has meant for Indians, whites, and the history of America.

#### **Plains Indian Leadership**

Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., was a screenwriter, a well-known journalist, and perhaps the preeminent scholar of his time in the field of Native American history (Fox 2005). He was also such a powerful advocate for Native

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American rights that in 1968 President Richard M. Nixon commissioned him to study the federal government's Indian Policy and to suggest ways to modernize and reform it. Josephy's suggested reforms later became the backbone of the landmark Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (Hart 2006; Parman 1972, 296). Several of Josephy's most famous literary works – *The Nez Perce Indians and the Opening of the Northwest* (1965), *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight for Freedom* (1971), and *Now That the Buffalo's Gone* (1982) – focus on the centrality of resistance to the Native American experience and how Indians persevered through the trauma of Euro-American colonialism.

The theme of resistance was paramount in Josephy's book, *Patriot Chiefs: A Chronicle of American Indian Resistance* (1961), which analyzed the lives of nine Indian leaders who used their military, political, and intellectual skills to mitigate the impacts of white expansion and to protect the native peoples who followed them. While these men were held up by fellow Indians as heroes, their white contemporaries regarded them as "hostile" and saw them as a threat to the fulfillment of America's Manifest Destiny. As a popular historian, Josephy hoped to shift the interpretation of these men as "hostile," recasting them as patriotic warriors in a valiant fight to preserve their independence against an oppressive colonial force. Josephy invoked the imagery of "patriotism" and "independence" to elevate indigenous leaders and their resistance movement to a place among other great American heroes in the fight for American Independence like Nathan Hale, George Washington, or Benjamin Franklin (Josephy 1976, xiv). In *Patriot Chiefs*, Josephy's profiles of warriors like Crazy Horse, philosophical thinkers like Hiawatha, and astute politicians like Chief Joseph reveal a nuanced picture of Indian leadership that emphasizes many of the same leadership qualities typical to successful leaders in the dominant culture. These men incorporated every possible skill to build support among a strong coalition of Indian warriors, to inculcate them with the righteousness of their cause, and to utilize every available means – diplomatic, political, military – to achieve their objectives and defend their people. Through their actions before, during, and after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, these great leaders left an indelible mark on both Indian and American history.

Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Gall, and other warriors at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, known to the Lakota as the Greasy Grass Fight, lived in a native culture that emphasized warfare. Historically, the tribes of the Great Plains have been described as "warlike," which is an incredibly narrow assessment of their culture. Warfare was important to them because it was woven deeply into their culture – it helped them to survive in a harsh environment, and it also provided social and political structure. Americans who wrote during the Indian Wars typically portrayed the indigenous people in dark, foreboding imagery that emphasized the violent nature of Indian-white relations on the frontier (Newson 1890). Sensationalized

accounts depicted Indians as uncivilized and bloodthirsty, which reinforced public support for the government's project of assimilation.

The notion of "warlike" Plains Indians was challenged in 1915 by anthropologist, naturalist, and historian George Bird Grinnell. In *The Fighting Cheyennes*, Grinnell used contemporary sources written from the "white" perspective as well as Indian sources, including interviews that he personally conducted with Cheyenne living on the reservation (Grinnell 1956, x). In short, he was offering a corrective to history written by the "victors." Warfare enabled the Cheyenne to defend themselves from attacks by neighboring tribes and was deeply connected to their buffalo-hunting culture, which fed and clothed their people during harsh winters on the Plains (Grinnell 1956, 12). Combat was also tied to the enforcement of cultural laws and norms, because Cheyenne warriors who belonged to one of four exclusive warrior societies were tasked with directing buffalo hunts and enforcing tribal laws (Grinnell 1956, 219). Martial prowess, therefore, was essential to maintain order and for the very survival of Cheyenne society as a whole.

Two of the main historiographical debates about the Battle of the Little Bighorn involve whether or not Plains Indian war culture was conducive to having actual "leaders," and if so, to determine how the Indians implemented specific strategies and tactics on the battlefield. Grinnell believed that because the main goal of Indian warfare was to earn war honors through individual acts of bravery, "tactics" and "leadership" would not have worked, a point made by John Stands In Timber and Margot Liberty in *Cheyenne Memories* (1998, 30–31, 204; Grinnell 1956, 71). Stands In Timber emphasized that chiefs often stayed back from a fight and rarely followed the warriors into battle. In the rare instances when they did, they merely fought alongside them as fellow warriors, not as leaders. Joseph M. Marshall III's work on the Lakota may well have resolved this debate. He agrees that the Lakota did not have leaders directing the action on the battlefield in the way that Custer commanded troops, because the concept of "authority" has no corollary in Lakota culture. In the heat of battle, Marshall writes, "Lakota war leaders did not stay out of harm's way and direct others. They were in the thick of it, leading the way" (Marshall 2007, 74). Lakota leaders dictated the movements of other warriors in battle by the reputation they had fashioned for themselves as warriors and through the example they set for other fighters, which inspired others to follow them into dangerous situations (Marshall 2009, 30–31; Marshall 2007, 64–65, 74).

Conflict with whites forced Indians to change their modes of warfare. Marshall discusses this development in his book, *The Power of Four: Leadership Lessons of Crazy Horse* (2009), in a section titled "Know Your Enemies." For the Lakota, enemies were an inevitable reality of life. Enemies made the Lakota stronger through vigilance, transformed them

into stronger warriors to defend themselves, and made the Lakota more effective when they went on the attack. According to Marshall, the Lakota became great warriors through an intimate knowledge of their enemy that was based in a deep sense of respect. Because warfare among the Plains tribes was grounded in bravery and a mutual quest for honor rather than blood, counting coup and stealing horses were valued more than scalping or killing the enemy (Marshall 2007, 95–98). White soldiers, however, waged war in a very different way than the Plains Indians; they broke treaties, and their goal was to kill as many Indians as possible. Marshall observes: “Because their enemy did not fight by the Lakota codes of honor and respect ... the Lakota would have to fight a war of attrition, ... if there was to be any chance of driving them out of Lakota territory” (Marshall 2009, 105). Adaptability, Marshall writes, is what made Lakota warriors so effective at the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Marshall 2009, 102–106). In the end, however, the Indians’ victory over Custer was short-lived. The American population vastly outnumbered that of the natives, and when that demographic advantage combined with American industrial and technological superiority, it proved to be too much for the Indians to overcome as the wars dragged on (Marshall 2009, 106).

To understand the outcomes of the Greasy Grass fight and the Great Sioux War of 1876, it is first necessary to understand the role of leadership. Powerful individuals organized the Indian resistance and inspired their people to continue to fight against seemingly insurmountable odds. These leaders assessed their environment and their common enemy and developed tactics that would best suit a prolonged resistance. To say that Indian warriors fought only for individual glory at the Little Bighorn or completely disregarded a broader objective or strategy diminishes their victory, because it implies that the Indians were merely lucky. Custer, despite whatever mistakes he made that day by dividing his forces and not waiting for reinforcements, was still among the best US military commanders at the time. In Custer, the Indians faced a worthy adversary, who believed in the cause he fought for almost as much as he believed in his own invincibility. The fact that Indians defeated Crook on the Rosebud and Custer at the Little Bighorn within a span of just eight days shows that the warriors were highly trained, adaptable, and motivated to defend their way of life. Above all, they were led by men who embodied their principles, advocated a common cause, and set an example for the rest to follow.

### **Sitting Bull: The Great Chief of the Lakota**

Hunkpapa Lakota chief Sitting Bull is easily the most famous of the “patriot chiefs” today, as he was in his own time. His leadership of the Indian resistance made him a household name during the Indian Wars, and he was often

mentioned in newspaper stories and official documents generated by military officials and federal Indian agents on the frontier. The quest to define his legacy also made him the subject of interviews with Indians on reservations, even many years after his death. *The Red Record of the Sioux* (1891) by William Fletcher Johnson was the first stand-alone biography of Sitting Bull. In his work, Johnson discussed the historiography on Sitting Bull up to that point. Several of the early accounts challenged his Indianness and speculated that Sitting Bull was really a Sac and Fox, who had been assimilated and educated in the Indian boarding school at Fort Garry. Others implied that he was not Indian at all but rather a former student at West Point, who quit school and sought refuge among the Indians of the Plains. There, he used the Napoleonic tactics he learned in military school against white settlers and soldiers on the frontier, with devastating effect (Johnson 1891, 28–39). Stories that portrayed Sitting Bull as a product of white culture, or as a white man among the “savages,” were racially motivated attempts to discredit the capacity and intelligence of Indians. They satisfied the ethnocentric need to explain the death of Custer, a man previously held up as a heroic figure who represented the American quest for Manifest Destiny, by attributing his death to either another white man or an Indian educated in white schools. In many ways, the Indians’ victory at the Little Bighorn challenged that entire nationalistic enterprise.

Johnson’s sources included Sitting Bull’s own pictographic autobiography, which had been stolen from him by Indians and given to Army officials at Fort Buford in 1870, as well as contemporary accounts from whites and newspaper articles (Johnson 1891, 17–18, 21–29, 49–52, 63, 84–102). Johnson was the first biographer to use these sources to challenge the idea of Sitting Bull as a great warrior, portraying him instead as a man who became chief not for his prowess and bravery on the battlefield but rather because of his own political savvy and through miracles he performed in his role as a medicine man. According to Johnson, Sitting Bull was an inveterate hater of whites. He manipulated the Lakota and other native peoples to keep them away from the reservations and to convince agency Indians to reject the influence of conciliatory figures like Red Cloud and Spotted Tail (Johnson 1891, 40–47, 64, 67, 156–159).

Johnson’s book was not the most scathing criticism of Sitting Bull, however. In 1910, James McLaughlin wrote *My Friend the Indian*, which is perhaps the most negative account of the great chief’s life. McLaughlin was the Indian agent at Standing Rock, who ordered Sitting Bull’s arrest on December 15, 1890. During the arrest, a riot broke out and Indian police officers shot Sitting Bull in the back and killed him. The circumstances of Sitting Bull’s death led to accusations that McLaughlin used his book to burnish his own image and to dispel accusations that Sitting Bull’s arrest was actually a pretense to have him murdered. McLaughlin wrote that Sitting Bull was a coward and never knew him “to display a single trait that

might command admiration or respect” (McLaughlin 1910, 180). According to McLaughlin, when Reno attacked the southern end of the Indian village near the Hunkpapa camp circle during the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Sitting Bull immediately ran away and fled into the hills and left his own small child behind (McLaughlin 1910, 142).

After his surrender, McLaughlin felt that Sitting Bull was a troublesome influence on older Indians at the agency, who were hesitant to embrace the federal government’s plan to transform the Indians into Christian, English-speaking, yeoman farmers (McLaughlin 1910, 35, 180, 183–194). McLaughlin cited this disruptive effect on the reservation as the pretense for Sitting Bull’s arrest. McLaughlin accused Sitting Bull of inciting a riot when Indian police officers came for him, which prompted the officers to shoot and kill him in self-defense and to prevent his escape. Among those who killed Sitting Bull were men who had fought with him against Custer only 15 years before (McLaughlin 1910, 220–222). Despite his best efforts to clear his own name, McLaughlin’s zealous attacks on Sitting Bull would not define the legacy of the most famous “patriot chief.”

The release of the Meriam Report in 1928 highlighted the dire conditions Indians endured on reservations and confirmed the failure of America’s assimilation policy. It also sparked renewed empathy for Indians, and historians began to look at Sitting Bull and other famous Indian figures through new eyes while using new sources. Stanley Vestal’s book *Sitting Bull: Champion of the Sioux* (1932) was the first to reexamine Sitting Bull’s legacy. Vestal was the pen name of historian Walter S. Campbell, a professor of English at the University of Oklahoma, whose methodology helped to transform historical studies about native subjects. The core of Vestal’s work was his use of Indian eyewitness accounts and oral traditions, as well as an intimate knowledge of Plains Indian culture. Vestal personally interviewed many Indians who had known Sitting Bull and fought alongside him in the Plains Wars. These sources formed the backbone of *Sitting Bull* and several other works. *New Sources of Indian History, 1805–1891* (Vestal 1934) was a collection of interviews and other material that related to the Indian Wars and the Ghost Dance movement from 1890–1891, both from the Indian and white perspective.

Vestal’s interview with White Bull, Sitting Bull’s nephew, was the basis of a 1957 article in *American Heritage* magazine, “The Man Who Killed Custer.” This essay was noteworthy because it was the first to identify White Bull as the man who killed Custer during the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Vestal 1957). Vestal acquired this information in an interview with White Bull in 1932 but did not include it in his first edition of *Sitting Bull* for two reasons. White Bull had never seen Custer before the battle and was only informed of the identity of his famous victim by one of the other Indians after the battle. Feeling that the identification of Custer was based on hearsay, White Bull asked that Vestal leave that part out of his story. Vestal also

feared that White Bull would be vulnerable to reprisals if his role in Custer's death was publicized, so he withheld that information until after White Bull's death in 1947 (Berthrong 1965, 101). Vestal's transcriptions were given to the University of Oklahoma to provide future researchers with access to valuable primary sources on the Indian Wars (University of Oklahoma 2014).

While he used the same sources that William Fletcher Johnson had consulted in 1891, the information Vestal gained from his interviews with White Bull and other Lakota enabled him to offer a much different picture of Sitting Bull (Vestal 1965, xii, 111). Vestal denounced McLaughlin's accusations of Sitting Bull's cowardice and hostility (Vestal 1957, x). Sitting Bull was seen by Vestal as a fierce warrior whose bravery on the battlefield earned him the title of head chief of the Hunkpapa band (Vestal 1965, 12–33, 50–69). In his interactions with whites, Sitting Bull was restrained but determined. He preferred that they stay out of Indian lands instead of going to war against them, but he refused to compromise and was willing to fight if necessary (Vestal 1965, 96–112). In response to McLaughlin's accusation that he had run away during the Reno fight, Vestal explained that Sitting Bull walked with a permanent limp because of a wound he had sustained in battle as a young man. This injury made it physically impossible for him to run (Vestal 1965, 177–179). Vestal found instead that Sitting Bull had rallied warriors to the south end of the village to meet Reno's advance. He also arranged for defense of the village's women and children when Custer attacked the northern side of the camp (Vestal 1965, 163–171, 177–179).

After a self-imposed exile in Canada, Sitting Bull still commanded respect and wielded considerable influence. According to Vestal, his opposition to assimilation was a direct threat to McLaughlin, who felt that his job as Indian agent required him to be the most powerful figure on the reservation. McLaughlin curtailed Sitting Bull's influence by besmirching his name and by elevating other Indians to important leadership positions to create internal rivalries. As McLaughlin's book clearly shows, Sitting Bull's death did not mark the end of efforts to cast his legacy in a negative light (Vestal 1965, 248–254). Nevertheless, *Sitting Bull: Champion of the Sioux* rescued Sitting Bull's legacy and sparked a renewed interest in his life.

Subsequent authors have agreed with the substance of Vestal's revisionism but were hesitant to completely embrace his heroic portrayal of Sitting Bull. Alexander B. Adams, for example, agreed that Sitting Bull became a very important figure among non-reservation Indians through a lifetime of bravery and seemingly prescient religious prophecy. While agreeing that Sitting Bull was a brave warrior and influential figure, Adams challenged Vestal on several points. First was the idea that Sitting Bull was selected to be the head chief of the Sioux. Adams observed that the different bands of the so-called Sioux Nation were diverse and had many different interests

that made it impossible for one man to effectively lead the group as a whole (Adams 1973, 43–57). Much of the childhood story that Vestal assigned to Sitting Bull was also left out by Adams (Adams 1973, 104). He wrote that Vestal had not been critical enough of the information gained in his interviews with Indians, who recalled events that had occurred nearly 60 years before. Adams largely ignored specific events in Sitting Bull's life because of a perceived lack of "valid" sources, and instead he contextualized the chief's life with what was developing in both the white and Indian worlds during that time. While Adams's methodology helped to place the events on the Plains in a broader perspective, his dismissal of Vestal's interviews reflects the stubbornly persistent bias Euro-American historians have held toward indigenous primary sources that undermined truly balanced scholarship of this important period in American history.

Robert M. Utley's *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (1993) concurs with much of what Vestal had written about Sitting Bull 60 years earlier. The title to his book is a metaphor for the dynamic leadership Sitting Bull provided for his people. According to Utley, the lance represents his life as a warrior and war leader of the Lakota from 1864 to 1868. In 1868, the Lakota essentially split into two separate factions, one which favored conciliation – embodied by Red Cloud and Spotted Tail – and another, led by Sitting Bull, that favored preserving traditional Lakota culture through uncompromising and, if necessary, violent resistance. The shield symbolizes Sitting Bull's leadership of these non-reservation Sioux from 1869 to 1881, a period defined by his unyielding stance against white expansion that ended with his surrender at Fort Buford in 1881 (Utley 1993, xi). Utley found that Vestal's most criticized sources – the oral histories given to him by One Bull, White Bull, and other Indians – were confirmed by other more "traditional" sources (Utley 1993, xvi). Contrary to Adams, Utley agrees with Vestal that the entire Hunkpapa band acknowledged Sitting Bull as their leader (Utley 1993, 36). By 1869, he had been selected head chief of all the Lakota, a largely ceremonial title that did not come with the authority to issue directives. Rather, it was a position that allowed him to use the wisdom gained from his life experiences to secure a future for his people, one that relied on Lakota tradition and culture rather than dependence on the Indian Department. His outspoken opposition to agency life put him in direct conflict with Red Cloud, who was the main leader of the Lakota on the Great Sioux Reservation (Utley 1993, 85–89).

Vestal, Adams, and Utley rescued Sitting Bull's legacy and restored his rightful place among the most honored patriots in American history, regardless of race. Sitting Bull embodied the power of intelligence, conviction, principle, and bravery when he defended Lakota lands against a relentless invasion by an imperial power. Historians also emphasized the critical role Sitting Bull played in assembling the so-called "Northern Nation," the massive gathering of Indians during the Great Sioux War of 1876.

Sitting Bull assumed a position atop its leadership structure (Bray 2006, 162). While Sitting Bull deserves credit for assembling the Sioux and Cheyenne alliance, the military prowess of this large Indian village could be traced to two other “patriot chiefs” who directed military operations.

### **Crazy Horse: The Mysterious Warrior Chief of the Oglala**

Perhaps the most misunderstood Indian figure is Crazy Horse, whose reputation as a warrior is well known but whose personal life has been shrouded in mystery. Most early writing on Crazy Horse focused on his exploits as a brave warrior and was confined to secondary mentions in literature about the Sioux Wars, Sitting Bull, and Gall. Mari Sandoz filled this void in the historiography with *Crazy Horse, the Strange Man of the Oglalas* (1942). Sandoz used the traditional range of sources – military reports, reports generated at the Indian agencies, newspaper accounts – but her use of Lakota oral traditions and her interviews with contemporaries of Crazy Horse had the greatest influence in shaping her narrative (Sandoz 1942, ix). Born with a fair complexion and light, curly hair, Crazy Horse’s strange appearance was merely the first sign of a uniqueness that made him stand out from other Lakota throughout his life (Sandoz 1942, 66–67). Sandoz revealed him to be a noble and courageous warrior whose only faults were the ways he flaunted Lakota convention, particularly his reserved and humble nature. He held several positions of leadership (Sandoz 1942, 122), serving simultaneously as the head chief of the Oglala band leading up to the Battle of the Little Bighorn and as the head war chief for the Northern Nation (Sandoz 1942, 309). As the main war leader of the Northern Nation, Crazy Horse planned the defense of the village before Custer’s attack (Sandoz 1942, 323, 326–334). His role in planning the defense of this massive village was his greatest legacy and etched his name in the pantheon of great American generals, both white and Indian.

Other historians have criticized the faults of Sandoz’s work in the years since, especially her literary flourish and the liberties she took with some of her sources; one historian described her book on Crazy Horse as historical fiction (Bray 2006, xvi). Her heroic image of Crazy Horse overshadows the more controversial aspects of his life, especially his affair with Black Buffalo Woman, who was the wife of a rival Lakota warrior. To make the situation seem more innocuous, Sandoz wrote that Crazy Horse and Black Buffalo Woman had a mutual affection that went all the way back to their adolescence. Their courtship was crushed by her uncle, Red Cloud, who felt that she should marry a man whose family had a higher standing in the tribe (Sandoz 1942, 134, 232–243). Beyond his role in the affair with Black Buffalo Woman, Red Cloud represented a controversial figure set up as the antithesis to Crazy Horse’s modesty, humility, and selflessness. To Sandoz,

Red Cloud was a vindictive man, jealous of Crazy Horse's prestige as a brave warrior, who had a direct hand in his death (Sandoz 1942, 134, 178, 232–249, 364–365, 385–386, 407–408). Red Cloud convinced both the military and Indian agency officials at Fort Robinson to arrest Crazy Horse after he brought his starving and weary band to the agency in 1877, less than a year after his triumph on the Greasy Grass. Red Cloud accused Crazy Horse of secretly plotting to escape the reservation and trying to lure other Indians away from the agencies to resume the Plains War. Crazy Horse surrendered peacefully and hoped to clear his name, but when agency officials tried to detain him in the agency jail, Crazy Horse resisted and a guard stabbed him to death with a bayonet (Sandoz 1942, 361, 407–413).

Despite its flaws, Sandoz's work charted the direction for future studies of Crazy Horse in much the same way that Vestal had done for Sitting Bull. Stephen E. Ambrose's *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors* (1975) so closely mirrored Sandoz's narrative that at times it is difficult to tell the two apart, even though Ambrose openly questioned Sandoz's methodology and her use of oral interviews (Ambrose 1975, 134, 487). Despite their similarities, Ambrose's account differed from Sandoz's work in several ways. He suggested that the affair between Crazy Horse and Black Buffalo Woman did not just cause embarrassment and disgrace for Crazy Horse but was one of the major factors that created a division among the Oglala. To Ambrose, the affair created a rift between Crazy Horse and Red Cloud that culminated in Red Cloud's signing of the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 (Ambrose 1975, 338–402, 506 fn. 23). This marked a turning point for Red Cloud, who had been a fierce opponent of white expansion in throughout the 1860s; after 1868, however, he was conciliatory toward whites. He worked closely with them to bring the Lakota to the agencies, which increased his stature with American officials and made him the most powerful Indian leader on the reservation. Red Cloud's status as the most influential Oglala was directly challenged by Crazy Horse's refusal to surrender, because his continued resistance inspired off-reservation Indians to continue the fight and emboldened others – especially young warriors – to reject the influence of Red Cloud and other moderates, to leave the agencies, and to join the Northern Nation in their defense of Indian culture. While Sandoz portrayed Crazy Horse as an important war chief, she did not fully explain his importance to the Indian victory at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Ambrose insisted that Crazy Horse's military prowess made him a military commander, who directed the movements of warriors across the entire battlefield (Ambrose 1975, 225–231).

Historian Mike Sajna offered the first major corrective to Sandoz's work. His revisionism stemmed largely from the sources Sandoz used and the way they influenced her account (Sajna 2000, ix). Sajna rejects Sandoz's depiction of a long courtship between Crazy Horse and Black Buffalo Woman,

pointing out that none of the interviews or written accounts taken from eyewitnesses had confirmed an earlier relationship between them (Sajna 2000, 157–158). Where Sandoz offered no deeper explanation of Crazy Horse's reserved demeanor, Sajna suggests that it was the product of several traumatic incidents from his childhood, particularly the suicide of his mother when he was a young boy. Her death and the circumstances that surrounded it – Crazy Horse's father, Worm, had a brother who was killed in combat against an enemy tribe and Crazy Horse's mother killed herself upon hearing the news – likely haunted him for the rest of his life (Sajna 2000, 25–27). Sajna also suggests that Crazy Horse's reserved nature and desire to become a fierce warrior could have resulted from the ridicule he received from other Lakota children because of his fair complexion (Sajna 2000, 28–29). He dismisses Crazy Horse's ties to the Cheyenne, a main point that drove Sandoz's narrative, because those connections are not supported by the sources (Sajna 2000, 123, 171). At the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Sajna believes that Crazy Horse realized that his greatest value to the Lakota was as a leader and knew that reckless charges into the enemy line would therefore jeopardize the welfare of his people. As a result, he attacked the enemy lines when only a few soldiers remained (Sajna 2000, 285–288). The fundamental flaws of Sajna's work are similar to those with Adams's book on Sitting Bull, that is, the tendency of Euro-American academics to disregard the value of natives' oral tradition. While oral histories and interviews taken after a significant passage of time do need to be examined with a measure of caution and corroborated whenever possible, the suggestion that oral tradition is more fallible than so-called "traditional" written sources veers dangerously toward "history by the victors" – a paradigm that has become passé in recent years.

Perhaps the most prolific contributor to the historiography on Crazy Horse is Joseph M. Marshall III, who has produced volumes on Crazy Horse, Indian leadership, Lakota culture, and the Little Bighorn fight. His books include *The Lakota Way: Stories and Lessons for Living* (2001), *The Journey of Crazy Horse: A Lakota History* (2004), *The Day the World Ended at Little Bighorn: A Lakota History* (2007), and *The Power of Four: Leadership Lessons of Crazy Horse* (2009). These works focus on leadership and the unique and historic ways that Lakota leaders, and Crazy Horse in particular, molded an effective fighting force that defeated the US Army twice during the Great Sioux War of 1876.

The substance of Marshall's work harkens back to Sandoz yet is enriched by his unique understanding of Lakota traditions and culture, which he learned throughout his life on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation. His key intervention in the historiography is his belief that Crazy Horse had a spiritual calling, likely from his vision quest as a young man, to be a Thunder Dreamer or *Heyoka* – a Lakota who "sacrificed reputation and ego for the sake of the people" (Marshall 2004, xvi). For Marshall, Crazy

Horse's calling as a Thunder Dreamer came with certain responsibilities, including the personal sacrifice of being isolated, reserved, and somewhat withdrawn from society to serve a higher calling on behalf of the people. This, in Marshall's estimation, explains the unique personality that was the source of so much speculation by previous Crazy Horse biographers: his reserved and humble nature, his disdain for the limelight, and his tendency toward isolation and contemplation (Marshall 2004, 82–83).

Crazy Horse's military prowess and courage in battle made him an ideal candidate for leadership positions in the Lakota political structure. They named him a Shirt Wearer – an exclusive leadership society that valued leadership through example rather than issuing directives – which required him to make personal sacrifices for the sake of the tribe as a whole (Sandoz 1942, 174–178; Bray 2006, 121, 423 fn. 3). He was expelled from this position because his affair with Black Buffalo Woman violated the core values of the Shirt Wearers; it was an inherently selfish act that elevated his personal desires above the collective good of the tribe (Marshall 2004, 141, 162, 193). Despite the scandal, Crazy Horse continued to play a key role in the war against American expansion and was named the war chief of the entire Northern Nation with Sitting Bull's approval. Sitting Bull realized that if Crazy Horse served as war leader for the camp, it would help to recruit young warriors away from the agencies for the chance to earn war honors alongside the most prestigious Lakota warrior of that time (Marshall 2004, 214–223).

After the debacle at Battle of the Little Bighorn, the US Army pursued the Lakota with renewed vigor and the Northern Nation was forced to stay on the run because of the constant threat of attack from soldiers. Sustaining such a large village was difficult because of the resources it consumed – food, clean water, and forage for their pony herd – so Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse divided their force to make them more mobile. Neither band had a safe place for refuge, and the disappearance of the bison made it more difficult to procure adequate food. The winter of 1876–1877 was especially harsh for the Lakota, and the normal hardships of the winter months were magnified by the lack of food, shelter, or respite from constant attacks by American forces. In the spring, Crazy Horse assessed the deteriorating condition of his people and made the difficult decision to surrender his band at Fort Robinson on May 6, 1877. Crazy Horse realized that until every Lakota had surrendered to the agencies, those who remained on the run would be under constant fear of attack by white soldiers. If Crazy Horse had continued his resistance, the only option for his band would have been to retreat to Canada to take refuge with Sitting Bull. Crazy Horse realized that if he surrendered he would likely be in great personal danger, yet he recognized that to remain on the run would be subjecting his people to more privation and suffering. His surrender to American officials may have doomed him, but this personal sacrifice was

consistent with his higher calling as a Thunder Dreamer and the legacy of his prior role as a Shirt Wearer – he willingly surrendered his own freedom, possibly even his life, for the good of his people (Marshall 2004, 243; Marshall 2009, 72–73).

Marshall feels that Crazy Horse was an effective leader because he led by example. Because the concept of “authority” had no parallel in traditional Lakota culture, their leaders built respect among the people and inspired others to follow them, a theme that Marshall repeats in each of his major works on Crazy Horse and Lakota culture (Marshall 2004, 286–288; Marshall 2007, 56–74; Marshall 2001, 11–12; Marshall 2009, 119–149, 167–168). One example of the power of Crazy Horse’s reputation occurred during Red Cloud’s War. On December 21, 1866, Crazy Horse was chosen to lead a decoy party to draw soldiers out of Fort Phil Kearny in what is known today as the Fetterman Fight. When Crazy Horse was selected, Marshall writes that hundreds of warriors volunteered to serve alongside him. His reputation for bravery and success in battle was so powerful that others were willing to follow his lead into a very dangerous engagement (Marshall 2009, 36–37).

Contrary to Sandoz’s account, both Sajna and Marshall described Crazy Horse as a heroic but deeply flawed individual. Humanizing Crazy Horse was certainly a focus of Kingsley M. Bray’s *Crazy Horse: A Lakota Life* (2006), which made several significant and controversial additions to the Crazy Horse historiography. Of particular interest is never before revealed information about Crazy Horse’s childhood and family life, which Bray obtained through confidential interviews with several Oglala (Bray 2006, xvii). Crazy Horse’s parents, Worm and Rattling Blanket Woman, experienced marital difficulties after both were accused of infidelity. According to Bray, Crazy Horse’s light complexion and wavy brown hair made Worm suspicious, and he accused Rattling Blanket Woman of having an affair with a white man, which ultimately led her to commit suicide (Bray 2006, 9–11). One of the other affairs Bray mentions was between Rattling Blanket Woman and Worm’s brother, Male Crow, who was killed in battle, which could explain Sajna’s claim that she committed suicide after the death of Worm’s brother. In either case, Bray points out, the death of his mother had a profound impact on Crazy Horse and likely contributed to his withdrawn personality. Bray’s depiction of Crazy Horse’s affair with Black Buffalo Woman is also unique, because he suggests that it occurred after Crazy Horse had already begun the courtship of his eventual wife, Black Shawl. Like Sajna, Bray finds no evidence that the affair between Black Buffalo Woman and Crazy Horse started in their adolescent years; it likely started several months before they eloped (Bray 2006, 127–133, 145–147, 424 fn. 3). Bray also suggests that Crazy Horse had several affairs throughout his marriage to Black Shawl, none of which were mentioned by previous biographers (Bray 2006, 172–173).

Bray's nuanced approach humanizes Crazy Horse by balancing his heroics against the flaws in his personal character, which allows Crazy Horse's accomplishments to be seen for what they truly were – brave and courageous acts of selflessness. The portrayal of Crazy Horse as man, not a demigod or a superhuman figure as Sandoz imagined him, makes his accomplishments more impressive, because they were performed by a human being who struggled with fear, insecurities, lust, and self-centeredness. Through courage and resilience he overcame his personal weaknesses and transformed himself into the mastermind behind the Indians' most stunning military accomplishment of the nineteenth century.

### Gall: The Forgotten Warrior

Unlike Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, the passage of time has not been kind to the legacy of the third “patriot chief,” Gall. Noted as a brave warrior and Hunkpapa leader, Gall achieved a level of fame in the 1880s and 1890s that was second only to Sitting Bull, a fellow Hunkpapa who had been Gall's mentor since he was a young boy. Gall's fame declined after his death in 1894 largely because of the life he lived after his surrender. Gall's elevated status as a leader on the reservation was mainly the work of James McLaughlin, the aforementioned Indian Agent at Standing Rock, who was a leading figure in the campaign to assimilate the Indians. After his surrender in 1880, Gall eagerly embraced the tenets of the assimilation campaign: farming, private property, education, American jurisprudence, and eventually Christianity. McLaughlin held him up to other Indians as an example of the success that could be achieved by abandoning Indian culture and becoming “Americanized.” At the same time, he publicized Gall's transformation to whites as proof that assimilation worked, because it proved that even the most fearsome warrior could be turned into an industrious, peaceful farmer (Vestal 1932, x; Larson 2007, xii, 194–196). In *My Friend the Indian*, McLaughlin balanced his character assassination of Sitting Bull by praising Gall as the true Indian hero of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, greater than either Crazy Horse or Sitting Bull. McLaughlin suggested that Gall was the lynchpin in the defense against Reno's attack at the south end of the village, not Sitting Bull, and eventually forced Reno and his men to retreat back across the river. Afterward, he personally rallied the warriors together to meet Custer's advance and led the charge that scattered the cavalry's horses and threw the soldiers' defensive formations into disarray, which proved to be a deciding factor in the battle (McLaughlin 1910, 118–119).

In the years since McLaughlin's book, Gall's legacy in the historiography was that of a supporting character in a number of key events. Gall was one of several Indian leaders in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, but the heroic

actions and leadership of Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and others certainly dispel the notion that Gall commanded the Indian forces across the entire battlefield, as McLaughlin suggested (Marshall 2004, 232). The idea that Gall was one of the most important Hunkpapa leaders on the Plains has also been challenged. During Sitting Bull's exile in Canada, Gall was not even Sitting Bull's second-in-command. Sitting Bull relied mostly on other men like One Bull, Sitting Bull's nephew, and Spotted Eagle, with Gall taking a secondary leadership role (Larson 2007, 159). Even his split with Sitting Bull was seen as largely orchestrated by McLaughlin, with Gall portrayed as either a dupe or willing participant to further his own objectives and lust for power (Larson 2007, 194; Utley 1993, 22, 251).

The fragmented documentary record on Gall was finally turned into a full-length biography by Robert W. Larson in *Gall: Lakota War Chief* (2007). Larson believes that there are two main reasons that Gall has received limited attention from historians and writers since his death in 1894. First, the amount of primary source material on Gall is small compared to that for Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. The second reason is due to the idea that Gall "sold out" after his surrender. In other words, he aspired to become a great leader among his people, which led him to curry favor with whites.

The lack of primary source material forced Larson to fill the gaps in his narrative of Gall's life by emphasizing his connections to other Indians on the Plains in the documentary evidence, events described in Lakota Winter Counts, and military records (Larson 2007, xxii–xv). Much of Larson's account about Gall as a young man correlates with the life of Sitting Bull, who mentored Gall as a young man after Gall's father was killed in battle against another tribe (Larson 2007, 27–31). When Lakota families, horses, and villages were threatened by neighboring tribes, Gall accompanied Sitting Bull in his raids against enemy peoples, was wounded in battle at least once, and, by one estimation, counted nearly 20 coups. Indeed, Sitting Bull held such high regard for Gall's military skills that he recommended him for membership in several prominent Lakota warrior societies. The honors he achieved as a warrior prove that he fought actively for the survival of his people. As tension escalated on the frontier, Gall joined Sitting Bull in fights at Killdeer Mountain and the Battle of the Fisk Wagon Train (Larson 2007, 31, 35–39, 45–50).

Larson refutes the suggestion that Gall was a sell-out, instead referring to him as the ultimate "pragmatic realist." Gall used several names throughout his life, including "The-Man-That-Goes-in-the-Middle," an indication that he was open to compromise and took whatever action he felt was necessary to provide for his people, even if it meant sacrificing his own reputation (Larson 2007, 17, 234). During a brief period of peace in 1865, Gall led his band to Fort Berthold to trade with whites and Arikara Indians (who were traditional enemies of the Lakota). In 1868, the Treaty

of Fort Laramie divided the Lakota into two factions. One group, led by Red Cloud, embraced life on the agency, while the other group, led by Sitting Bull, rejected reservation life and dedicated themselves to the Lakota tradition of hunting bison on the Plains. Gall moved to Fort Yates at the Standing Rock Agency to collect rations for his people, despite his close ties with Sitting Bull and the resistance movement, because the disappearance of buffalo threatened to drive his band into starvation (Larson 2007, 55–57, 61–62, 98).

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Larson's work is his suggestion that Gall did not play the deciding role in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, as McLaughlin and others have claimed. Contrary to McLaughlin's assertion that Gall coordinated the defensive effort against Reno, Larson found evidence that when the fight started, Gall first moved in the opposite direction in order to collect his band's horses. When he returned to the south end of the village, Larson believes that Gall directed the charge that drove Reno and his men out of the trees back across the river (Larson 2007, 119–132). Gall's personal account of the battle revealed that some of the first shots of Reno's attack on the Hunkpapa camp killed two of Gall's wives and three of his daughters. While previous scholars believed that Gall knew about their deaths from the time the battle started, Larson insists that Gall did not discover this until much later. Larson writes that before he rode to join the fight against Custer, Gall rode through the Hunkpapa camp to secure his family, only to find them dead (Larson 2007, 126–127, 258 fn. 39). This intriguing counter-narrative, that Gall grabbed his horses after the Reno fight had already begun and looked for his family before joining the attack on Custer, seems to preclude the idea that Gall dictated strategy and held command over every warrior in the fight. Larson also suggests that Gall did not lead the attack that scattered the cavalry horses but rather directed others to do it, while he led the fight against one of the soldiers' other defensive positions. Gall's role in the battle cannot be underestimated, but Larson's revisionism certainly brings the battle into sharper focus by clearing away the obfuscation created by McLaughlin's boosterism.

Larson is convinced that Gall's surrender and subsequent life on the reservation were driven by the responsibility he had for his people. Gall felt that starvation was inevitable if the Canadian government refused to distribute rations to Sitting Bull's beleaguered encampment, because hunting bison on the open range was no longer an option. Larson proposes that Gall's anger toward Sitting Bull came from the great chief's recalcitrance and stubborn refusal to surrender or negotiate with the US government despite the fact that his people in Canada were starving (Larson 2007, 169–173, 175–187, 194–196). Once he made his decision to surrender, Gall worked closely with agency officials to emphasize education, to teach his people to farm, and to accept American jurisprudence. To further those

goals, he turned himself into a model for others to follow. He worked hard to become a successful farmer, sent his own children to the reservation school, and even served as a judge for the Court of Indian Offenses (Larson 2007, 233–234). Gall was a fierce warrior but pragmatically traded with enemies when his people were hungry. He transformed himself from a war chief into a bridge between two civilizations as the Hunkpapa adjusted to life on the reservation. In these ways, he had truly become “The-Man-That-Goes-In-The-Middle.”

Starting in the 1930s, Gall’s stature among “patriot chiefs” declined, replaced by a resurgent interest in Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. The reasons why Gall’s reputation fell and the others’ rose is a matter of speculation, but this reversal does raise several intriguing possibilities. Sitting Bull’s time in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show aside, he and Crazy Horse both resisted assimilation, while Gall fully embraced American culture. Gall’s acceptance of assimilation, combined with his role in besmirching Sitting Bull’s legacy, damaged his reputation as a fierce warrior and advocate for his people.

The way that each of the “patriot chiefs” died may have played a role in their legacies. Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse were both murdered, because they threatened the political power-structure that agency officials and moderate Indians had created on the reservations after 1868. In the 1890s, McLaughlin and Indian agency officials were threatened by the Ghost Dance, which they felt undermined their control over the reservations and could potentially reignite warfare in the American West. Sitting Bull’s support for the Ghost Dance added to McLaughlin’s paranoia that the chief was subversive, that he was influencing agency Indians to reject white authority, and encourage their resistance to assimilation. Sitting Bull was killed when McLaughlin’s Indian police officers arrested him to prevent the Ghost Dance from destabilizing the entire reservation. Crazy Horse was killed during a similar confrontation. Many of his former allies, including Red Cloud and Spotted Tail, felt that Crazy Horse was given special treatment by American officials after his surrender. They resented the fact that they had given up the war against the whites, yet Crazy Horse was being feted and given special treatment despite his role in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Red Cloud, in particular, spread rumors that Crazy Horse planned to leave the reservation with his band to continue the war. Officials at Fort Robinson ordered his arrest, and he was killed when agency officials tried to place him in jail. In a sense, both Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse had become martyrs for the cause of preserving Plains Indian culture. They were great leaders, who fought until warfare had so thoroughly ravaged their people that they had no other choice but to surrender. After they had put the war behind them, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse both resisted outright assimilation and tried to use their influence and credibility to shape the terms on which Indians would be incorporated into the nation-state.

Gall, on the other hand, died under somewhat ignominious circumstances. Once he settled on the reservation, Gall embraced many tenets of American culture, including overeating. At the time of his death, his weight had mushroomed to nearly 300 pounds, despite being only 5 foot 7 inches tall. Gall died of a possible drug overdose on December 5, 1894, when he drank an entire bottle of medicine that was designed to help him lose weight (Larson 2007, 13, 230–232). Just as Sandoz and Vestal had done for Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, respectively, Larson's work is important because it turns one of the biggest criticisms of Gall – his acceptance of American culture – into a point of strength. Gall was a realist, who knew that the disappearance of the bison had rendered the nomadic lifestyle of the Lakota obsolete by eliminating their traditional hunts. He pragmatically embraced assimilation, because he knew that life on the reservation was the only option Indians had to survive in the harsh environment of the Great Plains. For Gall, his position as a respected figure and fierce warrior gave him the credibility to act as a cultural mediator between the white and Indian worlds, to promote assimilation, and to ensure that the Lakota people would endure.

### Conclusion

The legacies of all three “patriot chiefs” – and the field of Native American history more broadly – have benefited from scholarship that challenged long-held “sacred cows” of Euro-American history. These works drew from Indian oral traditions to incorporate the native voice into their narratives and used their knowledge of Indian culture to offer new interpretations of so-called “traditional sources” such as military reports and Indian affairs documents. Taken together, the scholarship on these great leaders marks a new direction – a more comprehensive and inclusive look at the Battle of the Little Bighorn – one that credits native warriors for the skill they used to secure this victory.

Future works on the Battle of the Little Bighorn will likely follow the model first established by Grinnell, Vestal, and Sandoz, which looked at indigenous oral traditions and stories as important and valuable resources, equal to those produced by white Indian agents, military commanders, or court stenographers. Surprisingly, despite the thousands of books about Battle of the Little Bighorn, there are still many aspects of the battle that have not been addressed. Grinnell's work on the Cheyenne is an example of this. *The Fighting Cheyennes* inspired a number of skillfully written volumes on Cheyenne culture, including E. Adamson Hoebel's *The Cheyennes: Indians of the Great Plains* (1960), Peter J. Powell's *Sweet Medicine* (1969), and John H. Moore's *The Cheyenne* (1996). Studies of individual Cheyenne leaders have typically focused on the early years of reservation life, most

notably Mari Sandoz's *Cheyenne Autumn* (1953) and John H. Monnett's *Tell Them We Are Going Home: The Odyssey of the Northern Cheyennes* (2001), which both describe the escape of Dull Knife's band from Darlington Agency in 1878. As of 2014, scholars have yet to employ the methodology of Larson, Marshall, or Utley to discuss Two Moons or Dull Knife, the foremost Cheyenne leaders in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Filling these gaps in the historical record is required for a comprehensive understanding of the Greasy Grass Fight.

In his book *The Day the World Ended at Little Bighorn*, Marshall observes that the Rosebud Sioux Tribal Fair and Powwow has evolved out of what used to be a celebration by the Lakota for their victory at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. It is fitting that the biggest yearly celebration of Lakota culture grew out of the memory of their greatest victory, thanks in large part to "patriot chiefs," who honored their rich and proud culture.

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# Chapter Four

## THE NATIVE WAY OF WAR

*Daniel Sauerwein*

The story of warfare between Euro-Americans and Native Americans has been etched into American myth and popular culture. The campaigns of the Plains Indian Wars have been dramatized in several ways since the fighting stopped. A number of these stories revolve around the United States Army waging war against Native Americans in support of westward expansion, especially in post-Civil War America. The Army was portrayed in a usually positive light, while Native forces were usually either seen as villainous or as unfortunate victims and remnants of a bygone era.

American understanding of the Plains conflicts and the Little Bighorn campaign is shaped by films, including *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Son of the Morning Star* (1991), and John Ford's older cavalry trilogy. Though recent attempts in film have provided a more balanced view of the Plains Indian Wars, general knowledge of the battles, particularly the Battle of the Little Bighorn, is clouded in myth and fabrication. According to John C. Ewers, the overall understanding and memory of the Indian Wars glossed over the larger intertribal warfare that was present on the Great Plains for many years. The various ways of war are worthy of study and are finally getting due diligence in the historical scholarship.

Since the earliest encounters and conflicts, Native Americans developed a unique style of warfighting, both suited to the various environments in which they lived as well as incorporating tactics used by their enemies. As with the larger historical understanding of Native Americans, the study of how they waged war has become an increasingly important area of study. The history of Native Americans was often overshadowed or ignored for

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much of the early twentieth century. The field blossomed in the late twentieth century, as the larger discipline has taken greater interest in the contributions of non-white actors to American history.

When considering Native ways of war, two distinct but linked types of conflict are present, each with their own unique characteristics that influenced the other. One conflict was between Native groups and the US Army, while the other was older, with hostilities running deeper, and involved conflicts between tribal populations. After contact with Euro-Americans, Native groups gained new technologies that affected their way of fighting, with firearms being the major variable of change in the nature of conflict.

In order to understand the unique attributes that characterized Native warfighting during the Little Bighorn campaign, a broader study of conflict in North America is essential. The study of both intertribal conflict and Native versus Euro-American clashes involves episodes dating to the colonial period in American history, as technologies introduced by Europeans altered Native culture and power politics well before direct contact between some tribes and whites occurred. Given that the tribes of the interior did not exist in a historical vacuum, they were part of larger networks of trade and interaction that spanned, in some cases, hundreds of miles from their homelands. In addition, events further to the east affected tribes on the Great Plains, as other Native groups were pushed westward while coming into contact, and sometimes conflict, with the Plains Indians.

### Officers and Gentlemen: Early Writers on Native Warfare

Long before Custer's command met disaster at the Greasy Grass, conflict among Native Americans and with Euro-Americans was present on the North American continent. Since the 1970s, historians have demonstrated a greater appreciation of Native warfighting abilities and their broader contributions on the American historical mosaic. Prior to that, Native American history, including warfare, was often cast in a negative light. This understanding usually revolved around the prevailing racial attitudes as well as the assumptions of Manifest Destiny that shaped how historians examined the nation's past.

Some of the earliest historical accounts dealing with Native American warfare were written by the soldiers, usually officers, patrolling the Plains as part of the broader American expansion westward. These men discussed the Native cultures they encountered in their reports back to higher headquarters as well as with their own personal reflections. Through the soldiers who fought the various tribes for control over the territories, the first glimpses of how Natives used warfare as part of their culture became apparent. Two prominent examples include James Willert's *Bourke's Diary* (1986) and Wilbur S. Nye's *Carbine & Lance* (1937). Lieutenant John Bourke served as adjutant

and aide to General George Crook during the 1876 campaign against the Sioux. Bourke's writings present a detailed account of Army life on the Plains. Regarding Native warfare, Bourke noted how the Sioux constructed shields made from thick skin of buffalo bulls, which were capable of repelling arrows and lances. He also noted the intertribal warfare between the Sioux and their enemies, specifically the Bannock, seeming to indicate the important role of combat in these cultures (Willert, 35–36).

In contrast to Bourke's work, Wilbur Nye examined the broad conflict between Native Americans and the federal government primarily in the southern Plains. Nye's analysis of Native societies was part of a larger historical study of Fort Sill that he was commissioned to write. While intended to be an area-specific history, Nye did an excellent job of considering the various Native societies that were affected by Fort Sill and the Army throughout the nineteenth century.

As Armstrong Starkey pointed out in *European and Native American Warfare, 1675–1815* (1998), the prevailing view in the United States of the broader conflict with Native American groups was informed by Francis Parkman's examination of the French and Indian War in *Montcalm and Wolfe* (1884). While Parkman's work focuses on a period and place well removed from the Great Plains, it is essential to understand that his interpretation of Native Americans was important in setting the tone for many years. Starkey noted how his own interest in frontier warfare was largely influenced by Parkman. However, he stressed that the problem with Parkman's analysis was the general disregard shown to the Native Americans within the larger conflict between Britain and France for control of eastern North America. Indians to Parkman represented an uncivilized and primitive contrast to the civilized and advanced European societies that were battling for influence and control over what was Native land.

It is important to stress that while Parkman's work, when seen against the backdrop of a century of historical scholarship, appears inadequate or even shoddy, his treatment of Native Americans reflected the biases of his times. His failure to see Native Americans through their own eyes was influenced by the contemporary conflict between the American military and Native forces in the territories. Less than a decade removed from the fighting at the Little Bighorn, Parkman viewed Native Americans as impediments to the civilizing force of an expanding United States. Furthermore, America was piecing together a coherent national history at the time, and historians were eager to trumpet the successes of the United States. There was no room for Native Americans in this history, because they were incorrectly perceived as uncivilized and backward. Understanding Parkman's view toward Native Americans as they related to early American history revealed much about how historians examined the nation's history in the late nineteenth century.

Another historian who influenced understanding of Native American societies in the territories was Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner, a giant

within the early profession, left a profound legacy on the study of America, and particularly the West that has been a foundation for subsequent historiography. His landmark work *The Frontier in American History* (1921) was an extension of his essay, delivered at the 1893 meeting of the American Historical Association, which argued the “frontier thesis.” Throughout this work, Turner discussed Native warfare as part of the larger frontier experience that shaped American culture, viewing it as necessary to remove Natives, who were seen as impediments to national progress. Given his level of influence over the larger profession, especially during its early days of professionalization, the “frontier thesis” was a dominant force in American historical thought until scholars began to challenge it in the 1940s.

While historians of the time were paying little attention to Native Americans and their ways of war, save for the riveting accounts of heroic soldiers expanding American control and jurisdiction across the continent, anthropologists began to consider Native peoples as distinct and worthy of study. One early example relating to the Native way of war was George Bird Grinnell’s article “Coups and Scalps among the Plains Indians,” which appeared in *American Anthropologist* in the spring of 1910.

Grinnell, who was a proponent of environmental conservation and the preservation of Native American cultures, was much more sensitive to gathering and collecting the stories of various cultures than his contemporaries. According to David Wishart (2011), he was a product of his time, viewing Natives through the lens of social Darwinism and needing to submit to progress and civilization. However, while reflecting those attitudes, his contributions to the understanding of Native Americans is profound. The accounts he gathered during his career survive, including in several of his prominent works such as *Pawnee Hero Stories and Folk-Tales* (1889), *Blackfoot Lodge Tales* (1892), *The Cheyenne Indians: Their History and Ways of Life* (1923), and *By Cheyenne Campfires* (1926). Wishart stresses Grinnell’s importance in fostering a better understanding of Native American cultures on the Great Plains.

For years, Grinnell argued that many contemporary works misunderstood the concepts of counting coup and scalping. He sought to correct the record. After providing two prevailing assumptions about the practices, which he excoriated for their inaccuracies, he underscored the greater importance within the Plains cultures of counting coup as an act of extreme bravery warranting recognition. Grinnell noted that touching a fallen enemy with an object held in one’s bare hand while under fire was brave. Even braver still was the act of touching an enemy combatant who was alive but then leaving – all the while under enemy fire. Grinnell also noted that the weaponry used in coup taking was hierarchical in nature, as it was preferred not to use weapons that could harm at long distances such as a bow and arrow but rather to use a lance, a war club, or a hatchet. The highest regard belonged to those only carrying a whip, or

a short stick, often referred to as a “coup stick.” Grinnell mentioned that counting coup extended beyond battle with human opponents, as members of hunting parties would count coup on fallen large game, particularly bears. Grinnell seemed to stress the psychological importance of counting coup within Native societies, both for the victorious parties and the vanquished, as it represented, at least in Native eyes, a seemingly emasculating force and a humiliation on the battlefield for the victim. Grinnell’s insight, though reflective of the period, was quite foundational for later understanding of Native American culture and warfare, as he stressed that warfare was one of the most important activities on the Great Plains.

As the early twentieth century progressed, the study of Native cultures and warfare became increasingly important for anthropologists and historians. Works like Doane Robinson’s *History of the Dakota Sioux Indians* (1904) and George Hyde’s *Red Cloud’s Folk: A History of the Oglala Sioux Indians* (1937) became quite useful in understanding the Plains Indians. By the 1930s, interest in Native cultures, primarily by anthropologists, began a slow ascent of new scholarship to an eventual place of importance within the broad historical discipline. While still mired by prevailing racial attitudes and prejudices, the growth in interest was spurred by both the reflecting upon the closed frontier and the popularity of the western genre in popular culture, which raised curiosity about the Plains tribes.

One important work to examine the Plains Indians was Walter Prescott Webb’s *The Great Plains* (1931). Webb’s study discussed the Native groups on the Great Plains, as he devoted a chapter to their significance and several pages to their style of warfare. He stressed the importance of the horse, especially in warfare, as the horse and its warrior were a perfect unit. He added that the weapons used by Plains tribes were adapted for use with the horse, illustrating the adaptability of their warfighting to changing technology. For Webb, the important and dominant tribe worth remembering for warfighting capabilities was the Comanche, which reflected Webb’s focus on the southern Plains. Despite the general lack of attention to northern tribes, Webb’s work remains an important text for a broad overview of Native Americans on the Great Plains.

One of the more prominent works to be published on Native American warfare represented a first-hand account of Lakota warfare from their perspective. Walter S. Campbell, who used the pen name Stanley Vestal, published *Warpath: The True Story of the Fighting Sioux Told in a Biography of Chief White Bull* (1934). He worked closely with the legendary Lakota warrior, White Bull, to bring his story to light. White Bull was the nephew of Sitting Bull, who had a great reputation as a warfighter even prior to the battle of the Little Bighorn. Vestal, a prominent writer from the 1920s into the 1950s, also wrote a biography on Sitting Bull in 1932. Vestal’s works popularized the Native American accounts of the Plains wars that anthropologists had begun to study, attempting to bring a new awareness to the

Native side of the conflicts. Vestal's contributions were essential to ensuring that the Native accounts of those directly involved in the fighting were preserved for succeeding generations.

White Bull's story is rich and detailed, chronicling the Lakota way of life. He discussed various elements that were essential both in hunting and combat on the Plains. He noted the tradition of counting coup and how the Lakota used beatings to punish warriors for various infractions. In addition to the accounts of fighting the US Army, White Bull also provided important background on the Lakota development of warrior societies.

### Revisionism Rising

By the 1950s, historians began to reassess the long-held interpretations regarding Native Americans, their warfare, and the Little Bighorn campaign. This was a slow process, as the larger discipline was still in the throes of the consensus mode of historiography. Scholars tended to focus on the virtuous qualities of Americans, influenced by the festering Cold War and clouded by McCarthyism and the second Red Scare. These forces caused the study of subjects that did not cast America in a positive light to be marginalized and potentially regarded as a threat to mainstream society.

Despite the overwhelming influence of consensus thought, two important works emerged during the early 1950s that had profound influence on the understanding of Native American warfare. Frank Raymond Secoy published his landmark *Changing Military Patterns of the Great Plains Indians* (1953), which considered the Native accounts of warfare on the Plains. These reminiscences were important not only because they represented the Native American side of history but also because such accounts had been ignored or marginalized by many historians.

Secoy's study of Plains warfare and military strategy was a landmark work of its time. He covered many variables that influenced the military history of Native Americans on the Great Plains, placing them within the context of early encounters with European colonial powers. He divided the region along geographic lines, including the southern, northwestern, and northeastern Plains. He further divided the chronology along the introduction of the horse and firearms to Native cultures, with each period and geographic area taking on its own characteristics as related to warfighting. In addition, Secoy stressed the differences in how various tribes adjusted to the shift from pre-horse and pre-gun periods to post-horse and post-gun periods and what those changes meant for the particular style of combat among tribes.

Secoy's work is significant in that it represented an early example of a new methodology that influenced later scholars studying Native Americans. As noted earlier, anthropologists had been researching Natives for decades. This stood in contrast to historians, who, largely influenced by the frontier

thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, disregarded studying Native perspectives while arguing that the closing of the frontier marked the end of Native American history. Combining the methodologies of both anthropology and history, some scholars began to craft the subfield of ethnohistory, which was suited to studying Native history from their own perspective. Given that the Native American tribes on the Plains relied upon oral traditions to preserve their accounts, the circumstances left little or no written evidence for scholars to utilize.

Secoy concluded that prior to the introduction of the horse Plains tribes fought in an infantry style, complete with animal skin armor, in a fashion similar to that used in the ancient societies of Europe. He added that some Plains cultures adorned their horses with leather armor for a period, an important sign of adaptation to the changing technology. As Secoy's analysis compartmentalized the Plains into several sectors based upon the horse frontier and firearm frontier, the emergence of several distinct patterns of warfare eventually posed challenges to the US Army. Soldiers were forced to contend with distinct enemy forces, each with its own variant to waging war that forced them to adapt to the changing dynamics. While one can bemoan the loss of various cultural attributes via the introduction of the horse and gun among Native Americans over time, these two forces also reflected the adaptability of Native culture, specifically to waging war by various means and to using innovations to their advantages.

Secoy's contribution to the understanding of Native American history and warfare is profound. His work influenced the early practitioners of ethnohistory while also greatly enhancing the understanding of Native groups as a whole. Through his examination of the various segments of the Great Plains, he was able to show the significant changes over time to the Native way of war via the introduction of the horse and gun.

Another major work of the 1950s that influenced the understanding of Native warfighting was William A. Graham's *The Custer Myth* (1953). Graham's work was important in attempting to revise the long-held interpretations of General George Armstrong Custer, which were dominated by the efforts of Elizabeth Custer to safeguard her late husband's reputation. Though marginalizing the Native accounts of the battle, Graham ushered in a reassessment of Custer and the Little Bighorn. The attempt to break the myth surrounding this major battle of the Indian Wars was important in encouraging succeeding generations of scholars to begin critiquing the accepted interpretations of Native culture and warfare. Graham's contribution also commenced the slow collapse of consensus thought within the discipline.

In addition to Secoy, several scholars began to examine specific tribes of the Plains. In the tradition of the earlier works of Grinnell to preserve the stories of Native Americans, John C. Ewers's masterful *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains* (1958) and Wallace and Hoebel's *The Comanches: Lords of the South Plains* (1953) were solid works addressing

groups that were prominent on the Plains in the late nineteenth century. These histories built upon the existing scholarly works written on other tribes, including George Hyde's *Red Cloud's Folk* (1937), which was one of the better early histories of the Sioux.

The Native American side of warfare benefited heavily from another important work on the subject. David Humphreys Miller, another prolific writer on Native American subjects, wrote *Custer's Fall: The Indian Side of the Story* (1957) and *Ghost Dance* (1959). These works, which exploited earlier oral history accounts, represented important contributions to the broader ethnohistory dealing with Native Americans. In *Custer's Fall*, Miller considered accounts from dozens of aged veterans of Little Bighorn, including One Bull, White Bull, Black Elk, and descendants of several Indian scouts. Their accounts had been long neglected. Long interested in Native culture, Miller provided a riveting account of the battle, noting its significance on the broad course of warfare between Natives and whites. He argued that Little Bighorn represented the high point for Native warriors, for they never massed forces in such a fashion again while focusing their efforts on a more defensive struggle.

Miller's *Ghost Dance* (1959) examined the later struggle against increasing pressure from American forces upon Natives, when the Ghost Dance movement provided them hope and an inspiration for resistance against white encroachment. Like his earlier work on the Little Bighorn, Miller relied upon first-person oral accounts and examined the larger movement and its consequences for Native Americans. Taken together, these two works were very essential to the capturing of Native views of a long war.

By the 1960s, social history had begun to creep onto the scholarly stage. Historians began to consider past events through the eyes of often under-represented populations, including minority groups and average folks. This was a reflection of the larger Civil Rights movement and the emerging counterculture of the late 1960s that began to question authorities. One of the important developments to arise during this decade was the greater interest in Native American history. For example, Royal Hassrick examined the broader culture of one of the most significant Native groups on the Plains in *The Sioux: Life and Customs of a Warrior Society* (1964). Hassrick stressed that the Sioux represented the stereotypical image of Natives to most Americans. Hassrick argued that the Sioux used warfare as a means to gain power and wealth, as their population transitioned in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, shifting from strict military-based leadership to civil authority (Hassrick 1964, 21–22). Throughout his massive study, warfare was an important cultural element for the Sioux. Hassrick's work on the Sioux represented a first important step in the systematic inclusion of Native Americans within historical scholarship.

One work must be mentioned for its holding onto the traditional and largely negative view toward Native Americans and their style of fighting. Don

Rickey's *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay* (1963) examined the US Army during the Plains conflict. While reflecting the early entrance of social history into the field through considering the common soldier's experience, he cast a hostile attitude toward Natives and their way of war. His analysis of the campaigns on the Plains, though considering the regulars from the ground up, also represented a last gasp for the traditional consensus interpretation.

Robert M. Utley, who wrote dozens of acclaimed books on the West, dove into the conflict between the US Army and Native Americans on the frontier. Though steeped in the traditional modes of military history, Utley's *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848–1865* (1967) represented an important work. Utley's study contrasted with the broader trends emerging within historiography that began to view the American military in a negative light. Many scholars grappled with the increasing anti-war sentiments at the height of the Vietnam War. With such anti-war sentiments building, the US Army began to be cast as a force for aggression and imperialism against its Native opponents, much in the same way the contemporary military was viewed against its Vietnamese adversary.

Utley's analysis of the Native forces on the Plains focused on the overall restraint of Native Americans to the encroaching white population. Noting that most tribes were only dealing with small groups of white settlers passing through, Natives were somewhat on edge. Yet, they only acted when circumstances warranted. Like Rickey, Utley's work focused on the white participants, but his treatment of Native forces was much more extensive, devoting a few pages to each of the prominent groups that called the Plains home. Furthermore, Utley did not cast them in negative terminology. Though traditional in outlook, Utley did note divisions among the various tribes over which strategy to use against the whites. While largely focused upon the military side of the emerging conflict on the Plains, Utley's study demonstrated that Natives were an active force during the years of US development.

Utley's later *Frontier Regulars* (1973) picked up where his earlier work left off, examining the US Army on the Plains from 1866 to 1890. His assessment of Native Americans and their warfighting abilities was quite good, as he stressed the diversity among the tribes that inhabited the Plains. This lack of homogeneity led the various tribes to fight one another as often and in some cases more often than the whites. Utley emphasized how the various groups ostensibly exalted the glory of combat and raised up their young men to become warriors.

### **New Indian and Military Histories**

From the 1970s into the 1980s, the scholarship on Native Americans continued to blossom, as social history came to dominate the discourse on American history. Once historians began to appreciate the contributions of

“invisible Americans,” the Native side of warfare became increasingly important. A work of popular history, Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970) represented the attempt by writers to begin to free Native American history from the shackles of the past. Brown sought to write a history of the American West from the perspective of the victims of cultural destruction, arguing that the literature on the conflicts between whites and Natives remained clouded by the mythology of the Old West and the ignorance toward Native accounts. Brown painted the struggle as a long one, placing the Plains conflicts within the violent clash between Natives and whites dating to the first encounters with Columbus. This work was important in that it forced readers to reassess their perceptions of the Native response to aggression.

Russell Weigley encapsulated the wars on the Plains within the larger analysis of the American way of warfare, which is an essential text in the field of American military history. In *The American Way of War* (1973), he hinted that the struggle of Native Americans against the American military in the post-Civil War years was doomed from the start. Through analyzing American warfighting via Carl von Clausewitz’s concepts of war, the Indian Wars revealed the destruction of an enemy as a military power. He noted that prior to the Civil War, the American policy regarding the Plains was one of establishing a permanent “Indian Country” for the various Native groups in the region, with Natives largely at ease and tolerable of whites traversing their lands to reach locations farther westward. This situation allowed Natives to continue to engage in their traditional way of life, including waging war with one another with little fear of white interference.

After the Civil War, the nation downsized its military while westward migration forced a change in policy regarding Native Americans on the Plains. This in turn forced Indian groups to adjust their warfighting in an attempt to hold back the tide of emigration. Weigley stressed that in the late nineteenth century, America embarked on a policy change once establishing and maintaining a permanent “Indian Country” was no longer deemed feasible. This left the Natives only two options, assimilation or extermination. With the inability to further relocate them due to increased demand for land in the interior, the federal government embarked on developing the reservation system in earnest, which in turn shifted Native strategy to one of cultural survival.

For tribes on the southern Plains, Weigley noted that the destruction of the buffalo directly threatened their way of life. This action motivated the tribes to begin attacking white hunters, which sparked the American response that ended their independence. The northern tribes also faced the increasing threats from whites but eventually were subdued by American might as well.

Weigley criticized the northern tribes’ strategy against the United States, emphasizing their inability to deal a decisive blow in the wake of their

victory at Little Bighorn. He stressed the example of Red Cloud's earlier decisive and successful resistance to the US Army in 1866–1868, adding that the victorious Lakota and Cheyenne believed that the already stunning victory over Custer's command would have a similar effect on the whites. His criticism was based upon the incredible strength of the combined Lakota and Cheyenne forces that would not be replicated again, which could have dealt a significant blow to American forces coming to reinforce Custer. Weigley was correct in emphasizing the losses suffered by Natives at Greasy Grass, which undoubtedly weighed upon their ultimate fate.

Weigley concluded his examination of the Indian Wars by noting the decline of the Sioux after 1877. The adaptation of guerrilla tactics by the Army against the Apache led to their downfall in the southwest, while the Sioux met disaster at Wounded Knee after a last attempt at resistance. Overall, Weigley described a strategy of annihilation against Indians, which destroyed their culture and way of life by the end of the nineteenth century. Though brief, Weigley's inclusion of Native warfare demonstrated its importance to the American way of war that he sought to contextualize in his study.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, several works came out to enhance the collective understanding of Native Americans on the Plains. This period represented the ascendancy of social history, where Native Americans would gain increasing attention and appreciation for their contributions to American history. Two works that stood out in the early 1980s were Peter Powell's history of the Cheyenne, *People of the Sacred Mountain* (1981), which improved upon Grinnell's early work, and Raymond DeMallie's new analysis of Black Elk's life in *The Sixth Grandfather* (1984). DeMallie delivered a fresh, updated interpretation of the classic work by John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). While Neihardt's work was well received and based around the methods of oral history – albeit with some artistic license – DeMallie allowed Black Elk to speak for himself. His work included verbatim transcripts of the original Neihardt interviews with Black Elk. DeMallie's approach to Black Elk was to let Native sources stand upon their own merits. Both Powell and DeMallie, guided by the acceptance of social history methodologies, advanced the understanding of Native societies battling for survival. They stripped away the artistic veneer that clouded the works of the 1930s, whose writers provided a more romantic portrayal of Native life and warfare than reality likely dictated.

By the 1990s, one of the most influential works on Native American history was published. Richard White's *The Middle Ground* (1990) examined the vast cultural exchange between Natives and Europeans within the larger Great Lakes region. While geographically removed from the Plains, White's analysis is important, as the activity in the Great Lakes between the various tribes in the region and the emerging Europeans allowed for the introduction of firearms and the subsequent inclusion of that technology into the

Plains military patterns. Furthermore, White's influence went beyond the Great Lakes region, as his work revolutionized Native American history and popularized the concept of a "middle ground" as an analytical mode for a whole generation of scholars. While criticized several years later in an assessment of his work on the broader historiography, White's concept is still important to understanding the complex network of exchange among Native Americans in the interior, which influenced broadly the patterns of warfare on the Plains.

As White was publishing *The Middle Ground*, Anthony McGinnis published his landmark *Counting Coup and Cutting Horses: Intertribal Warfare on the Northern Plains, 1738–1889* (1990). McGinnis, building upon Secoy's analysis, skillfully investigated intertribal warfare on the Plains. Using accounts from travelers to the Plains as well as other sources, McGinnis discussed the cultures, traditions, alliances, and rivalries of the various tribes that called the Plains home. He noted that tribes vied with each other for dominance and power for generations before European arrival. Once Europeans made contact with Natives and became aware of the complex system of intertribal relations, they used the network of rivalries and intertribal conflicts to play various Native groups off one another for their own gain. Through this vast network of alliances and conflicts arose the foundations for the competing forces of the Indian Wars of the late nineteenth century, when the US Army used rival tribes as scouts to undermine other groups, particularly the Sioux. The longstanding hostilities among the different populations hindered their ability to overcome differences and unite to resist white encroachment effectively. *Counting Coup and Cutting Horses* remains the best work that examines essential aspects of Native warfare on the northern Plains.

The 1990s represented a flowering of scholarship on Native warfare. Scholars largely embraced the tenets of social history to examine the societies and combatants from a "ground up" approach. Native American history became increasingly important, as did studying the common soldiers who fought them. Jerome Greene's *Lakota and Cheyenne: Indian Views of the Great Sioux War, 1876–1877* (1994) was similar in approach to Powell's earlier work on the Cheyenne, seeking to use more Native sources to examine their conflict with the US Army. Elliott West's *The Contested Plains* (1998) examined the broad struggle between Indians and whites for control of the Plains in the nineteenth century, setting it against the backdrop of the white settlement of Colorado and the quest for gold.

Stan Hoig's *Tribal Wars of the Southern Plains* (1993) discussed Native combat in stunning detail, advancing the claim that their inability to put aside tribal strife to unite and resist the whites doomed them to eventual conquest. Where Hoig's analysis shines is in his differentiation of how whites and Natives viewed history, with Natives viewing the past as part of a larger continuum, thus giving the conflicts of the past relevance in

the present. Hoig further illustrated the change over time that came to Native warfare, both from technological changes but also from differing circumstances. He noted how prior to mass European contact Natives employed a strict regimented style to their fighting, including massed infantry facing off on open fields. Furthermore, this regimentation extended to simple journeys to trade, where groups of warriors moved in battle formations in preparation for possible attack. Hoig emphasized the importance of the horse and gun in altering the nature of fighting, similar to Secoy's earlier analysis, while also stressing the importance of the intertribal conflict of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as stated in McGinnis's study of the northern Plains. Hoig combines the insights of Secoy and McGinnis to provide an overview of Native warfare while covering the two distinct regions of the Great Plains during the same general time period.

The study of the how Natives viewed their fighting with whites, particularly at the Little Bighorn, has been an area of profound interest for several scholars in recent years. Richard Hardorff's *Hokahey! A Good Day to Die! The Indian Casualties of the Custer Fight* (1993) considered how Indians reflected upon their sacrifice at the battle. Detailed research concluded that the victory at Greasy Grass was even more decisive, with Natives losing only a fraction of the casualties they inflicted upon the 7th Cavalry. However, the losses still affected the Lakota and Cheyenne deeply, including the desire to commemorate sacrifices on the battlefield. Hardorff followed up his masterful examination of Native casualties with two works that emphasized the accounts of Native participants. Both *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight: New Sources of Indian-Military History* (1997) and *Indian Views of the Custer Fight: A Source Book* (2005) gather together various Native accounts of the battle. While Hardorff discussed some of the issues complicating these accounts, including passage of time and misunderstanding about Native culture, he stressed their importance to further understanding the Native role in the battle.

Other scholars have delved into analyzing Native accounts of Little Bighorn. Gregory Michno's *Lakota Noon* (1997) is an outstanding work that discusses the problems and debates over the use of Native accounts. He seeks to use them to present a new understanding of an often misrepresented and misunderstood battle. Michno stressed the shortcomings of many works that attempted to use Indian accounts, including those by Dee Brown and David Miller, arguing that the authors failed to understand how Native chronology differed from whites, with the result being that the importance of Native sources was lost while applying white structure to a non-white source. Noting some drawbacks with reliance on Native sources, Michno argued that his desire to uncover what happened at Little Bighorn is often derided in academic circles. He noted wryly that Native Americans were not concerned with political considerations, though historians too often are (Michno 1997, ix–xi).

Joseph Marshall III, who wrote *The Day the World Ended at Little Bighorn* (2007), provides an important breakthrough in the broader study of the Native way of war. Like Michno, Marshall employed Native accounts to examine their side of the battle. What separates Marshall from others is that his works privilege the Lakota perspective. It is important to understanding the broader subject of Native American warfare, drawing upon source material that was often discounted in previous generations.

Scholars used Native warfare as a way of understanding the development of later counterinsurgency strategy as well as the development of an American way of war. Giving proper credit to Weigley for his groundbreaking study on the American way of war, John Grenier's *The First Way of War* (2005) examined the role that conflict with Native Americans on the colonial frontier and the rise of *petite guerre* played in the broader American military tradition. Though focused on the conflicts of the colonial and early national periods, Grenier's analysis is essential to understanding how American forces later fought Natives on the Plains. He rightly criticized Weigley for limiting his analysis, ignoring a broader continuity in later American military history with that of the colonial period (Grenier 2005, 2–3). Grenier also discussed conflict with Native Americans as part of the empire-building among the great powers in *The Far Reaches of Empire* (2008). He used the fighting between British forces and Natives as focal points in the conquest of Nova Scotia during the eighteenth century. While focused outside the Plains both geographically and chronologically, Grenier's works relate in understanding how fighting limited wars with Native Americans contributed to the birth of counterinsurgency doctrine. Future scholars will look to his approach to find a worthy model for studying Native warfighting.

While the Great Sioux War and the Little Bighorn campaign in particular have garnered much of the scholarly attention on the Plains Indian Wars and Native warfare in general, there are several other conflicts that provide important insights into the Native way of war. Overshadowed by both the Civil War and the conflict with the Sioux further east, conflict arose in 1864 in the mountainous West between the United States and the Snake – a term used to describe bands of Paiute, Bannock, and Shoshone that lived along the Snake River. Though geographically removed from the Plains, the war is important for its style. Gregory Michno's *The Deadliest Indian War in the West: The Snake Conflict, 1864–1868* (2007) is one of the few works to examine this forgotten conflict. Michno described the war as the deadliest in the West in terms of lives lost. Moreover, it revealed General George Crook's innovations in fighting the Natives, which allowed him to later subdue the Apaches. He also noted the ferocity of the fighting, which included guerrilla tactics and small unit actions. This style of fighting stood in contrast to the tactics used on the Plains, which relied upon larger forces in combat.

Like the Snake War, the fighting between the Nez Perce and the US Army was overshadowed by the Little Bighorn. In his masterful account of this conflict, *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* (2009), renowned western historian Elliott West noted their conflicts with neighboring tribes prior to war with the United States. These fights were influenced by the introduction of horses and guns to other tribes, who then placed increased pressure upon the Nez Perce for hunting grounds. After covering the overall history leading up to the hostilities in 1877, including positive relations with the United States for many years, West presented a sad tale of a people retreating from their homeland, desperate to reach safety. They eventually succumbed to American power. Set against the backdrop of both the Civil War and the more prominent campaigns in the Plains, the Nez Perce War represented one of the last clashes between whites and Natives in the northern tier of states.

### **Conclusion: New Frontiers in Native Warfare**

While much of the early understanding of Plains Indian warfare was clouded by ethnocentric, white-dominated accounts of the fighting, scholarship on the subject has blossomed with the emergence of social history as an interpretive method in the discipline. However, the subject is still wide open for study by scholars. Much has been done to study the Native accounts of battle and the tactics they used against whites and each other, yet some possibilities for new research remain. The battlefields of the Great Plains were often located very near to Native villages, while the Civil War communities in the North could be quite removed from the horrors of war. A comparative study on how noncombatants coped with warfare in different regions offers the opportunity to broaden the understanding of “home fronts.” One interesting consideration is whether or not the Indian Wars represent a continuation of “total war” strategies and tactics from the Civil War.

The recent trends and broad changes within the historical profession have vastly improved the understanding of the disparate cultures on the Plains. Where early historians lumped all tribes under the banner of Indians, scholars now examine the diversity of particular Native societies and bands, giving each cultural group its own agency. This enriches the understanding of Native people and how they waged war in the nineteenth century. It also indicates why attempts to resist white encroachment and invasion via “pan-Indian” or confederacy-type movements often failed.

In addition, how Native American forces and African American soldiers regarded each other and fought one another deserves closer analysis. Perhaps their encounters present a fascinating case study of two groups whose shared experience of racism and hostility at the time caused their stories to be disregarded in much of the early scholarship. Their stories raise

several interesting questions, including how Natives treated “buffalo soldiers” versus white soldiers during and after battle – and vice versa.

The biggest challenge still facing scholars today when considering the Indian Wars and the Native strategies and tactics is moving beyond the mythologies that dominated historical writing in the past. Much progress has been made to fairly analyze the Native American side of these conflicts, but a better grasp of the finer details of the wars, including the minor battles, will go a long way to heightening awareness of Native warfighting. As the nation begins the long period of commemorating the 150th anniversary of the battles and wars that shaped the Great Plains, scholars will have new opportunities to reassess these events and how we commemorate them. Ultimately, the story of the Native way of war is part of the larger American way of war, as much as Native history is essential to American history. Often ignored or marginalized, theirs is a story of bravery and pride against many challenges. Their ways of war are worthy of everyone’s attention.

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## Chapter Five

### AUXILIARIES AND SCOUTS

*Adam R. Hodge*

When Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer's 7th Cavalry began its march up Rosebud Creek on June 22, 1876, 39 Native American and mixed-blood scouts guided it. The cohort included 25 Arikaras, six Crows, four Dakotas, two mixed-blood Blackfeet, a French-Lakota, and an Arikara-Lakota guide (Gray 1991, 204). Like virtually every other facet of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, these scouts have been the subject of scholarly debate. In fact, within days of the battle's conclusion until the last of the Crow scouts died in 1929, many writers sought out scout testimony in an effort to understand what happened to Custer and his men. Other authors, however, disregarded the seemingly contradictory and confused Indian accounts.

The performance of the Indian scouts at the Little Bighorn remains a contentious subject. Authors have depicted the Arikara and Crow scouts in many ways: as cowardly deserters, effective guides and skillful warriors, betrayers of their Indian "race," turncoats who led Custer into a trap, and colorful characters who did little of consequence. Perhaps most significantly, some of the Indian scouts and their accounts contributed to the development of Custer's mythic "last stand." Regardless of their precise role in any given interpretation of the Little Bighorn, however, the Indian scouts are usually treated as little more than supporting characters in a story that pits cavalymen against Lakota and Cheyenne warriors.

This essay explores the existing literature on the Indian scouts involved in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. In particular, it examines how writers have treated their motivations for enlisting, their performance, and their

testimony. Since only a small body of work focuses on the scouts themselves, the following pages will also consider discussions of the scouts presented in biographies of Custer, studies of the Little Bighorn, and examinations of the nineteenth-century Indian Wars. It finds that although many writers include scouts in their stories of the Little Bighorn, there remains room for further development, especially concerning the history of Indian scouts from Native perspectives. But before focusing on Custer's defeat, it is necessary to provide an overview of the broader literature on Indian auxiliaries and scouts.

### **Indian Auxiliaries and Scouts**

Scholars observe that Indian auxiliaries and scouts were integral to the European conquest of the New World. Francis Jennings, for one, writes that in British North America "the cooperation of some Indians was essential to the process of dispossessing all." Yet, some Natives allied with the British to "curry favor," secure trade, and forestall British hostility (Jennings 1975, 125–126). Okah L. Jones demonstrates that the Spanish used Indian allies more extensively than the British used them. Hernán Cortés, for instance, enlisted the aid of the Aztecs' many enemies to overthrow their empire, thereby establishing a tradition that endured into the nineteenth century in the form of New Spain's "defensive expansion." Jones offers an in-depth analysis of the organization and contributions of the Pueblo auxiliaries, placing their service within the narrative of New Spain's ongoing conflicts with Natives. He observes that the Spanish employment of Indian scouts was rooted in the European mercenary tradition. However, he simplistically casts the Pueblos as "loyal mercenaries," who served for promises of wealth and titles of nobility (Jones 1966, 176).

Thomas W. Dunlay wrote the seminal history of Indian auxiliaries and scouts in the North American West. Dunlay emphasizes Indian agency, asserting that many scouts saw the US Army as a valuable new ally in their intertribal conflicts and struggles for survival. He highlights the intricacy of scout motivation, the ways that Army officers viewed and treated them, their many duties, their loyal service, how scouting acquainted them with Anglo-American culture (and vice versa), and how both the federal government and Native societies benefited from their alliances. This work, which reveals the complexity of what is often seen as Indian–white warfare, is the essential starting point for anyone studying Indian scouts (Dunlay 1982).

Indian scout units were organized following the Army Act of 1866. Philip Burnham offers an overview of Indian auxiliaries and scouts but presents little more than Dunlay's work. In regard to their treatment, he views the incarceration of Apache "hostiles" and scouts alike more unfavorably (Burnham 1999). Fairfax Downey and Jacques Noel Jacobsen's study of

Indian scouts is more descriptive than analytical. It largely focuses on such things as scout actions and attire while asserting that Native scouts “turned on their own race” for pay and out of love for a good fight (Downey & Jacobsen 1973, 9–10).

Indian scouts have received increasing attention in surveys of the nineteenth-century Indian Wars. Fairfax Downey writes that, “[h]ating the all-conquering Sioux who had driven them from their hunting grounds, these lesser tribes [Shoshones, Crows, Arikaras, etc.] helped fight the white man’s battles – superb scouts, great warriors” (Downey 1944, 25–26). Stanley Vestal concludes that the 250-plus Crow and Shoshone auxiliaries prevented “a general massacre of Crook’s outfit” at the Battle of the Rosebud on June 17, 1876 (Vestal 1948, 231). However, Indian scouts sometimes grew weary of ineffectual campaigning and went home. Crows and Shoshones did so after the Rosebud and again later that summer after they wearied of the fruitless marches. By highlighting such incidents as well as the efforts of Crow, Shoshone, and Arikara allies during the Centennial Campaign, John S. Gray shows how the Indian Wars were more than Indian–white struggles (Gray 1976). Charles M. Robinson devotes considerable attention to the scouts with Crook, General Alfred H. Terry, and Colonel John Gibbon, observing that military operations often thrived on the intelligence that scouts provided. Although Crook was authorized to recruit only 50 scouts in the summer of 1876, he enlisted nearly 300 Crows and Shoshones prior to the Rosebud. Clearly, he valued their work (Robinson 1995). The Crows lost respect for Crook once he became inactive after the Rosebud; James Donovan writes that they called him “Squaw Chief” (Donovan 2008, 151).

S. L. A. Marshall observes that the Crow alliance with the Army during the 1877 Nez Perce War dealt a psychological and strategic blow to Chief Joseph’s people, who expected to find asylum among the Crows. Condemning the Crows, he calls it “another sad chapter in the story of Indian betrayal of Indian. [The Crow] had no quarrel whatever with the Nez Perce. But having bedded down all along with the army, they put that interest above a traditional loyalty, and this act of picking the winning side at the right time has served them quite well ever since” (Marshall 1972, 211–212). Marshall’s vilification of the Crow and his rosy depiction of their treatment at the hands of the federal government are problematic, as is his statement that Crook’s use of Apache scouts was “a quite new idea” (Marshall 1972, 123).

More specialized studies contribute to our understanding of the relationship between Indian scouts and the US Army. Anthony McGinnis, for instance, places auxiliaries and scouts within the broader context of northern Great Plains intertribal warfare. In doing so, he captures a complex world of raiding that the Army encountered during the nineteenth century, when it became a powerful new ally for the tribes that struggled to survive

against the Lakota and Cheyenne. During the early reservation era, scouting offered warriors an opportunity to continue an old way of life and gain status even as the Army strove to end intertribal warfare. However, McGinnis falls into the trap of referring to scouts as “mercenaries” (McGinnis 1990, 150).

Sherry Smith analyzes how Army officers viewed the Natives allied with them against a common enemy. She observes that while many officers distrusted scouts and underestimated them, even most of those who valued them never really tried to understand them. Ironically, some officers promoted scouting as an assimilation method even as they capitalized on the Indians’ perceived “love of war” (Smith 1990, 165). Paul N. Beck emphasizes that officers interpreted Indian scout actions as Victorian Americans. Many behaved paternalistically while viewing scouting as a civilizing tool. Some officers expressed more respect for enemy Indians than their allies, admiring those who defended their homelands but not those who submitted. Beck also discusses how Native auxiliaries viewed their service, concluding that it was a mixed bag of frustration with distrustful officers, concerns about fellow scouts from different tribes, satisfaction with successful campaigns, and enjoyment of some cross-cultural friendships (Beck 1993).

Scholars have examined some specific scout units. The first such study was George Bird Grinnell’s biography of Frank and Luther North, who led the Pawnee Battalion. Grinnell largely focuses on the North brothers, but he nevertheless highlights the motives, duties, and accomplishments of the Pawnee scouts to demonstrate their contributions to the American conquest of the West. Despite their long period of service (1864–1877), Pawnees still lost their lands (Grinnell 1928). Mark van de Logt focuses on the scouts themselves, placing their service within the context of nineteenth-century Pawnee military culture. He asserts that they were hardly “duped” into scouting, for it sustained their warrior tradition while allowing them to take the war to their Lakota enemies. It also provided them with pay, opportunities for vengeance and to capture horses, and an escape from the hardships of reservation life (van de Logt 2010).

The Seminole-Negro Indian scouts have also received some attention. About 50 served as effective scouts during the campaigns of the 1870s and 1880s on the southern Plains, yet the federal government balked on giving them a homeland that had been promised to them (Porter 1952). Michael Tate reveals how Seminole-Negro Indians, Apaches, Caddos, Wacos, Wichitas, Tonkawas, Delawares, and Pawnees aided the US Army during the 1874–1875 Red River War in exchange for captured ponies, pay, war honors, and revenge (Tate 1978). Thomas A. Britten explores the world of the Seminole-Negro scouts, examining how their culture was a blend of African, Native, and Mexican characteristics. Once exiled from the United States, Seminole-Negro men served as scouts for the Mexican government

against Apaches before offers of land and pay lured them to enlist in the US Army as scouts. Despite service in hundreds of expeditions, the Seminole-Negro Indians struggled to obtain a homeland in the United States, finding poverty in a nation that they once left (Britten 1999).

Scholars have also written extensively about Apache scouts. Eve Ball emphasizes the political divisions that influenced some Apaches to pursue their off-reservation rivals. Most Apaches deemed scouting acceptable and even admirable when the Army operated against other tribes, but they despised Apaches who worked as spies and trackers against other Apaches (Ball 1965). Richard N. Ellis devotes more attention to the military value of Apache scouts as well as the quarrels among officers regarding them. Despite their loyalty and performance, General Phil Sheridan distrusted Apache scouts and challenged Crook's use of them. Their quarrel ultimately resulted in Crook resigning his command and Miles replacing him. Miles initially used Apache scouts less than Crook, but soon he came to rely on them. Nevertheless, the Army imprisoned Apache scouts and "hostiles" alike upon Geronimo's final surrender (Ellis 1966).

### Custer's Scouts

Custer's Crow and Arikara scouts have sometimes been treated as villains. Dee Brown's polemical work views Indian auxiliaries and scouts within the framework of the Red Power movement, labeling them "mercenaries" (Brown 1970, 288, 307). Others, such as John C. Ewers, defend the scouts. He asserts that one must consider the long history of intertribal conflict on the northern Plains before dubbing Crows, Arikaras, and others "mercenaries." Indeed, the ongoing Lakota expansion compelled their enemies to ally with the US Army (Ewers 1975, 409–410). Similarly, Richard White challenges the "heroic resistance approach to plains history," which miscasts Native scouts as "dupes" or "traitors" to the Indian "race" (White 1978, 320).

Scouts appear in biographies of Custer, but they usually have little more than cameo roles. Fredrick Whittaker's book, published within months of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, briefly discusses Indian scouts. Whittaker notes that Custer gained an appreciation for his Osage scouts while campaigning on the southern Plains. During an 1873 Yellowstone River railroad survey and in the Black Hills in 1874, Custer became friends with the Arikara-Lakota scout Bloody Knife, who was reportedly an excellent guide and fierce warrior. Custer hired Bloody Knife as a civilian guide in 1876, but Whittaker neglects that story. However, he uses alleged scout testimony to advance the image of Custer's "last stand," including the tale of how the Crow scout Curley offered to help Custer escape from certain death under the guise of a Sioux blanket. Heroically declining the offer

and opting to die with his men, Custer left Curley to escape alone and watch the final stages of the fight from a nearby hill (Whittaker 1876).

Frederic F. Van de Water's critical biography of Custer devotes more attention to the scouts, but his views are generally negative. For instance, he writes that Gibbon's Crows were in "a perpetual state of fear" throughout the campaign and that all of them fled for home upon learning of Custer's defeat. Van de Water also writes that once Sioux warriors challenged Reno's detachment, almost all of the scouts deserted (Van de Water 1934, 308).

Others, such as Edgar I. Stewart, treat the scouts more favorably. Stewart observes that they were of "inestimable value," noting that they performed their assigned duties at the Little Bighorn. Although only ordered to capture enemy horses, Reno's Arikaras also fought, thereby becoming the target of Sioux warriors, who took extra pleasure in killing Indian scouts. Stewart consults scout testimony, but it becomes problematic when he uses the Arikara scout Red Star's testimony to assert that Custer told his scouts that a victory over the Lakota would make him the next US president (no other scout made such a statement). On the other hand, Stewart observes that Curley, often cast as a liar, never claimed that he fought at the Little Bighorn; he only said that he watched part of the battle before leaving to report what he saw. Inept interpreters and exploitative writers misrepresented the scout (Stewart 1958, 109).

Evan S. Connell discusses how some Lakotas mistreated Bloody Knife, because he was the son of a Lakota man and an Arikara woman. A personal vendetta led Bloody Knife to become an Army scout during the 1860s, but his grudge died with him at the Little Bighorn, where his severed head caused much excitement in the Lakota camp. Connell also grapples with the Curley legends, observing that they began to emerge when Curley attempted to relay by sign and broken English what he saw on the Little Bighorn to the men aboard the steamship *Far West*. While Curley initially denied that he escaped from Custer's "last stand," Connell concludes that he eventually assented to being the "lone survivor" (Connell 1984).

Robert M. Utley discounts Red Star's claim that Custer sought the US presidency. Yet, although Utley includes scouts in his narrative, he uses their testimony sparingly because "their recollections are badly garbled" (Utley 1988, 186–187). Louise Barnett highlights the relationships based on mutual respect that Custer cultivated with his scouts. Ultimately, Barnett neglects individual Indian scouts other than Bloody Knife while asserting that Reno's line collapsed because of "the hasty departure of the Indian scouts. These men were supposedly eager to fight their traditional enemies, the Sioux, but ... [t]hey took the low road and survived" (Barnett 1996, 291). Thom Hatch's guide to Custer and the Little Bighorn acknowledges the value of Indian scouts, including concise biographies of Bloody Knife, Boyer, and Curley. He notes that Curley's status as

the battle's "lone survivor" resulted from his trouble communicating with Americans as well as other factors (Hatch 2002).

Marshall's treatment of Custer's scouts is brief as well as problematic. He disregards Crow concerns about Americans when he observes that "the Crows not only tried to get along with the palefaces, but fairly fawned on the army." Marshall also writes that Custer's Indian scouts informed him of the enemy's overwhelming numbers and then rode away before the fighting began (Marshall 1972, 56). In his study of the 1876–1877 Sioux War, Gray notes that the Arikaras and Crows performed well as guides, trackers, couriers, pony-capturers, and fighters. Robinson points out that soon after some Crows enlisted as scouts under Gibbon, several grew bored with his inaction and returned home. The intelligence that Gibbon's Crows gathered later became the basis of Terry's plan, which aimed to trap the Lakotas and Cheyennes between two columns. Throughout the subsequent campaign, Custer's scouts provided crucial intelligence and located the enemy (Robinson 1995).

Ben Innis's biography of Custer's favorite scout, Bloody Knife, presents the story of an individual within the context of an entire tribe's struggles. Innis begins his narrative decades before Bloody Knife's birth, thereby highlighting the deep hostility between the Arikara and Lakota. By the time that the US Army recruited Arikara warriors to serve as scouts in the 1860s, the Arikaras were "beggars and scavengers" at the Fort Berthold Reservation. Bloody Knife was among those who enlisted and became a well-seasoned courier and scout by the time he first served Custer in 1873. Bloody Knife's personal history with the Lakota, who abused him because of his mixed Lakota-Arikara heritage, culminated in his death at the Little Bighorn. Innis writes that the Arikaras performed well in the 1876–1877 Sioux War and that many continued to do so after, although they struggled for decades to receive their pensions (Innis 1973, 42).

Conversely, Downey and Jacobsen note that Arikaras, Crows, and others of the "lesser tribes" enlisted out of love of a good fight as well as to earn pay and government favor. They consult Indian scout testimony and demonstrate that they performed well in battle. Although the Arikaras captured few ponies, they did not take more because they had to fight. They had served Custer loyally, even after they warned him that they would encounter too many Lakotas and Cheyennes (Downey & Jacobsen 1973, 9–10).

Dunlay's seminal work on Indian scouts includes limited coverage of Custer's scouts. He observes that the Lakota had long warred on the Arikara and Crow, so the latter enlisted as scouts to gain a powerful new ally in that fight. They also desired individual prestige and pay. They hardly saw themselves as traitors to the Indian "race." Otherwise, Dunlay only notes how Terry's Crows deserted upon learning of Custer's defeat, for they feared Lakota retribution as well as the likelihood that the Army would abandon them (Dunlay 1982).

Surveys of the Sioux Wars typically devote little attention to Crow and Arikara scouts. Although few works focus on Custer's scouts before the Little Bighorn, much has been written about them during and after the battle. They long accompanied military expeditions for pay, loot, glory, and revenge, and their service with Custer eventually made them subject to numerous interviews. They have been central to the debate over what happened to Custer, yet few authors have endeavored to see things from their perspective.

### **At the Little Bighorn**

When Custer divided his command into four detachments just after noon on June 25, 1876, he sent 19 Arikaras, four Dakotas, and two mixed-blood scouts with Reno. Two Crows misunderstood Custer's orders and joined Reno's detachment. The remaining four Crows and the mixed-blood Mitch Boyer went with Custer. One Arikara scout remained with the pack train, while none accompanied Benteen's detachment.

Studies of the Battle of the Little Bighorn usually devote significant attention to Indian scouts, although their assessments of the scouts' motives, performances, and accounts vary. William A. Graham disregards Indian testimony, arguing that their accounts are too inconsistent and confused to reconcile. Graham's portrayal of the scouts is unfavorable, for he notes that Custer berated the Arikaras for failing to pursue the party of Sioux that abandoned the "Lone Tipi" site during the command's advance toward the Little Bighorn. In fact, they had been ordered to capture enemy ponies, not fight. Similarly, he writes that Reno's scouts "scattered and vanished" during the battle, thereby enabling the enemy to collapse the major's line (Graham 1926, 38–41).

Fred Dustin addresses the challenges of using Indian accounts, yet analyzes Arikara and Crow testimony while giving the Arikaras a fair treatment. Although Crow elders refused to send warriors to serve as scouts under Gibbon, over 20 young men volunteered. They did commendable work, and then six of them joined Custer's command, making an immediately favorable impression on their new commander and interacting "easily" with the Arikaras. He finds that the Arikaras do not deserve criticisms leveled at them for their performance; many either drove captured horses toward the rear or fought alongside the cavalry. Moreover, he argues that interviewers, journalists, and others put words in Curley's mouth to support preconceived notions of what happened to Custer. Many believed that Curley told those stories, which drove a wedge between him and Custer's other three Crows. Perhaps White Man Runs Him, Hairy Moccasin, and Goes Ahead resented Curley's inflated role in the battle (Dustin 1939).

David Humphrey Miller's treatment of the Indian story of the Little Bighorn examines the scouts and their accounts while also attempting to offer their perspective. For instance, Miller highlights the tension between Custer's Crow and Arikara scouts, discussing how the former questioned why Custer employed so many of the latter. The Crows thought the Arikaras brave enough until they had to fight the Sioux. Similarly, the Crows wanted Custer to know that they – not the Arikaras reporting the discovery – first spotted the village on the Little Bighorn. The Crows later alleged that Custer praised their work while stating that the Arikaras were worthless. According to Miller, Reno's Arikaras quickly went "dead or missing" once the battle commenced. He also addresses the rift among the Crow scouts, arguing that it resulted from interpreters, interviewers, and writers twisting Curley's testimony while ignoring the others (Miller 1957, 100).

Utley also examines the Curley enigma, noting that although he clearly saw some of Custer's fight, Whittaker and others twisted his accounts to fit the "last stand" legend to the point of rendering his "true" testimony unrecoverable. As Utley writes, "[s]o embedded are the Curley myths in the Little Bighorn that it is difficult to evaluate Curley's genuine role in the battle." Yet, while Curley repeatedly stated that he was not involved in the battle, Crows, Lakotas, and many Anglo-American writers labeled him a liar (Utley 1962, 136). Mari Sandoz ignores the Curley controversy but engages with another hot topic by stating that Custer told the Arikaras that a victory would carry him to the White House. Also, Sandoz asserts that those scouts were "protesting and apprehensive" during Custer's approach to the Little Bighorn, that they had to be "pushed" along, and that many deliberately lagged behind, claiming that their horses were tired. Most of the Arikaras who made it to the line quickly fled (Sandoz 1966, 64).

On the other hand, Thomas B. Marquis asserts that although the Arikaras were only supposed to capture ponies, many distinguished themselves in combat. He also devotes a short chapter to Curley, stressing that Anglo-American "romancers" fabricated many of the fantastic stories attributed to him. As Curley searched for Terry's column after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Custer's other three Crows found it, and they informed the disbelieving soldiers of Custer's demise before "fleeing" with every other Crow scout to their agency (Marquis 1975, 53). Kenneth M. Hammer's collection of short biographies of those who served under Custer during the Little Bighorn campaign includes all 51 full and mixed-blood Indian scouts. His matter-of-fact treatment discusses the scouts' duties, where they were during the battle, and what they did during the following years. Although Hammer notes that some called Curley a "survivor" while really only an observer, he does not engage with any of the debates (Hammer 1972).

Bruce A. Rosenberg offers perhaps the best analysis of the Curley accounts. In particular, he describes how Curley long contended that he did not fight

at the Little Bighorn and that he made no dramatic escape. Yet, Whittaker and other writers cited him as a “source” to legitimize their fictions. Such writers used Curley’s testimony to formulate the story about Custer turning down Curley’s offer of a last-minute escape as well as the mythic “last stand,” including the idea that Custer was the last to fall. Rosenberg also addresses unfounded rumors that some Indian scouts betrayed Custer and purposely led him into a trap (Rosenberg 1974). Marquis uses Crow testimony and oral traditions to support his theory that many cavalymen committed suicide at the Little Bighorn. Although Cheyenne testimony most directly supports that argument, Marquis also cites Crow reports that Custer’s men drank liquor. He also writes that the Arikaras with Reno “broke ranks” and scattered once the fighting began (Marquis 1976, 105–106).

Roger Darling also engages with the Curley controversy, concluding that some of his accounts are trustworthy. So, he consults Curley’s testimony as well as that of other scouts, depicting them generally in a positive light. He notes that Crows served as scouts, because “wolves” were highly respected among their people. The Crow scouts were reportedly “untiring and unreliable,” providing necessary guidance and information. Unfortunately, soldiers’ racist views prevented them from fully valuing the Crows’ work. Yet, Darling notes that officers typically viewed the Crows more favorably than they did the Arikaras, and their favoritism apparently caused some friction among the scouts (Darling 1990, 152). Richard Allan Fox uses Indian scout testimony alongside archaeological evidence relating to the Little Bighorn. Although he acknowledges the challenges of consulting Curley, Fox concludes that it would be folly to ignore his accounts. He makes limited use of the other Crows’ testimony, citing Curley’s assertion that many troopers were “working at their guns,” the basis for the idea that faulty shell extraction contributed to Custer’s demise (Fox 1993, 241).

James Welch writes that although many poor interpreters and biased interviewers marred Curley’s reputation, his early accounts offer valuable information. He also emphasizes the importance of other scout reports and oral traditions. Moreover, Welch expresses sympathy for the “much-maligned” Arikara and Crow scouts, who prepared for battle as they approached the enemy village (Welch & Stekler 1994, 20). However, he writes that the Arikaras’ flight from Reno’s line precipitated his defeat and that the Arikaras only captured horses after they “recovered their courage” (Welch & Stekler 1994, 156). Douglas D. Scott, P. Willey, and Melissa A. Connor briefly discuss the Indian and mixed-blood scouts in their work on those who died at the Little Bighorn, particularly Bloody Knife and Mitch Boyer. Boyer was a French-Lakota but had married into the Crow tribe before scouting; he perished with Custer’s detachment (Scott, Willey, & Connor 1998). Larry Sklenar extensively utilizes Crow and Arikara testimony, including Curley’s accounts. Sklenar believes that Curley’s early reports are credible, for they frequently parallel other Indian accounts.

However, interviewers, interpreters, and his own aging memory led writers to dismiss his recollections entirely. Otherwise, Sklenar concludes that the Arikara scouts followed their orders. He also touches upon scout motivation, noting that Crows and Arikaras were longtime enemies of the Sioux and that while the Crow had concerns about Americans, they allied with them as “a matter of convenience” (Sklenar 2000, 94).

Jack Pennington’s in-depth study of the Little Bighorn emphasizes the importance of analyzing Indian accounts to unravel the mysteries of that engagement. Unlike most books on the Little Bighorn, Pennington’s work devotes several chapters to the Indian scouts, tracing their actions and concluding that, “[a]ll in all, they did what they were expected to do.” He asserts that the many conflicting Curley stories resulted from his vacillating as well as the distortions of interpreters, interviewers, and writers. So, the enduring resentment that the other Crows harbored was not entirely unjustified (Pennington 2001, 85).

James Donovan opens his book by recounting how the Crow and Arikara scouts spotted the enemy encampment from the Crow’s Nest and reported the news to Custer. He also includes some relevant background information about the scouts, including Bloody Knife’s troubled past as well as the Crows’ past interactions with Lakotas and Americans. Donovan thereafter devotes relatively little attention to the Crows while treating the Arikaras rather favorably. Many fought and acquitted themselves well. A few successfully captured some horses and drove them toward the rear, where they met others who fell behind because their horses were worn out after several days of near-continuous scouting (Donovan 2008).

Nathaniel Philbrick highlights the central role of the Indian scouts in the cavalry’s search for the Lakota and Cheyenne. He casts the Arikaras in a positive light, observing that they captured enemy horses and killed some Sioux. However, Philbrick repeats the lone Arikara’s report that Custer boasted about presidential ambitions. On the other hand, he notes that the Crows did not necessarily ally with the Army because they liked Americans; they hated the Lakota and saw scouting as a means of defending their land. Finally, Philbrick grapples with the inevitable issue of Curley’s testimony, highlighting the accuracy of Curley’s early reports by juxtaposing them with other eyewitness information (Philbrick 2010).

Tim Lehman opens his study of the Little Bighorn by recounting how Terry’s Crow scouts mourned when they learned of Custer’s defeat. The Indian scouts appear sporadically thereafter, but Lehman nevertheless touches on some key information. For instance, he writes that Crows served as scouts to escape from reservation life and to sustain their warrior culture. He notes that the Crow alliance with the Army represented the continuation of their decades-long struggle to defend their homelands from the Lakota. On the other hand, Bloody Knife’s story highlights the personal motivations that might compel one to become a scout. Curiously, Lehman

does not engage with the Curley controversy, despite discussing the later life of one of his critics, *White Man Runs Him* (Lehman 2010).

Most of the earliest treatments of the Little Bighorn gave little consideration to the Indian scouts. Brady writes that “[n]o Arikara that ever lived was a match for the Sioux or Cheyennes” and that the Arikaras “broke and fled incontinently” once the fighting began. He admits that Curley may have hidden in a ravine and escaped by dark, yet he still recounts how Curley escaped with the aid of a Sioux blanket (Brady 1904, 238–239). Unlike Brady, C. E. Deland uses Crow testimony to throw light on the battle. He favors Curley’s accounts over those of the other Crows, citing their resentment for the attention devoted to Curley and how they tried to discredit him while inflating their own roles. Otherwise, Deland notes that Boyer and the Crows were invaluable to Custer, since the Arikaras were unfamiliar with the country beyond the Yellowstone River (Deland 1930). Vestal reports that Custer promised to reward the Arikaras for their service. Vestal also notes that the scouts failed at the Little Bighorn, for the Lakota were able to recapture many of the horses that the scouts took (Vestal 1948).

The relatively few studies that closely examine the Crow and Arikara scouts at the Little Bighorn are insightful. Dale T. Schoenberger’s essay does not analyze scout motivation or their post-battle lives, yet it demonstrates that they performed well at the Little Bighorn. Instead of depicting the Arikaras as deserters, Schoenberger reveals that those who did not drive off enemy ponies fought the Lakota alongside the cavalry. Several – including Bloody Knife, whose death “somewhat demoralized Reno” – lost their lives as a result (Schoenberger 1966, 46).

John Gray observes that the Indian scouts “served not only well, bravely, and honorably, but going beyond the call of duty” as guides, trackers, couriers, and fighters. To a greater extent than Schoenberger, Gray meticulously documents the whereabouts and actions of every Arikara scout at the Little Bighorn (Gray 1968, 474). He consults Indian scout testimony to reconstruct the Battle of the Little Bighorn, demonstrating that despite their concerns about enemy numbers, many of them participated in the battle. He favors Curley’s testimony over that of his Crow comrades, for he notes that Curley “lingered” longer than them (Gray 1976, 177).

Gray’s biography of Mitch Boyer intertwines an individual past with the events at the Little Bighorn. Using Curley’s much-maligned accounts, the testimony of other Indian scouts, and other sources, Gray conducts a time-and-motion analysis to reconstruct Custer’s fateful fight. Like Innis’s work on Bloody Knife, Gray’s study highlights the twists and turns that led one man to become a scout. In Boyer’s case, although he was half-Lakota, half-French, his marriage to a Crow woman and his adoption into her tribe led him to enlist along with over 20 Crows in 1876. Despite his belief that Custer would find more enemy warriors than he expected, Boyer remained with Custer to the end and perished as a result. Gray concludes

that Curley likely witnessed much of Custer's fight and subsequently made reports that writers distorted to support existing theories. Gray also notes that Curley and other Crows reenlisted in mid-July for further service against the Lakota and Cheyenne (Gray 1991).

Dennis W. Harcey and Brian R. Croon's biography of White Man Runs Him is one of the best studies of Custer's scouts. The authors consult a variety of sources, but they emphasize Crow oral traditions. They point out that Crow "wolves" were distinguished warriors, who bore responsibility for monitoring their enemies. When White Man Runs Him and other "wolves" enlisted as scouts, they took the war to the Lakotas who threatened their land. Furthermore, they hoped to win war honors. Harcey and Croon discuss how the Crows initially chafed as they adapted to Army life; the rigidity of military protocol, the emphasis on group rather than individual action, and Gibbon's reluctance to pursue the enemy troubled the Crows. Nevertheless, they served Gibbon and Custer well, even as they adjusted to working with other Natives (Harcey and Croon 1995).

Friction occurred when the Crows first spotted the enemy village on the morning of June 25, 1876. Though an Arikara reported the news to Custer, the Crows wanted sole credit for the discovery. Harcey and Croon also discuss how the Crow scouts believed that Custer and his men drank alcohol on that day, an allegation that remains controversial. During the ensuing battle, White Man Runs Him stuck around until dismissed by Custer, and then watched enough of the battle to conclude that Custer died at the Medicine Tail Coulee ford (this conflicts with Curley's early accounts). Unlike most other authors, Harcey and Croon discuss what transpired after the Crows returned home. White Man Runs Him and dozens of others reenlisted thereafter, and they served into 1877. White Man Runs Him later became a popular source of information about the battle, a regular attendee at Little Bighorn reunions, embroiled in a feud with Curley over their accounts of the fight, prominent in tribal politics, and a tribal representative in Washington. Yet, he struggled for decades to obtain his pension, and his people lost much of their land to allotment (Harcey and Croon 1995).

Colin G. Calloway argues that, in order to better understand their motivations, scholars must view the Sioux War as an "Indian-Indian conflict [that] occurred within the context of competing strategies for survival." Indian scouts were not traitors, "other Indians," or mere US allies. Rather, the Battle of the Little Bighorn was but a part of their ongoing intertribal struggle against the Lakota. Calloway also emphasizes the appeal of scouting to those wanting to escape reservation life. He insists that the Native scouts performed well throughout the entire 1876-1877 Sioux War. Yet, scouting was a mixed blessing. Although it enabled men to sustain their warrior traditions and to make war on their enemies, they nevertheless had to return to reservations that continued to diminish in size (Calloway 1996, 65).

Viola carries Calloway's emphasis on the Little Bighorn as an Indian-Indian conflict to the next logical step: a book-length study of the place of the battle in Arikara and Crow history. Viola's collection of essays challenges stereotypes of the scouts as mercenaries, arguing that they sided with the US Army to preserve their lands and ways of life. Although scouts received pay and war honors, the Crow and Arikara now feel that the government turned its back on them. Using eyewitness accounts and oral traditions, Viola's volume tells the story of the Little Bighorn from Arikara and Crow perspectives. Joe Medicine Crow's chapters on the Crow scouts suggest that although the Crows had professed friendship with the Americans, admired Custer, and were loyal to the Army, they were reluctant allies. He also addresses the controversy surrounding the Crow scouts, such as their assertions that Custer's men drank alcohol as well as the conflict between Curley and the other scouts. Although Joseph Medicine Crow was a descendant of White Man Runs Him, his treatment of Curley appears fair, for he notes that Americans fabricated many of the Curley stories. The book also discusses Custer's lesser-known scouts, such as White Swan, who sustained multiple wounds at the Little Bighorn, one of which left him with a maimed hand. Melfine Fox Everett's chapter on the Arikara highlights how the reservation era was difficult and how men struggled to sustain their warrior traditions by scouting. The descendants of the Arikara scouts continue to honor them today, but some Lakotas view the Arikaras as traitors, even though they simply chose what they believed would be the best path into an uncertain future. One chapter of Viola's book covers the scouts' "other" duties, such as hunting and delivering messages. Another documents the bureaucratic hurdles that faced scouts who struggled to obtain their pensions (Viola 1999).

Adrian E. Hirst's study of Custer's scouts includes biographical sketches of Mitch Boyer and the six Crows. Hirst discusses their allegations that cavalrymen drank liquor on the day of battle as well as the controversy among the Crows regarding Curley's testimony, ultimately siding with his detractors. He acknowledges that writers made up many Curley stories, but he accuses Curley of changing his story. He defers to Goes Ahead and Hairy Moccasin, who claimed that Curley left early and that he therefore could not have witnessed the fight. Hirst also briefly covers what these scouts did after the Little Bighorn, including the selection of White Man Runs Him to be the model for the Wanamaker Memorial, Goes Ahead's service during the Nez Perce War, and Hairy Moccasin's life as a farmer. Although an admirable attempt to highlight the Crow story of the Little Bighorn, Hirst repeats one Arikara's claim that Custer aspired to win the presidency with a victory over the Sioux (Hirst 2004).

## Conclusion

Although much has been written about Indian auxiliaries and scouts in general as well as those who served Custer in particular, much work remains to be done. Dunlay (1982) provides the authoritative study of Indian scouts, but it should be used as a springboard into newer studies. Van de Logt (2010) represents an example of what can be achieved when one uses ethnohistorical approaches to examine a particular Native scout unit. One wonders what insight might be gained from the application of a similar approach to the Crow or Arikara scouts. In general, histories of the nineteenth-century Indian Wars would do well to place them within the broader history of intertribal warfare, for that would give scouts greater historical significance.

One must marvel at the ongoing disagreement regarding the performance and testimony of the Arikara and Crow scouts involved with the Battle of the Little Bighorn. That likely has to do with the fact that much has been written about that fight but not the scouts themselves. Informed by secondary sources, many authors tend to unquestioningly accept what one previous author or another said about the scouts. For instance, writers still repeat the story about Custer telling the Arikaras that a victory over the Lakota would make him president, but that claim is based on a single Arikara account. Also, the recurring accusation that the Arikaras deserted Reno and thereby doomed his detachment to defeat is erroneous, for some Arikaras fought alongside the soldiers; several perished as a result. The accounts of Curley and the other three Crows who accompanied Custer's detachment remain controversial. Although most writers now accept Curley's early testimony as reasonably accurate, some still question the credibility of all of his reports. Gray should be consulted as a model for handling Curley's testimony (Gray 1991).

With this in mind, there are some prospects for future research. Although the works of Innis (1973), Harcey and Croon (1995), and Viola (1999) represent important steps toward offering scout perspectives of the Little Bighorn, scholars have yet to embrace the opportunity to present the battle through their eyes. Historians may argue that a lack of primary source material would hamper any such attempt to grapple with the Little Bighorn as an event in Arikara or Crow history, but an analysis of oral traditions and written accounts would be a good start. Placing this battle within the context of Crow and Arikara history would help us to better comprehend the "Indian-Indian" dimension of the Indian Wars. It also would allow us to better appreciate the place of "other" Indians in Western history.

In general, scholars should consider utilizing an ethnohistorical approach to the scouts of the Little Bighorn. We must endeavor to shed dated, biased, and simplistic explanations of why Arikaras and Crows did what they did. That includes questioning the legacy of the Red Power movement, which victimized

the “hostiles” while painting those who “collaborated” with the military as “traitors” to the Indian “race.” We must try to discover how Arikaras and Crows viewed the world around them, their position within that world, and their range of viable options. Perhaps one should proceed by first turning away from the mountain of books that has been written about the Little Bighorn and then turning to the written sources and oral traditions to gain a better understanding of who the scouts were, why they served, and what they did. Since 1876, Whittaker and others have muddled our understanding of Custer’s Indian scouts. Must their biases continue to taint our understanding of those “other” Indians?

For too long the American imagination has focused on the Little Bighorn as an Indian–white conflict. The story of that fight – and that of the American West for that matter – is about so much more than encroaching Anglo-Americans and “hostile” Natives. The Crows and Arikaras, who worked with the US Army against a common enemy, merit far more attention and thoughtful analysis than they have yet received.

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## Part II

# THE US ARMY IN THE WESTERN TERRITORIES



## Chapter Six

# THE POLICIES OF WAR AND PEACE

*Bill Carney*

Americans through the years have considered almost every war a crusade for freedom and democracy, although the Indian Wars of the late nineteenth century usually lacked such idealism. The United States deployed the regular Army to secure the North American continent, where soldiers often faced spirited resistance from the indigenous population. After the end of the Civil War but before the Spanish-American War, the Army's primary objective was to enforce the policies of the federal government in the American West. Numerous books and articles have been written both defending and condemning the military operations that produced the Battle of the Little Bighorn. This chapter places the armed clash that began on June 25, 1876, squarely within the context of federal policies of war and peace, focusing on the literature about bureaucratic oversight as well as civil-military relations. Indeed, George Armstrong Custer's fate can be traced directly to the policies advocated by President Ulysses S. Grant.

Historian Donald Fixico notes that scholars have frequently conceptualized federal Indian policy in the past as an "oscillating pendulum," which tended to swing between accommodation and dispossession (Fixico 2002). The questions surrounding policy-making provide a familiar structure for the study of Indian history, although the approach privileges the perspectives of non-Indians. The answers often reveal the ways in which bureaucrats in Washington, DC attempted to gain control over Indian land, trade, religion, and education. Their frequent disregard for the welfare of Indian tribes is a sad legacy of conquest.

To implement what many called Grant's "peace policy," Army officers were expected to collaborate with Indian agencies to provide security on remote reservations. The federal government began to emphasize the role of civilian workers, especially Quaker missionaries, in dealing with Native Americans. Unfortunately, administration officials failed to reconcile the goals of the War Department and the Interior Department. Ineptitude and mismanagement undermined humanitarian efforts, which fueled distrust among Indian tribes. Corrupt politicians, greedy contractors, and naïve agents rarely kept their promises to Indian leaders during the 1870s. Rotten food and shoddy clothing often arrived at the agencies. According to historian Michael Tate, the interagency strife over "administrative control of Indians symbolized a larger national conflict over defining the army's mission in the West" (Tate 1999).

### Indian Affairs

The federal government's role in Indian affairs originated with the ratification of the US Constitution in 1789, which led to the immediate creation of the War Department. Originally, a chief clerk and an assistant clerk oversaw matters pertaining to Indian tribes. As the nineteenth century dawned, district offices and trading posts began to proliferate across the United States.

The position of Superintendent of Indian Trade was responsible for oversight of what was called the "factory" system. The primary objective was to encourage the fur trade in western territories and thereby make Indians dependent upon the United States. The federal government provided education, medical care, food, farming assistance, and other resources to Indian tribes as part of treaty agreements. In exchange, officials demanded land cessions. In 1824, Secretary of War John Calhoun organized the Indian Office within the War Department. The first head of the Indian Office is the subject of Herman Viola's *Thomas L. McKenney: Architect of America's Early Indian Policy, 1816–1830* (1974). Following the Mexican War in 1849, Congress transferred the Indian Office to the newly created Interior Department.

Without question, Indian affairs reflected the assumptions of paternalism. Native Americans occupied a special status as "domestic dependent nations" due to the approximately 600 treaties signed with the United States since the Revolutionary War. The Supreme Court, though recognizing Indian tribes, shifted the balance of power in the relationship to the nation-state. Historian Brian Dippie critically examines the enduring perception that Indians constituted a "vanishing" race, a view among officials in the War Department and the Interior Department that had far-reaching ramifications for their treatment (Dippie 1982). The reservation system won support among officials

before the Civil War, although it was not fully developed until later. Frequent turnover in the federal bureaucracies undermined the policies and procedures. Poor management of Indian affairs generally fostered corruption in Washington, DC over the years.

According to historian Cathleen Cahill, Indian affairs was guided by a wide array of ideological, economic, and political movements. She carefully studies the federal bureaucracies tasked with overseeing Indian affairs, giving due attention to the policy of assimilation after the Civil War. Her focus is on the United States Indian Service during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a branch of the Indian Office charged with working alongside Native Americans on a day to day basis. Her work uniquely highlights the roles played by ordinary men and women, Indian as well as non-Indian. She reveals a more diverse bureaucracy than most scholars have assumed, telling the stories of employees who, in modern phrasing, worked in the trenches to teach Indians the basic concepts of “civilized behavior” (Cahill 2011). She examines the archives of the Indian Service to show that these men and women shaped policy-making through their daily interaction with Indians. They strove to overturn centuries of tradition and custom. Much of their reformist zeal focused on replacing established gender roles in Indian tribes, promoting the disruptive idea of the male as the primary breadwinner as well as the patriarchal head of the household.

As governmental relations with Indian tribes shifted away from the domain of “foreign” to “domestic” affairs, bureaucrats searched for a solution to the so-called Indian “problem.” At times, it was considered a problem of administration. At other times, it was seen as a problem in regard to the cultural and social characteristics of the Indians themselves. However defined, it was a problem that derived from the development of the nation-state. Loring B. Priest’s *Uncle Sam’s Stepchildren: The Reformation of United States Indian Policy, 1865–1887* (1969) is a standard treatment of the subject. Another notable study is Robert Winston Mardock’s *The Reformers and the American Indian* (1971).

The problem of Indian affairs grew acute, because of westward expansion. Indians in the American West looked warily at the peace commissioners, who were sent by various administrations at the same time that US soldiers tried to erect forts. For example, the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 established the “Great Sioux Reservation” in the western half of the Dakota Territory. It also guaranteed a number of Indians the right to reside outside the reservation in the Powder River region, which was “unceded” land. It acknowledged the power of Indians in the northern Great Plains, where a brief period of relative calm interrupted the sporadic fighting.

The treaty-making process between the United States and Indian tribes has been described by historian Frances Paul Prucha as an anomaly (Prucha 1994). In his view, the traditional concept of treaty negotiations between two parties is based on the premise that both possess equal power. Equality

and justice were seldom achieved by “touching the pen” to the treaties, because Americans refused to share power with Indians. Instead of peace, the process often led to war. In fact, the United States recorded 1,642 military engagements with Indian tribes irrespective of agreements. Prucha lamented the armed clashes between Indians and settlers that seemed inevitable in the western territories, even though the federal government tried at times to avoid them.

The best study of federal policies toward Indians in the late nineteenth century is Frederick Hoxie’s *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians* (2001). The book offers a careful analysis of the assimilationist movement, which intensified after the Great Sioux War of the 1870s and persisted through the 1920s. Reformers promised to bring individual Indians into the mainstream of American society. While Prucha sees much continuity in the attitudes and goals of reformers, educators, and politicians, Hoxie argues that profound changes occurred as the century closed. He believes that the “friends of the Indian” combined an ethnocentric intolerance of tribal cultures with a racially optimistic belief in the capacity of the people to undertake complete assimilation. Through the allotment of tribal lands and compulsory education for children, the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship eventually would transform Indians into citizens. As reformers grew more pessimistic about their efforts, they actually tended to push Indians to the margins of “civilization.” Ultimately, the results for Indians were devastating.

In the name of progress, the federal government gradually dispossessed Indian tribes from their homelands. The Indian population in North America steadily declined on the reservations, eventually dwindling to a few hundred thousand by 1900. Perhaps “ethnic cleansing” is not an inaccurate term to describe what happened as a result of starvation, disease, deception, violence, deportations, and other abuses. The outspoken Indian reformer, Helen Hunt Jackson, memorably called it “a century of dishonor” (Jackson 1881). Nevertheless, Indians adapted to the adverse situation. Historian William T. Hagan delivers a sympathetic account of Indian police and judges, who were “vanguards” at the agencies. In addition to providing security, reformers hoped that they would undermine the authority of conservative tribal elders (Hagan 1966).

Standard narratives portray the nineteenth century in terms of steadily declining sovereignty for Indian tribes, especially with the passage of the Dawes Severalty Act in 1887. In *Crooked Paths to Allotment*, historian C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa (2012) complicates these narratives, focusing on key moments when viable alternatives to assimilationist policies arose. In these moments, reformers challenged coercive practices and offered visions for policies that might have allowed Indian tribes to adapt on their own terms. Examining the contests over Indian affairs from Reconstruction through the Gilded Age, he reveals how these humanitarians and their allies

opposed such policies as forced land allotment, the elimination of traditional cultural practices, mandatory boarding school education for Indian youth, and compulsory participation in the market economy. Although the mainstream supporters of assimilation successfully repressed these efforts, the ideas and frameworks that they espoused offered a tradition of dissent against injustice. In other words, reformers “destabilized, if only briefly, the status quo in federal Indian policy development” (Genetin-Pilawa 2012, 2).

Complementing the federal government’s efforts were the Indian boarding schools, which historian David Wallace Adams examines in *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (1995). Congress appropriated funds for off-reservation institutions such as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Officials hoped that Indian children would acquire skills as well as discipline in the classrooms.

Dismayed by the massacres at Sand Creek and at Washita, a number of Americans were willing to rethink federal Indian policy. Liberals often worked with conservatives, who complained that the Indian Wars were simply too expensive. Some estimated that the federal government spent roughly a million dollars for every Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho killed in the American West. Historians have helped to illustrate the mentalities of those who influenced Indian affairs, yet their analysis must also focus upon the front lines of implementation. Civilians may have developed and supervised the reforms in Washington, DC, but the Army would be asked to carry out the policies in remote frontiers.

### A Peacetime Army

While the Interior Department maintained administrative control over Indian reservations, the War Department was expected to provide what amounted to a “peacekeeping” force in the western territories. Soldiers not only kept trespassers off the reservations, they also kept Indians on them. Sporadically, they conducted brutal campaigns against “hostiles.” At the same time, they maintained a presence in hundreds of posts on or near reservations. For good and for ill, they often found themselves at the spearhead of federal Indian policy.

Political scientist Samuel Huntington asserted that the Army suffered through a period of public isolation from 1865 to 1890. As a consequence of their geographic, social, and intellectual insularity, officers appeared apolitical. However, they also developed an increasing sense of professionalism. Though celebrated during the Civil War, military service in subsequent decades no longer garnered public attention or honor. In addition to their unpopular assignment to Reconstruction duties in southern states, blue-coats were spread along small posts in the western territories days and weeks

apart from each other. Huntington opined that this experience “made these same years the most fertile, creative, and formative in the history of the American armed forces” (Huntington 1957).

The Army struggled to deal with troop drawdowns during the era of Reconstruction. Though seasoned by “total war,” officers frequently discussed the need for different strategies and new tactics by which to engage Indians as well as civilians. Historian Robert M. Utley authored two indispensable works on service members, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848–1865* (Utley 1967), and *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866–1891* (Utley 1973). What emerges from his work is the recognition that the armed forces were in a difficult position during the Indian Wars of the nineteenth century. “The army’s particular contribution,” Utley concluded, “was to precipitate a final collapse that had been ordained by other forces” (Utley 1973, 410–411).

As historian Russell Weigley states, the American military had embraced a strategy of annihilation during the Civil War that was not conducive to achieving other kinds of political objectives. The overwhelming mass and concentration of the Union crushed the Confederacy, to be sure, but the behemoth was ill-suited for Indian fighting in the American West. Weigley traces the long line of policy decisions and military actions from the colonial period into the late nineteenth century and concludes that the American “way of war” was characterized primarily by the desire to achieve a decisive victory in battle (Weigley 1973, 475). Whereas the Army had been quietly patrolling the borders of Indian Territory for years, the appetite for national expansion after the Civil War meant that the Army would assume an offensive posture in subjugating foes on the frontier. In garrisons west of the Mississippi River, the War Department tasked soldiers with forcing Indian tribes onto reservations and dealing with them harshly if any resisted.

Edward Coffman’s *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784–1898*, is considered the best study of the “garrison world.” He finds that the Army was part of the general trend in the nation toward middle-class professionalism. While he characterizes the role of the Army as a “frontier constabulary,” he notes the irony of the word “peacetime.” Throughout this period of no declared wars, there were armed conflicts brought on by Indian encounters, westward expansion, and advancing technology. As a “buffer” between civilians and Indians, the men in uniform amounted to a “not wholly appreciated class” (Coffman 1986, 328).

The mounting clashes in the American West occurred as Reconstruction of the post-Civil War South stressed the armed forces. The standard treatment of military service during this emotionally charged period is James Sefton’s *The United States Army and Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (1967). He explains that the demands of the War Department became more

extensive at the same time that troop levels fell dramatically. He portrays the Army as conservative in its approach to its role as occupier and enforcer in southern states, doing its best to navigate between policy mandates by the federal government and the need to be able to maintain law and order at the community level. Commanders in the field wrestled with ambiguous directives as well as local politics. The soldiers were frequently viewed with resentment and scorn in the states of the defeated Confederacy.

Scholars focusing upon the post-Civil War Army note an institution not only strained but also overstretched by too many missions. Historian Robert Wooster maintains that the Army was the primary agent of conquest, where frontier borders were essentially militarized (Wooster 2006). In an ongoing war between Indians and civilian settlers, a dedicated corps of professional officers was forced to contend with the nation's fears about a large standing Army. Despite the downsizing of forces, funding the regular Army accounted for approximately 15% of the federal budget between 1865 and 1885 (Wooster 2009). Evidently, the Army's role in national security was more complex than just fighting Indians.

With Manifest Destiny a national watchword, the federal government used the Army time and again across the North American continent. Versatile regiments found themselves laboring to improve infrastructure, providing protection to wagon trains, building forts and outposts, escorting the construction crews for railroad companies, patrolling national parks, and reporting on weather and environmental conditions. At the same time, promotion and advancement through the ranks was slow, professional education for personnel was non-existent, the training at the company level remained substandard, and the supply system was a model of inefficiency. With its reach often exceeding its grasp, the Army was a reflection of the nation it defended.

As Mark Grandstaff explains, the Army after the 1860s served three vital roles: frontier peacekeeping, defense of the coasts, and enforcement of Reconstruction policy. According to his insightful article in *The Journal of Military History*, the Army was seriously undermined by public apathy toward national security and a continued distrust of a standing military in peacetime (Grandstaff 1998). He also describes an accordion-like effect on the Army, which was brought on by Congressional legislation that at first expanded the force structure and then quickly reduced it in size between the late 1860s and the early 1870s.

The Army suffered, in the words of Louis DiMarco (2007), from a lack of resources to carry out the mandates of the federal government. He details the "post-conflict" operational duties, which represent an important aspect of winning the peace. However, deficiencies in training and personnel were chronic. Given the Army's limitations, the military campaigning in the western territories to pacify Indians while also performing Reconstruction duties in southern states was too much of a burden to bear.

The general opinion of Army commanders toward the Indians was one of contempt, although not all were chauvinists, bigots, or racists. In an article published in the *Western Historical Quarterly* in 1972, historian Richard N. Ellis called a number of them “humanitarian generals.” Though remembered as Indian fighters, prominent officers such as General George Crook championed Indian rights over the years. Given their lifelong interest in Native languages and customs, many were considered pioneers of anthropology in the United States (Ellis 1972, 169–178). Recently, Charles M. Robinson III in *General Crook and the Western Frontier* (2001) notes the officer’s battles against military superiors as well as the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Apache. Upon hearing of Crook’s death, the Sioux leader Red Cloud remarked: “He, at least, never lied to us.”

Scholars have collected an engaging and descriptive set of observations by Army officers in the Indian campaigns. For example, Robinson also edited the diaries of Captain John Gregory Bourke, who served as an aide-de-camp to General Crook during his expeditions in the western territories (Robinson 2003). Bourke provided 124 manuscripts now held in the United States Military Academy library at West Point. In his study of military men who were observant recorders of Indian life, Robinson reveals the ambiguities of military service during the Indian Wars. Peter Cozzens edited a multivolume work on the Indian Wars, which contains first-person accounts by such Army officers as Nelson Miles, Wesley Merritt, and Ranald Mackenzie, among others. In particular, Volume 5 contains eyewitness testimony of soldiers, Indians, and civilians during the long struggle for control of the Great Plains (Cozzens 2007). As with other primary sources left by field commanders, their most ethnocentric observations described Indians in terms that ranged from “noble” to “savage.” A few grew to respect their enemy.

Most primary sources come from the pens of soldiers attempting to chronicle the accomplishments of the military beyond the Mississippi River. Published in 1990, Sherry Smith’s *The View from Officers’ Row: Army Perceptions of Western Indians* features the contemplations of wives of officers as well as the men in blue. While they shared valuable observations about the Indians that they encountered in faraway places, they never really came to understand the diverse cultures of Indian tribes. Nevertheless, military history continues to give scholars an important vantage point for the study of the Indian Wars.

While the fighting between the Army and Indian tribes was deadly, Indian War veterans did not receive the same respect or attention that Civil War veterans did. Historian Jerome Greene, who has written extensively on the experiences of the Army during the Indian Wars, provided 120 first-person accounts of the men who survived the battles in the American West. The veterans were seldom treated as if they had fought in defense of the United States. Instead, their tours of duty were seen as routine activity with constant

patrolling and sporadic combat. He describes the formation of the National Indian War Veterans as a lobbying force to gain pension rights for the forgotten soldiers. This organization included several chapters comprised of African American veterans. Greene states that the organization provided “unity and therefore valuable assistance to veterans who had heretofore perceived their sacrifices as having gone unacknowledged by the federal government” (Greene 2006, xxxii).

Historians William Leckie (1967), Elizabeth Leonard (2010), and Frank N. Schubert (2003) featured African American soldiers in the American West. As members of an ethnically diverse Army, many hoped to earn a measure of respect and recognition for their gallant service. Their desires seemed contradictory to the extent that they wanted to attain equality at the same time as they often were stripping Indian tribes of their rights. In other words, they were both discriminating and experiencing discrimination. Whether assigned to the cavalry or the infantry, blacks played a role in the subjugation of Indian tribes. In all likelihood, Indian observers first gave the description “Buffalo Soldier” to the African American troopers.

American Indians also served in uniform as scouts, trackers, interpreters, and advisers. General William Tecumseh Sherman suggested the establishment of an “Indian Guard” in 1876. However, General Philip H. Sheridan opposed recruiting them into the rank and file of the regular Army. For almost 20 years, the War Department debated vigorously whether or not enlisting Indians into military service might hasten their assimilation. Historian William Bruce White examines the presence of Indian soldiers in his 1968 dissertation, “The Military and the Melting Pot: The American Army and Minority Groups, 1865–1924.”

The close encounters between the Army and the Indians continue to attract keen interest from military historians, but the multifaceted duties of ordinary soldiers deserve more attention than the war stories of armchair generals. Rather than glory and adventure, officers and enlisted personnel in the American West endured hard work, tedious drills, bad meals, isolated quarters, and long deployments. Though ready to use force against all enemies, the War Department did not plan for the Army to bring about the utter extinction of Indian tribes.

### **The Grant Administration**

The historical assessments of Ulysses S. Grant as President of the United States often depict him as personally honest though mired in controversy. This image is best represented in historian Ethan S. Rafuse’s description of him as a man of “complex simplicity” (Rafuse 2007). Grant is the epitome of an exemplary leader of soldiers but a failed commander in chief.

Historian Jean Edward Smith authored the most complete biography of the general who became a president, which was simply titled *Grant*. Smith insists that he “personified the egalitarian values of a modernizing, democratic society” (Smith 2001, 342). Accordingly, Grant’s efforts at bringing peace during the Indian Wars spawned comparisons to President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s approach to ending the Korean War in 1953. Both men had extensive careers in the Army, yet both surprised many by pursuing goals of peaceful resolution to the respective conflicts in their time. Both may have been elected with the assumption among many voters that as military men they would bring their expertise to bear on a swift and victorious end to fighting. With regard to leadership styles, the good will that they gained from their prior service in the armed forces may have added an element of credibility to their domestic policies.

The analysis of Grant’s policies toward Indian tribes is mixed. As Smith illustrates, Grant appears to have sincerely tried to find solutions that were beneficial to Indians, moving quickly as his first term began to appoint a Board of Indian Commissioners – in effect, a blue ribbon panel – to provide advice and support for a new and more humane Indian policy. Initially, he showed determination to reform Indian affairs, to treat the Indians in the western territories with fairness, and to protect them from encroachment by white settlers. Grant proudly repeated his aim to audiences: “Let us have peace!”

There is no shortage of Grant biographies. The most useful ones for scholars include William McFeely, *Grant: A Biography* (1981); Josiah Bunting III, *Ulysses S. Grant* (2001); H. W. Brands, *The Man Who Saved the Union: Ulysses Grant in War and Peace* (2013); Geoffrey Perret, *Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President* (2009); Joan Waugh, *U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth* (2009); and Brooks D. Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction, 1861–1868* (1991). Despite the accolades of some scholars, Grant is ranked among the worst presidents.

Grant’s goal for his administration was to bring stability to the country after years of war, though his “peace policy” spawned more violent disruptions in the western territories. Political scientist Stephen Rockwell suggests that nineteenth-century Indian policy in general was not as haphazard as it often seemed, since it was designed primarily as a tool for US territorial expansion. He maintains that the pacification of American Indians “arose from the careful, planned, and effective actions of reasonable and often well-meaning people” (Rockwell 2001). Despite Grant’s state purposes, Indian affairs were often secondary to other priorities.

However, not all scholars view Grant’s record in office with empathy. Historian David Sim believes that Grant’s policies were muddled and lacked cohesion. The resulting collapse of reform efforts was largely a reflection of political factors not connected to the facilitation of Indian–white

relations. He notes three specific events in the formulation of Indian policy: the failure of the transference of Indian affairs from the Interior Department to the War Department; the increasing dependence upon religious denominations and their members to fill the ranks of the Indian Office; and the Congressional halt to the treaty system. Consequently, contingencies and circumstances tended to force the Grant administration into reactionary roles (Sim 2008).

The Grant administration occupied a central position linking the assorted agencies of the federal bureaucracy. During Grant's two terms in office, the reservation system was expanded. He believed that the best recourse to end the violence would be based upon assimilating Indians into American society. Unfortunately, this reflected the widespread prejudice that there was little worth preserving in Indian culture. While such views are abhorrent today, Grant's intentions at the time were comparatively more humane than many of the crude sentiments expressed by his contemporaries. Displaying similar antipathy toward immigrants, individuals inside and outside of government generally disregarded minority rights.

Grant appointed Ely S. Parker, a Tonawanda Seneca who had served on his staff during the Civil War, as the first Native American to serve as Commissioner of Indian Affairs. The two officers were close personal friends. According to biographer William Armstrong, Parker was "a warrior in two camps" (Armstrong 1978). To his credit, Parker modernized the distribution of rations, goods, and annuities. He advocated the enforcement of existing treaties just as they were written, even if it produced negative consequences for white settlement. He also fought against holding Indians to the terms of treaties that were fraudulent or unjust. Nevertheless, he was unable to end the corruption that plagued Indian agencies. Parker continued to serve as commissioner until 1871, when he resigned amid allegations of corruption that led to hearings in the House of Representatives.

Despite the loss of his ally in the administration, Grant held to a paternalistic attitude that assimilation would be good for Indians in the long run. His "civilizing" efforts recognized that it was in the best interest of the United States to not kill the Indians in the American West. He appears to have recognized and acknowledged the injustices committed against the Indians, though he did little to stem the tide of dispossession. He sought ways to place Quakers and other religious activists in powerful positions within the Indian Office. As Quaker Lawrie Tatum recalled, the President expected the agents to "assist in the scholastic, industrial, moral, and religious education of the Indians" (Tatum 1899, 25). Grant's motives, while grounded in biased assumptions about the need to assimilate the tribes into civil society, were extraordinary in many ways. The formation of what he called a "peace policy" occurred at a time in which outspoken members of his own party equated Indians with "wild animals" and advocated their extermination. Patronage-dispensing politicians were rarely altruistic.

Regardless of the sentiments, Grant hoped to find ways to end the abuses in the reservation system and to improve Indian relations without resorting to another war.

A standard treatment of Indian relations in this critical period is Utley's *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846–1890* (1984), which notes that Grant did not consciously craft the “peace policy” as an instrument of radical change. Despite what some biographers have claimed about the President, he never vowed to obliterate the evils of “the Indian system.” He did not hold strong convictions about Indian rights, yet he did hope that honest and more efficient agents on reservations would encourage assimilation. Utley finds “no grand design for a fresh and humane approach to Indian relations” in Grant’s administration (Utley 1984, 128).

Historians generally agree that Grant desired to avoid what he called a “war of extermination” in the western territories. By signing the Indian Appropriation Act of 1871, he authorized the federal government to nullify existing treaties and to define the Indians as national wards. “Our superiority of strength and advantages of civilization should make us lenient toward the Indian,” he declared in his second inaugural address. The best actions to take toward Indians, he believed, was to force them to reside on reservations, where the agents would introduce them to farming, science, reading, writing, clothing, and the other trappings of “civilization.” Though missionaries and churches would take the lead, the Army would watch Indians march on “the white man’s road.” Of course, the eruption of violence between Indians and emigrants constantly imperiled their efforts. Ultimately, greed and mismanagement doomed the plans of Grant to avoid military actions as a means to end Indian hostilities.

Grant opted for military action to end the Black Hills controversy. During 1875, the Allison Commission attempted to negotiate an agreement with the Sioux for the sale or lease of the Black Hills. The Sioux rejected the unwanted offers, and the commissioners returned to Washington, DC empty handed. Consequently, their report recommended that Congress set a fair value for the Black Hills and that they present it to the Sioux as a finality. That November, Grant met with Secretary of the Interior Zachariah Chandler, Secretary of War William W. Belknap, and select Army officers in the White House. They decided to no longer use the Army to keep trespassers out of the Black Hills, where gold had been found. They also agreed to compel Sitting Bull and his followers to reside on the “Great Sioux reservation.” At the request of the Interior Department, troops prepared to subjugate the “wild and hostile bands.”

Bowing to public pressure, the President decided to promote the “extinguishment of title” to the Black Hills by any means necessary. Commissioner of Indian Affairs Edward Smith ordered all the Sioux to return to the reservation by January 31, 1876, or else General Philip Sheridan would order the Army into action. The best synthesis of the

war that Grant unwittingly helped to manufacture is John S. Gray's *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876* (1988).

A brief yet engaging survey of Grant's scandals is Charles W. Calhoun's *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age* (2010). Because the federal bureaucracy had grown to tens of thousands of positions, Grant was often at the mercy of "political machines." Though personally exonerated from wrongdoing, he repeatedly drew fire for "Caesarism." A series of Congressional investigations examined the role of his administration in *Crédit Mobilier* and the Whiskey Ring. The New York Gold conspiracy as well as the Panic of 1873 further tarnished his reputation. The resulting outcry placed the President and the Republican Party under a cloud of suspicion, from which he would never escape. Calhoun notes that Grant did not fully appreciate "that for a president to succeed as a tribune of the people, he must also be an effective leader of his party" (Calhoun 2010, 17).

The Belknap scandal epitomized the chronic problems of the Grant administration. At the behest of his wife, Secretary of War Belknap secured a post tradership at Fort Sill in Indian Territory for John S. Evans. Carrie Tomlinson Belknap reportedly received \$6,000 annually for her influence peddling. Following her death, the money allegedly was paid to Secretary Belknap. A Congressional investigation revealed that he received kickbacks for years. On March 2, 1876, the House of Representatives voted unanimously to impeach him. Belknap, who was Grant's personal friend, resigned the same day. He soon was acquitted by the Senate on grounds that there was no jurisdiction to impeach someone no longer holding public office.

In an ironic twist of fate, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer became intertwined in the Belknap scandal during 1876. A Democratic representative from New York, Hiester Clymer, led the Congressional investigation of the disgraced Secretary. Custer had been writing anonymous pieces for the *New York Herald*, which suggested that Belknap was involved in other kickback schemes at various Indian trading posts. Surprisingly, Custer testified twice before Congress in regard to the machinations of Belknap and Orville Grant, the President's brother. Within weeks of attending the hearings, Custer met defeat at the Little Bighorn.

## Conclusion

The year 1876 marked the centennial of American independence, but it also marked a conspicuous turning point for the federal bureaucracy. Even as the nation was reeling from Custer's death that year, General William Tecumseh Sherman began to initiate serious reforms in the Army. The new Secretary of War, Alonso Taft, endorsed Sherman's efforts. They included a rewriting of Army regulations as well as the appointment of capable officers

such as Emory Upton, Winfield Scott Hancock, John Schofield, and John Pope to key posts. Meanwhile, the Indian Office and the Interior Department advanced policies that deepened the dependency of Indians on the federal government. Backed by members of Congress, commissioners and agents insisted upon the assimilation of Native Americans. Bureaucrats continued to accept bribes for allowing unscrupulous practices at reservations and forts. Despite the efforts for reform, there seemed to be no resolution to the corruption that became rampant. In many respects, the growth of bureaucracy was the antithesis of democracy for Indians.

Modern scholars of the bureaucracy that developed by 1876 have much to consider. The warehouses of records collected and maintained by the federal government are an asset for research of almost any kind. In particular, the War Department documented just about everything that involved expenditures of public funds. The Interior Department maintained records on a vast number of filings for public land. However, tracking down materials at the local level can be frustrating, leading to a predictable emphasis on the “top down” perspective. Likewise, efforts to fully consider Indian voices remains incomplete. Because customs differed widely from tribe to tribe, scholars have used anthropology and ethnology to complement what was captured by the written word. Only a handful of historians are using sources from an Indian perspective to examine the policies of war and peace.

In the broadest sense, the history of bureaucracies may be ready for significant changes. Traditionally, writers have focused on public policies from the standpoint of the nation-state. Closely scrutinizing reforms and their implementation, the student of any presidential administration will tend to emphasize the deeds and decisions of officials in governmental departments and agencies. More recently, revisionists have taken pains to more effectively place governmental oversight within wider cultural, economic, and social contexts. Historians of American institutions acknowledge that activities commonly associated with nation-building consumed energy and resources from the Reconstruction Era to the Gilded Age. More effort should be made by historians to understand federal bureaucracy systematically rather than anecdotally. Most of all, the ramifications of governmental actions should be considered from all sides.

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## Chapter Seven

### FORTS ON THE NORTHERN PLAINS

*Janne Lahti*

Living under canvas, exposed on vast grass-covered flatlands to violent and nearly incessant gales that penetrated their bones and made their heads ache with unrelenting pain, a group of men toiled from morning to dusk building barracks, individual homes, storage buildings, administrative offices, as well as a hospital and a guardhouse. Enlisted for service with a notion of becoming professional soldiers, these men who had journeyed from eastern urban residences to the distant reaches of the Wyoming Territory grew intimately acquainted with the axe, shovel, hammer, and paint brush – but rarely found time for their rifles.

It was November of 1867, and the construction of Fort Fetterman on the strategically vital junction of the Oregon and Bozeman Trails had started in the twilight of summer. Although winter loomed just around the corner, not a single building at the post had a floor or a roof. The only thing finished was the telegraph connection with the transcontinental line. In truth, even the wire was more often down than anyone cared to admit. Each person and each article of supply and equipment, including weaponry, faced exposure to the elements. Poor diet, lacking, for instance, vegetables, milk, or eggs, and little if any flour, led to chronic fatigue and terrifying scurvy. The ill-nourished builders also regularly shivered because of a shortage of wood for fuel, their only source for any type of warmth seemingly resting on funding the neighboring prostitutes, who, sensing lucrative commerce, had reached the site already in August. Making the frustrating construction ordeal more painful was the fact that most of the soldiers did not know what they were doing, as they possessed few of the skills required

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for competent builders. As snow began to fall regularly by year's end, Fort Fetterman remained far from finished, construction now resuming only as weather permitted (Lindmier 2002).

Being initially the southernmost garrison in a line of new forts penetrating the indigenous domains, Fort Fetterman came to life to abolish the Sioux and Cheyenne claim on the Bighorn and Powder River country. Following the Army's abrupt abandonment of the Bozeman Trail in 1868, Fetterman would function as a major marshaling point, headquarters, and supply base for operations in this contested area. Still, Fort Fetterman was hardly exceptional. It was just one among several garrisons instituted in response to the dynamic and constantly changing balance of power on the Great Plains. Given the geographical scale of conquest and the decentralized nature of the Indian population, the War Department opted for extensive coverage of real estate instead of concentrating troop strength in a few isolated spots. Thus, over time, numerous yet temporary habitats were constructed, repaired, rebuilt, removed, abandoned, and reestablished in various sections of the Plains by soldier labor. A snapshot from 1875 shows the Army manning 12 garrisons and three Indian agencies in the Dakota Territory alone, with an additional four posts in Montana, seven in Wyoming, and five in Nebraska. Five years later Dakota still retained 12 active posts and Wyoming seven, as now did Nebraska. Montana held nine forts (Frazer 1965; Barnes 2008). It was only after fighting ended on the Plains that proposals of concentration gained ground among senior military leaders in the United States.

### Islands of Occupation and Civilization

In many ways, the Army fort stood not only at the pinnacle of military operations but also at the heart of the US colonization efforts. Like a spider's web, the posts dotting the Plains linked the political, economic, military, cultural, and social facets of conquest. In other words, the garrisons militarized the space in multifaceted ways. If reality made them appear more like government workhouses, and if the establishments were meant to operate primarily as bases for housing men who specialized in violence, the posts came to function as sites through which American political and cultural claims and presence as well as economic products were channeled to lands under colonialism.

Many military historians such as Robert Utley, Robert Wooster, Michael Tate, Robert Athearn, Edward Coffman, and Don Rickey, Jr., have agreed that typically the western military posts were remote and miserable places as far as quality of life was concerned. They have also stressed how their presence was expected to convey a message of US power to the indigenous peoples. A diverse tradition of scholarship on militarized spaces, often

emphasizing military urbanism, geographies of fear, and surging markets for security and surveillance, has pertinently discussed how militarization and military presence makes claims for power and civilization. While controlling development, new uses of space significantly augment understandings of place (Woodward 2004; Graham 2010; Davis 1992).

Showing how the academic conversation on militarized spaces has moved beyond the narrow definition of theatres of war, Alison Hoagland discusses how an architectural look that emphasized the appearance of power, the more or less rectilinear and symmetrical log, frame, and adobe buildings in an area of wide open spaces, eclipsed the conical-shaped tipis made of animal hides that had previously defined the Plains. The forts indicated American grit as well as the hegemony of a new regime (Hoagland 2004). In the process, they distanced the occupiers and their communities and contained the “other,” keeping the indigenous peoples outside and thus effectively marking the line between “us” and “them.” Army forts inscribed what the critical geographer Edward Soja has called relations of power and discipline into the spatiality of human geography (Soja 2011, 6).

It often seemed as if the Army was out of its element on the Plains, for its soldiers were short on local knowledge and frequently in pitiable physical condition. They built their bases to impress their enemies. US forts shaped the Plains also by funneling new products to western territories, creating new demands in local markets, and serving as supply stations for settlers in search of land and wealth. In the process, the forts directly and indirectly altered the landscapes, depleting its game, cutting its timber, exhausting its water, and using its soil. Thus, the militarization of Plains space resulting from the establishment of Army forts reached far beyond the immediate parameters of post sites or battlefields. Even if the sight of the forts might have puzzled or awed some of the Indians, the limited military impact of the posts on the highly mobile indigenous warriors insinuated that the posts were in fact something less than perfect supreme islands of occupation. The garrisons were typically unable to control or even to deter threats. Suggesting further weakness and failure, the posts fared poorly against the storms, wind, and fire, all of which tore away at the shabbily fabricated structures. One would only need to look at the construction of Fort Fetterman to recognize the impacts of the Plains environment.

Regardless of their flaws and shortcomings, Army forts held a significant cultural function in the US colonization of western spaces. In my own work, I have described how garrisons represented more than isolated domains of misery. They functioned as sites through which eastern cultural standards and social customs were channeled to western regions. Military outposts stood as places for cultural experiment, where the residents, most prominently officers and their dependents, wanted to see themselves as refined and influential people. Many sought to put into practice their visions of proper life and social order. When Army personnel arrived

at a destination, their models of American communities, leisure and work regimes, consumption, public space, and domestic life not only proved vital in their effort to adapt but also served as vehicles and sites in their quest for authority. In short, identity and power were built through the orchestration of public and domestic space in leisure and labor. Often, however, the challenges of everyday survival – including but not limited to questions relating to food, drink, shelter, and warmth – sapped much of the energy, hampered many of the plans, and consumed most of the patience of those living far from the centers of US population, commerce, and industry. Still, the ongoing reordering and reconstruction of the posts signified a refusal to give up on their collective aspirations to generate superior islands of occupation and civilization (Lahti 2012). Operating in the juncture of grand expectations and taxing realities, the posts stood as imperfect yet forceful sites marked by a dynamic effort to narrow the gap between the everyday and the ideal.

So it was at Fort Fetterman. Just as the first winter at the fort was bleak and miserable, so were many that followed. Construction and repairs while battling the elements proved the norm for years to come. Visiting in 1876, John Finerty, a Chicago newspaperman, wrote that Fort Fetterman “was a hateful post” in a dreadful place, where summer was “hell” and winter “Spitzbergen.” Not realizing that Fort Fetterman represented a rather typical military installation on the Plains, Finerty was certain that “the whole army dreaded being quartered there” (Finerty 1890, 59).

Whether one approaches conquest from the colonial, cultural, spatial, or the transnational “turn,” there is no denying that nineteenth-century western Army posts remain seriously understudied by modern scholars. The potential for innovative research certainly exists. As imperfect islands of occupation and civilization exemplifying the varied facets involved in the militarization of colonial spaces, the Army forts offer pathways for students interested in pursuing social and cultural history, including discourse analysis and postcolonial theory, and for those setting their sights on the use and understandings of space, military cultures, or domesticity and intimate colonialism. Posts in the American West also practically beg for transnational and comparative analysis with similar installations built by various European colonial regimes in Asia and Africa.

Utley, Wooster, Coffman, Rickey, and others have made observations on the military, social, and cultural functions of the forts in the colonization of the American West, but their emphasis has tended to be fixed on military campaigns and policies, on leaders, or, in the case of Coffman and Rickey, on the social experience of the rank-and-file soldiers. Michael Tate has discussed the multipurpose role of the military in relation to expansion, but his survey avoided analysis of the posts as engines of colonialism and laboratories of colonial projects. Among the several encyclopedic descriptions of forts, the most prominent studies penned by Robert Frazer (1965) and

Francis Paul Prucha (1964) mainly help track the lifespan of the numerous, and often short-lived and ephemeral, military communities. So do lavishly illustrated Osprey guidebooks, although they offer more on the different types of fort structures that existed as well as highlight the architectural and functional elements of posts. For those planning to visit the forts and other Plains military sites, Jeff Barnes (2008) and John D. McDermott (1998) provide useful guides.

Numerous individual posts histories also exist. Studies have been penned of Forts Robinson, Randall, Sully, Custer, Meade, Buford, Laramie, and Fetterman. For example, Thomas Buecker's *Fort Robinson and the American West, 1874–1899* (2003) explores both the larger story of a Nebraska fort as well as the particulars of Army life. The mostly descriptive works, however, tend to highlight the military operations or the day-to-day routine without applying a more analytical approach or theoretical insights. Many studies also describe how Army posts provided business opportunities, aid, security, and escorts for settlers, while also serving their main military purpose as bases for training, rest, and supply for the troops. They permitted the garrisons to extend campaigns into the indigenous homelands. While much has been scripted by scholars on the US Army and the Indian Wars, no historical monograph has yet fully analyzed the strategic, social, and cultural meanings of the Army forts that made possible US colonization in the Great Plains.

### Post Functions

Throughout the history of colonization in North America, the regular army made the US occupation of indigenous peoples' homelands visible by establishing forts. Never randomly scattered, much of fort distribution revolved around practical needs and military strategy. Obviously, a bastion without some kind of supply of water, timber, and grass and adequate transportation corridors could not function for long. Rather than safe logistics, the corridors of Anglo traffic primarily directed post allocation on the Great Plains. Regardless of the Montana and the Black Hills mining booms, the north-central Plains was predominantly a place to hurry through on the way to the natural bounty of the Pacific Coast. Keeping the lines of communication, trade, and transport from the eastern United States to the Pacific operational was instrumental in securing the west coast against potential foreign influence, as was overseeing the safety of Anglo emigrants, who would populate the acquisitions. Following the Oregon Treaty between Britain and the United States, the massive land transfers of the US–Mexican War, and the feverish news regarding California gold discoveries, tens of thousands of Anglo travelers took to the road each year in the late 1840s and 1850s. Many headed to Oregon, California, and Utah via a

route running through Nebraska and Wyoming. Arteries connected to the main road, called the Oregon Route by the military, from Independence, Missouri, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and Omaha, Nebraska, which in turn drew people from Iowa, Illinois, and beyond. There is little question that the Great Plains represented a vast highway for colonization.

The federal government acted promptly in 1846 when enabling the establishment of a chain of military posts along the main route. Fort Kearny stood on the Platte River in Nebraska, where various trails converged on the main artery, Fort Hall guarded the western edge of the road, and Fort Laramie stood in the center. Possessing a rich history in fur trade, Fort Laramie emerged as a fur-trading station in 1834. It was a wooden palisade structure called Fort William prior to changing ownership in 1841, becoming part of the American Fur Company. Refashioned as a high-walled adobe structure called Fort John, the name then swapped to Fort Laramie. It grew into a key center in a hierarchy of trading posts during an era that saw fur trading develop into a highly systemized transnational industry. Furthermore, the site was not merely an essential east–west nub on the path via South Pass, but it was also along a route regularly utilized by trappers between Fort Pierre and Taos, New Mexico. As a central stopover station on the pathway to Oregon and California, the post also attracted volumes of travelers whose yearly numbers jumped from an estimated 30,000 people in 1849 to 50,000 and over in the 1850s. On some summer days the traffic flow actually became heavily congested, the fort being practically overrun by emigrants searching for information, provisions, and amenities. With the exception of the short abeyance during the 1854–1855 conflicts, traffic would boom and mark the seasons at Fort Laramie for years (McChristian 2008).

Much of the spark for military action on the northern Plains came from the Grattan Massacre, a conflict incited by a missing emigrant cow, flamed by an arrogant army officer, and confused by the Army's desire to show force. In their retaliatory offensive, US troops not only crisscrossed the grasslands hunting the Sioux but also searched, often though trial and error, for suitable garrison locations. The Missouri River, being the sole dependable river route to the interior domains of the Yellowstone and Powder River country, proved a top strategic site. Fort Pierre, a once mighty fur-trading center acquired by the government during the wars in 1855, on the other hand, proved to be one of those places with a particularly short history as an Army post. Many men and horses starved and froze in the unsanitary, rundown post during the first winter of deployment there, which propelled the Army to search for a worthier location.

In 1857, the last of the transferable property from Fort Pierre was moved by a steamboat down river to a new site dubbed Fort Randall. Located on the current South Dakota–Nebraska border, Fort Randall proved not only suitable but aptly shows the different phases in the lifespan of a more durable Army fort. Fort Randall closely followed Alison Hoagland's three

stages in mapping the ways forts occupied space and created militarized domains on the Plains. At first, the forts functioned as outposts at the end of long supply lines and remote from white settlements. Next, they acquired a village-like feel, serving as centers for developing settler communities that often began to grow around them. Finally, in the 1890s forts became standardized, reflecting an institutional outlook of order (Hoagland 2004, 9–10). When established, Fort Randall was right on the frontlines of Anglo settlement – an outpost in a remote land. It operated as a vanguard base for offensive operations and federal exploring expeditions. As historian Jerome A. Greene points out, Fort Randall enabled an unimpeded route between Fort Laramie, 300 miles to the west, and Fort Ridgely, 100 miles to the east. It was a part of a chain of posts that included Forts Ridgely, Leavenworth, Riley, Kearny, and Laramie that practically enclosed the northern Plains from the south and southeast (Greene 2005).

As the American hold on the Missouri River tightened, the role of Fort Randall gradually transformed. It became just one among many forts on the river, albeit still a significant arrival and departure point for the steamboat traffic. It also functioned as a reserve base for the Dakota conflicts in Minnesota. Later on, as new posts were located hundreds of miles to the west, Fort Randall took on the role of a sedentary government station, a support facility and a depot that guarded perhaps the most tranquil corner of the Sioux reservation buttressed against enlarging Anglo settlement on the Missouri River. Fort Randall served as a linkage station toward the fresh posts penetrating the western heartlands of the Sioux.

In 1856, only Fort Randall had occupied the Missouri River, but circumstances changed over the course of the next decade. From north to south, Forts Union (dismantled in 1867), Buford (obtained in 1866 and located on the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers), Berthold (a fur-trading post occupied by the Army in 1864 and abandoned in 1867), Rice (built in 1864), and Sully (1863), along with some temporary camps, flanked the river. New posts continued to pop up along the Missouri: Forts Stevenson (1867), Benton (1869), Thompson (1870, shut down in 1871), Hale (1870), Bennett (1870), Abraham Lincoln (1872), and Yates (1874) occupied the river prior to 1876 (Frazer 1965). The Missouri River, a key steamboat highway for commercial and military penetration to the western interior, stood as the ground zero of US control on the north-central Plains. In some sense, the river had served such a role since the 1830s, when American merchants had set up Fort Union on the river to command a lucrative fur-trading region (Barbour 2001). While soldiers had taken over from trappers, Americans commanded the river in the early 1870s and flanked the Great Sioux Reservation from the east and north. They kept the Sioux hemmed in, while also deterring white trespassers, although the latter task proved particularly difficult when it came to the Black Hills. Troops also maintained order in the vicinity of the reservation agencies.

By the end of the Civil War, news of riches from Bannack, Alder Gulch, and Virginia City had lured thousands of prospectors to Montana Territory. Reaching the latest western mining bonanza, John Bozeman, a businessman with a strong proclivity to mine the miners, sought and marketed a substitute route. It was a shortcut across the Bighorn and Powder River country along the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains, the prime Sioux hunting ground, linking with the Oregon Route near Fort Laramie. Deeming the Bozeman Trail as an essential pathway to the colonization of Montana, the Army tried to secure the road by putting posts on it without consulting the Sioux. The string of forts leading from Fort Laramie northward saw the addition of Fort Fetterman (1867) on the south bank of the North Platte River, Fort Reno (1865, originally called Fort Connor) on the left bank of the Powder River, Fort Phil Kearny (1866) at the eastern base of the Bighorn Mountains, and Fort C. F. Smith (1866) on the Bighorn River. Topping the journey at the gates of the mining zone was Fort Ellis (1867), located near the settlement of Bozeman.

While the closing of the Bozeman Trail and the abandonment of Forts Reno, Phil Kearny, and C. F. Smith in 1868 represented a blow to the Army, the significance of this road for Anglo incursion was already on the decline. Ostensibly, new routes and the transcontinental railroads offered fresh opportunities for emigrants. In 1867, the roads from Minnesota to Montana had been strengthened by the building of Forts Ransom and Totten in eastern Dakota, thus augmenting the earlier garrisons of Forts Abercrombie (1857) and Wadsworth (1864). In Nebraska, the Army had built Fort McPherson (1863) to aid settlers traveling the overland routes toward Colorado. On the other hand, as the volume of traffic shrunk on the Oregon Route, the War Department deemed Fort Kearny no longer necessary and closed it down in 1871.

As the Union Pacific pushed westward, it helped to expedite troop movement in general as well as alter everyday life at existing posts and the overall setup of fortifications. In Wyoming, Forts Fred Steele, Sanders, and D. A. Russell took hold on the transcontinental line, guarding the rails and supplying the troops and forts radiating from them. Fort D. A. Russell and the Cheyenne Depot linked to Fort Laramie, while additional new roads, built by soldier labor, connected Fort Fetterman to both Rock Creek and Medicine Bow, two new railroad settlements. Further to the north, the construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad reached the Missouri River in 1874. US troops frequently protected railroad crews and set up new posts. In 1872, Fort Abraham Lincoln on the west bank of the Missouri River opposite Bismarck and Fort Seward on the James River appeared to secure the advancement of the railroad.

The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 led to the establishment of the Great Sioux Reservation. Containment by a line of fortifications stood now as the top dish in the War Department's menu. Missouri River forts enclosed the

eastern and northern borders of the reservation, while in the west Forts Fetterman and Laramie formed a second line of containment. In northwest Nebraska, Fort Robinson was set up in 1874 near the Red Cloud Agency and Camp Sheridan on the Spotted Tail Agency. The layout also reflected a mental shift. At first, the military had focused on keeping the Sioux and the Cheyenne at arm's length from the Anglo routes. Over time, however, the nature of the Army's conflict with the indigenous populations progressed from shielding emigration and keeping roads open to enabling settlement and extraction on the Plains itself. The area initially conceived as indigenous lands with few posts and trails in it, transformed into a predominantly Anglo domain, where the indigenous peoples lived segregated in distinct spaces reserved for that purpose.

Calls for a military post on the Black Hills and the Yellowstone country had begun as early as 1857 and surfaced persistently right up to the Sioux War of 1876–1877. For example, General Phil Sheridan, commander of the Division of the Missouri in the early 1870s, called for two new forts, one northwest of the Sioux reservation and the other in the Black Hills. His intention was to halt Sioux buffalo hunting in one of the few areas where it was still possible. The posts would also keep the Sioux away from their Crow enemies by closing a vital outlet for their warrior culture and safeguard the construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad. While the Army had its eye on the Powder River–Yellowstone area, its hands were tied in the 1850s and early 1860s by Sioux military dominance resulting in part from the remoteness and inaccessibility of the country from Anglo military bases. Moreover, the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty barred white settlement in this area and gave the indigenous populations hunting rights as long as there were buffalo. Nevertheless, Sheridan in 1874 ordered a military reconnaissance of the Black Hills with the ultimate purpose of setting up a military post there. While the expedition's reports triggered a gold fever, the posts would have to wait until the aftermath of the 1876–1877 conflict. Eventually, the United States gained in strength and the Sioux lost much of their former clout. To secure US control in this latest sector, the government set up Fort Keogh (1876) on the Yellowstone at the mouth of the Tongue River, Fort Custer (1877) at the confluence of the Bighorn and Little Bighorn rivers, Fort McKinney (1877) at the foot of the Bighorn Mountains, near the site of old Fort Reno on Powder River, and Fort Meade (1878) at the base of the Black Hills. The occupation of the Sioux homeland by US troops seemed almost complete. In three decades the spread of forts had grown from a few isolated posts far apart along a single Anglo road to numerous forts spread along the key indigenous sites.

Enabling Anglo success, Army forts no longer so much aided travelers in the late 1870s as they facilitated the birth of new civilian communities in the Great Plains. For example, the settlers who rushed to the Black Hills ceaselessly appealed to Washington, DC for a military post in the vicinity. Alarm

over Sioux raiding was most likely only part of their motivation, as the new Fort Meade, like any civilian settlement, constituted a massive consumer of food, hay, grain, and a plethora of manufactured items. On the other hand, many of the Army veterans from the enlisted ranks also made their homes in the nearby civilian communities. Furthermore, officers regularly invested in local businesses and land. For example, the historian Robert Lee explained that General Sheridan acquired 12 townsite lots of Black Hills property in nearby Rapid City during his visit to the Fort Meade site. Later, the general's holdings became valuable commercial property in the growing town's business district. The mutually beneficial relationship between forts and civilian communities did mimic the Fort Meade–Black Hills mold at, for instance, Fort Abraham Lincoln and Bismarck, Fort Robinson and Crawford, and Fort Benton, Montana (Lee 1991; Schubert 1993).

The Army presence did not lead to the birth of permanent urban settlements in every site, even though military contracts, services, and consumption stimulated local businesses. By offering protection and markets, the forts enabled ranching to develop on the Wyoming plains. Forts Laramie and Fetterman provided the only medical services in their respective areas for numerous years. Furthermore, sensing opportunities for making some money, the more or less movable saloon and brothel villages sprang up near the garrisons. Also, many Indians approached the forts, some seeking protection, others assimilation and companionship, while still others came for the vices. Hence, a “Squaw Camp” appeared near the Platte River outside Fort Laramie. At one time, a Civil War veteran noted, it was occupied by close to 200 indigenous women and their offspring, many of them abandoned by their white suitors. The dire conditions at the camp killed many prematurely and contributed to prostitution (McChristian 2008; Ware 1960).

Furthermore, thousands of civilians found employment as freighters to keep all the posts operational. Maintaining the lines of supply and communication to the forts was often problematic even in times of peace. At Fort Fetterman, the effort to keep the telegraph line, marred by brittle wire and rotten poles, operating was often a struggle. Such was the case with all traffic on the three land routes that linked the post to the outside world. First, a weekly quartermaster stage from Fort D. A. Russell took several days to reach the post as it went via Fort Laramie, subsequently meeting a Fetterman detachment halfway between the two military villages. The second route, the Rock Creek–Fetterman road, was a direct line but went via tough mountain passes and was especially unreliable during bad weather. In the dead of winter, mail and other materials arrived on sled if they arrived at all. The third pathway that led from the post to Medicine Bow was a wagon route in theory alone, as pack animals had to be regularly used, because more or less impassable snow drifts nearly ten feet deep hindered movement (Lindmier 2002).

Most forts located in the interior experienced similar problems. Supplies for Fort Robinson were shipped via the Union Pacific Railroad to Cheyenne, then north by wagon, arriving when weather and luck permitted. To counter chronic delivery problems Fort Robinson requested supplies 11 months in advance, not the standard three months (Buecker 2003). At Fort Laramie, government freight wagons that tried to reach the post had a hard time making it during freezing weather. As for mail, it took over a year for a service to become available, and even after it did there was little reason to rely on its regularity (McChristian 2008). On the Missouri River, a combination of Army roads and steamboat traffic kept the forts functioning. Mail riders and freighters battled dirt roads and the elements, seeking shelter in the huts the Army built and supplied with firewood. The mail coming via Fort Randall, for instance, first traversed some 180 miles to Fort Sully and from there it continued half of the 250 miles to Fort Rice, from where a detachment arrived to exchange the mail (Greene 2005).

Army forts enabled US colonization also by acting as bases and stop-over stations for various types of hunting, exploring, and scientific parties. For example, on August 15, 1870, the famed geologist Ferdinand V. Hayden and his party, sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution, camped near Fort Fetterman for several days while in route to the Great Salt Lake. A year later, Hayden was again relying on the Army's help and hospitality at Forts Bridger, Ellis, and Hall when directing a survey expedition to the Yellowstone country, a trip that would lead to the establishment of the Yellowstone National Park. Between 1871 and 1873, Fort Rice served as the base for further Yellowstone expeditions and escort parties surveying the route of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Such private ventures would not have been likely to succeed without the fortifications on the Great Plains.

### **Housing and Public Space**

As instruments for the conquest of territory, most Army forts proved temporary yet dynamic establishments. The Quartermaster General in Washington, DC released plans for housing, but local officers exercised discretion for planning as they worked to satisfy their own preferences using the materials at hand. Apparently, designs were not shared among forts, thus resulting in burgeoning individuality, a matter of some irony in an organization that savored homogeneity and standardization. Many an officer who conceived himself an architectural genius discovered that he had the opportunity to try to put bold visions into action.

The layout at any post was comprised of a densely settled center consisting of buildings organized in rectilinear arrangement that radiated symmetry and order. They often included a less organized outlying area. The community spread out around an open space, the parade ground.

Usually at least one side of the parade was exclusively reserved for officers' households, while the enlisted "district" habitually stood on the opposite side. Flanking the other rims of the parade were administrative, commercial, and miscellaneous public buildings. In some places, a roadway encircled the parade, while trees, porches, sidewalks, and gardens contributed to the domestic atmosphere. Away from the center were numerous other constructions. For example, Fort Seward had company quarters on the southern edge of the parade, while the eastern and western sides included laundresses' homes, the adjutant's office, and commissary and quartermaster houses, with officers' houses occupying a higher elevation on the northern side. Located outside the village center were the post hospital, eating and sanitary facilities, with stables and the facilities of the blacksmith, baker, and carpenter some distance to the southeast. Fort Robinson also had the officers residing on the northern flank of the parade, while enlisted men lived on the eastern and western edges, the southern rim being primarily the domain of the adjutant, quartermaster, commissary, laundresses, and the guardhouse. Stables, bakery, carpenter, tailor, saddler, butcher, and post trader were relegated outside the "inner city." Fort Ellis had four sets of officers' quarters on the south side of the parade, while on each of the three other sides stood one enlisted men's barrack scattered amidst the commissary storehouses, old hospital building, carpenter shop and bakery, quartermaster's office, post library, and guardhouse, which together enclosed the parade. Outside the center were three ice-houses, grain-houses, sawmill, cavalry stables, as well as a new hospital, commissary storehouse, quartermaster storehouse, and other miscellaneous buildings (Billings 1870; Billings 1875; Buecker 2003).

Barriers were essential in creating militarized spaces, although any kind of walled fortifications proved a rarity in most garrisons in the trans-Mississippi West. Seeing its position as vulnerable, many of the early military installations on the north-central Plains, however, had some type of barricades. These were typically not heavy stone construction but tall walls of vertical posts or pickets along with corner blockhouses from which defenders could, if need arose, fire along the walls. The rear walls of buildings often formed part of the stockade. Defensive structures were primarily meant for security, but they also were designed to convey an image of military might. Across a landscape short on human-built permanent structures, orderly and symmetrical buildings and stockades marked by flagpoles hoisting the Stars and Stripes stood out visually not just because they could be seen from miles around but also because they represented something truly exceptional in the scenery. Images of power notwithstanding, the indigenous populations could easily spot the fortifications and avoid contact with the troopers' homes if they so wished.

Fort Sully was one such place that relied on a stockade to impress. First set up in 1863 and then relocated in 1866 on the Missouri River,

it was built of heavy cottonwood logs forming an impressive mass of timber in a region generally short on any. It had a stockade of 700 by 624 feet, consisting in part of the back sides of several buildings, and a two-story sally port building located in the center with a main gate containing portholes on the lower level. Impressive, 20-foot high 16 by 16 foot bastions occupied the southwest and west corners of the picket walls (Schuler 1992). The short-lived Fort Phil Kearny on the Bozeman shortcut included an even bigger 600 by 800 feet stockade built of 11-foot long pine trunks (Carrington 2004). When the Army was clearly on the offensive against indigenous populations and when it had become obvious that attacks on forts were unlikely to ever materialize, stockades were by and large omitted. If there still survived any type of fence, it was improbable that it was a protective structure. Rather, its function was to keep the soldiers from leaving the fort and to exclude the livestock from the parade ground and the quarters.

Many historians (Hoagland 2004; Adams 2009; Lahti 2012) have emphasized the village-like outlook and feel of the forts. If a sutler's buildings represented stores, then kitchens, canteens, and mess rooms substituted for bars, restaurants, and clubs. Bakeries as well as blacksmith and carpenter shops offered services as in "normal" villages. Typically, hospitals were part of the military compound. The guardhouse performed as village jail, while law and punishment was meted out by officers in courts-martial that convened regularly. The Army provided administrative offices, but they rarely were comparable to elegant town halls. While some posts had a library, they were habitually in a dilapidated state. Posts were short on banks, communal meetinghouses, and churches, although cemeteries abounded. They did not have factories or visible signs of the burgeoning industrial revolution. They did have corrals, stables, and plenty of animals, most noticeably horses and mules, in addition to chickens, cows, and dogs.

Although officers, their wives, and the enlisted men shared residence in the same locales, they never subsisted like a cohesive community at Army forts. Not only were the officers' quarters physically detached from the buildings for the enlisted men, but the dwellings themselves contrasted substantially, denoting a strict class hierarchy. Enlisted men lived densely in large barracks with little privacy, comfort, or room per person. For example, the log barracks of Fort Sully allocated a space of 175 feet by 17 per company, which ranged anywhere from 30 to 90 men. The main living area consisted of a 10-foot high squad room filled with two-story bunks and a few benches, tables, and wardrobes. Over the years the occupants suffered from pretty much everything one can associate with bad housing: shortage of air due to defective ventilation, rotting foundations, darkness caused by shortage of windows, decaying chimneys, leaking roofs, and collapsing walls. A fire in 1884 destroyed

most of the barracks, in addition to the sally port and what was left of the stockade (Schuler 1992). Deteriorating buildings and shortage of space ensured that construction remained a daily event, often at the expense of actual military training. At Fort Laramie, the two new companies of the 6th Infantry that arrived on post in November 1854 suspended all drills and dress parades to concentrate fully on sawing lumber and building housing to avoid the dreaded prospect of tent living that winter. The situation was so dire that some of the soldiers in crumbling barracks actually favored tents as their residences.

In stark contrast to enlisted men, officers and wives did not have to endure shared lodging; they did not reside in overcrowded and stuffy barracks or in shabby tents. Instead, they lived in one- or two-family houses assigned according to rank. While colonels were officially supposed to get five rooms, second lieutenants were allocated only one. In reality, officers' quarters varied from post to post and over time as they were constantly reconstructed or repaired. In 1874, Fort Fetterman had seven houses used for officers' quarters. The units offered agreeable living, as they had finished attics and included verandas and paling fences along the front and high fences around yards. The commanding officer enjoyed, according to an army inspector, a "well finished and very comfortable" home (Billings 1875, 349), the latest of at least four attempts to build a sufficient home for the post commander since the fort's erection. The house came with five rooms on the first floor and two on the second floor. It also included pantries, closets, outhouses, a root-cellar, and a private stable. Ideally, home represented a space where officers and their wives could display their level of refinement and emulate eastern middle-class norms. Home was not just any place, but an important symbol that reflected one's status and showed one's worth. As such it was also a vital parameter in defining proper domesticity and gendered identity, including true womanhood, a contested middle-class notion during the Victorian era. As officers' wives lacked official status in the Army, being ranked as "camp followers," their identity and sense of self as paragons of civilization depended on their ability to create a comfortable home (Lahti 2012).

While some historians see that western life offered middle-class women an escape from their eastern gender roles, many white women also seemed to reinforce their notions of womanhood by copying eastern norms and practices (Riley 1988; Myres 1982). Being a wife, and often a mother, who lived a proper life in a proper home mattered. Therefore, the officers and wives at Fort Fetterman in 1874 saw their dwellings as far from perfect specimens of civilized housing. They felt the wide cracks on the floor, ceiling, and window and door frames that made the dwellings more than adequately ventilated, while smoking chimneys, tumbling down plaster, and bed bugs caused further irritation. Altogether the fort housing was

below par, some distance from the ideals of middle-class living. As a rule something better was always needed.

Army officers and wives wanted to be a group of people responsible for civilization. Their identity called for a classy “village” and home, and this expectation, in turn, made both public and domestic spaces at Army posts targets for endless improvement (Lahti 2012). Fort Buford represents a typical case. First built near Fort Union in 1866 as a small one-company post, it was shortly thereafter enlarged to a five-company garrison, a project where the actual building work lasted up to the time the next round of expansion was decided four years later in 1871–1872. During the next two years the six dark, gloomy, and poorly ventilated adobe barracks were renovated to prevent them from collapsing. On the outside, wood sheathing protected the buildings from the rough climate, plastering boosted the interior, and a new lighter roof covered with tar and gravel replaced the former sod covering. By 1880, however, all of the remaining adobe buildings were disintegrating, some having already yielded, causing the troops to seek out refuge in tents on the parade ground. A year later, the adobe structures were gone, for the post consisted entirely of wooden structures made from materials hauled from elsewhere. Expansion and rebuilding was still far from finished. In 1889, a grander commanding officer’s quarters was built to replace an older 1872 building. At that time, the garrison also initiated efforts for installing water mains to the buildings and built a water tower en route to the river. The challenge proved too much, however, as pipes could not be buried deep enough to keep them from freezing every winter (Billings 1875; Remele 1987).

Constant decay made the military communities look like older settlements, whose features were the result of decades of occupation. At Fort Laramie, there stood in the mid-1850s a walled fort with bastions, a southern plantation-style house, southwest adobes, frontier slab jacals (walls made of posts set vertically in the ground), simple frame cottages, stone buildings, and Plains Indian lodges used by soldiers. While the post hospital was in such a ruinous condition that patients moved to tents, the north and west sections of the old adobe walls were razed by the soldiers to prevent them collapsing. In fact, a shaky building used as stables and a storehouse did collapse, luckily without taking any lives. A decade later, following occupation by volunteer units during the Civil War, the buildings at Fort Laramie looked even more worn out and aged. The village as a whole had a forlorn feel, as if it stood on the verge of abandonment. Appearances can be deceiving, as Fort Laramie was still the most important US base on Sioux lands. It now contained a peculiar mixture of wooden, adobe, and concrete houses that grew more dilapidated during the 1870s. A civilian observer described the post “as old and dirty as it is ancient” (McChristian 2008, 349; Hedren 1998; Carrington 2004).

## Conclusion

During the Centennial Campaign of 1876, thousands of troops stood ready to take the field at Forts Abraham Lincoln, Ellis, and Fetterman. They prepared to converge on the Powder and Tongue River country, treating any free Lakota, Cheyenne, or Arapaho they met as “hostile.” This would be the biggest, boldest, and most demanding campaign of a long war against those who had not faltered under diplomatic pressure to give up the Black Hills. Every fort in the north contributed, and more than a few practically emptied, as soldiers took field. Just two years later, the military phase of conquest was practically over.

Having secured control over the Plains through warfare, diplomacy, and coercion, the federal government shifted its use of military force. The War Department began to close forts almost every year. In 1878, it was Fort Rice. In 1880, it was Fort McPherson. In 1882, it was Fort Fetterman. In 1884, it was Fort Hale. Forts Fred Steele and Ellis closed down in 1886 and Fort Sisseton in 1889. The next decade brought more base closures: Forts Laramie and Totten in 1890, Forts Abraham Lincoln and Bennett in 1891, Fort Shaw in 1892, Fort Randall in 1893, Fort Sully in 1894, Fort Buford in 1895, and Fort Custer in 1898. As the new century dawned, Fort Keogh shut its doors in 1900, followed by Fort Yates three years later.

By 1900, one might have been fooled into thinking that the Army had never touched the landscape. While a handful of forts, among them Forts Meade and Robinson, remained operational for a few decades more, and while places such as Forts Robinson, Laramie, and Fetterman later gained significance as historical sites for tourists, many disappeared like ghosts of frontiers past, leaving very little if any sign of their existence. Their buildings decayed and collapsed, or the materials were appropriated and put to use by local settlers. Fort Buford’s buildings were sold at public auction and put into use building the town of Buford, North Dakota, while Fort Hale was floated down the Missouri River and used in Chamberlain, South Dakota. The imperfect islands of occupation and civilization were no more. Nevertheless, their legacies were everywhere, on the soil, waterways, flora, fauna, and the built environment and the human society of the Plains. In fact, these legacies are still very much alive and present while shaping the Plains and those who live there.

As sites and vehicles in colonization, the Army forts enabled and enforced the conquest of a region. They had contributed to the building and rebuilding of a continental empire, a domain of power that had ended the tenure of indigenous sovereignties, linked the Plains to transnational networks of extractive capitalism, and introduced settler societies. They had a role in a colonial project, wherein aggressive newcomers categorized, assigned meaning and value, and created a social connection to the place under colonialism – its landscapes, societies, peoples, and events – constructing

power and identity for themselves in the process. In many ways, they permitted the colonizers to create new understandings of space, culture, and domesticity. The post, along with its village-like layout, hierarchical housing, and architectural outlook, was meant to indicate the capabilities of the United States to govern the country.

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# Chapter Eight

## ARMY LIFE

*Robin S. Conner*

Much scholarship on the social history of Army life has centered upon the officer corps. As C. Robert Kemble's (1973) study of cultural attitudes toward Army officers indicated, becoming an officer was not an entirely respectable career choice for middle-class sons. Civilians criticized enlisted men as "bummers, loafers, and foreign paupers," and they tarred officers as members of an elite circle who performed no useful, productive role in society. When Captain Charles King returned home to Milwaukee to recuperate from a gunshot wound, he was outraged by businessmen who asked him, "Well, old fellow, how do you manage to kill time out in the Army – nothing but play poker and drink whiskey?" (Knight 1978, 222).

The late nineteenth-century trend toward professionalism dominated many early discussions of the Army officer corps. For example, in his now classic *The Soldier and the State*, Samuel P. Huntington (1957) argued that the post-Civil War army was isolated from the main currents of American life and that isolation was, in fact, an essential factor in fostering military professionalism. Beginning in the 1970s, the influence of social history prompted some historians to reevaluate this alleged isolation. John M. Gates (1980; 1985) and Kevin Adams (2009, 24–57) have rejected the notion of military isolation by pointing to the military's strong links with the rest of society, particularly its connections with business and government. Adams in particular highlighted the cultural ties with civilian society that the officer corps sought to maintain. Peter Karsten's (1972) argument that late

nineteenth-century officers' efforts at professionalization reflected Gilded Age and Progressive Era impulses also fits within this vein.

Twenty years ago, frontier military scholars such as Bruce Dinges (1991, 103), Sherry Smith (1998), and others wrote with justifiable optimism of a "renaissance" in frontier military history. Since the 1980s, a wealth of new scholarship has expanded and revitalized the field in myriad ways. To be sure, many of the seminal studies of the US Army in the "Old West" remain invaluable standards. Yet over the last several decades, scholars have employed social and cultural analyses and investigated new kinds of sources in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the Army's social organization and composition, mission in the federal territories, and contribution to broader late nineteenth-century colonial endeavors. This essay will highlight some of the major scholarly trends and suggest avenues for further exploration.

### **Army Composition and Organization**

In May of 1865, crowds welcomed the victorious Union armies home and thronged the streets of Washington, DC to witness the Grand Review of the Grand Army of the Republic. Despite their patriotic fervor, many Americans felt deeply ambiguous about the prospect of such a large standing army. America's minuscule prewar army of less than 18,000 men had erupted during wartime into a massive military bureaucracy of more than one million men (Weigley 1984, 190). Americans were proud of the men in uniform, but they were also anxious about the potential threat to liberty and virtue that hundreds of thousands of armed men posed (Lane 1987, 15–26). Not all of these men would remain soldiers; many volunteers mustered out of service in the months following Appomattox. Yet a substantial number of men found their callings in the military, viewed military service as a steady wage, or discovered they had little aptitude, training, or desire for civilian life. The mix included over 13,000 African American troops, whose hotly debated service had undeniably helped turn the tide for the Union, but their military training and organization now seemed to present white America – North and South – with the terrifying specter of racial violence (Leckie 2003, 5; Dobak & Phillips 2001, 3).

In the five years following the Civil War, military and civilian leaders slowly established the size and structure of the postwar Army through a combination of attrition, retirements, and legislation. An 1866 Congressional Act authorized 10 cavalry regiments, 45 infantry regiments, and five artillery regiments, and unofficially set the Army's strength at 54,302, figures subsequently reduced to 25 infantry regiments and 28,000 enlisted men. One clause authorized the enlistment of Indian scouts (Utley 1973, 11–12, 15; Coffman 1986, 215–220; Weigley 1984, 262–263). The 1866 Act also

established a new administrative system for the Army that consisted of 10 staff bureaus, including the Adjutant General's Office, the Inspector General's Office, and the Judge Advocate General's Office. Geographically, the Act divided the nation into three Divisions, which were further subdivided into eight Departments and 11 smaller Districts. Communications, orders, and correspondence traveled up and down this chain of command (Utley 1973, 13–14; Thian 1979).

The 1866 reorganization and subsequent clarifying legislation laid the groundwork for the structure and organization of the Army between 1866 and 1898. Official guidelines, however, provide a deceptive portrait of the Army's true strength and capability. During this period, the Army's total strength rarely reached its Congressionally authorized limit of 28,000 men and approximately 2,100 officers. In fact, most regiments did not assemble as complete forces until the Spanish-American War. Rather, the company – composed of 64 privates, three officers, and about a dozen noncommissioned officers – constituted the basic unit of the Army's fighting force.

Although Congress established a company's maximum strength at 64 privates – later increased to 100 after Custer's defeat in 1876 – companies almost never operated at full capacity. Soldiers on sick report, detached service, or in the guardhouse severely reduced company strength. In 1876, Captain H. C. Corbin reported that in the largest company of his 24th Infantry, "I [have] seven soldiers fit for duty." Likewise, officers were frequently away from their duty stations on sick leave, recruitment duty, serving on court-martial boards, or for other reasons. Although the roster of officers for Captain Corbin's regiment was full, he noted, "I am the only officer [present] for duty with my own company" (House Report No. 354, 1876). Overall, these troop limitations increased costs and reduced military effectiveness. Indeed, the Army had become "a skeleton" (Utley 1973, 16–18).

Between 1866 and 1898, more than two thirds of the Army's forces were stationed throughout the trans-Mississippi West. The federal government had purchased a few former fur trading outposts, such as Fort Laramie, and converted them into military posts, but generally the Army constructed installations from scratch. Officials chose sites for posts to satisfy large-scale strategic objectives. For example, Fort Concho in central Texas was established in 1867 as a show of force against the Mexican government and to protect the Goodnight-Loving cattle trail (Matthews 2005, 2–3).

Posts varied in size and evolved and expanded over time, but they usually adhered to similar physical plans. Most followed an open plan with a parade ground as the central focal point. Officers' quarters, large houses divided into multiple sets of quarters, lined one side of the parade ground. Two-story barracks buildings, each housing a single company of men, ringed the other side of the field. The company mess hall, kitchen, latrines, store-rooms, and workspace for company craftsmen occupied the lower floor.

Enlisted men bunked in an open squad room on the upper floor. Some barracks also boasted a room for a company library and a private room for the company's first sergeant. Post administration buildings and numerous support structures were also interspersed around the parade field. Larger posts often had additional facilities, such as chapels, rooms for post libraries, or large halls that could be used for dances and theater productions (Schubert 1993, 69–72, 80–84).

### The Army's Mission

The frontier army's portrayal in popular culture often conjures mythic images of dashing cavalymen charging across the Plains in pursuit of wily native warriors, but this image bore little resemblance to reality. Although the Army recorded 943 separate fights with Native Americans between 1865 and 1898, only a handful of these engagements entailed pitched battles involving substantial numbers of troops. In a 1973 study, Don Russell estimated that during the period 1776–1890 US soldiers killed, at most, 6,000 Native Americans (Weigley 1984, 267–268; Russell 1973). An enlisted man's lament that the "spade is mightier than the sword" more accurately reflected the Army's duties in the West (McConnell 1970, 53).

Numerous scholars have devoted attention to exploring the Army's mission in the West. In the 1950s and 1960s, Francis Paul Prucha and William Goetzmann penned groundbreaking studies that highlighted a host of noncombat responsibilities in exploration, scientific inquiry, and economic development. In *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (1966), Goetzmann detailed the role that the US Army Corps of Topographical Engineers played in exploration and environmental study in the West. In his studies of the Old Northwest, Prucha asserted that the Army served as a critical agent of American empire by protecting Anglo settlers, providing territorial law enforcement, surveying and constructing transportation and communication routes, and promoting local economic development. Prucha argued that the Army helped spread "civilization" and "order" to the West. Indeed, he contended that only the federal government possessed the ability and authority to undertake most of these responsibilities. The Army operated as one of the key tools for executing a conscious federal policy of manifest destiny (Prucha 1953; Prucha 1969; Tate 1980).

These studies undoubtedly cast important light upon frontier military campaigns and the Army's multifaceted contribution to Anglo-American westward expansion, yet they had a tendency to view this process from an ethnocentric perspective. Prucha's soldier-explorers, for example, tamed wildernesses and prepared the way for the advance of civilization. In these more traditional works, Native Americans appeared more as objects acted

upon by military personnel and policies rather than players in their own right, who both collaborated with and contested the formulation of Anglo-American hegemony. In the 1980s, New Western historians challenged the Turnerian view of westward expansion as the inevitable, triumphant progression of civilization by instead portraying it as a process of cultural collision and conquest. This narrative stressed the ways that native peoples, Hispanics, and even nature itself contested Anglo efforts to extend dominance over the peoples, landscapes, and resources of the West (Limerick 1987; White 1993). The use of military power would seem to be an obvious avenue for exploration, yet scholars of New Western history have either neglected the Army's role in cultivating American empire completely, or they have focused almost exclusively on negative aspects of the Army's activities. As Sherry Smith suggests, this deficiency can be traced to a Vietnam-era antipathy to military topics, especially toward a style of military history that "concentrates on the actions and motives of white men and generally fixates on the battlefield to the exclusion of a broader context" (1998, 151).

Michael L. Tate attempted to rehabilitate the Army's contribution to Western history in *The Frontier Army in the Settlement of the West*, a sweeping overview of the "multifaceted" Army's activities in the nineteenth century. Tate's stated purpose was to "craft a companion volume" to Prucha's *Broadax and Bayonet* that encompassed the entire region and incorporated social history "rather than stressing the martial side of the story" (Tate 1999, xvii, xv). He succeeded admirably in detailing the staggering array of duties the Army conducted throughout the West, ranging from road construction to agricultural experimentation and disaster relief. Tate relied primarily on published primary and secondary accounts, yet his purpose was more descriptive than analytical. Nonetheless, he returned the Army to a central position in the Western narrative and pointed to profitable avenues for future studies.

Scholars such as Robert W. Frazer (1983), Darlis A. Miller (1989), and Thomas T. Smith (1999) have shed light on the Army's part in facilitating the extension of federal control over the region – a key theme of New Western History – by underscoring the economic implications of the Army's mission. In New Mexico, Frazer contended that military spending marked the Army's greatest contribution to territorial development. In her monumental *Soldiers and Settlers: Military Supply in the Southwest, 1861–1885*, Darlis Miller expanded Frazer's thesis to encompass the entire Military District of New Mexico. Miller's detailed analysis of defense contracts demonstrated that in pumping money into local economies, the Army fueled the growth of agriculture and ranching after the Civil War. Moreover, these federal dollars for grain, forage, flour, construction, and other goods and services percolated throughout the region to generate civilian employment and to boost banking, mining, and mercantile interests. More recently, Thomas T. Smith's analysis of expenditures by the Paymaster's Department, Quartermaster

Department, and Corps of Engineers revealed similar themes in Texas. Smith convincingly challenged the myth of frontier individualism by emphasizing how the influx of federal dollars, through soldier pay, freight contracts, construction projects, and other endeavors, proved pivotal to expanding and strengthening Texas's economy.

Each of these studies provides impressive examples of how scholars can mine voluminous government and military records in imaginative ways. They indicate how the federal government through the Army fostered regional development. Much work still remains to be done in testing these hypotheses for other sub-regions of the West, as well as applying these conclusions to America's broader late nineteenth-century colonial endeavors. It might prove fruitful to investigate the intersection of federal expenditures and imperialism as the Army transitioned to an overseas mission after 1898.

Many traditional frontier military historians have tended to emphasize top-down examinations of military policy, campaign histories, or tactical battle analyses. Robert M. Utley's *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866–1891* (1973) and Robert Wooster's *The Military and US Indian Policy* (1988) remain classics of this genre. Utley relied heavily on traditional sources such as Army and Congressional records, newspapers, military officials' personal papers, and campaign histories. He chronicles the Army's major campaigns against native foes in the late nineteenth century. Writing in the shadow of Vietnam, Utley asserted that the late nineteenth-century Army was neither the "heroic" institution touted by contemporary military practitioners nor the "barbaric band of butchers" promoting Native extermination as depicted by its humanitarian detractors. Rather, Utley concluded that white settlers, federal policies and bureaucracy, internal Native dissension, and military strategies all contributed to the ongoing cycle of Native-white conflict in the late nineteenth century. Wooster, meanwhile, surveyed similar records to explore the Army's formulation of policy and doctrine for dealing with Indian tribes.

In *Soldiers West: Biographies from the Military Frontier* (1987), Paul Andrew Hutton approached "traditional" military history in an innovative fashion. Hutton and the other contributors to the volume – leading frontier military historians all – used biographies of 14 officers, ranging from prominent figures like Sheridan, Custer, and Bourke to lesser-known men such as Frank Baldwin, to highlight the themes of exploration, economic development, and Indian relations introduced in earlier scholarship. *Soldiers West*, however, struck a different tone by emphasizing the complexities and contradictions among officers' attitudes, particularly regarding the moral implications of the Army's role in expansionism and Indian policy. For example, the essays invited contrasts among Phil Sheridan's stance that the only good Indian was a dead Indian, John Bourke's evolution from militant Indian fighter to scholar of Native American culture, and the dichotomous George Crook as hardnosed campaigner yet staunch advocate of Indian

rights. In its approach, *Soldiers West* struck a balance between “traditional” frontier military scholarship and “new” histories that explored war and society.

Writing in a similar vein in *The View from Officers’ Row* (1990), Sherry Smith analyzed officers’ and their wives’ perceptions of Native Americans and federal Indian policy. In Smith’s estimation, officers and their wives – who were among the few nineteenth-century whites directly interacting with Native Americans – did not subscribe to monolithic attitudes about Indians but viewed them with “various shades of gray” (185). Unlike earlier studies that focused exclusively on male military perceptions, Smith’s incorporation of wives’ perspectives introduced a more complex and nuanced portrayal of Indian–white relations. Indeed, Smith found that officers often regarded Indian women in a more favorable light than did their spouses. The interaction with native groups led both officers and wives to alter or moderate their perceptions. Yet while many officers expressed private frustration with Indian policy or the Bureau of Indian Affairs, they faithfully carried out their mission as agents of federal authority.

### Class, Race, and Gender in Military Society

As *Soldiers West* and *The View from Officers’ Row* indicated, the surge of interest in social, minority, ethnic, and family history that swept the historical profession in the 1960s slowly penetrated and transformed military studies as well. Since then, the best overviews of “new” military history have integrated analyses of the military social milieu into narratives of military policy, strategy, and campaigning. The results have generated more nuanced appraisals of the Army’s composition and behavior in the West. Edward Coffman’s magisterial *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784–1898* (1986) remains the best single overview of the military social environment. Coffman uses an impressive array of government documents, newspapers, official Army records, and manuscript collections to assemble a lively and eminently readable portrayal of the nineteenth-century Army. More than any previous author, Coffman braided political, organizational, and campaign histories together with social considerations and devoted substantial attention to the personal and professional lives of black and white enlisted men, officers, and military dependents.

Few studies of the nineteenth-century Army explicitly considered the experiences of rank-and-file soldiers. Don Rickey’s (1963) *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay* marked one notable example. Much as Bell I. Wiley’s work considered the average Civil War soldier, Rickey’s study examined the lived experience of frontier troopers. His interviews with Indian War veterans pioneered the use of oral history to enrich traditional military studies. In addition to oral histories, Rickey also examined a range of other enlisted

primary sources, many of which have now been published. Some of the best of these works include cavalryman H. H. McConnell's (1970) memoir of soldiering in Texas, Frank Mulford's (1972) wonderfully wry account of his service with the 7th Cavalry, and Private Theodore Ewert's diary of the 1874 Black Hills Expedition (Carroll & Frost 1976). Sherry Smith's (1989) *Sagebrush Soldier* and Thomas T. Smith's (1994) *A Dose of Frontier Soldiering* are two excellent examples of edited diaries.

Race and rank sharply divided the military community, but class and the social distance between officers and enlisted men constituted the most important distinction. Enlisted men's backgrounds varied, but they were typically farmers, workingmen from the cities, freed slaves, and immigrants. Kevin Adams's (2009) recent study of class and ethnicity in the Western Army served as a useful update to Rickey's portrayal of enlisted life. Officers were usually educated men with Northern, middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds, who saw themselves as members of a Victorian elite (Adams 2009, 20–23). By juxtaposing enlisted men's worldview with that of officers, Adams argued that the two groups adhered to class-based identities and values that clashed with each other and with the military system in which they were enmeshed. He cogently outlined the ways that officers used their leisure activities and consumption habits to establish themselves as an exclusive caste and to confirm themselves as members of the elite. Enlisted men's leisure and consumption habits, meanwhile, revealed a sense of mutuality, practicality, and reliance upon older, working-class traditional values, as well as an egalitarian streak of contempt for officers' purported superiority.

Men enlisted for a myriad of reasons. For some, the lure of the frontier and the opportunity for travel and adventure were powerful draws. Eighteen-year-old Wallace Bingham "always had a desire to go west." After observing soldiers in Kansas in the late 1870s, and "seeing what a good time they were having I concluded that was the life – Uncle Sam [would] feed and clothe you and all that had to be done was to lay on your bunk and wait for the war." Bingham enlisted in 1880 and "soon found out differently" (Rickey Papers).

For other men, economic necessity, unemployment, or an inability to succeed in civilian life propelled them into the Army. When he enlisted in 1876 at age 21, James Starr Hamilton recalled it "was after the panic of '73 and work was hard to find so the army seemed a good opportunity. [I] hoped to acquire more education and learn some trade" (Rickey 1963, 29; Rickey Papers). Since many of these enlistees were unskilled laborers, the prospect of a steady wage also acted as an incentive. In the immediate postwar years, a large number of men looked to the Army simply because they had spent the last several years in the armed forces and knew little of any other way of life. After the 1870s, the numbers of Civil War veterans slowly declined, but many units still contained at least one veteran into the 1890s.

Other men turned to military service for less honorable reasons. The popular perception that the Army was populated with drunks, thieves, murderers, and other petty criminals was not without some foundation. As a recruit at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, in 1867, H. H. McConnell concluded that many of his fellow recruits “were ‘bounty jumpers,’ blackguards and criminals of various degrees, or, at any rate, men who had sought the army as an asylum from the punishments that the law would have justly meted out to them had they remained in civil life” (McConnell 1970, 13). When George Neihaus enlisted in 1884, he discovered that “many [men] joined the Army because of misdemeanors at home. Some were good, bad, and some very bad” (Rickey 1963, 17–32; Rickey Papers). Some of these kinds of men did join the service, although they were probably never more than a small minority.

New recruits often enlisted expecting adventure and glory, but they quickly discovered that the life of a soldier primarily entailed physical labor. Throughout the nineteenth century, soldiers surveyed and mapped lands, guarded railroad lines and overland trail routes, built roads, bridges, and telegraph lines, improved water sources along travel routes, served as a *de facto* territorial police force, and provided valuable services to the local civilian communities whose development the Army helped foster. Soldiers spent a great deal of time and labor on fatigue duties that ensured their post’s survival and sustenance. They chopped and hauled wood for lumber and firewood, dug latrines, carried water and ice, and participated in post clean-up details. In addition, since military rations did not include fruits and vegetables, in regions where the climate permitted it, soldiers built, planted, and tended gardens large enough to feed the entire post (Tate 1999; Rickey 1963, 88–99).

Tedium and isolation dominated soldiers’ lives. Many soldiers expressed disgust that they had joined the Army to fight Indians and found themselves doing little more than manual labor. As one private wrote to his girlfriend, “the soldiers in the Department of the Platte know better how to handle pick & shovel than they do a gun” (quoted in Rickey 1963, 93). The isolation and boredom that most soldiers experienced prompted many of them – and officers as well – to turn to alcohol, gambling, and women for diversion. As James Potter (2005), Bruce White (1968), William Dobak (1995), and others have shown, soldiers did participate in more wholesome activities, including post theatrical societies, dances, glee clubs, hunting, baseball, and other athletics. Drinking, however, was endemic among enlisted men at military posts. Soldiers also frequented off-post brothels called “hog ranches.” Officers made unsuccessful attempts to prohibit soldiers from visiting prostitutes, but some simply left posts without permission. When they snuck away to the brothel in a nearby New Mexican town, former Sergeant George Neihaus recalled that they “used to put dummies in our bunks for check roll call” (Rickey Papers). Anne Butler

argues that post officials simply turned a blind eye to the prostitution that took place on and off post, because they viewed it as a necessary outlet for male sexual urges. Unless – or until – these illicit sexual encounters caused a scandal within the garrison, the de facto policy seemed to be tacit toleration (Butler 1981; Rickey 1963, 156–164, 168–171).

Soldiers frequently ran afoul of regulations. Jack Foner's (1970) *The United States Soldier Between Two Wars* still offers the best treatment of the late nineteenth-century military legal system. Soldiers who deserted or violated military rules or customs in other ways faced courts-martial. Indeed, men who had not committed infractions were uncommon. One soldier remarked, "I have heard more than one old army officer remark that 'a man was never fit to be a NCO until he had been a few times in the guard-house or before a court martial,'" and he noted that "guard-house lawyers" were in much demand (McConnell 1970, 195–196). Military justice was deeply subjective, though. Officers who served on courts rarely had legal training. Military regulations did not specify standard punishments for most offenses, which resulted in wildly disparate sentences for similar infractions. As military officials worked to professionalize the Army during the 1880s through the introduction of service journals, branch schools, marksmanship training, and post canteens, they also devoted attention to reforming the legal system to ensure more evenhanded treatment.

### African American Soldiers in the West

Some of the richest scholarship on enlisted soldiers and frontier military life has focused on the experience of African American troops. In the immediate post-Civil War period, African American units presented a particularly contentious issue for military and Congressional leaders. Many officials viewed armed African Americans – whether in or out of uniform – as a threat to white society and favored eliminating black units. Proponents of black soldiers, meanwhile, argued that black troops had fought bravely and had thus earned the right to remain in the nation's service. Indeed, if these men were to be granted citizenship, then they should shoulder the burdens of citizenship as well as reap the rewards. Despite their advocacy of African American troops, few of these backers supported social equality. In their view, one of the most attractive attributes of black soldiers was their perceived docility and receptiveness to being led by white officers. In the end, two cavalry regiments and four infantry regiments were designated segregated African American units to be led by white officers. As a further, unspoken compromise, these black units would be stationed almost exclusively in the West, largely in Texas and the New Mexico and Arizona Territories. Overall, African Americans composed 20% of the Army's cavalry and 5% of the infantry; out of the almost 28,000 troops authorized

for the post-Civil War Army, 10% were African American (Dobak & Phillips 2001, 90–102; Dobak 2011).

As scholars uncovered the experiences of these so-called “Buffalo Soldiers,” they tended to focus on several key aspects of the black military experience. Early works emphasized black soldiers’ participation in military operations. William Leckie’s (2003) *The Buffalo Soldiers* narrated the contribution of black cavalrymen, while Arlen Fowler’s (1971) *The Black Infantry in the West* served a similar purpose for black infantry units. William Dobak’s and Thomas Phillips’s (2001) *The Black Regulars* offered an excellent recent synthesis that unites the two combat branches. While Leckie and Fowler devoted substantial attention to campaign histories involving black soldiers, Dobak and Phillips instead situated black military service into the larger political context of the postwar era and allotted greater emphasis to the social dimensions of black soldiers’ service.

In addition, numerous fine studies explore specific groups or individuals within the black military community. Black chaplains attracted substantial attention because of their stature within the black community and their military rank that awarded them officer status. Chaplains could use their position to press for reforms and more equitable treatment for black troops, but privileges warranted by their rank were often negated by racial discrimination (Stover 1975). The four black officers who served in the late nineteenth-century Army have also received treatment. Scholars have written extensively about Henry O. Flipper’s career and court-martial (Dinges 1972; Harris 1997; Robinson 2008), and Brian Shellum (2010) has recently produced a biography of another black officer, Charles Young. Marvin Fletcher’s (1974) work, *The Black Soldier and Officer in the United States Army, 1891–1917*, highlighted the experience of black officers and carried the narrative forward into the early twentieth century. Noncommissioned officers liaised between officers and enlisted men and provided companies’ day-to-day leadership. In “Dress on the Colors, Boys!” Douglas McChristian presented the best account not just of black NCOs but of late nineteenth-century NCOs in general (McChristian 1996). Finally, historians such as Frank N. Schubert (1997; 2003) and Thomas R. Buecker (1993) have demonstrated how painstaking research into Army records can be used to piece together the fascinating details of individual soldiers’ lives. In addition, Schubert’s (1995; Schubert and Schubert 2004) two-volume *On the Trail of the Buffalo Soldiers* provides an encyclopedic compendium of biographical information on men who served in black units.

Other historians gravitated toward exploring the relationships between black soldiers and white officers. Charles Kenner took up this theme in *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867–1898: Black and White Together* (1999). Relying on biographical sketches, Kenner’s work noted conflicting impulses of discrimination and egalitarianism that usually

reflected the personalities of the individuals involved. Several studies have probed these issues by shining light on specific individuals and their relationships with their troops. John Bigelow, a 10th Cavalry officer who kept voluminous journals, drew such attention from both Douglas McChristian (1984) and Marcos Kinevan (1998).

The interplay between black soldiers and white civilians in frontier settlements has proven an especially fruitful area of inquiry. Most of these analyses taken the form of case studies of particular regions or specific posts, with almost every territory receiving attention. For instance, Monroe Lee Billington's (1991) *New Mexico's Buffalo Soldiers, 1866–1900* detailed the experience of the substantial number of black troops who served in New Mexico. Accounts of black military service in Utah are especially interesting, since the arrival of black units at Fort Douglas in 1896 doubled the new state's black population and brought black soldiers into rare proximity with a large city. As Michael J. Clark noted, black soldiers' professionalism helped transform white Utahans' initial trepidation into respect (Clark 1978). Frank Schubert's (1993) *Buffalo Soldiers, Braves, and the Brass* depicted the best close analysis of the social world of a single post and the interactions between military personnel and the civilian community. Fort Robinson sustained the nearby town of Crawford with medical care to civilians, defense contracts that pumped federal dollars into the local economy, and by providing a soldier-clientele for saloons and brothels. Crawford city officials filled the town's coffers – and raised revenue for education and other local services – by imposing vice taxes on saloons and prostitution. Schubert traced the persistence of these civil–military connections into the early twentieth century. The Army transferred most active troops elsewhere in 1916, and Crawford's economy never rebounded.

Finally, historians have investigated racial tensions within the military community or between black soldiers and white civilians. Most of these accounts analyze specific incidents of soldier mutinies – usually in reaction to abuse or mistreatment by white officers – or racial violence between black troops and white citizens, such as the Brownsville riots (Schubert 1973; Buecker 1984; Leiker 1997). Garna Christian's (1995) *Black Soldiers in Jim Crow Texas, 1899–1917*, for example, examined episodes of racial violence in Texas between black soldiers and white Texans. Texans wanted federal dollars to flow into their communities, but they resented black soldiers' presence and demanded their adherence to Jim Crow laws. Violence flared when black soldiers, proud of the status that their uniform granted and accustomed to better treatment elsewhere, resisted attempts to render them subservient. More recently, James Leiker (2002) suggested a different approach for analyzing racial interaction in Texas. He portrayed the region as a borderland rather than a frontier and considered racial relationships from a “tripartite” perspective that incorporates black, white, and Hispanic outlooks. Leiker characterized black soldiers' service in Texas as part of the

broader nineteenth-century project to extend federal control over populations and resources and to assert American national authority amid border disputes with Mexico. In this context, black soldiers' mission as an extension of federal hegemony placed them in conflict with Native Americans, white Texans, and Hispanic Tejanos and Mexicans. Both Christian's and Leiker's work suggest ways for uniting military history with recent trends in social and ethnic history and for situating the Army within the larger context of race relations and America's burgeoning colonial impulse.

### Military Dependents

The interminably slow pace of promotions impeded officers' careers and lowered morale. Civil War veterans had gained combat experience and served in positions of authority in the volunteer service. For men accustomed to command, the postwar return to subservient positions galled their egos, particularly since promotions moved so slowly that a return to their previous positions seemed almost impossible. Moreover, the slowness of promotions meant that salaries did not keep pace with inflation or the growing size of officers' families over time. Some officers attributed their peers' mounting debts to profligate spending and unwise personal decisions, but many of them blamed the system itself. General O. O. Howard observed, "The remark often made that 'an Army officer should not be married' never alters the fact that a majority *are* married and have families" (House Report No. 354, 1876).

Studies of military families and dependents have typically concentrated on the officers' caste. Officers' wives believed they were participating in a historically significant enterprise by following their husbands into the West. The numerous published accounts they penned of their experience offer valuable insight into social relations within posts. Some noteworthy examples include Elizabeth Custer's (1885; 1887; 1890) trilogy about her military life in Texas and the Dakotas, Frances Boyd's (1982) and Frances Roe's (1981) depictions of military life in the 1870s and 1880s, and Martha Summerhayes's (1979) memoir of postings in Arizona. Scholars also have edited some excellent diaries and collections of letters, such as Shirley Leckie's (1989a) *The Colonel's Lady on the Western Frontier: The Correspondence of Alice Kirk Grierson* and Sandra Myres's (1977) *Cavalry Wife: The Diary of Eveline M. Alexander, 1866–1867*.

Scholarly accounts of officers' wives have slowly proliferated since the late 1970s. Patricia Stallard's (1978) groundbreaking *Glittering Misery* is still one of the best treatments of military dependents. Oliver Knight's (1978) *Life and Manners in the Frontier Army* explored military social relations through the cultural lens of Captain Charles King's late nineteenth-century Army novels. Sandra Myres (1982; 1990) and Shirley Leckie

(1989b) also wrote important early contributions in this field. As these works explain, Army women coped with climate changes, extreme isolation from family and friends, constant mobility and the resulting difficulty in maintaining social networks, and the threat of Indian attack. In addition, they bore responsibility for creating homes in quarters that ranged from frame houses to sod dugouts. In furnishing their homes, feeding and clothing their families, hiring servants, and organizing social activities, officers' wives learned to cope with limited resources. Much of this early scholarship on officers' wives thus focused on the hardships they overcame and the ways they adapted domestic ideology to suit their circumstances.

These studies provided important counterpoints to military histories that concentrated exclusively on campaigns and tactics, but they did not explicitly analyze the importance of gender distinctions in maintaining military hierarchies. Officers' wives' attempts at cultivating domestic spaces, social accomplishments, and participation in leisure pastimes, which included theatrical productions, fancy balls and "hops," buffalo hunts, or promenades about the post, confirmed the family's status within the Victorian elite and helped to maintain class and racial distinctions within the garrison. Their successes or failures reflected upon their husbands' reputations. The Army's organizational structure limited officers' opportunities for career advancement, but their wives' demonstrations of status could help the family achieve social distinction, if not career or economic advancement.

A number of excellent studies have begun to incorporate analysis of how gender considerations influenced military order and contributed to the Army's broader mission in the West. Lorien Foote's (2010) discussion of competing strands of manhood within the Civil War Union Army indicates useful avenues for combining military and gender history. Kevin Adams has taken up this theme by exploring the tensions between enlisted men's and officers' masculinity, but much work remains to be done. Meanwhile, in their treatments of social scandals, Bruce Dinges (1986), Cynthia Wood (1999), and Louise Barnett (2000) showed that officers deployed gendered assumptions and expectations in order to defend or assail each other's reputations. Wood, for example, demonstrated how allegations of infidelity against their captain's wife enabled two Arizona lieutenants to act out their personal antagonisms. Shannon Smith's (2008) *Give Me Eighty Men: Women and the Myth of the Fetterman Fight* argued that gendered considerations shaped the accepted version of the 1866 Fetterman Fight. She showed how two wives published accounts of the episode that exonerated post commander Colonel Henry Carrington from blame and instead depicted Captain William Fetterman as a rash officer whose reckless behavior caused his demise. Out of chivalry to the women, military brass deferred to their portrayal and silenced contradictory evidence. Gender concerns thus tarnished an officer's reputation and prejudiced historical interpretations of the military engagement.

The examinations of social relations among the officers' caste have broadened and enriched our knowledge of military social life, but the heavy concentration on white, middle-class officers' wives neglects and even obscures the complex class and racial interactions among men and women of the garrison. In fact, the only women whose presence on military posts was authorized officially by regulations were working-class laundresses of varying racial or ethnic backgrounds. An 1802 Congressional Act permitted four laundresses for each company and authorized laundresses to receive food and fuel rations and a transportation allowance. The Army withdrew laundresses' official recognition in 1878, but laundresses continued to wash for soldiers with military officials' tacit approval through the end of the century (Coffman 1986, 25–26, 112–116; Stewart 1980, 421–422; Stallard 1978, 66). Few records give a clear view of their background and identity as a group. Like soldiers, many laundresses were Irish and German immigrants; in areas garrisoned by black troops, many were African American or Hispanic. Most laundresses were married to noncommissioned officers. Indeed, soldiers were eager to marry laundresses. In addition to female companionship, laundress wives provided significant monetary contributions to the family coffers, which enabled married soldiers to live a little better than unmarried soldiers. Married soldiers could also petition for private quarters away from the barracks, and their wives prepared home-cooked meals that were presumably better in quality than the fare at the mess tent.

Despite the patina of privilege that their official status might suggest, however, laundresses' lives were far from privileged. Laundresses and their families invariably lived in the poorest post quarters. Quarters for officers and their families were not lavish by any means – lieutenant's wife Frances Roe's 1872 quarters at Camp Supply, Indian Territory, consisted of a rough log hut with a roof made of poles and dirt and a sand floor where "almost every night little white toadstools grow up all along the base of the log walls." Nevertheless, laundresses with the Army fared much worse (Roe 1981, 58). Post surgeons' reports indicate that laundresses' quarters were often no more than tents patched together with gunny sacks and barrel staves and were often overcrowded, poorly ventilated, unsanitary, overrun with chickens, and plagued by disease.

Despite the poverty and squalor that often surrounded them, laundresses performed vital tasks that impacted virtually every aspect of post society. In addition to washing for 20 or more men, laundresses bore and raised their own children, cared for officers' children, cooked and sewed for their families, and took in washing and sewing for officers' families. Some laundresses also doubled as cooks or servants in officers' homes. Scholarly treatments of laundresses have shed much new light on their contributions, but the limited scope of these inquiries has focused largely on correcting the stereotype of laundresses as prostitutes. Much fruitful work on enlisted family life, domestic violence, and sexuality remains to be done. Few

workingwomen left firsthand accounts of their experiences, but military correspondence, records of courts-martial, and pension files abound with information waiting to be tapped.

## Conclusion

Scholars have begun to rediscover the lost soldiers, as Sherry Smith advocated over 15 years ago. Yet there is much work still to be done. Paul Hutton's criticism of earlier incarnations of frontier military history as "narrow, myopic, and ethnocentric ... concentrat[ing] on individual engagements of campaigns, usually viewed in a void untouched by larger national or international questions" thankfully no longer accurately describes the field (1986, 253). Military scholars must continue and expand their efforts to integrate analysis of the military's mission and social environment with broader national – and global – social, cultural, and political considerations, just as it behooves New Western historians to incorporate the military dimension into their assessments. For example, several recent works on the Civil War have woven together environmental and military history to explore the ways that military conflict transformed physical and human landscapes (Nelson 2012; Brady 2012). This type of approach could offer compelling results for the West, a region in which natural resources were and are deeply contested, and in which the military long struggled to impose federal control and protection over the natural environment.

In *The American Military Frontiers: The United States Army in the West, 1783–1900* (2009), Robert Wooster indirectly took up Sherry Smith's question of "Where are the soldiers?" and presented a new synthesis that granted the frontier military a central role in the process of extending federal hegemony over the West and its peoples. He traced the Army's role in furthering federal power through interactions with Native Americans across a series of frontier contact zones – "borderlands," as Wooster calls them – from the earliest days of the Republic through the end of the nineteenth century. Though military operations and policy received primary attention, Wooster also incorporated recent scholarship on social and racial aspects of the military experience in recognition that the social dimension composed a fundamental element of Anglo-American ascendancy. Nor was this an uncomplicated endeavor. Wooster noted that the nineteenth-century Army frequently confronted civilian hostility or apathy that inhibited its preparedness for an ever-expanding mission. Much as military scholars John M. Gates (1983) and Andrew Birtle (2009) observed, Wooster contended that endemic manpower and supply shortages, combined with Army leaders' focus on fighting conventional, large-scale campaigns, inhibited the Army's ability to develop useful, transferable doctrine and tactics for combating insurgents. Military power proved critical to federal control of the West, yet

the military itself drew limited lessons from the experience that could be applied to future conflicts.

As these recent works indicate, the field of frontier military history still has much provocative scholarship to offer. Military and Western historians have made significant strides in integrating the frontier military experience into the larger social, cultural, economic, and political project of late nineteenth-century American imperial expansion. Yet much work remains to be done. Scholars like Wooster, Coffman, Utley, and others have highlighted the evolution of America's military from the eighteenth century through the antebellum years and up to the dawn of the twentieth century. These accounts demonstrate the significance of the Army's Indian-fighting mission, which largely ended in the 1890s. With the close of the Indian Wars, subsequent post closures, and the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, the 1890s marked an important transitional moment for the frontier Army. However, this chronological cut-off obscures continuities, especially as the Army's mission shifted to building and supervising America's overseas dominion. Studies that bridge the gap between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might create avenues for incorporating broader social and political considerations into military analysis – and vice versa.

The military social world also remains a fruitful area of inquiry. Kevin Adams's recent analysis of class and ethnic tensions within military garrisons offers a useful example. Adams perceptively situated officers and enlisted men within the social and cultural milieu of broader late nineteenth-century America, particularly in the arenas of consumption and labor, but his treatment of race relations and gendered interactions lacked the same depth. Moreover, in emphasizing such a binary distinction between officers and enlisted men, Adams – like many other scholars – missed important stratifications *within* the officer corps or enlisted ranks. For example, rank, status, age, pay, responsibilities, and other privileges set noncommissioned officers apart from other enlisted men, yet only a handful of studies – the best being Douglas McChristian (1996) – have addressed this group in any meaningful way.

Digging deeper into the sources promises to add richness and depth to military scholarship. Military records housed at the National Archives include pension files, court-martial files, post correspondence, surgeon's reports, personnel records, and other reports offering a wealth of information. If used imaginatively, these sources hold the potential to continue adding vibrancy and relevance to frontier military scholarship for decades to come.

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# Chapter Nine

## WOMEN AND DEPENDENTS

*Shannon D. Smith*

In the decade following the Civil War, the Union Army transformed itself into the US Army by dropping from approximately one million men to 25,000 soldiers, most of them assigned to the remote posts in the western frontier (Coffman 1986, 215). The Army's mission was to control the Indian population while protecting multitudes of white miners, entrepreneurs, and homesteaders seeking to build a new life. Thus began in the mid-1860s the Great Plains Indian Wars that culminated in the final dispossession of the Plains Indians in the 1890s. Best-selling books, popular magazines, and major motion pictures about the Indian Wars attest to the historical importance and drama of this era. While most people are able to identify many of the places, people, and events of this time, few know what role women played in this story, a situation that led an early researcher to complain that "the women of the frontier army suggest an ethereal 'lost battalion'" (Sibbald 1966).

The Little Bighorn campaign is perhaps the most recognized event of the Indian Wars, and it is chock-full of interesting women. The stories range from Mrs. Nash, a thrice-married laundress who was discovered to be biologically male when she was prepared for burial at Fort Abraham Lincoln, to Buffalo Calf Road Woman, a Northern Cheyenne woman who fought in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. This chapter will explain how we have come to know what we know about women of the era, highlight some of the more interesting women whose stories are woven into the historical narrative and legacy of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and identify areas ripe for further research.

*A Companion to Custer and the Little Bighorn Campaign*, First Edition.

Edited by Brad D. Lookingbill.

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As historian Sherry L. Smith points out, primary resources from which to tell the stories of women associated with the frontier Army are fairly abundant, comprising “an especially rich source of materials regarding the everyday life of everyday people” from letters, diaries, and extensively detailed military records (Smith 1998). Over the last few decades, scholarship has integrated indigenous sources into the research of the era, which has added more perspectives and stories of American Indians into this rich narrative. It is also important to understand the great cultural shifts that occurred during this era, as these dramatic transformations in American society are revealed in the stories of these women’s day-to-day lives.

As the Reconstruction Era drew to a close, the United States was entering a “Gilded Age” of phenomenal industrial and urban growth. On the western frontier, while the soldiers were addressing the so-called “Indian Question,” women followed the Army into the territories with their own agendas that were shaped by the times. Some went as servants and laundresses out of economic necessity, but many went to create a traditional domestic environment for their husbands based upon the values of civility and respect. Victorian sensibilities had dominated American culture for nearly a century, and a set of ideas known as the “Cult of True Womanhood” defined a proper woman’s role in society (Welter 1966). The idea that women were purer and morally superior to men took hold, especially in the safety of their homes. The “private sphere” of domesticity was the realm of women, who avoided the “public sphere” of men. Middle- and upper-class women of good character demonstrated piety, submissiveness, and compassion. Male chivalry toward women, an extension of men’s acknowledgment of the importance of women’s virtue, was a defining characteristic of middle-class gender relations throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Many women cultivated and leveraged this noble, gentlemanly respect. In fact, some women maneuvered between the public and private spheres by taking advantage of society’s respect for their moral authority. Social historians Steven Mintz and Susan Kellog point out that “middle-class women achieved a public voice in such reform movements as temperance and antislavery and succeeded in communicating with a wider public as journalists and authors” (Mintz & Kellog 1988, 56). Indeed, since before the Civil War, the literary marketplace had become what one women’s historian has called “strikingly feminized” (Fahs 1999). So-called “domestic novels” about home and family were the dominant form of fiction, so much so that Nathaniel Hawthorne famously complained to his publisher in 1855, “America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women” (Frederick 1975). The demand for these books opened the market for a flood of popular literature by and about women’s domestic participation in the Civil War, setting the stage for women involved with the post-war military to publish the stories of their adventures. The

general public was interested in reading about women in unusual circumstances. These dramatic changes in American society – urbanization, industrialization, modernization, gender role shifting – took place as the Army and its female “camp followers” struggled to control, settle, and domesticate the frontier. We can learn a great deal about this important era in American history through an examination of the women engaged in the domestication of the frontier.

### Women Writers

What we know about women on the frontier during the Plains Indian Wars has evolved following a course similar to other American historical topics. Historians, as their ranks grew more diverse and their range of interests and techniques expanded, incorporated new perspectives and sources into the narrative. Unfortunately, like many other areas of Western American history, fascination with an overly romantic and misleading image held on for too long. Army officers’ wives themselves shaped this perception through their own publications. Realizing they were part of an important historical event and likely encouraged by the literary market for women’s adventures, the officers’ wives kept diaries and journals. Many published their stories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Women were urged to write by the Army itself. As part of a concerted effort to convert the regiments from a Civil War machine to the protector of the frontier, military leaders believed that the presence of the officers’ wives would help civilize and tame the West. In 1866, General Sherman met with several officers’ wives at Fort Phil Kearny in Nebraska, as they were preparing to accompany their husbands into the heart of contested Indian lands. He suggested they “take with them all needed comforts for a pleasant garrison life in the newly opened country” and record the events of their journeys (M. Carrington 1868; F. Carrington 1910). Their stories, viewed as “minor classics of frontier literature,” were frequently cited as primary sources in other historical publications but were seldom the focus of comprehensive studies and analysis (Utley 1969). To get a full sense of what life was like for the women and dependents of the frontier Army, we will look at the primary sources from the officers’ wives who kept diaries and journals and wrote books. To get a sense of how scholarship has enriched the narrative, we will look at the subsequent historical analysis that puts their stories in the context of the larger cultural changes in American society.

Prior to the Battle of the Little Bighorn, there were several officers’ wives who had published accounts of their adventures with the frontier Army. In 1849, Mary Eastman became the first with *Dacotah; Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling*. In 1858, Teresa Vielé wrote about her experiences in the Texas frontier Army before the Civil War in *Following the Drum: A Glimpse of Frontier Life*. In 1868, Margaret

Carrington published *Absaraka, Home of the Crows: Being the Experiences of an Officer's Wife on the Plains*, which was written to protect her husband's reputation after he was removed from command at Fort Phil Kearny and blamed for the stunning loss of 80 men in the battle that has become known as the Fetterman Massacre. These early publications paved the way for the most famous Army wife of all: Elizabeth Bacon Custer, wife of George Armstrong Custer. After the Sioux routed the 7th Cavalry in the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, killing her husband and most of the soldiers with him, "Libbie" became a prodigious writer. Her description of day-to-day life in the garrison or in the field is extremely detailed. Like other female writers, she paints a vivid picture of life in the frontier Army, and as such has been frequently cited.

Several other wives published memoirs during the era that Elizabeth Custer was prodigiously writing her stories. These include Frances Boyd, who published *Cavalry Life in Tent and Field* in 1894, Ellen McGowen Biddle, who published *Reminiscences of a Soldier's Wife* in 1907, and Martha Summerhayes, who published *Vanished Arizona: Recollections of My Army Life* in 1908. One year later in 1909, Frances Roe published *Army Letters from an Officer's Wife, 1871-1888*, and in 1910, more than 40 years after her short time on the frontier, Frances Carrington published *My Army Life and the Fort Phil Kearney Massacre, with an Account of the Celebration of "Wyoming Opened."* Like Margaret, Frances wrote her memoirs, including the dramatic story of the tragic loss of her newlywed first husband, to support her second husband (widower of Margaret) Henry's reputation, even though he was in his late eighties by this time (Smith 2008).

After this initial wave of publishing the original accounts of officers' wives, many were reissued several times well into the 1920s. In the 1940s and 1950s, historians found and published, either in book form or as articles for historical journals, several new manuscripts; a few were professionally edited and annotated for the first time. The most notable of this group is *With Custer's Cavalry*, published in 1940 by Katherine Gibson Fougera. Considered a classic and integral to any collection of Custerana, this posthumous publication of Katherine Gibson's memoirs by her daughter is the glue that binds many of the other Custer books together. Gibson's husband Francis was a Captain in Custer's cavalry and participated in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, but he was not with Custer's ill-fated command. Katherine Gibson's memoirs support and enforce much of the information presented by Elizabeth Custer and other writers on life with the infamous 7th Cavalry during its heyday and after the catastrophic battle.

This first generation of primary sources on women in the frontier Army, written mostly by the women themselves and published over the span of nearly a century, shares a common theme: the struggle to maintain a good, civilized, Christian home in the decidedly uncivilized western frontier. In 1958, Dee Brown published *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild*

*West*. This survey of the different types of women helping to “tame” the frontier dedicated two chapters, about 30 pages, to “The Army Girls” and “Beau Sabreuer and His Lady Fair,” referring, of course, to the Custer couple. Brown annotated his work, and his sources for the two Army wives’ chapters were almost entirely from a core group of frontier Army officers’ wives including Roe, Boyd, Summerhayes, Gibson, both Carringtons, and Elizabeth Custer. Brown excerpted and summarized from their books while providing the first, albeit brief, overview of women’s life in the Indian Wars. Brown’s book essentially affirmed the older, male-dominated view of western women, where the white male “tamed” the physical West and the white women who followed gently “tamed” the social environment. Although Frederick Jackson Turner virtually ignored women’s roles in his famous 1893 thesis describing the impact of the frontier on the shaping of America, Brown’s work was quite consistent with Turner’s thesis in his framing the narrative on the achievements of the Euro-American male while emphasizing the rareness of women – the few included being predominantly white upper-class “ladies.”

### Beyond Domesticity

Recent scholars have embedded a newer multicultural approach into the narrative that adds more depth to the story, which includes the contributions of the many types of women who lived in the West during this era (Jensen & Miller 1980). During the 1960s, a handful of writers took some small interpretive or analytical steps by pointing out new ways of looking at the writing of frontier military women. Among the most notable was Donald K. Adams, who edited and published the 1868–1871 journal of Ada A. Vogdes in 1963. Adams’s careful selection and presentation of passages reveal just how far Vogdes could step out of the traditional woman’s world. For instance, she writes about privately entertaining several Indian leaders – including Red Cloud – who ate with her in her kitchen wearing only a buffalo robe and moccasins: “I thought, as I sat at table with him, how strange it would seem to an Eastern person coming in suddenly to see me sit with this naked man, but it does not seem strange to me at all now. I am not shocked if I see them with no clothes on.” Adams took a significant step in selecting and presenting these passages, offering a glimpse at how this information could be used to examine gender roles.

In 1966, John Sibbald published a *Gentle Tamers*-like synopsis called “Camp Followers All: Army Women of The West.” He noted that there were women other than the wives of Army officers in the military. Laundresses, servants, enlisted men’s wives, civilian worker’s wives, and the “hog ranch” women of easy virtue at each Army post were listed as part of the female “camp followers” of the frontier military. On top of citing

the officers' wives' publications, Sibbald used government records and publications by and about officers and enlisted men as sources for his article. In addition to finding these new women at the posts, this is the first example of using sources other than officers' wives' writings to research women of the frontier Army.

*Glittering Misery: Dependents of the Indian-Fighting Army*, published in 1978 by Patricia Y. Stallard, was the first in-depth book about nineteenth-century military dependents in the West that discussed more than the officers' wives and remains the seminal comprehensive work on the subject. The result of her 1972 master's thesis, *Glittering Misery* was the first published monograph on military dependents of the Indian-fighting Army and a "path-breaking book in military and western women's history" (Miller 1992). Stallard made use of more than a dozen of the officers' wives' publications, but she also researched military records in the National Archives and United States Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. Her comprehensive study of all of the different types of women "camp followers" captured the interest of many historians and inspired further investigation into the life of these women. Over the next few decades, scholars began to study divergent works for social and cultural information, and historians began to develop a layer of analysis on top of the existing body of primary sources by exploring gender, race, and class as frameworks for research.

During the 1980s, historians began to conduct serious research and critical analysis of the history of frontier military women. Laundresses, servants, and prostitutes were woven into the story, and officers' wives' writings were enhanced with interpretive analysis, primarily through introductory essays with another round of reprints of original officers' wives' books. Sandra Myres emerged as one of the preeminent authorities on this topic along with Darlis Miller and Shirley Leckie. In 1982, Myres wrote "Romance and Reality on the American Frontier: Views of Army Wives," which broke new ground with her discussion of the impact that living in the frontier had on women's lives.

Historians and writers began to use gender, race, class, and ethnicity to explore these women, and by the end of the 1980s a growing body of work using new sources or research models had appeared. In 1989, Myres published "Frontier Historians, Women, and the 'New' Military History," wherein she pointed out issues that should be explored: the women who couldn't stand it and left the frontier, the roles of the wives in military power struggles, marital relationships and infidelity, insanity, family violence, divorce and separation, sexual deviancy, and alcoholism. A few months later, an emerging expert in this area, Shirley Leckie, published "Reading Between the Lines: Another Look at Officers' Wives in the Post-Civil War Frontier Army," arguing that some "slight erosion of gender roles occurred" and that the West was "not so much a place as it was a process in which

these women struggled to uphold their female values in the face of a harsh environment.” In 1990, Myres published “Army Women’s Narratives as Documents of Social History: Some Examples from the Western Frontier, 1840–1900,” which analyzed many of the officers’ wives’ comments on local cultures including Indians, Mexicans, Chinese, African Americans, and local “common folk.” They reveal insights not only into life on the frontier but also into nineteenth-century middle-class values. This was soon followed by Sherry L. Smith’s *The View From Officers’ Row* (1990), an in-depth examination of officers’ and their wives’ writings focusing on their views of Indians and Indian policy. In 1993, Shirley Leckie published *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth*, an excellent biography that frames Libby Custer’s success in maintaining her husband’s heroic reputation in terms of leveraging Victorian gender roles. In 1997, Mary Williams’s article “Ladies of the Regiment: Their Influence on the Frontier Army” analyzed the presence of women at the frontier Army posts. From the types of food and products carried at the post sutlers and traders, to the social life and activities, to the very real influence exerted on their officer husbands, Williams concludes that “the story of the frontier army can no longer be told without [women’s] presence being acknowledged, and their contributions recognized.”

### The Women’s Battle

What do we know specifically about the women in the locale of the Battle of the Little Bighorn? An excellent framework is to use class, race, and gender as lenses to examine the primary sources that tell the story. Because they simultaneously structure the experiences of all people in society, using these lenses as a way to look at the past from multiple views adds greater context to the historical narrative. The aforementioned secondary research on the writings of this era provides an excellent guide and jumping off point and also points the way toward new trails for research.

The officers’ wives wrote from a privileged view and experience of life. A common theme among their writings was that of deprivation, especially as compared to a woman of a comparable social standing in the East. Indeed, a great deal of their writings had to do with adaptation to deprivation, often revealing their views on their roles in society as compared to people of other races, classes, or genders. For example, their books typically start out with a harrowing story of the journey to their first frontier assignment, detailing the hardships of traveling in the back of an ambulance – a converted wagon with shelving that was used as a medical wagon during times of war. Several officers’ wives wrote about riding horses, though few of them would ride while on the trail. Elizabeth Custer was exceptional in almost everything, including the fact that she would frequently ride alongside her husband at

the head of the column as his command moved between posts. But most women, no matter what their social standing, found themselves enduring miles and miles jolting and bouncing in the back of a horse- or mule-drawn wagon. While the officers' wives were allowed more room and were made as comfortable as possible on beds of hay and buffalo robes or blankets, Elizabeth Custer wrote of the poor laundresses and enlisted men's wives huddled with their children among the freight and baggage (Custer 1885). In contrast, she rode in a special spring wagon that her husband had outfitted for her comfort and had it "curtained, fitted up as a dressing room with adjustable seats" and specially rain-proofed (Stallard 1978, 79). What did the infantrymen's wives and children, who were probably walking alongside the wagons, think as they endured the march?

The quality of accommodations at frontier posts varied wildly depending upon the age of the fort and how remote it was. When an officer's wife and family arrived, an immediate assignment of housing would occur and the new family would be placed in their home according to the officer's position. In fact, the family that was residing in the home would be forced to move into the next lower-ranking officer's home, creating a falling-domino-like series of relocations. Called "ranking out," many wives wrote of both the anger at being displaced by a new family and the guilt of moving families to lesser quarters as they dispossessed them of their abode. Stories of being ranked out into shared rooms with other families and even former chicken coops are found throughout the officers' wives' writings. One poor wife of a junior officer was forced to set up housekeeping in a hallway, and her husband ultimately resigned when they were ranked out of their measly space a short time later (Boyd 1894). But the worst of the officers' housing situations were likely better than those of the wives of enlisted men and the camp laundresses, who frequently lived in tents or rustic half-finished log cabins.

By the time the cavalry officers' wives of Fort Abraham Lincoln arrived at the post in 1874, it contained seven detached officers' quarters facing the Missouri River on the opposite side of the parade ground from the soldiers' barracks. Today, one can tour the beautiful multistory Victorian-style home that the Custers lived in at Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park in Mandan, North Dakota. On the other end of the officers' wives' spectrum, Elizabeth wrote of visiting infantry officers' wives' homes in a garrison adjacent to the new 7th Cavalry garrison where she lived. The infantry post was located on a hill about a mile away from Fort Abraham Lincoln, and she observed how difficult it was for the mules to drag the wagon with her and the other cavalry officers' wives up the steep hill when they went "to return the visits of the infantry ladies." She described the housing: "We found living in this bleak place – in small, shabbily built quarters, such as a day laborer would consider hardly good enough for his family – delicate women and children, who, as usual, made no complaint about their life." Perhaps revealing an

inter-military class relationship, Elizabeth described how she and her ladies (cavalry officers' wives) were indebted to a wife of an infantry officer, who was "determined to conquer fate" and give all the officers' wives at both garrisons something to look forward to by organizing a reading club that met weekly (Custer 1885, 79).

Also outside of the main post garrison, farther out than the horse stables and located closer to the Missouri, were the laundress quarters with swinging clotheslines out front. Soldiers dubbed it "Soap Suds Row" or "Suds Row." Company laundresses were the only women officially recognized by the Army and received quarters, fuel, one daily ration, and the services of the post surgeon. Officers' wives were wont to complain about their own lack of official status. Frances Boyd decried the fact that no provisions were made for officers' wives and noted that when they got together, wives frequently bemoaned being relegated to the status of "camp followers" (Boyd 1894, 21). Despite the envy of their official status, the officers' wives would not have envied the laundresses or their living arrangements. Described as a rough lot living together in barely habitable quarters, laundresses existed in "a general atmosphere of squalor amid hordes of shock-headed and raucous children of dubious parentage, scavenging chickens, and prowling dogs" (Stallard 1978). Elizabeth Custer wrote about her husband being called upon to settle disputes on Suds Row: "If the laundresses had a serious difficulty, he was asked to settle it. They had many pugilists among them, and the least infringement of the rights provoked a battle in which wood and other missiles filled the air. Bandaged and bruised, they brought their wrongs to our house, where both sides had a hearing" (Custer 1885, 102).

Indeed, officers' wives and other writers frequently depict the clear class delineation between themselves and the laundresses at their posts. A former soldier from the 7th Cavalry, Ami Frank Mulford, wrote in his memoirs in 1879 of an encounter between an officer's wife and a laundress:

As he sat there he saw one of the company laundresses and the wife of an officer approach and pass each other, coming from opposite sides of the parade. Both ladies were togged in their finest fixings, were equally proud and dignified, and they passed each other with eyes front and nose up, as if each thought she owned the whole reservation, with the troops thrown in.

It was evident that both ladies just ached to look back and see what the other wore. The Laundress controlled her curiosity. Not so the other lady. She looked back, continuing her grand march as she did so, and disastrous was the result. She encountered a plebian wheelbarrow, which had no respect of class or caste. The wheelbarrow reared up and knocked her hat off, and the lady sat down on the parade with the wheel end of the wheelbarrow on her lap. (Mulford 1879, 52)

Mulford may have been predisposed to writing of an officer's wife's humiliation. His memoir is full of stories related to officers' snobbery:

“There is, socially, an impassable gulf between enlisted men and their officers.” He noted their predilection for the finer things in life: “As a general thing the officers of a regiment are very cranky after they leave good quarters for field duty.” He made another observance about the complex class interplay between officers’ wives and laundresses:

There were but a few women attached to our command – two laundresses to each company – and they were ladies in every sense of the word, and were respected by the common herd more then [sic] were the wives of the officers. Officers’ wives in the army seem to act just as though they had a right to give orders to the privates, but they are the only ones that the rules do not recognize and provide for. When a command is on the move, there is transportation furnished for the laundresses, but their places at that time are nearly always usurped by painted dolls. (Mulford 1879, 60)

Perhaps the most famous laundress of the Indian Wars, who happened to serve with the 7th Cavalry at Fort Abraham Lincoln, was Mrs. Nash. In *With Custer’s Cavalry*, Kate Gibson described the wife of Sergeant Nash as the “superlaundress of the regiment,” a “tall, thin Mexican whom the sergeant had picked up on the border.” She was “swarthy of countenance” and displayed a “Latin coquetry” of always wearing a veil. In describing why, Gibson parodies Mrs. Nash: “So bad these vinds ... for a jung girl’s complexion.” Gibson concluded that, although it was true that the bad winds affected a woman’s complexion, she thought it surprising Nash cared so, “inasmuch as she had passed her pristine youth” (Fougera 1940, 191). Mrs. Nash’s story enables a fascinating exploration of race, class, and gender views of the time. Gibson noted that the laundress was of Hispanic descent, and as historian Peter Boag writes in his excellent chapter on Nash in *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past*, “Race charged almost all sources that described Mrs. Nash’s body” (Boag 2011). Gibson wrote, “if one, from time to time, noticed a bit of down on her lips, one reflected that Latin women as they grow older are prone to develop hair on their faces and let it pass at that” (Fougera 1940, 191).

In addition to being a “superlaundress,” Mrs. Nash is described as having been a cook of some renown whose multiple husbands grew fat off of her famous tamales, pies, cakes, and donuts. She sold these items for extra income at the fort and as far away as Bismarck. Both Elizabeth Custer and Katherine Gibson noted Nash’s skills in decorating for camp festivities, and Custer described Nash’s neat and “shining” little place that she shared with her third husband, who happened to be Tom Custer’s “striker,” an enlisted man who served an officer for extra pay during his off hours. She also made extra money as a seamstress and kept bolts of silk and other material at hand to make herself dresses and “gauzy, low necked gowns” that she wore to company balls (Custer 1885, 165).

Hope kept springing eternal for Mrs. Nash, who retained her first husband's name after she married Corporal John Noonan, Tom Custer's striker. Despite her unfortunate looks, Nash was a good catch, as there were so few women at the fort. As Elizabeth Custer put it, she was "that most desirable creature in all walks of life – 'a woman of means'."

One day, while her husband was in the field, Nash fell ill with appendicitis, and as she lay dying she implored a fellow laundress to see to it that she was buried immediately in what she was wearing at the time of death. When she passed, her friends felt that she deserved a more dignified burial and that was when they discovered a secret. The laundress cleaning her body apparently screamed: "She's got balls on her as big as a bull, she's a man!" When her husband returned, he was tormented by the rest of the garrison's soldiers to the point that he committed suicide a month later. The most detailed and researched description of Nash's life is in Boag's *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*, where he mines her story for the rich material it provides in exploring not only cross-dressing and gender but also race and ethnicity. Contemporary newspaper reports wondered why a man would want to live as a woman. It made more sense to people at that time for a woman to want to break from the social constraints of a woman: "Why did this man leave the wider field of action vouchsafed to man, and take upon himself the drudgery incident to a poor woman's life on the frontier[?]" Boag also explains how sources reveal Nash and other cross-dressers' bodily attributes through the lens of race. Class is also a lens into the Nash story, as Boag found accounts attempting to explain Nash's cross-dressing as a factor of crime (Boag 2011).

In addition to laundresses, other women lived in and around the fort, including women who married enlisted soldiers without the benefit of a laundress position. They frequently worked as cooks and servants for officers' families. Life was especially challenging for these women, as the Army was not supportive of the arrangement. An enlisted man would have to ask the commanding officer for permission to get married, and there was seldom housing available if he was able to get approval. The best hope was for a married enlisted man with a laundress wife to be reassigned, so that an enlisted man with matrimonial hopes could jump in on the opportunity to have a wife with an income and a home provided by the Army. A married couple fortunate enough to find housing would have to contend with living on the soldier's rations; the wife was able to obtain a few days' rations at a time, and they lived on the same bacon, beans, hardtack, and beef as the soldiers in the barracks. This motivated the women to find any kind of work possible to supplement their meager income. Indeed, women moved between laundress and servant roles and recognized their class limitations, as Elizabeth Custer wrote of a former laundress, who served as an officer's cook until she became ill. When she recovered she found that her position had been filled, and the only other service position available was to work for the

wife of an officer who had “risen from the ranks” and who had once been a laundress as well. She told Mrs. Custer: “I ken work for a leddy, but I can’t go there; there was a time when Mrs. — and I had our toobs side by side (Custer 1887, 263; Stallard 1978, 63).

Unmarried laundresses on Soap Suds Row were also known to generate extra income as prostitutes, and there were loose arrangements in which one woman was considered the spouse of several soldiers (Boag 2011, 145; Stallard 1978, 57). Nearly every fort had a “Hog Ranch” establishment close enough to be convenient for the soldiers to get away from the post, where they could drink alcohol and avail themselves of female companionship. Elizabeth Custer was clearly aware of the local Hog Ranches, writing that Fort Abraham Lincoln was too large for the proprietors to place their establishments on the same side of the Missouri. Hence, they were located just across the river. With names like “My Lady’s Bower” and “Dew Drop Inn,” several bleak, untidy, canvas-covered cabins were sited on several rises on the opposite shore. When the ice broke on the Missouri after the fort’s first winter, Custer shared the frightening tale of how the owners and occupants found themselves suddenly surrounded by fast-running currents filled with large chunks of ice. The garrison watched helplessly from across the river, as the cabins were swept away, and the people who lived and worked in these establishments scrambled to the highest ground they could. Elizabeth wrote that at first the officers half-jokingly expressed relief at losing the whole lot of the “utterly abandoned, lawless company,” but soon the entire post community was caught up in watching the tragedy unfold. Elizabeth, watching through field glasses, noticed there were women among the distressed group and expressed alarm “for no matter what they were, the helplessness of women at such a time makes one forget everything, save that their lives hung in the balance.” The scene soon became unbearable for Elizabeth, and she spent the day inside until hearing that the river was slowly starting to recede. Several people, including a woman and a man attempting to escape in a small boat, were washed away never to be heard from again (Custer 1885, 190).

In addition to laundress quarters and Hog Ranches on the edge of the post, there was a small group of Indian scouts, who lived on the outskirts of the garrison with their families. In all of her writings, Elizabeth looked down upon the Indians as “savages,” conveying this sentiment by “unobtrusively stressing differences between Indian and Anglo-American home life” and justifying that “fate ordained their removal in the face of a genteel, progressive and Christian civilization” (Leckie 1993, 238). Indian women were described as beasts of burden, and even when portraying what she viewed as “princesses,” she wrote in condescending tones similar to her descriptions of laundresses and servants. Her sentiment may have been influenced by a relationship her husband may have had with a Cheyenne woman, Mo-Nah-Se-Tah, who was taken captive after the

Battle of Washita River and accompanied Custer as a scout and interpreter in 1868 and 1869. A handful of American Indian and military sources imply Custer not only had an affair but also fathered a child with Mo-Nah-Se-Tah. The evidence is not conclusive, however (Hofling 1981, 83). Similarly, accusations that Custer not only partook in the abuse of captured Indian women but that he endorsed and encouraged it were put forward by Custer's nemesis, Captain Frederick Benteen (Carroll 1974, 271). While there is a great deal of evidence that American Indian women were raped while being held captive by the frontier Army, the evidentiary trail supporting the accusation against Custer's 7th Cavalry raises more questions than answers. We do know that Custer wrote affectionately about Mo-Nah-Se-Tah to his wife, and she would likely have heard rumors about their relationship.

Scholars have explored the views on Indian women by Euro-American women migrating to the frontier. Glenda Riley argued that many white women's views softened as they endured the hardships of building a life, which forced them to revise their own perceptions of gender and themselves (Riley 1984). But much more work can and should be done to explore the connections of gender and ethnicity in the West. The angle that is most interesting to contemplate is how Custer and other officers' wives describe Indian women as slaves or beasts of burden. Their terms sound almost sympathetic in their descriptions of the drudgery, all the while they had servants of their own, frequently former African American slaves, doing much of that same menial work.

The Custers employed African American servants throughout their marriage. In Virginia during 1863, George had taken on Eliza, a "contraband" former slave who had walked away from her plantation after she heard about the Emancipation Proclamation. Eliza stayed with the Custers after they were married and ran the household, since Elizabeth "understood that she was not to know anything about housekeeping," supposedly so she could join her husband in some activity at a moment's notice. Eliza left them in late 1869 when she was let go because she "went on a spree" and was "insolent" (Leckie 1993, 122). According to Elizabeth, Eliza frequently expressed her loneliness and desire for male companionship, and one wonders if there was empathy on Elizabeth's part given her ardent passion for her husband. Mary Adams was an African American servant, who joined the Custers as a cook in Kentucky in 1873 and followed them to Fort Abraham Lincoln. Her sister, Maria, came from Kentucky to join her sister at the fort in 1875 and worked for the Custers as a maid. A great deal has been written about these two women, contributing to confusion about whether one of them was in the field as a cook for Custer during the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Manion 2000). Research has yet to explore the idea that African American women were considered acceptable risks for accompanying the soldiers into battlefields. A great

place to start exploring this topic is the anthology *African American Women Confront the West: 1600–2000* by Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore (2003).

### Conclusion

As this essay indicates, serious social analysis of the women and dependents associated with the frontier Army exists. However, as Sherry Smith (1998) points out in her excellent article “Lost Soldiers: Re-Searching the Army in the American West,” historians have yet to fully take up the challenge to include the insights and innovations of ethnohistory, social history, and the New Western history in crafting a narrative of the American West. According to Darlis Miller, the goal of creating a new multicultural history that focuses on family adaptation to the western environment has yet to be achieved, and “the true story of the American West awaits the ingenious scholar” (Miller 1992).

In particular, scholars note the paucity of research on historical American Indian women. The reasons behind this dearth range from the male-produced ethnographic accounts to the pervading view that there was a monolithic, essential Indian woman regardless of tribal affiliation or family affiliation (Mihesuah 1996). Although scholars such as Beatrice Medicine (1988) have issued detailed calls for more research, there remains a great deal of work to do. One fascinating story has been recently mined from Northern Cheyenne oral tradition, that of Buffalo Calf Road Woman, who fought in several battles including at the Rosebud and the Little Bighorn. The Northern Cheyenne call the Battle of Rosebud “The Fight Where the Girl Saved Her Brother” in honor of her rescuing her brother, a chief who had been left wounded on the field. Her actions inspired a rally among her compatriots, who ultimately defeated General George Crook’s forces in this confrontation. In 2005, the Northern Cheyenne gave their first-ever public recounting of their oral history of the battle and indicated that Buffalo Calf Road Woman had struck the blow that knocked Custer off his horse. *Buffalo Calf Road Woman: The Story of a Warrior of the Little Bighorn*, a historical novel culled from oral histories and research of cultural material of the era, tells the imagined story of her life (Agonito & Agonito 2006). It offers a fictional sense of life for Plains Indian women of the era.

Exploration into the lives of children at the military forts is also warranted. We know that many officers’ wives brought their children with them or had babies after arriving at their post, but very little has been written about their experiences. In 1989, Elliott West published *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier*, and although he does not deal with Army offspring, some of what he writes does resonate with the few memoirs that have been published. In 1996, the University of Nebraska

Press published a manuscript written by Mary Leefe Laurence in the 1940s titled *Daughter of the Regiment: Memoirs of a Childhood in the Frontier Army, 1878–1898*. In his introduction, Thomas T. Smith presents the most detailed historiography to date on the research of children at frontier Army posts and elsewhere in the western territories. While both the pioneer and Army child grew up with a strong sense of place and affinity for the land, they also felt a “deep sense of foreboding, the great open space leaving them afraid and vulnerable.” Both sets of children shared a dreadful fear of Indians that took many of them years to overcome in adulthood. Similarities aside, Laurence’s memoir reveals that military offspring had a safer, albeit more sheltered, life with better housing but far more social restrictions (Smith in Laurence 1996, xxii–xxiii). Another example of a memoir is *Child of the Fighting Tenth: On the Frontier with the Buffalo Soldiers* by Forrestine Cooper Hooker (2003), who wrote in the 1930s about her childhood. Hooker’s account fits with Laurence’s version, as they both describe a nearly idyllic life in which the officer’s child is treated almost as a pet by the enlisted men. While Smith mentions several other accounts in his introduction to Laurence’s book, few have been published.

There will always be a place for histories of the military campaigns against the American Indians. Rather than telling these stories in the same old fashion, let us hope that historians will take up the challenge to use some of the new frameworks to present history with greater awareness about the role of women. Fortunately, the excellent original sources plus the follow-up analysis and identification of additional sources by diligent writers over the last 40 years provide a detailed map to guide the way.

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# Chapter Ten

## TECHNOLOGY AND TACTICS

*Andrew J. Forney*

George Armstrong Custer's visage graces the front cover of a 2013 issue of *Military Review*. Serving as the professional journal of the US Army, *Military Review* provides a home for thoughtful discourse on policy, planning, and professionalism – an unlikely place to find the notoriously less than studious Custer. Flipping through the pages and analyzing the table of contents, one quickly realizes that no article on Custer or directly relating to his career is printed inside. Why is Custer on the front cover? The primary article, the one that draws the only possible parallel with the ill-fated colonel (and yet never mentions him), is titled, “Narcissism and Toxic Leaders.” Custer's image, according to the authors, equates to poor undisciplined leaders and potential military catastrophes. To complete the portrait, the back cover contains a still from the film *Little Big Man* that prominently shows a Hollywood Custer primping before a hand mirror (Doty & Fenlason 2013).

The symbolism that the front and back covers of the journal evoke generates more interest than the several thought-provoking articles that they bookend. Authors have spilled more ink while writing about Custer and his legacy than about any other colonel of cavalry, leading one modern historian to call the entire scholastic field “Custerology” (Elliot 2007). Several authors have waded against the stream of popular histories to create a more nuanced assessment of cavalymen during the late nineteenth century. More work still needs to be done.

This present analysis will attempt to synthesize the myriad secondary works about the cavalry, using the themes of tactics and technology to discuss the

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current state of scholarship in the field. A thorough reading of these sources creates an image of the cavalry often missing from popular narratives: an ill-trained and doctrinally deficient constabulary charged with a task it found itself ill-suited to execute. Pertinent primary sources will be referenced, as needed, to show the contemporary guidance that governed the themes as discussed herein. All sides of historiographical debates will receive due examination; those theories that have been discounted or gone by the wayside, however, will be acknowledged. The examination will close with an attempt to discern where future scholarship may lead.

### Antecedents

The United States always possessed a mounted arm. Henry “Light Horse” Lee formed and led the primary cavalry force of the Continental Army during the Revolution, and mounted soldiers participated in every conflict thereafter. A classical republican aversion to a standing army, along with the higher cost of maintaining a mounted soldier over an infantryman, led to the removal of the cavalry from the regular army and its confinement to volunteer or militia units during the early nineteenth century (Higginbotham 1983, 250, 352, 369–373; Weigley 1973, 40–56; Kohn 1975, 185–186; Utley 1967, 18–20; Watson 2012, 7–11). States and territories that mounted volunteer cavalry units fully expected individual troopers to bring their own mount and weapons, precluding the entrance of poor soldiers from what many perceived as an almost “aristocratic” branch. This perception persisted through the Civil War, when the dashing General J. E. B. Stuart came to epitomize the daring and noble spirit of the cavalry for the Confederacy. The cavalryman played the role of a chivalrous knight on a grand battlefield (Thomas 1988; Trout 1993; and Wert 2008).

By the time of the Civil War, the Union still wrestled with defining the nature of the cavalry. General officers subordinated cavalry regiments to individual infantry divisions at the onset of the war. This served to weaken the cavalry as a fighting force, often relegating Union troopers to guarding pack trains and screening on open flanks (Starr 1979, 234–259). The Army commissioned the printing of *Cavalry Tactics*, a glorified mounted drill manual penned by Brigadier General Phillip Cooke in an attempt to standardize Union cavalry tactics and techniques (Cooke 1862). Cooke emphasized the saber and the mounted charge as the key elements to the cavalry’s offensive actions.

Union generals began to learn from and improve upon the Confederate example, and by 1863, General Joseph Hooker created an independent cavalry corps within the Army of the Potomac. During the spring and early summer of 1863, Major General John Buford, the cavalry operations officer for the Army of the Potomac, initiated a series of reforms that deemphasized

the mounted charge in the context of cavalry tactics. Buford sought to gain an advantage from the dissemination of Spencer repeating carbines and Colt revolvers. Cavalry should use its speed and mobility to locate the key terrain on the battlefield or a weak spot in an enemy's defensive array, and then attack it dismounted with rapid and accurate fires while still retaining freedom of maneuver in case of the need for a speedy withdrawal (Starr 1979, 327–328, 339–342; Longacre 1995, 135–140; Wittenberg 2003, 4–7). Buford's reforms proved prescient, and at Gettysburg served to slow the Confederate advance on the first day while allowing follow-on units to seize and maintain the key defensive positions south of town. By the end of the war, the Union cavalry fought primarily dismounted; commanders could focus on maintenance and marksmanship over mounted combat during their always too short training period (Starr 1979, 422–429; Starr 1981, 32–33; Longacre 1995, 179–200; Sears 2003, 33–34). These trends in cavalry tactics carried on past the war itself, as many cavalry officers and noncommissioned officers continued to serve after Appomattox.

Most historians consider the period of the “modern” Indian Wars to be from 1865 to 1890, running from the redeployments following Appomattox to the rise of the Ghost Dance and the massacre at Wounded Knee (Utley 1973; Utley and Washburn 2002, 192–301). Without a doubt, the 7th Cavalry that charged into Black Kettle's Cheyenne village along the Washita River during the winter of 1868 differed from the one that battled the Sioux on the Little Bighorn during the Centennial Campaign of 1876. Likewise, that force differed significantly from the cavalry that garrisoned the western and Rio Grande frontiers in the years following the tragedy at Wounded Knee in 1890.

For the purposes of this examination, the primary chronological focus will fall on the decade of the 1870s. This decade produced the bulk of the fighting during the Indian Wars, as disparate tribes formed large but loose coalitions to stymie westward expansion. The decade also saw the cavalry as an institution become its most distinct and homogeneous. Having fully accepted their new task on the frontier while escaping dreaded Reconstruction duty, the cavalry by 1870 operated as a distinct fighting force. By 1880, lessons learned from the numerous reverses against the Indians on the battlefield, coupled with an introspection that identified many inefficiencies within the Army as a whole, led to a period of increased professionalization and specialization. By the time these changes were put in place, the majority of the fighting had ended, providing little solace to frontline troopers, who experienced a decade of conflict as part of an Army still fighting its last war. In fact, the cavalry's combat record during the decade proved less than stellar, with several clear reverses (Fetterman, Little Bighorn, and Clearwater Creek), numerous stalemates (Washita, Lava Beds, Powder River, Rosebud, Big Hole, and the Victorio chase), and only one clearly successful campaign (Red River War).

## Doctrine and Tactics

The cavalry entered the post-bellum era much like the rest of the Army did: gutted by budget cuts and facing a civilian authority that saw no need in maintaining a large force. The task of policing the western territories fell predominantly to the cavalry, their mobility supposedly providing a ready solution to the problem of the region's wide open spaces and the Indian's disregard for a sedentary lifestyle. With the United States lacking any federal law enforcement arm and the Indian Bureau not possessing an effective enforcement apparatus, the cavalry settled in for a generation of constabulary duty that at times was marked with incredible violence. The doctrine and tactics used by the cavalry during this time have engendered two prominent points of contention among scholars: the appearance of doctrinal malaise and the notion of "total war."

The basic organization of the cavalry from the Civil War persisted. The regiment supplanted the division as the largest command element. Twelve troops formed a regiment, with each troop identified alphabetically A through L. A captain typically commanded a troop and a colonel the entirety of the regiment. If the regiment mustered for a campaign, the squadron commander often divided the regiment into three squadrons of four troops each, the squadron commanded by a major (Utley 1973, 11, 36; Katchner 1977, 14–15, 20). In practice, the formation of squadrons tended to be ad hoc and hearkened back to the "wing" concept practiced during the Civil War: left, center, and right. Although appearing organized on paper, the reality of budget cuts, manpower shortfalls, and garrison duties eroded the cavalry west of the Mississippi River. Between 1869 and 1874, Congress reduced the size of the Army by half but did not reduce any of its garrison tasks. To address the numerous requirements facing it, the Army often reassigned individual officers and soldiers to perform specified duties away from their unit. As a direct result, the majority of cavalry troops were undermanned. When combined with men lost to illness, desertion, and the expiring of their enlistments, troop commanders faced significant personnel issues. As Robert Utley states, "Fortunate was the company commander who could actually muster three-fourths of the men carried on his rolls." A troop conducting a campaign at under 50% strength was not uncommon (Utley 1973, 15–18).

Perry Jamieson posits in his analysis of post-Civil War military thought that "American military leaders never prepared a formal statement of Indian-fighting doctrine" (Jamieson 1994, 37). Well into the 1870s, the primary doctrinal text remained Cooke's *Cavalry Tactics* from 1862. As discussed earlier, Cooke's regulation placed a primacy on close order drill, the saber, and the charge. Attempts to codify lessons learned from the latter stages of the Civil War led to a series of reform boards, the most important one led by Brigadier General Emory Upton, a protégé of General of the

Army William T. Sherman. Drawing on personal observations from the war, Upton stated that “shock” tactics like the cavalry charge had become obsolete in the face of massed firepower. The dismounted trooper, armed with a repeating carbine, provided far more lethality on the battlefield than a trooper on a horse felled by a barely trained infantryman firing from the safety of entrenchments (US War Department 1878).

While many within the cavalry community agreed with Upton’s ideas, traditionalists voiced an equally adamant rancor over what they perceived as the demise of the cavalry force. Mounted warriors should stay mounted, many claimed, with saber in hand. Disregarding the fact that most troopers fought dismounted by the end of the Civil War, stubborn cavalry officers continued to point to the charge and mounted combat as the crux of cavalry operations. The force’s transition to fighting a mounted threat on the Great Plains only seemed to validate many of these officers’ notions. Even though the Indian Wars lasted throughout the post-bellum generation, the 1892 training manual for cavalry formations still culminated with the cavalry charge (Jamieson 1994, 12–14; Coffman 1986, 353).

This schism in cavalry concepts helped to create a similar rupture among historians. The preponderance of historians portrayed the Indian Wars as doctrinally stagnant and devoid of martial innovation. Seeing no formal Indian fighting manuals or training programs, historians began in the 1960s to portray the cavalry on the frontier as a wayward force not at all prepared to fight an unconventional enemy. Utley sounded the most stringent critique of the Army’s doctrinal malaise, titling his chapter on it “The Problem of Doctrine.” His narrative portrayed a “skeleton” force led by Civil War veterans for whom that conflict marked the peak of their military careers. “The Civil War experience,” one historian noted, “permeated the army” (Coffman 1986, 220). An intransigent Congress, by slashing military appropriations and stifling the promotion system, set the conditions in which innovation died in the womb. Not until the late 1880s and early 1890s did enough senior leaders die or retire that “young blood” could rise to the top (Utley 1973, 44–77; Rickey 1963, 71–72; Katchner 1977, 13–15).

Utley and others pointed to the dismal combat record of the cavalry, particularly during the conflicts of the 1870s, as evidence that the Army was not prepared doctrinally to fight on the western frontier. Army leaders viewed Indian fighting as an interlude to its intended mission: mobilization and combat against a conventional, European-style foe. Many cavalry leaders found it too confusing, too emotional, too alien, and bound to gradually fade in prominence as truculent tribes made their way onto reservations (Utley 1973, 44–46). Even renowned Indian fighter Major General George Crook stated, “They [Indians] do not fear the white soldiers, whom they easily surpass in the peculiar style of warfare which they force upon us” (Utley 1973, 54). Historians following Utley’s historiographical path

deemphasized the role of the Army in the resolution of Indian conflicts, claiming that it only “contributed to the defeat of the Indians” and pointed to the railroad as the true causal agent of the Indians’ demise (Coffman 1986, 216, 254). If one counted up the individual engagements, they would quickly determine that the cavalry rarely fought during the Indian Wars. The vast majority of the regulars never fired a shot against the Indians, instead facing a mundane life of garrisoning western posts, guarding railroad construction, and enduring monotonous tasks (Wooster 2009, 273; Rickey 1963, 88–115; Tate 1999).

Such a condemnation of cavalry doctrine closed the book on its study for almost a generation. Not until the mid-1990s and the publication of Jamieson’s *Crossing the Deadly Ground* did a significant reinterpretation come to the fore. In his study of tactics and strategy during the Indian Wars, Jamieson conceded that the Army as an institution generated no doctrinal framework to cover the conduct of operations in the American West. He does point out that doctrine in its modern conception existed in the Army only after the turn of the twentieth century. To condemn the cavalry for not possessing a standardized doctrinal model when such a concept had not gained significant traction throughout the “professional” militaries of the world epitomizes faulty historicism. He goes on to delineate between “formal tactical doctrine” and what he terms “theory,” better conceived as “a collection of ideas about Indian-fighting strategy and tactics based on experience and common sense.” The development of four distinct tactical practices, Jameson claims, provide evidence for his argument: the acceptance of winter warfare; the operational and tactical use of converging columns; the prevalent use of Indian auxiliaries; and the ready adoption of the dismounted skirmish line under contact (Jamieson 1994, 36–45; Hedren 2011, 21, 34–40). Jamieson’s interpretation allows historians to piece together the informal practices of fighting during the Indian Wars.

General Philip Sheridan claimed that he invented the concept of the winter campaign after he forced the Cheyenne onto reservations during the winter of 1868–1869 (Jamieson 1994, 38; Hutton 1985, 54–55; Brill 1938, 101–123; Greene 2004, 61–76). The idea of sallying forth to confront hostile Indians during the depths of winter seemed novel to military theorists, as many of them considered the season a period of garrison duty and training not suitable for extended operations. Such an innovation, however, countered what many in the cavalry considered the Indians’ most obnoxious tactical qualities: speed and mobility. Plains Indians adhered to seasonal rhythms that prescribed their migratory habits. The spring and summer entailed wide-ranging movement and a general dispersion of tribes into extended familial units, the process reversing itself with the onset of winter as tribes coalesced around sources of fresh water and forage for their horse herds (Brown 2000; DeLay 2008; Hämäläinen 2008; McGinnis 2010). This tribal concentration presented a high value target

for the cavalry commander, who risked tromping through the snow and shivering against the subzero wind-chill of the grasslands. After his initial success on the Southern Plains, Sheridan replicated this strategy during the Red River War against the remnants of the Comanche and Cheyenne still ranging on Texas's Llano Estacado (Haley 1976; Donovan 1972). Some claim that the general failure of the campaign against the Sioux during 1876 owes much to the inability of the Army to launch their various units into the Black Hills and the Northern Plains during the winter months, allowing the Sioux freedom of movement as they checked advances by the cavalry at the Powder River, Rosebud Creek, and the Little Bighorn River (Utley 1973, 248–252; Donovan 2008, 97–100; Hedren 2011, 41–58).

Developing concurrently with the concept of winter campaigning, the practice of converging columns took hold at the operational and strategic level. Commanders viewed the convergence of subordinate units from disparate locations into one designated region as the best way to trap hostile Indians and prevent their escape. Much as with the adoption of winter campaigning, commanders concerned themselves most with the Indians' speed and mobility (Jamieson 1994, 38–39). At the operational level, department commanders ordered regiments to focus their marches toward one point, attempting to chronologically manage their movements in order to generate a level of synchronicity. In practice, the vagaries of distance, weather, and terrain precluded any perfect coordination. More often than not, commanders allowed for flexibility in their orders that favored individual initiative among regimental and squadron commanders. During the Red River War, Sheridan favored "saturation" over perfection, believing that precision within his plan was less important than forcing constant contact with hostile bands and preventing their escape (Utley 1973, 232–233; Donovan 1972, 40; Hutton 1985, 248–251). Major General Alfred Terry envisioned the same operation during the Great Sioux War two years later. He intended for Custer's command, ordered to lighten their logistical load while operating as a fast and mobile strike force, to harry the Sioux and "steer" them into Major General John Gibbon's more heavily armed column somewhere along the Yellowstone River. The unraveling of his plan owed much to the Sioux's ability to soften Custer's hammer-blow, thus rupturing the sequence of events (Gray 1976, 142–147; Donovan 2008, 172–176).

The idea of converging columns also came to dominate tactical thinking during the 1870s, best exemplified by the cavalry attack on Indian villages. In the rare chance that a cavalry regiment caught a hostile tribe unaware, commanders ordered a multipronged attack in the hope of encircling the hostile village. Such tactical execution served several purposes. First, a cavalry charge into a village would hopefully flush out the warriors and prevent them from either finding a defensive position or from escaping to lead a counterattack. Commanders viewed cutting off Indians from their horses as

crucial and often ordered their lead elements, typically Indian scouts, to seize or stampede the herd. Indian warriors made far superior mounted warriors, and an honest commander realized that a concerted mounted Indian counterattack could unhinge portions of his unit. Second, it allowed cavalry troopers to seize women, children, and the elderly for use later as hostages. Many commanders saw the taking of hostages as a sure way to bring truculent Indians to the negotiating table or reservation. With tribes as extended family or clan networks and a chief's authority stemming from his support among the group, a seizure of members of the tribe represented a direct challenge to legitimacy. Finally, cavalry units used the charge on Indian villages as a means to destroy the Indians' logistical cache. The dislodged Indians found themselves beholden to reservations for food and supplies. Such a tactic, particularly during a winter campaign, had the potential to quickly end hostilities (Jamieson 1994, 48–51; Panzeri 1995, 30–31; Utley 1973, 150–152; Donovan 2008, 62–68; Philbrick 2010, 12; Hoig 1976; Carroll 1978; Chalfant 1997; Gwynne 2010, 276–283).

Finding an Indian village entailed finding Indians, and this proved to be the primary bedevilment of the cavalry during the Indian Wars. Indians proved adept at eluding the cumbersome formations. The Army gradually adapted by creating informal units of Indian auxiliaries. Charged by commanders to use their knowledge of local geography and customs to find elusive Indians, these units ranged far ahead of a regiment's main body. US military history includes numerous examples of the inclusion of friendly Indians in conventional formations (Calloway 1995, 85–107; Hall 2009; Dunlay 1982, 11–24). General Crook first popularized the practice during his early 1870s campaign against the Apaches, although he based his ideas on smaller campaigns elsewhere (Bourke 1891, 391–392; Utley 1973, 196–198). Crook remained the loudest advocate for full inclusion of Indian scouts with regular formations, claiming the use of scouts proved the key to success (Jamieson 1994, 41).

Not all commanders – or historians for that matter – held the same notions about Indian scouts. Some cavalry officers and troopers viewed all Indians as ethnically homogeneous, discounting the vagaries of region, tribe, and acculturation. A suspicion grew that Indian scouts might turn on the white cavalymen in the midst of a battle and join their Indian “brethren” in a race-based conflict. Only one example of such betrayal exists from the entire Indian Wars period, but for many this proved enough (Dunlay 1982, 59–68, 85). Wary officers ordered Indian scouts to range far ahead of a column until they had made visual contact with a hostile band's trail, village, or warriors. Collapsing back on the main body, Indian scouts were not expected to participate in the battle. Commanders commonly tasked the Indian scouts to seize or to stampede a village's horse herd, allowing them to keep any horses they managed to wrangle. Although Custer ordered his scouts to seize the Sioux horse herd early during the Battle of

the Little Bighorn, Indian auxiliaries found themselves pulled into the fighting at several locations. At the Battle of the Rosebud a week prior, Indian scouts posted in advance of Crook's column met a Sioux attack and formed the initial backbone of the defensive position (Dunlay 1982, 69–90; Davenport 1993, 27–28). Nevertheless, Indian auxiliaries have faced an uneven recounting among historians.

During the conduct of direct fire engagements with hostile Indian forces, cavalrymen typically fought dismounted. This may seem odd; horse and saddle define the cavalry as a distinct fighting force, replete with different conceptions of how they fight and the missions they conduct. One historian goes as far to claim that, "The Army did most of its Indian fighting on foot" (Jamieson 1994, 41). As discussed earlier, the cavalry increasingly fought dismounted as the Civil War progressed. Buford's 1863 reforms had emphasized the skirmish, or "vedette," line as the primary fighting formation of the cavalry. Although they sacrificed their mobility by dismounting, the advent of repeating and breech-loading carbines had greatly increased the cavalry trooper's individual firepower. In practice, platoon leaders organized their troopers into "fours," four-man fighting units. Each four would then designate a horse handler responsible for managing all four of the trooper's mounts upon dismounting, taking them to a position a short distance behind the skirmish line. All the horses would be tied into a buckle on the horse handler's saddle. In this manner, cavalrymen could maximize their fire forward, while still protecting their horses and maintaining some mobility in case of the need to advance or withdraw. This practice carried over from the Civil War period, as most of the significant battles of the Indian Wars entailed dismounted fighting by cavalry troopers (Utley 1973, 200–208; Riddle 2004, 99–119; Murray 1959, 82–134; Fox 1993, 45–46).

A general lack of training among most cavalry troopers precluded them from actually fighting mounted. During the post-bellum era, men from industrialized cities and foreign immigrants composed the bulk of cavalry recruits. Lacking a foundation in horsemanship, the new troopers could not expect to receive any training at the cavalry recruit depots nor from their gaining units. Most had to contend with a myriad of other tasks prior to horsemanship training. Many left for campaigns having little knowledge of how to ride a horse, let alone how to maneuver the animal in a fight or to fire accurately while mounted and at a gallop (Rickey 1963, 99–100; Utley 1973, 22–25; Coffman 1988, 336, 350–351). Dismounting and forming a skirmish line proved to be far easier to execute and manage for both untested soldiers and their leadership.

Beginning in the 1960s, historians portrayed the Army's tactics during the Indian Wars as a continuation of the "total war" doctrine from the Civil War. Sheridan, often at the focal point of Indian campaigning, apocryphally proclaimed, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," further ordering his men in 1867 "to destroy their [Cheyenne] villages and ponies; to kill or

hang all warriors" (Hutton 1985, 63). Winter campaigning and assaults on villages seemed to drive this lesson home. Historians tended to emphasize the harshness of the cavalry, burning villages and protecting buffalo hunters in an attempt to break the will of the hostile Indians by destroying their way of life (Utley 1973, 51; Gwynne 2010, 1–11; Weigley 1973, 153–163; Marshall 1972, 2–11). The influence of popular images of "pacification" operations from the Vietnam War, ongoing during the genesis of the "total war" school of thought, played an obvious role in the formation of these historical ideas (Slotkin 1995, 578–623).

Reflecting the changing schools of thought that followed the birth of the "new histories," some scholars characterized cavalry tactics as less destructive and more focused on negotiation and eventual assimilation. These historians often deemphasize the Civil War as a schism in the history of cavalry operations, instead pointing to the preponderance of frontier constabulary duties as the common element that runs through the nineteenth-century military experience (Hedren 2011, 21, 34–40; Wooster 1988, 2–5, 208–209; Anderson and Cayton 2005). In terms of Indian conflict, this new thematic portrayal recasts cavalry operations as less destructive in their own right but more as means to an end – the movement of Indians onto reservations. In this light, historians would see the Battle of the Washita less in terms of the destruction of Black Kettle's village or the assault on women, children, and the elderly while focusing more on Custer's desire to force the Cheyenne warriors to the negotiating table and to the reservation (Donovan 2008, 172–173; Wooster 2009, 215).

The differences between the "total war" and "reservation" schools of thought may appear as one of degrees rather than overall structure. What many may find striking about the two schools pertains to how scholars have extrapolated two very similar conceptions of cavalry operations into much larger views about the cavalry as a whole. As the "total war" view of the Indian Wars took hold during the 1960s and 1970s, scholarly and popular conceptions of the cavalry tended to portray them as racist sadists, lacking in general cultural sensitivities and driven by wanton bloodlust (Brown 2000; Anderson 2005, 345–361). Later interpretations of the cavalry from "reservation" scholars saw the cavalry in more of an intermediary position, forced to mediate between an encroaching Anglo frontier and an Indian population fighting to maintain a culture in their homelands. Elliott West's award-winning *The Last Indian War* about the Nez Perce conflict epitomizes this notion. West views the cavalry as enforcing a national policy of assimilation and that their struggle during the Nez Perce war entailed bringing Chief Joseph's people into what some hoped would become an increasingly homogeneous American polity (West 2009). The recent publication dates of books and studies from both schools provide ready proof that historians have yet to close the debate on the nature of cavalry tactics, operations, and policy during the Indian Wars.

## Weapons and Technology

Issues in equipment and technology, particularly weaponry, have persisted as one of the most contentious in Indian War historiography. Disagreements began as far back as Major Reno's Board of Inquiry following the 1876 Little Bighorn catastrophe, where he and others advanced claims of the Indians "out-gunning" them and cavalry troopers falling victim to shoddy weapons (Donovan 2008, 359–378; Utley 1972). Many historians jumped on this idea to help explain the destruction of the majority of Custer's vaunted 7th Cavalry as well as the cavalry's abysmal tactical record during the decade of the 1870s. Only within the last few decades have historians made a concerted effort to debunk or refine these ideas, often appealing to science and archaeology to help make their cases.

Following the Civil War, the Army possessed a plethora of weapons. The ready need for arms and the less than scrupulous handling of some munitions contracts meant that several types of weapons saw service up through 1865. For the next ten years, the War Department relied on surplus left over from the Civil War to provision the soldiers on the frontier, with equipment running the gamut from uniforms, ammunition, boots, saddles, canteens, pistols, and rifles. A mid-1870s observer of the cavalry would have seen a unit strikingly similar in appearance and accoutrement to a similar type of force from a decade earlier (Rickey 1963, 122–126; Utley 1973, 73–77).

That said, neither General Sherman nor the War Department believed that the war surplus would prove adequate to fight a future conflict with a foreign power. Revolutionary technologies increased the power and distance of weapons, not to mention the rapidity of reloading. Breech-loading conversions of Civil War weapons served only as a stop-gap for War Department administrators. Influenced by Upton's proposed reforms and notions of open formations and firepower, Sherman convened a formal board in 1872 to recommend the next generation of small arms. General Alfred Terry, later commander of the Department of the Dakotas and overall in charge of the Centennial Campaign, served as chair of the board. Major Marcus Reno, later besmirched survivor of the Little Bighorn battlefield, represented the cavalry branch (McChristian 1995, 104–114).

The board considered many weapons and weapon types, from experimental weapons to retooled versions of rifles, carbines, and pistols already in use. New technology aside, the board operated under some guiding notions. First, the War Department wanted to use a single round for all of its weapons, as opposed to the myriad of round sizes and grain weights currently in service. They also hoped to conserve ammunition. Most officers believed that soldiers fired wildly and inaccurately during combat, leading to an inefficient exhaustion of ammunition stores. Enlistment data presented to the board showed that uneducated industrial workers and

partially literate foreign immigrants composed the majority of the force. Commanders could not assume that new recruits possessed any experience with firearms. Finally, the transition to conflict on the western frontier necessitated a lengthy supply line. Moving large amounts of specialized parts over long distances in inhospitable terrain and weather to maintain the small arms of a widely scattered force daunted many on the board (US Ordnance Department 1874).

The board selected the 1872 model .45 caliber Springfield breech-loading rifle for the Army, designating the carbine version for the cavalry. The Springfield rifle brought simplicity and durability to the field. As a single-shot breech-loader, it appeared to address the board's concern with ammunition expenditure, while the .45/70 metallic centerfire round provided high muzzle velocity and added range. The Springfield rifle and the .45/70 round would receive numerous plaudits, Major General John Gibbon proclaiming it "a first rate rifle, and probably the best ever placed in the hands of troops" (Utley 1973, 70). The Springfield would remain as the Army's primary small arm until the eve of the Spanish-American War and the adoption of the Krag-Jorgensen rifle. Historians often view the adoption of the Springfield breech-loading rifle as a key step toward modernization (Utley 1973, 69; McChristian 1995, 115).

Nonetheless, observers did not line up to heap the same praise upon the 1872 Springfield carbine. One historian compared troopers fighting with it to "pugilists fighting with one hand" (Rosebush 1962, 71). Many officers during the 1870s believed that the Springfield carbine, a breech-loader, lacked the distance and the rapid fire of many of the repeating rifles and carbines manufactured at the same time, particularly the Winchester models of the 1870s. At Major Reno's inquest following the Little Bighorn fiasco, many officers attested to the perceived prevalence of Winchester repeating rifles among Sitting Bull's Sioux warriors. This became a common trope for many historians of the cavalry during the Indian Wars. If only the cavalry had possessed an adequate carbine, many posited, they could have prevailed in more actions. Historians perceived this technical inferiority at more than just the Little Bighorn, lauding the Nez Perce and their prowess with the rifle over the carbine during the Nez Perce War (Rosebush 1962, 72–77; Brown 2000, 191; Haines 2007, 75, 88, 143).

Rebutting this notion, the United States Military Academy commissioned a series of short films made during the 1990s that examined small arms throughout military history, eventually devoting an entire 45 minute film to discuss the debate over the Springfield carbine and the Winchester repeater at the Battle of Little Bighorn. The narrator pointed out that the Winchester repeater models of the early 1870s suffered from a poor design, the weapon's internal mechanisms preventing the adoption of a long and powerful round. The Winchester could reach out accurately to 120 yards

*at best*, with little force behind the round after approximately 80–100 yards. The Springfield carbine could maintain a steady rate of fire and deliver well-placed and effective rounds past 200 yards (US Military Academy 1996). The Academy's analysis considered archaeological evidence found in the 1980s and 1990s at the Little Bighorn. Surveys of the battlefield helped to discount the idea that every Sioux warrior fired a Winchester repeater during the battle. Searchers found evidence of 43 other types of small arms used at the battle, running the gamut from old muzzle-loading muskets to the historically much-ballyhooed Winchesters. They and others advanced the proposition that only about a third of all warriors possessed firearms of any kind, further evidence and first-person Indian accounts showing that the majority of the Sioux, particularly early in the battle, fought with bows and arrows instead of rifles (Viola 1998, 43, 57). Of those third, a fraction possessed repeaters. Historians still debate the exact number of warriors on the battlefield (and thus the amount of repeaters) but most concede that from 200 to 300 Henrys and Winchesters fired on Custer's cavalry (US Military Academy 1996; Scott & Fox 1983, 49–58; Scott et al. 1989, 102–120; Fox 1993, 237–243; Philbrick 2010, 266–267). While this number may seem striking, historians note the lack of range the Winchesters possessed as well as the lack of a regimented Indian marksmanship program. Custer's troopers would have most felt the impact of the repeaters at close range, the short distance limiting the impact of their carbines' rate of fire and accuracy (McChristian 1995, 115).

Several historians and other observers have advanced different notions relating to the Springfield carbine's perceived ineffectiveness. Following the battle, Reno and others blamed the carbine's propensity to jam. The copper .45/55 cartridges fired by the carbine had a propensity to corrode and misshape when exposed to the tannic acid within the leather "prairie belts" popular among troopers. Claiming that the standard issue bullet pouch damaged rounds, made too much noise, and would not carry enough cartridges, troopers began to fashion cartridge belts during the early 1870s that allowed ready access to approximately 50 rounds. If troopers did not wipe the rounds off each night, the corrosive material on the cartridges would swell upon firing and semi-weld to the inside of the carbine's barrel (Rosebush 1962, 70–72; Parsons & du Mont 1953, 15–16; Donovan 2008, 230; Rickey 1963, 291–292). Archaeological evidence has proven that such malfunctions did take place but not in cataclysmic numbers. "Extraction failure did occur," the archaeologists found, "but it was not significant to the outcome of the battle" (Scott et al. 1989, 115; also Scott & Fox 1983, 58–84; Fox 1993, 237–243). At the battles of the Rosebud and Big Hole, the Springfield carbines fired numerous rounds (up to 25,000 rounds at the Rosebud) with only one malfunction reported between the two (McChristian 1995, 114–115; Haines 2007, 36–37).

The presence of corroded cartridges may indicate a more fundamental problem in the 7th Cavalry: a lack of discipline and training. Several historians have pointed out that a large number of green recruits joined in the weeks preceding the regiment's departure for the Dakotas. During the decade of the 1870s, the Army lacked a recruit training program, banking on the notion that the gaining regiment or troop would familiarize the recruit with tactical and technical information. This rarely worked out in terms favorable for the new trooper (Donovan 2008, 135; Rickey 1963, 33–34, 86–87). The Military Academy's small arms analysis placed a significant portion of the blame on a perceived lack of discipline and preparedness within Custer's command (US Military Academy 1996). Moreover, several Indian accounts from the battle reported that many of the cavalry's shots went high, indicative of poor marksmanship training (Viola 1998, 38, 47). At the same time, ammunition expenditure during the battle appears to have been quite high. Numerous officers voiced concerns about the scarcity of ammunition. Such evidence not only speaks to the general lack of training among the cavalymen but also serves to validate some of the fears voiced by the Terry small arms board (Fox 1993, 260–275; Donovan 2008, 237, 250–253).

Cavalrymen and historians have generally agreed that the other small arm utilized by the cavalry, the Colt .45 caliber single action Army revolver known as the "Peacemaker," performed exceptionally well during the Indian Wars. The cavalry utilized several different models of Colts during the 1870s and 1880s, but contemporary observers almost uniformly found the weapon to be durable and easy to use. The Army stipulated during the testing phase of the Terry board that revolvers should have an optimal range of 25 yards and fire a .45 caliber cartridge, again hoping to standardize size across the force. The Colt Peacemaker met all of these requirements, firing a .45/25 centerfire round that provided more than adequate stopping power out to 25 yards. The Colt boasted fewer and sturdier internal parts than the Remington and Smith and Wesson revolvers it competed against, and the stopping power of the .45/25 round it fired helped to finalize its eventual selection (Virgines 1969, 29–36; Josserand & Stevenson 1968, 172–174; Parsons 1950, 17–27; Keith 1955, 27–28; Rosebush 1962, 71–72; McChristian 1995, 120–121).

While the Colt performed admirably well in combat against Indians, some questions concerning its utilization persist. Most accounts of the revolver's use indicate that troopers viewed it as a close range weapon, which was fired only while dismounted and when threats presented themselves in their immediate vicinity. Archaeological evidence from the Little Bighorn battlefield adds credence to this vision of the weapon's use, as surveyors found large amounts of spent .45/25 cartridges immediately among the dead on Last Stand Hill and at the site of Reno and Benteen's defense (Scott et al. 1989, 166–168). Troopers do not appear to have used

the Colt revolver mounted to counter Indian mobility, ironic when one considers that the genesis of the revolver lay in the demands of the Texas Rangers to find a weapon that allowed them to fight mounted against the Comanche during the 1830s (Webb 1931, 167–179; Moore 2006, 356; Moore 2007, 22–24; Keith 1955, 1–3). The post-bellum cavalry's tendency to fight dismounted upon contact mitigated the effectiveness of the Colt Peacemaker during the Indian Wars.

A product of the Civil War's advances in rapid firing weaponry, the Gatling gun maintained its place in Army stocks during the Indian Wars. While initially bored to fire a .50 caliber round, the model 1874 Gatling changed to meet the Army's new .45 caliber standard. The Gatlings could fire up to 350 rounds a minute, and many officers and planners initially foresaw their use on the Plains as a ready means to halt mounted Indian charges. Gatlings protected several fixed positions, particularly the scattered forts garrisoned by sparsely manned companies and troops. The development of a "cavalry cart" coincided with the production of the model 1874 Gatling, as developers hoped that a light, two-wheeled carriage might increase the weapon's mobility and allow its use in an offensive capacity. The gun saw limited offensive service in several small engagements during the Red River War and at Clearwater and Bear's Paw during the pursuance of the Nez Perce (Wahl & Topel 1965, 57–62, 80–82; Utley 1973, 223, 230, 303, 306; Greene 2000, 81–83). The controversies surrounding Custer's defeat include Gatling guns as well. The ill-fated colonel of cavalry turned down the offer to take three Gatling guns with him on his march. Several historians reviled Custer for this decision by claiming that the added firepower would have broken up the several Sioux and Cheyenne rushes that poured over Custer's lines (Rosebush 1962, 70–71; Wyckoff 1967, 52–55).

Truth be told, many officers during the Indian Wars did not like the Gatling gun and did not see it having a prominent place on the mobile battlefield. General Nelson Miles, although using them during the Nez Perce campaign, found Gatlings "worthless for Indian fighting ... the range is no longer than a rifle and the bullets so small that you cannot tell where they strike" (Utley 1973, 73). Gatlings suffered problems with headspace – the gap between the barrel unit and the firing mechanism. Due to the rotation of the barrels in the Gatling gun, maintaining a proper headspace proved critical. After firing for an extended period of time, the barrels and other mechanisms would expand, forcing the crews manning the gun to constantly check and adjust the weapon's headspace. If not, the Gatlings proved prone to jamming and fouling within the barrels. Headspace also tended to be thrown off by the bumping and jarring from traveling over the broken ground of the western frontier. The cavalry cart required two horses when traversing rough surfaces, and the cart carried over 3,500 rounds, making it heavy and cumbersome (Wahl & Topel 1965, 57, 77–87; Utley 1973,

72–73; Rickey 1963, 219). Custer, primed for speed and mobility as he sought the major Sioux encampment, most likely viewed the inclusion of the Gatlings as a hindrance (Rickey 1963, 219; Donovan 2008, 172–173; Philbrick 2010, 72–73, 99).

In terms of weaponry, the Indian Wars did resolve the status of the cavalry's defining weapon. The saber found no real place amid the myriad battles of the 1870s. "By the time a cavalryman was close enough to deliver a saber blow," one historian noted, "he was likely to be bristling with arrows and liberally punctured with Indian bullets" (Rickey 1963, 219). Most units viewed the saber as a drill field weapon, proper for inspections but not for campaigns. The records of the units participating in the Army's campaign of 1876 indicate that all of the squadrons boxed up their sabers after a final parade (McChristian 1995, 192; Philbrick 2010, 83; Utley 1973, 71). While the cavalry drill manual from 1892 still included individual and unit saber drills, the saber lost all tactical relevance during the Indian Wars (Jamieson 1994, 12–14).

## Conclusion

The cavalry force that entered the 1890s looked in many ways like the force that entered the 1880s. Having modernized their weaponry during the prior decade, the Army only sought minor updates to the Springfield rifle and Colt revolver. Uniforms underwent small revisions, the biggest change being the full adoption of the "prairie belt" to replace the cartridge box (McChristian 2007; US Ordnance Department 1885). Troopers still kept their sabers keen and polished for regular parade-ground drills at far-flung forts. The abysmally slow promotion system enforced by Congress ensured that many troops and regiments maintained the same personnel for long periods of time.

But in some ways, the decade of the 1880s ushered in some mammoth changes for the cavalry. Most significantly, the intense fighting had ended. The cavalry fully settled into constabulary duty during the 1880s. Reviewing the performance of the regiments during the Indian Wars, many officers noticed a yawning divide between expectations and reality when it came to preparedness and training. Slowly at first, then building momentum, officers began to start marksmanship and fitness training programs to better prepare soldiers for combat. For the cavalry, this also included more drill and horsemanship training at the recruit depot at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. Troopers also received a monthly allocation of ammunition for target practice along with classes on weapon and ammunition maintenance (Rickey 1963, 103–106; Jamieson 1994, 54–69).

If one new scholarly development could help to synthesize the field of tactical and technical cavalry history, training just may be it. Most authors

at least nod to the fact that troopers went into combat during the 1870s with little to no standardized training. However, few take it a step further to analyze the effects. Many historians have written about the demands of combat and how regimented training enforces discipline under fire, promotes *esprit de corps*, and molds efficiency into units. The debates surrounding technology and tactics would benefit from a thorough analysis of training and discipline in the Army.

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Part III

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THE MAKING OF GEORGE  
ARMSTRONG CUSTER



# Chapter Eleven

## A YOUNG GENERAL

*Mark Ehlers*

George Armstrong Custer's cavalymen desperately hugged the ground, seeking what cover they could find behind their dead mounts and small undulations in the earth. Above them, a hot June sun beat down unmercifully on the dusty, exhausted, smoke-begrimed troopers. The heat, however, was the least of their troubles. From all directions, their enemies probed forward on foot and on horseback seeking weak points in the steadily thinning blue line. Well-aimed carbine fire drove back these sorties repeatedly, but as ammunition began to grow scarce desperate troopers turned to scavenging unspent rounds from the dead and wounded near them. As the sun began its long descent into the west, the irate Custer began to wonder aloud where the devil his relief was. This scene, however, took place in 1864, not 1876. It was not Sioux warriors who were threatening to overrun the cavalry perimeter, but two Confederate cavalry divisions. The place where Custer's brigade of Michigan cavalymen made their stand was a clearing near Trevilian Station, Virginia, not a butte overlooking the Little Bighorn River in Montana. This battle would have a very different ending (US War Department 1880–1901, I/33/1: 820–825; Merington 1994, 103–105; Monaghan 1992, 53–68).

Custer's record during the Civil War was nothing short of remarkable. He entered the conflict as a second lieutenant fresh from West Point, spent several years doing exemplary staff work and was given command of a cavalry brigade just in time to take part in the battle of Gettysburg. Between Gettysburg and the end of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign he

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turned this brigade into one of the best units in the Union army. In September of 1864, the hard-charging Philip Sheridan elevated Custer to command of a cavalry division that he led with great success until the end of the war. Custer's men loved being part of an outfit that fought often and won almost as often. "Under him a man is ashamed to be cowardly," wrote one of Custer's subordinates. "Under him our men can achieve miracles" (Kidd 2000, 88).

This quote should give us pause. The wildly successful and beloved "boy general" of the Civil War seems to have very little to do with the arrogant and despised commander of the postwar 7th Cavalry. Unfortunately, this problem has led generations of authors to separate the Custer of the Civil War from the Custer of the Little Bighorn. Scholarship that focuses on the Little Bighorn tends to shove Custer's entire Civil War career into a short introductory chapter. Conversely, the few works that study Custer's Civil War career in depth invariably end at Appomattox. This essay, however, argues that understanding Custer's Civil War career is vital to understanding his post-Civil War career and suggests some new ways in which the two might be integrated.

### The Cadet

When the Civil War erupted on April 12, 1861, the 21-year-old Custer was nearing the end of his fourth year at West Point. Custer's time at the military academy was legendary among his classmates for all the wrong reasons. After the war, one of Custer's classmates remembered that the young cadet "had more fun, gave his friends more anxiety, walked more tours of extra guard, and came nearer to being dismissed more often than any other cadet I have ever known" (Hatch 2013, 12). Cadet Custer accumulated a staggering 726 demerits – reprimands for violations of military protocol – during his stint at the academy (Hatch 2013, 22). In his uncompleted memoirs, he noted frankly that, "my career as a cadet had but little to commend it to the study of those who came after me" (Custer 1992, 42). However, a close examination shows that Custer's infractions were those of the adolescent boy confined to a military monastery rather than major breaches of discipline. He threw snowballs, talked in formation, and wore unauthorized pieces of clothing. On one occasion, he hoodwinked his Spanish instructor into translating the phrase "class dismissed" and then proceeded to lead his fellow cadets out of the room. Though he was disciplined for visiting the forbidden local tavern of Benny Havens more than once, he probably did not drink more than most other cadets and eventually even swore off alcohol completely during the Civil War.

Interestingly enough, Custer's demerits apparently did not stem from any innate inability on his part. Indeed, he possessed the capacity to be a model cadet when the situation demanded it. Every year he would accumulate

demerits with abandon until he came close to reaching the 200 that would mandate his dismissal from the academy. Then, he could go for weeks without receiving a single one until the clock reset for the next 12-month period. He also excelled in subjects that interested him, particularly horsemanship and athletics. According to some sources he executed the highest horseback jump ever recorded at the academy. Despite (or perhaps because of) his dismal academic record, Custer's classmates loved him. "He was," wrote one cadet, "beyond a doubt the most popular man in his class" (Hatch 2013, 13).

Custer graduated last in his class of 34 in June 1861 – though he might have had a slightly higher ranking if most of the Southern cadets in his class had not left the academy as their home states seceded from the Union. Much to Custer's delight, the demand for trained officers to lead the masses of volunteers forming all over the North allowed his class to graduate an entire year early and ended the academy's experiment with a five-year academic curriculum. In spite of four years of West Point education, the new second lieutenant of cavalry probably knew just as little about Euclidian geometry leaving the Academy as he did when he entered, but his behavior at West Point demonstrated that he had learned how to lead men through the force of his personality. This quality is what the Army would need in abundance as sectional differences ripped the nation apart.

For the last 30 years, historians have debated the state of professionalism within the "old" Army. The oldest school of thought suggests that the Army did not become a truly professional organization until the very end of the nineteenth century, because the company-sized elements flung throughout the antebellum frontier did not allow units or officers to develop a true sense of professionalism (Coffman 1986). A new generation of historians, however, have turned the traditional argument on its head. They insist that the Army professionalized before the Civil War (though the date continues to fluctuate) precisely because life and service on isolated frontier posts created a unique sense of community that developed into a sense of professionalism (Skelton 1993; Watson 2013).

Looking at Custer through this lens might make for an interesting addendum to the historical conversation. Custer received a West Point education where he, at least in theory, received a dose of professional knowledge. Following this, however, he spent the first five years of his career in the massive armies of citizen soldiers created to fight the Civil War instead of out on the frontier. If isolation in the West bred professionalism, what effect did Civil War service have on young officers like Custer? Future researchers also need to remember that Custer spent the vast majority of his Civil War service with volunteer units and not regular army units. How did leading this type of organization alter Custer's sense of professionalism? Answers to these questions would go a long way in helping us understand what happened to the young officer when he did start leading components of the regular Army on the frontier.

Whatever the state of his professionalism, Second Lieutenant Custer's military career was almost stillborn. As Officer of the Guard in his last official duty at West Point, he failed to break up a fight between two cadets. Another officer who happened on the scene put Custer under arrest and proffered charges. Luckily for Custer, the War Department desperately needed trained officers and after a brief court martial, Custer was exonerated.

### First Assignments

Early on the morning of July 20, 1861, Custer reported to Washington, DC for orders and was introduced to the venerable General of the Army, Winfield Scott. Scott asked the new second lieutenant whether he preferred a job that promised military action or whether he would prefer to drill new recruits around the capital. Though Custer claimed he was so star-struck by Scott that he stammered his response, it is hard to imagine that Custer had any doubt about immediately requesting the field assignment. The commanding general heartily approved of Custer's desire to get into the war and had orders drawn up that assigned Custer to Company G, Second Cavalry. Custer reported to his unit early the next morning after delivering dispatches from General Scott to Irvin McDowell, the field commander of the Union army poised to attack Confederates arrayed along Bull Run, 30 miles south of Washington (Hatch 2013, 27–29; Custer 1992, 47–50).

Later that day, McDowell's army attacked and was repulsed. Constrained by their orders, Custer and the other members of Company G could do nothing as they watched the repulse quickly disintegrate into a rout. Late in the day, Company G received instructions to help cover the retreat of the army. The exhausted Custer kept his troopers in good order throughout the night of July 21, and skillfully screened the path of the demoralized Union soldiers as they made their way back to Washington. In a beaten army desperately seeking good news, Custer's competence on that rainy night earned him a commendation for bravery (Urwin 1983, 44–46; Hatch 2013, 33–35).

As a response to the Bull Run fiasco, President Abraham Lincoln relieved the genial but hapless Irvin McDowell and gave the promising Major General George B. McClellan the task of turning the army of amateurs surrounding Washington into something that could best its Confederate opponents. As a West Point officer who had experience with the sort of bureaucracy that would be necessary for this transformation, Custer was removed from his company and placed on the staff of the colorful and ostentatious Brigadier General Phillip Kearny. According to Custer, he found the change "both agreeable and beneficial" (Urwin 1983, 46). He remembered Kearny as an extremely strict disciplinarian, but also as an officer who was "never so contented and happy as when moving to the attack." Kearny, according to his aide, "was always to be found where the

danger was thickest” (Urwin 1983, 46). Kearny’s inexhaustible energy, flamboyance, aggressiveness – and perhaps some of his less desirable traits – made a permanent impression on his young staff officer.

In the spring of 1862, McClellan opened a new campaign season by loading his newly trained and organized Army of the Potomac onto transport ships and moving them to Fort Monroe on the tip of the Virginia Peninsula. Custer eagerly sought military action wherever he could, as the massive Union army lethargically maneuvered northwest toward the Confederate capital of Richmond. On multiple occasions he volunteered for the dangerous job of going aloft in an observation balloon to sketch enemy positions. As an unofficial aide to Brigadier General Winfield Scott Hancock, Custer found himself under fire at Williamsburg on May 5. Custer led a counterattack that broke through the rebel lines and personally captured an officer, five men, and a battle flag (allegedly the first ever captured by the Army of the Potomac). These were the type of exploits that brought young officers to the attention of important men, and on June 5 the nondescript second lieutenant who barely graduated from West Point was asked to join the august staff of General McClellan himself (Urwin 1983, 47; Hatch 2013, 51–63).

Custer was overjoyed with the new appointment, which came with the honorary rank of captain. Only a few months before, he had written to his parents, “I have more confidence in General McClellan than in any man living” (Merington 1994, 29). The respect was, in some ways, mutual. McClellan found Custer an exceptional aide: resourceful, brave to the point of recklessness, possessing boundless energy and fiercely loyal. “I became much attached to him,” McClellan remembered after the war, “his head was always clear in danger” (McClellan 1887, 365). It probably also helped that Custer – like McClellan – was an outspoken Democrat in a war run by a Republican administration. Unfortunately for both men, McClellan’s tenure as army commander did not last long. After failing to capture Richmond and then proving unable to achieve a decisive victory over the Army of Northern Virginia at the battle of Antietam, President Lincoln relieved McClellan in the fall of 1862. Without an army, McClellan had no need of a staff. A disgusted Custer helped his beloved commander complete his final reports and then went home to Michigan to await new orders (Hatch 2013, 77–79; Urwin 1992, 10–11).

The spring of 1863 brought Custer an appointment to the staff of Alfred Pleasanton, a division commander in the newly formed Cavalry Corps. Prior to this reorganization, Union cavalry units had been parceled out amongst the infantry brigades, which limited their effectiveness greatly. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the martinet Pleasanton put absolute trust in his eager new aide. Custer responded to this with actions that regularly blurred the lines between commander and subordinate. The division’s brigade commanders quickly came to realize that if Lieutenant Custer gave

an order, it was to be obeyed as if given by Pleasanton himself (Urwin 1983, 50–51). As on the Peninsula, Custer cheerfully sought out any dangerous assignments that could be had. In March he led a daring amphibious raid across the Rappahannock River that netted a dozen prisoners, destroyed several rebel vessels, and attracted the attention of the new commander of the Army of the Potomac, Major General Joseph Hooker. Pleasanton's promotion to command of the entire Cavalry Corps in late May brought even further opportunities for his aide (once again a captain) to distinguish himself as a combat leader. On June 9, Custer led the attack that opened the battle of Brandy Station: a massive cavalry engagement which demonstrated the increasing confidence of the Union's mounted troopers (Urwin 1983, 53; Longacre 2000, 146–161). A week later at a spirited skirmish near Aldie, Custer led a saber charge that carried him into Confederate lines and was only able to escape by hacking his way through three assailants – a feat that was well publicized in Northern newspapers (Urwin 1992, 14–15).

While Custer was busy leading saber charges, Pleasanton focused his own attention on two other fronts. First, he worked to transform his much maligned Cavalry Corps into an effective unit that could trade blows with their Confederate counterparts. Second, he acted aggressively to protect his own career. Joe Hooker's replacement by Major General George Meade in late June gave Pleasanton an opportunity to attack on both fronts. Pleasanton immediately met with his new commander and quickly received permission to reorganize the officer corps as he saw fit. As a gifted political schemer, Pleasanton realized that placing young, aggressive officers in leadership positions would provide two benefits. It would put new fight into his units, as their ambitious commanders vied against one another for military glory. Moreover, it would establish a group of officers who owed their advancement entirely to his favor. Pleasanton already had names in mind when his recommendation was approved. Less than 12 hours after Meade took command of the Army of the Potomac, a flabbergasted Custer found that he had been made a Brigadier General and would take command of a newly organized brigade of cavalry (Urwin 1992, 14–15; Longacre 2000, 147–150, 174–175).

### Brigade Command

Custer's rise to brigade command is worth further examination, for it could tell historians much about the politics of command in the Union Army. Ironically, Custer's new brigade included the Seventh Michigan Cavalry, which Custer had sought command of only a few months before. Sometime in the early spring of 1863 Custer discovered that his home state of Michigan was raising a new mounted regiment. Frustrated at being little more than a glorified messenger-boy, Custer wrote to Governor Austin Blair applying

for command of the regiment. On paper, Custer had impressive qualifications. In addition to his West Point training, he had spent time on the staffs of numerous generals, and, of course, had plenty of combat experience in the cavalry. Custer, however, was a Democrat, and Blair was a Republican. To make matters worse, Custer was known to be an admirer of his former commander George McClellan. The disgraced McClellan had become an even more outspoken critic of Lincoln's war policies since his removal from command and was seen by politicians as the likely Democrat nominee for the 1864 presidential run. In Blair's eyes, it would not do to have a "McClellan man" in an important position of command. With these political concerns in mind, Blair tactfully but curtly rebuffed Custer's application (Urwin 1983, 51; Urwin 1992, 14; Hatch 2013, 103–104).

This rejection was not the first time Custer had run into politics within the Army, and it certainly would not be the last. To this day, for example, historians cannot explain how Custer managed to finagle an appointment to West Point from a Republican congressman in a district where his father was a vocal Democrat (Hatch 2013, 6–7). In late 1863, Republican congressmen called Custer's politics into question by accusing him of being an anti-war Democrat and opposing his official confirmation as a brigadier general. With his rank in jeopardy, an embarrassed Custer called in favors from political friends and submitted written testimony in which he professed unvarnished loyalty to Republican war policies (Hatch 2013, 216–218). Politics was a game that Custer embraced over time. For example, in 1864 while being considered for a promotion to major general (an appointment which was eventually accepted by Congress), he wrote a letter praising President Lincoln that just happened to find its way into the newspapers. At virtually the same time, Custer allowed a Democrat campaign official to canvass his brigade for potential votes (Urwin 1983, 19).

A more extensive study of Custer's troubles as a Democrat fighting a Republican war might be a useful lens in which to explore civil–military relations during the Civil War. Traditional political history has fallen out of favor in the last few decades, but understanding how Army politics intertwined with conventional politics could provide interesting insights on how the two major parties functioned within a single political system. In addition, Custer's story would almost certainly complicate the simplistic dichotomy historians continue to draw between generals who received commands for their political clout and regular Army generals who received West Point training. As Custer discovered quickly, all Civil War generals were, in some form, political generals. Further investigation into Custer's politics might also present some interesting and vital connections with Custer's later career. Did the political skills that Custer acquired during the war help him in the postwar Army? If his overt support of Andrew Johnson's famous "swing around the circle" to encourage states to vote against ratification of the fourteenth amendment in 1866 is any indication, the answer would

seem to be no. Did Custer change, or did a changing situation cause him to fail to adapt? Either way, answering that question could tell us much about civil–military relations during the Civil War.

The brigade Custer took command of on June 29, 1863, was officially titled the Second Brigade of the Third Cavalry Division. Outside of official channels, however, the First, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Michigan Cavalry regiments were known collectively as the Wolverine Brigade or the Michigan Brigade. To go with his new assignment, Custer pieced together a new uniform of black velveteen with elaborate gold braids and a double row of gilt buttons. This dark coat accented his long blond hair, which was already becoming famous in many Army circles. Under the blouse Custer wore a bright blue navy shirt trimmed in white, and the shirt's wide collar lay over the jacket. He topped it off with a bright red cravat around his neck. This foppish ensemble was designed to make Custer a marked man – to both the enemy and his own men. The youngest general in the Union Army wanted his subordinates to see that he was in the forefront of every charge and to know that he would not ask them to go anywhere that he would not lead them (Hatch 1983, 57–58).

Custer knew he had to make a statement quickly to his brigade, because the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia was already prowling through the Pennsylvania countryside on its second invasion of the north. On July 1, 1863, advance elements of the contending armies stumbled into each other at a quiet crossroads town named Gettysburg. For two days the largest battle ever fought in North America raged fiercely but inconclusively on the hills and ridges surrounding the town. After testing the flanks of the Union line on July 2, Robert E. Lee planned to break through the center on the following day. Part of the plan required J. E. B. Stuart's Confederate cavalry to skirt around the Army of the Potomac's right and slice through the Union rear echelon just as George Pickett's infantry attack culminated on Cemetery Ridge. On the morning of July 3, the 2,344 men of the Michigan brigade moved to the Union right flank to relieve the tired cavalry division of David Gregg. Shortly after taking up their position, scouting parties discovered Stuart's brigades moving in their direction. With Gregg's division exhausted and unprepared for a tough fight, Custer and his Michiganders prepared to hold off Stuart's 6,000 veterans (Urwin 1992, 15–16; Urwin 1983, 63–82; Hatch 2013, 125–154).

Confederate artillery opened the battle around noon. For two hours the two cavalry forces lunged and parried with skirmishers as the rebels looked for a weak point in Custer's lines. Around 4:00 p.m., the Confederate cavalry massed for a final attack. With most of his brigade spent and disorganized from hours of skirmishing, Custer called on his last reserves: the First Michigan regiment. Riding to the head of the unit so that his men could see that their commander would lead them personally, Custer gestured dramatically with his saber. He bellowed, "Come on you Wolverines!"

and took off toward the enemy at a gallop. With a whoop, the First Michigan followed him into the fray. The bluecoats were heavily outnumbered, but the sheer impact of the charge stopped the Confederate advance. As remnants of other Union cavalry outfits converged on the melee, Stuart's vaunted horsemen broke for the rear. The two sides continued to spar warily until dusk, but Custer's men had held their ground and won their first fight against the cream of the Confederate army (Kidd 2000, 48–50; Urwin 1992, 15–16; Urwin 1983, 63–82; Hatch 2013, 125–154).

Custer's men were justifiably proud of their victory against the previously unbeatable rebel cavalry, but they had little time to rest over the next few months. As Lee withdrew his army from Pennsylvania, the Army of the Potomac's cavalry kept busy harassing the retreating rebels. Custer made sure that the Michigan Brigade was kept in the thick of things. At the battle of Falling Waters, their mounted cavalry charge overran the entrenched Confederate rear guard to capture 1,500 prisoners and three battle flags. As usual, Custer led from the front. Shortly after the battle one of Custer's soldiers told his friends at home that he watched his commander "plunge his saber into the belly of a rebel who was trying to kill him." He then thoughtfully added, "you can guess how bravely soldiers fight for such a general." As Meade and Lee jockeyed for position through the fall of 1863, Custer and his brigade added to their laurels at the battle of Culpeper Courthouse, where they captured several Confederate artillery pieces. The brigade's engagements, however, were not all successes. On October 10, the Wolverines' division commander – a grandstanding incompetent named Judson Kilpatrick – led the brigade into a well-planned Confederate ambush near the old battlefield at Brandy Station. Only quick thinking and decisive personal leadership by Custer allowed his brigade to escape disaster. With the exception of some minor skirmishing, this near catastrophe brought the 1863 campaign season to a close. As Custer's Wolverines settled into their winter camps around Stevensburg, Virginia, they had much to celebrate. They had proved to be an extremely effective unit and though they had seen some tough scrapes, they had not yet suffered a true defeat. The war, however, was far from over (US War Department 1880–1901, I/27/1: 997–1001; Hatch 2013, 155–207; Urwin 1983, 85–113).

Virtually every member of the Michigan Brigade credited their success on the battlefield to their young commander. Despite his draconian post-war reputation, Custer excelled at leading men during the Civil War. This curious paradox presents an intriguing avenue of inquiry for the intrepid researcher. Historians have devoted surprisingly little ink to explaining tactical leadership. While some very good historians have done much to explain the set of values that internally motivated Civil War soldiers, no one has given much thought to the idea of external motivation (McPherson 1998; Linderman 1989). Custer clearly spent an inordinate amount of time and energy developing his leadership style. His outlandish uniform was one

aspect. As noted before, after some initial guffaws, the Michiganders realized that this uniform was not simple braggadocio – it was a very tangible way to show his subordinates that Custer would be at the front of every charge. By the end of 1863, the entire brigade was wearing red cravats in emulation of their commander. To further mark his place at the front of the battle line, Custer developed his own flag – a red-over-blue swallow-tailed guidon with crossed sabers. Custer also took the time to form a brigade band that was always on hand to buoy the men's spirits, even in battle. "Yankee Doodle" became the brigade's favorite tune. When the band struck up the ditty, the men of the Michigan brigade knew that the next order they received would be "Draw Sabers!" (Urwin 1983, 94–95).

Based on the documents that have survived, Custer also adopted less visible ways of leadership. Unlike many West Point trained officers, Custer minimized the gulf between himself and his enlisted men. He spent time personally out on the picket line with his men and even assisted in the building of breastworks. One newspaper noted that, "Among his own men Custer is idolized," not only because of the courage and skill he displayed in battle, but also because of his "care and regard for the lives of his men" (Urwin 1983, 36). Custer made sure that his troopers received their share of Medals of Honor – the only national award for valor during the Civil War – though he himself never received one. Because the Medal of Honor was so commonplace, Custer had a special medal struck by Tiffany and Company, which was issued only by his direction for feats of conspicuous valor. By all accounts the men who earned their "Custer Medal" wore it with pride as a badge that testified to their special role in saving the Union (Kidd 2000, 125; Urwin 1983, 282–284).

Custer was idolized by the men he commanded during the Civil War, and under his watch they achieved a near uninterrupted string of victories. Yet, we still have no systematic study that explains why, or puts the record into the larger context of tactical leadership. Even more surprising is that historians have so far failed to explain how this brilliant leader became so despised later. Perhaps his leadership style changed. If so, how, and more importantly, why? Alternatively, perhaps the type of men he led changed, and Custer proved unable to adapt his leadership techniques to fit the postwar Army adequately. Either way, this fascinating story deserves to be told.

The Michigan Brigade's war started again in the spring of 1864 with the opening of the Overland Campaign. During the winter months the Union command had been shuffled once more. George Meade still headed the Army of the Potomac, but he did so under the close supervision of the new general of the armies, General Ulysses S. Grant. Grant had brought several of his trusted subordinates with him when he moved to the eastern theater of operations. Two in particular affected Custer. The first was Brigadier General James Wilson, who replaced the incompetent Kilpatrick as the Third Cavalry Division commander. As Kilpatrick's senior brigadier and as

an officer whose rank dated Wilson's by four months, the ambitious Custer bristled at being passed over for division command. To avoid problems, the entire Michigan Brigade was transferred to the First Cavalry Division. The other new face in the Cavalry Corps was its commander. Custer's patron Pleasanton was replaced by Major General Philip Sheridan. Despite his fondness for Pleasanton, Custer quickly learned to like the new cavalry chief. Sheridan was a no-nonsense, hard-charging officer, who wanted to make the Cavalry Corps into a potent force that could undertake offensive operations independently of Meade's infantry. The eager Custer knew that using the cavalry this way would unquestionably offer him and his brigade plenty of opportunities to get back into combat (Longacre 2000, 246–252; Urwin 1983, 125–135).

He did not have to wait long. In early May, Sheridan detached his Cavalry Corps from the rest of the Army of the Potomac and moved south looking to bring Stuart to battle. On May 11 Sheridan succeeded at a crossroads village called Yellow Tavern. In the ensuing battle, Custer and his Wolverines took advantage of a weak point in the Confederate lines and captured several artillery pieces in yet another expertly conducted saber charge. As Stuart threw in reinforcements to seal the break in his lines, Custer conducted a fighting withdrawal. In the confusion, one of Custer's men took aim at a large Confederate officer directing the action and succeeded in mortally wounding Stuart himself. His point well made, Sheridan turned his corps southeast to rendezvous with Union troops in the Army of the James. Unfortunately, but undoubtedly to Custer's great pleasure, the hapless General Wilson lost his way and led the column straight into the Richmond defenses. Sheridan called on Custer to extricate Wilson from this mess. The Michigan Brigade pounded forward and succeeded in cutting open an escape route for their old division. By the end of the expedition Sheridan was referring to Custer as the "ablest man in the Cavalry Corps" (Urwin 1992, 20–21; Sheridan 1888, 1: 372–412).

While the two cavalry corps traded blows outside Richmond, the infantry of the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia had been trading even heavier blows during battles at Spotsylvania Courthouse and Cold Harbor. Unable to achieve a breakthrough, Grant decided to send his cavalry northwest in an attempt to cut the rail lines that connected the Confederate army to the fertile Shenandoah Valley. Sheridan and two of his cavalry divisions rode west toward Charlottesville and encountered Confederate cavalry sent to intercept them at Trevilian Station on June 10, 1864. Both sides intended to attack on the following day, but Sheridan got his troopers moving first. Custer's Wolverines were detached from the rest of their division and sent looking for the Confederate flank. By mid-morning Custer found that he had worked his way into the Confederate rear. His brigade immediately pounced on the undefended rebel wagon trains and captured virtually all of them (Sheridan 1888, 1: 413–436).

What Custer did not know was that a second Confederate cavalry division was still on the march west and approaching the battlefield just as the Wolverines seized their prizes. When it became clear that his brigade was about to be surrounded by two Confederate divisions, Custer pulled his troopers back into a tight circle to await the rest of the Union cavalry, which was supposed to be pushing south toward his position. The next few hours were probably the toughest that the Wolverines experienced during the war. Repeated Confederate attacks were beaten off. Casualties mounted. Time and again, rebels overran cannons from the single battery of artillery that the brigade had with them, but each time Custer himself led out sorties to retake the guns. Custer seemed to be everywhere at once: placing the artillery, plugging holes in the line, making adjustments to positions. At one point he sustained a minor wound from a spent round as he carried a severely wounded trooper to safety. Another time he had to save the guidon after his color bearer was killed beside him. After what must have seemed like an eternity, the rest of the Union cavalry broke through and linked up with the bloodied Wolverines. They had held on, but only just. It was the closest thing to a defeat that they would experience during the war (US War Department 1880–1901, I/33/1: 820–825; Merington 1994, 103–105; Monaghan 1992, 53–68).

### Division Command

By the summer of 1864, Grant had the Army of Northern Virginia penned up in entrenchments around Petersburg and Richmond. As long as they continued to receive supplies from the Shenandoah Valley, they could hold out indefinitely. To alleviate this problem, Grant sent Sheridan with an independent force to clear out the valley of both Confederates and anything that could be used to supply Lee's army. The Michigan Brigade participated in this expedition. Custer performed brilliantly. At the battle of Winchester on September 19, Custer and 500 of his troopers overran an entrenched infantry line of triple their number, captured half of them, turned the Confederate flank, and caused the rebels to abandon the battlefield in confusion. So complete was the defeat that the Confederates abandoned the entire northern half of the valley. Eleven days later, Sheridan fired the glaringly incompetent Wilson and placed Custer in command of the Third Cavalry Division. It was a bittersweet moment for both Custer and his Wolverines. Custer had certainly earned his promotion, but it did mean leaving the men of the Michigan Brigade behind. The brigade, in fact, petitioned to be reassigned into Custer's division to no avail. Whatever mixed feelings Custer or his Michiganders had, however, there were still Confederates lingering in the valley as summer turned into fall (Sheridan 1888, 2: 26–27; Urwin 1983, 178–188; Hatch 2013, 275–278).

Custer's first assignment as commander of the Third Division was anything but the grand Napoleonic charges that the romantic general imagined. Sheridan had orders to clean out the valley, and cavalry with their superior mobility were ideal for this task. Custer and the rest of the cavalry in the valley army moved in a wide swath north from Harrisonburg to Strasburg, seizing crops, animals, and burning any supplies they could not carry with them. By early October, the Confederates had recovered enough from their drubbing at Winchester to take another shot at the Yankees as they methodically burned their way north. When Confederate cavalry started nipping at his army's heels, Sheridan ordered his own horsemen to take care of the problem. At the battle of Tom's Brook, Custer faced off against Confederate troopers under the command of his old West Point friend Tom Rosser – a fact that Custer acknowledged by riding out in front of his lines and bowing gracefully to his opponent before opening the battle. Over the next hour, Custer's troopers splashed across Tom's Brook to assault the Confederate earthworks. A combination of mounted charges and superior firepower compelled the rebels to abandon their positions so quickly that the cavalry began to refer to this victory as "the Woodstock Races" (Sheridan 1888, 2: 57–58; Urwin 1983, 190–202).

The Confederates had enough fight in them for one last attempt at wresting back control of the Shenandoah Valley. On October 19, they surprised entrenched Union infantry at the battle of Cedar Creek and drove them back several miles. Later in the day, Sheridan regained control of the situation and set his forces forward in a massive counterattack. The *coup de grâce* was dealt by Custer's Third Division, which exploited a gap that opened on the Confederate left. The sight of 2,000 saber-swinging troopers crashing through their flank was enough to cause the entire butternut line to collapse and break for the rear. Custer's division pursued the fleeing rebels for five miles, capturing hundreds of prisoners, dozens of wagons, and 45 pieces of artillery. Also captured were ten Confederate battle flags. As the officer that Sheridan thought most responsible for the victory, Custer was sent to deliver those flags to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton in Washington, DC. In a brief ceremony on October 23, the enlisted men Custer brought with him to carry the flags were awarded medals, and then amid cheers and tears Stanton himself appointed their commander to the rank of Major General (Urwin 1983, 205–219).

With Federal control of the Shenandoah Valley ensured, Sheridan's troops went into winter quarters. The army broke camp in late February 1865 with orders to rejoin the Army of the Potomac around Petersburg. They marched south in miserable weather with Custer's Third Division in the lead and encountered Confederates entrenched on a commanding ridge outside Waynesboro. Waynesboro protected the passes through the Blue Ridge out of the Shenandoah Valley. Custer quickly sized up the situation and laid a trap. He dismounted one of his brigades and snuck it around the

unguarded Confederate left flank, while his other two mounted brigades struck the Confederate front. The trap worked perfectly, and the division snapped up 1,600 prisoners, 17 battle flags, 200 wagons, and 11 pieces of artillery. The way east to Petersburg was clear, and the end of the war was finally in sight (Sheridan 1888, 2: 112–115; Lloyd 1992).

It took Sheridan's columns almost three weeks to reach Grant at Petersburg. When they did, there was still more fighting to be done. Sheridan's first task was to seize the vital crossroads of Five Forks southwest of Petersburg. Lee got wind of the movement, however, and sent a force out to contest Sheridan's corps. On the afternoon of March 29, rebels surprised Sheridan's lead divisions and pushed them back. Custer's cavalry (in the unusual role of guarding the corps baggage) was called up to stem the Confederate advance, which they did just in time. Never one to be denied, Sheridan sent his men forward the next day in a general attack. In a hard fought battle both mounted and on foot, Custer's cavalry troopers gamely fought their way forward through breastworks and thick woods. It was not until late in the afternoon that a belated flanking movement by Sheridan's infantry finally broke the back of Confederate resistance. Taking Five Forks made the Richmond–Petersburg line untenable for the Army of Northern Virginia. Lee abandoned his entrenchments and attempted to retreat west toward the remains of the Confederate armies in North Carolina. The end was near (Sheridan 1888, 2: 148–167; Urwin 1983, 235–242).

It might surprise most readers that historians still debate exactly how cavalry fought during the last days of the Civil War. Napoleon had used cavalry as shock troops to break through the wavering enemy infantry line using a saber charge at the decisive point of the battle. When explaining why such tactics did not continue into the Civil War, historians usually suggest that the extended range of the rifled musket robbed the cavalry of the offensive striking power it carried on earlier battlefields. According to this version of events, the new rifled technology relegated cavalry to the role of reconnaissance. What combat power the cavalry still possessed was in its ability to move quickly around the battlefield and then deploy as infantry for defensive operations using their breech-loading carbines and, increasingly, repeating weapons (McWhiney & Jamieson 1982; Mahon 1961). More recently, however, other historians have suggested that it was not extended range of the rifle or repeating weapons technology that led to the new uses of cavalry, but rather it was leadership and organizational failures. These historians suggest that Civil War cavalry could not make their traditional Napoleonic saber charges, because they had neither the numbers nor the training to conduct such maneuvers (Starr 1979–1985).

A detailed tactical examination of Custer's battlefield operations during the Civil War would almost certainly complicate both of these positions. Custer, after all, was able to make mounted saber charges work against infantry repeatedly during his career. The battle of Winchester and the final phases

of the Cedar Creek battle in particular seem to show that a Napoleonic saber charge was perfectly possible during the Civil War if executed properly. This in itself seems to call into question the entire nature of this debate. However, it is also worth considering that Custer was perfectly capable of fighting his cavalry dismounted in a decidedly un-Napoleonic fashion. When he did so, he used the superior firepower of his troopers to overwhelm his enemies. Indeed, Custer was arguably at his best when he used his dismounted and mounted troopers in tandem, as he did at Waynesboro. To be even more useful, a tactical study should link Custer's Civil War career to his later career. Why was Custer so able to adapt so quickly and successfully to the tactics of the Civil War but seemingly unable to do the same during the Indian Wars? Was it simply the nature of the enemy? Was it the nature of the soldiers he led and the weapons they used? Was it something that changed about Custer himself?

Tactics aside, pursuing a broken enemy has traditionally been the perfect job for mounted soldiers. Unsure of Lee's exact intentions, Grant sent his cavalry divisions out to dog the retreating Confederates and slow them up long enough for the infantry to catch up and finish the job. Lee successfully avoided contact with the cavalry for several days, though hundreds of disheartened and exhausted rebels turned themselves in to Custer's troopers daily. On April 6, a mix-up in Confederate orders allowed Custer's division to play a large role in gobbling up almost a third of the rebel army at the battle of Saylor's Creek. Custer kept his men going at a rapid pace, and as the worn-out troopers stopped for the night on the evening of April 8, they finally got the break they needed. Informed by a deserter that trains laden with supplies for the Army of Northern Virginia were waiting at Appomattox Station, Custer put his division back in the saddle and continued the march. A few hours later they swooped down on the trains capturing all of the supplies and, more importantly, cutting off Lee's line of retreat to the west – at least temporarily. Pushing back northeast toward Appomattox Court House where he found Lee's main body, Custer placed his brigades to contest any westward movement by the Confederates and waited for infantry support. At daybreak on April 9, hungry and weary Confederate foot soldiers pressed forward to test Custer's lines, but as they did, infantrymen from the Army of the Potomac arrived to relieve the thin cavalry screen. Lee was trapped. By the end of the day, it was all over. The Army of Northern Virginia had surrendered (Urwin 1983, 244–260; Hatch 2013, 295–308).

## Conclusion

For Custer, the fighting was over, but the work was not. Less than three months after Lee's surrender, Custer was in the Red River region of west Louisiana. Custer's post-Appomattox Civil War career could be another

line of inquiry for the intrepid researcher. Virtually nothing has been written on this subject, since nearly all work on Custer's Civil War career ends at the high point of Appomattox, and those studies that focus on his Indian Wars exploits usually pick up with Custer's return to the regular army in 1866. Nevertheless, Custer's time in Louisiana and Texas might very well be the key to understanding how and why the beloved "boy general" became the maligned commander in the American West. It also would provide some fascinating insight into how officers raised in an army at war transitioned to the duties of an army at peace.

The basic facts are these: Custer headed a cavalry division made up of men who had spent the war serving in the western theater. Officially, they were on station in Texas to round up wayward Confederates who had not yet surrendered, but in actuality, they were there to keep a watchful eye on the French puppet government in Mexico. The mid westerners in Custer's division had fought long and well, yet with no rebels to fight, they wanted to go home. It was mundane and unpleasant work. Morale was hard to maintain and discipline was difficult to enforce. Custer, who was used to commanding men who enthusiastically supported his orders without question, was flummoxed and reacted harshly to any resistance to his authority. For minor infractions the perpetrator could expect to have his head shaved or to receive 25 lashes. Those who refused orders could expect the firing squad (Utley 1988, 36–38).

Custer's measures did little to endear himself to his troopers. One of them wrote that Custer "had no sympathy in common with the private soldiers, but regarded them simply as machines created for the special purpose of obeying his imperial will." The difference between this trooper and the sentiments of troopers from the Michigan Brigade could not be starker. Custer never did manage to solve the vexing problem of leading volunteers in peacetime, but in the end, it did not matter. In early 1866, Congress disbanded the volunteer army formed to fight the Civil War. On February 1, Major General George Custer, US Volunteers, reverted to Captain George Custer, Fifth Cavalry. With that, Custer's moment of achievement with the Civil War army ended (Utley 1988, 36–38).

Arguably historians have spilt more ink over Custer than any other officer in American history. We have excellent military narratives of Custer's Indian War service. We have thousands of pages debating fault for the Battle of the Little Bighorn. We even have several very good narratives of Custer's Civil War service – in particular Gregory Urwin's *Custer Victorious* and Thom Hatch's *Glorious War*. These last two have done excellent work in rehabilitating the reputation of the Civil War Custer. What we need now are works that link the Civil War and the Indian War Custer, which connect him to the larger historical questions raised in this essay. Ultimately, historians need to identify whether it was

Custer or the Army that changed, and explain how and why. Hopefully these questions will be answered soon by ambitious researchers. After all, understanding how soldiers who come of age during a time of continuous warfare transition to a time of peace seems more relevant than ever.

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## Chapter Twelve

### COMMANDER IN THE WEST

*Jeff Broome*

George Armstrong Custer's western odyssey began with the formation of the 7th Cavalry in late fall of 1866. It culminated with his demise while fighting Plains Indians at the Little Bighorn River on June 25, 1876. The cavalymen under his direct command perished in the fight as well. During his 10 years on the Great Plains, there were several campaigns and military actions that shaped his character. Knowing these events helps us to understand who Custer was in 1876.

Among the best biographies of Custer, Robert M. Utley's *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* (1988) combines broad analysis with succinct coverage of events. Important events that shaped Custer's career include the formation of the 7th Cavalry in 1866 and General Winfield S. Hancock's campaign in 1867. Custer led his own summer campaign, which culminated in his arrest. In the fall of 1867, he faced a court-martial, was found guilty, and was suspended from service for a year. He returned early in the fall of 1868 and gained his one victory against Plains Indians at the Washita River on November 27, 1868. The 7th Cavalry was deployed to the northern Plains and in 1873 were a part of the Yellowstone Expedition, providing protection to survey crews of the Northern Pacific Railroad. In 1874, Custer led the 7th Cavalry in the Black Hills Expedition. A gold rush began as the result of this summer excursion, which set the stage for 1876 and the Centennial Campaign.

These events before the Battle of the Little Bighorn may be divided chronologically as follows: The organization of the 7th Cavalry at Fort Riley, Kansas; Hancock's campaign in the spring of 1867; Custer's first

independent Indian campaign during the Hancock excursion; Custer's court-martial in the fall of 1867 and subsequent suspension from the service until the fall of 1868; Custer's reinstatement to the 7th Cavalry and the subsequent winter campaign of 1868–1869, especially his fight along the Washita River on November 27, 1868; Custer's rescue in early 1869 of two female captives taken during Kansas raids in 1868; the 1873 Yellowstone Expedition following reassignment into the Dakota Territory; and finally, the 1874 Black Hills Expedition. What follows is a brief summary of each of these important incidents in Custer's life as well as the controversies that developed under his command.

### Organizing the 7th Cavalry

After the Civil War had ended and the many Union veteran volunteers finished their service, Congress on July 28, 1866, created four new cavalry regiments designated the 7th through the 10th Cavalry. The last two regiments were comprised of African Americans, most of whom were freed slaves and were commanded by white officers. Custer, a commissioned officer of the regular Army, was offered the rank of full colonel commanding one of the black regiments. He turned that down but was then appointed a lieutenant colonel – second-in-command – of the 7th Cavalry. He was still referred to as “general,” because of his brevet rank.

The new regiment was organized in late August, and by November 23, 1866, was assigned to the Department of the Missouri. Colonel Andrew Smith commanded the regiment but remained on detached service, leaving the regiment to the second-in-command, Custer. By December of that year, all of the officers had been assigned to the regiment. Three companies as well as the Regimental Headquarters remained at Fort Riley, while the other companies were assigned to stations in Kansas and Colorado Territory. By early 1867, the regiment consisted of 15 officers and 963 enlisted men (Chandler 1960, 2–3).

The rank-and-file of the post-Civil War Army included a hodge-podge of enlistees. Veterans of both sides of the conflict served in the regiments with foreigners just beginning their American experience. Included among the new recruits were men seeking a new life west of the Mississippi in addition to persons of questionable moral character. Putting all of these men together into a cohesive military unit was challenging, and the 7th Cavalry was no different than other regiments of the era. How Custer dealt with disciplinary problems was one of the controversies that stayed with him throughout his tenure with the 7th Cavalry (Carroll 1974, 250–251, 257; Utley 1977, 52–53; Burkey 1976, 14–15).

The organization of the 7th Cavalry coincided with the federal government's efforts to keep peace with Plains Indians. These groups included

various Brulé and Oglala Lakota tribes, Kiowa, some Apache, Arapaho, but mostly Cheyenne, especially a band known as Dog Men or Dog Soldiers. Encroaching white settlements threatened their traditional hunting grounds, and the younger warriors became frustrated with the caution of their elders. The causes for this discontent were many. Diminishing land and food sources, however, represented the main element of friction. By 1867, buffalo herds were noticeably thinner, and it was known to both federal officials and tribal chiefs that the old hunter-gatherer way of life could not survive for much longer. The Indians themselves had contributed to this problem by trading vast amounts of buffalo robes in the prior decades to the many fur traders, who came into the Indian lands. Open land was visibly vanishing due to the establishment of new settlements, which increased in number after the discovery of gold in Colorado in 1858 and the Homestead Act of 1862. As a result, much of the timber found along creek beds and in a few other places was disappearing at a rapid rate, since white settlers used wood as a building material and as a means of fuel. Indian populations also were declining, because of the impact of the many diseases inadvertently brought to them by white expansion. But more importantly, much of the Indian land was ceded or stolen through treaties. For example, the Treaty of the Little Arkansas in 1865 resulted in the Indians conceding nearly all of the lands between the Platte River in Nebraska down to the Arkansas River in southern Colorado and Kansas (Greene 2004, 28). Lastly, the coming of the railroad was a daily reminder that the old way of Indian life was fast becoming a distant memory (Broome 2009b, 23).

The Plains Indians were not blind to the future and saw this unfortunate trend as early as 1863. Earlier conflicts between the Cheyenne and American military forces did much to reinforce this discontent. The massacre at Sand Creek in southeast Colorado Territory on November 29, 1864, was the watershed for distrust and animosity between the Plains Indians, especially the Cheyenne, and the blue-clad soldiers. People who were living in central Kansas and further west expected an Indian war once the grasses came up in the spring of 1867, which fed the Indian ponies during their raids. This raiding of settlements escalated after 1864 (Davis 1868, 293). Figures show that as many as 400 settlers and teamsters were killed by Indians in Nebraska and Kansas alone in the years 1866 and 1867 (Garfield 1932, 344).

Originally published serially in the *Galaxy* magazine, the autobiographical *My Life on the Plains, or, Personal Experiences with Indians* (1874) offers Custer's perspective on Indian resistance at this time. Covering the years 1867–1869, the period of most extensive military activity against the Plains Indians, he recounts the newly organized 7th Cavalry's operations in the southern Plains. As he reinvents himself into an Indian fighter on the frontier, Custer vigorously denounces the “humanitarians” for espousing what was known as the “peace policy.”

## Hancock's Campaign

Under the command of Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, a major campaign in the southern Plains began in 1867. By April 1, the 7th Cavalry – companies A, D, F, G, H, and M – were at Fort Harker, Kansas, as part of a contingent of infantry and artillery comprising nearly 1,400 soldiers. Hancock's orders were to meet with the chiefs of the Cheyenne, Kiowa, Arapaho, and other Plains Indian groups and communicate with them that the federal government was prepared to make war against them unless they promised to end their depredations against travelers on the roads through Kansas (Chalfant 2010, 76–78; Kraft 2011, 180; Broome 2013, 249–252). A show of force would encourage the Indians to submit or permit the Army to punish them.

The Indian agents among the tribes communicated with them to bring their villages to Fort Larned, where the planned parley was to be held. Snow delayed the Cheyenne from reporting as scheduled, but when they finally came, many of the Cheyenne warriors and sub-chiefs were not there. They appeared concerned with other matters. The few Cheyenne who did arrive reported that many of their men were out hunting. Hancock then decided to move his command closer to the Indian villages, located about 35 miles west of the post, on a river called Pawnee Fork. When the command arrived near the villages, Hancock learned that the women and children had fled. They feared a repeat of what had happened at Sand Creek in 1864.

When Hancock was told the Indians had fled their villages, he ordered Custer to take four companies on a march to find and to bring the Cheyenne back to council. Custer never found the Indians, and instead, while pursuing them, saw where Indians had attacked and killed three men at a stage station on the Smoky Hill Road. When he sent a report via courier back to Hancock, informing him of the murders, Custer speculated from information received from his scouts as well as other persons along the road that the Indians who had fled from Hancock were the same Indians who had committed the murders. However, Custer received further information which revised his thoughts, and he then sent Hancock a second report indicating his new belief that other Indians were responsible for the stage station attacks. That information came to Hancock too late, for he had already responded to Custer's first report and ordered the two abandoned Indian villages – one Cheyenne and the other Oglala Lakota – destroyed. Hancock was not bothered by Custer's amended report, feeling that the claim that the Cheyenne failed to report to council while out hunting was a ruse for them to commit depredations, of which these murders were but one (Broome 2009b, 30; Chalfant 2010, 239–240).

As Custer was pursuing the Indians who fled from Pawnee Fork, his Delaware Indian guides believed that the warriors were heading north to the Platte River area. Custer's pursuit brought him to the original site of

Fort Hays, where he sought to replenish his forage. To his dismay, he learned that no grain was stored at the post. Unable to continue his pursuit, he was forced to end his march. His plans soon changed, and Custer was selected to conduct a campaign taking him out of the Department of the Missouri and up to the Department of the Platte.

Custer was given orders to take six companies of the 7th Cavalry, and with 20 forage wagons, proceed north to the Platte River and patrol the Platte River Road, where it was anticipated Indian raids would focus on the overland freighters and ranch houses near the Platte. Custer left Fort Hays on June 1, 1867. His expedition ended six weeks later at Fort Wallace. Soon afterward, he was arrested, court-martialed, and suspended from service for a year.

This campaign is noted for several incidents. First was the suicide of his second-in-command, Major Wycliffe Cooper, one week into the campaign. The men had just gone into their evening camp when Cooper shot himself in the head inside his tent, dying instantly. Some officers blamed Custer for his suicide, though all agreed that excessive whiskey contributed to his sorrowful state of mind (Broome 2009b, 37–39).

Following the suicide of Cooper, Custer's next problem involved excessive desertions, including 34 soldiers who deserted near the South Platte River in Colorado Territory on the nights of July 5–6. A total of 60 men deserted from Custer's command during this six-week expedition. In addition to desertions, this campaign included Custer's first skirmish with Indian warriors. It also involved a prolonged skirmish for a company escort of 16 wagons that Custer sent to Fort Wallace for forage and supplies. While the wagons were away at Fort Wallace, Custer stayed with the rest of his command in camp just inside the southwestern portion of Nebraska at the forks of the Republican River near present-day Benkelman. It was here that Oglala under Pawnee Killer made a surprise daybreak attack upon skirmishers guarding the camp, severely wounding one man. That same day, June 24, Captain Hamilton, who would die the next year at the Washita, had a spirited fight with Pawnee Killer's warriors a few miles away from Custer's camp. Two days later, Custer's wagon escort faced a prolonged skirmish upon leaving Fort Wallace to return to camp 80 miles to the north. While this fight was occurring, a more deadly attack was made upon members of the 7th Cavalry stationed at Fort Wallace. Six soldiers were killed and another six wounded (Broome 2013, 287–292).

A controversy arose with Custer's decision to replenish his supplies at Fort Wallace, not Fort Sedgwick, which some authors say contributed directly to the death of Lieutenant Lyman S. Kidder, 10 men of the 2nd Cavalry, and an Indian scout. When Custer went into camp on June 24 at the forks of the Republican River, his scouts informed him that, though his camp was roughly halfway between Forts Wallace and Sedgwick, sending the wagons north to Sedgwick would entail a much longer journey due to

water sources as well as the impassable breaks of the Republican River valley. The shorter journey to Wallace was relatively flat and straight. Custer followed their advice and sent an officer and 10 men to Fort Sedgwick. They carried a letter that Custer wrote, seeking permission to remain near his present camp in order to locate hostile Indians believed to be in that area. In addition, he informed General Sherman of his decision to replenish supplies at Wallace and not Sedgwick.

Custer's letter was telegraphed from Sedgwick to headquarters at Omaha, but a reply did not come back before Custer's couriers were ordered back to his camp. The orders came the next day, however, and denied Custer's request to remain in the Republican River valley. Custer, however, finding no answer to his request, followed his original orders and marched his command back north to the Platte River, arriving 45 miles west of Fort Sedgwick. During the next two nights, while his command was camped on the Platte, 34 men deserted. It was here that Custer learned that Lieutenant Kidder had been sent to deliver the missed orders, which arrived at Sedgwick the day after Custer's men left to return to Custer's camp on the Republican.

Custer and his officers feared the worst might have happened to Lieutenant Kidder's small party, and on July 7, the command returned to Kansas, following their earlier trail that brought them north into Colorado Territory and to the Platte. While at the camp on their first day returning, several more soldiers deserted. Three were shot in an attempted recapture, one mortally. Upon retracing his march back down to the Republican River valley, Custer's scouts on July 12 discovered the remains of Kidder and his command on the north bank of Beaver Creek, situated about halfway between Custer's earlier Republican River camp and Fort Wallace to the south. The men had been overwhelmed by at least 200 warriors and died in the fight. Their bodies were mutilated grotesquely.

The controversy that erupted over these events invited differing interpretations. Though some historians believe that Custer was not at fault for what happened to Kidder, others blame the commander for Kidder's fate (Broome 2009b, 79–90). Those criticizing Custer claim that his motivation for sending wagons down to Fort Wallace and not Fort Sedgwick was entirely personal. He anticipated his wife to be at Wallace. In all likelihood, he wanted Libbie to share his tent and campaign experiences, much as she did during the last year of the Civil War (Chalfant 2010, 377–389; Burkey 1976, 29; Schultz 2012, 176–177).

### **Court-Martial**

After finding Kidder's unfortunate command, Custer buried the bodies and proceeded to Fort Wallace, arriving there the next day. Historians are in agreement in that his next actions brought upon him a subsequent

court-martial. He had anticipated finding General Hancock at Wallace, but Hancock was not there, having shortly before Custer's arrival returned to Fort Harker 204 miles to the east (Frost 1968, 147). Custer selected from his command 76 enlisted men and three officers and proceeded east to Fort Harker.

Historian William Chalfant in *Hancock's War: Conflict on the Plains* claims that the only reason for Custer making this eastern jaunt was to unite with his wife. After not finding her at Fort Wallace and concerned that she might have fallen victim to cholera, Custer decided to abandon his post. When Custer began his summer campaign, "he had been more concerned about having her with him than with fighting Indians" (Chalfant 2010, 411). Regardless of Custer's motive, his actions resulted in charges filed against him. That fall, he faced a court-martial at Fort Leavenworth. The specific charges were that he left his command without authority – "absent without leave from his command" – and he executed an unauthorized journey on private business – "conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline." One of his junior officers, Captain Robert West, added to the second charge even more serious allegations, accusing Custer of ordering his officers to shoot three of the deserters who had been observed leaving the command while in camp in July. Captain West also accused Custer of not providing medical treatment to the wounded men after they were shot and apprehended (Frost 1968, 89, 99, 101). Custer disputed the charges.

Custer's trial began on September 15, 1867, and lasted for a month. The finding of the court was that Custer was guilty as charged. He was suspended from rank and from duty for one year, forgoing his officer's pay during his suspension.

Subsequent to Custer's court-martial, the federal government began negotiating peace with the Plains Indians. A peace council to negotiate the Medicine Lodge Treaty began on October 19 near Fort Larned, but few Cheyenne were present. They finally arrived eight days later, and it was thought at the conclusion of the council that peace would finally prevail. Unfortunate events occurred, however, that ultimately brought violence back to Kansas, which necessitated another military campaign against the Cheyenne. The last weeks of Custer's sentence were reprieved, as Sheridan wanted him to return to command of the 7th Cavalry. He needed a commander with Custer's audacity and determination to lead that contingent on a vigorous march in 1868, which was designed to surprise the warriors in their winter camps.

Two events happened that broke the treaty. First, in early June a large party of Cheyenne warriors ventured east to the Kaw Reservation in Marion County near Council Bluffs. The Cheyenne were interested in avenging a skirmish with the Kaw near Fort Zarah. Five Cheyenne were killed, and a larger number were wounded. Several horses were stolen. As the spring of

1868 passed, the Cheyenne intended to get their revenge against the Kaw (Kraft 2011, 232–233; Broome 2013, 329). At least 300 Cheyenne conducted a raid against the Kaw on June 3. It amounted to only a skirmish. Three Cheyenne and one Kaw were wounded.

It was the raids against many settlers near the Kaw Agency and Council Grove that inspired the federal government to delay distributing arms and ammunition to the Cheyenne that summer. When the Cheyenne learned they were denied arms and ammunition by the government, they refused all other annuities until they were given their distribution as previously promised. They insisted that they needed them in order to do their summer hunting (Kraft 2011, 234–235; Broome 2013, 342). Finally, in early August, the government relented. Almost immediately, a devastating raid occurred to the north near the Saline and Solomon Rivers in Kansas, near present day Lincoln and Beloit. When it was over, numerous Kansas citizens had been murdered and their property destroyed (Kraft 2010, 239–240; Chalfant 2010, 509–511; Broome 2013, 346–354).

### **Custer at the Washita**

The result of the August raids into north-central Kansas caused General Sheridan, now commanding the Department of the Missouri, to seek Custer's services in leading the 7th Cavalry on a winter campaign. Custer was expected to punish the Cheyenne. More than just the raids into Kansas prompted military action. Equally deadly forays were made by Arapaho and Cheyenne warriors into Colorado Territory, too (Broome 2013, 359–388).

Following his suspension from the Army, Custer took residence in Monroe, Michigan, where he had lived prior to entering West Point and where his wife Libbie was raised. Custer was pleased when he received General Sheridan's urgent telegram on September 24, 1868, asking him to return to command the 7th Cavalry and to "move about the first of October against the hostile Indians, from Medicine Lodge Creek toward the Wichita Mountains" (Frost 1968, 266).

With that objective in mind, Custer returned to the 7th Cavalry and advanced toward an Indian camp at the Washita River on November 27, 1868. "Heap Injuns down there," reported an Osage scout to Custer. As he outlined the plan of attack to his officers, he boasted: "There are not Indians enough in the country to whip the 7th Cavalry" (Utley 1988, 65).

After the fight along the Washita ended, Custer gave differing accounts on the number of Indian dead. In his first report, Custer claimed 102 warriors killed and 53 women and children captured. Soon, he revised the casualty account up to 140 killed and many more wounded. The Cheyenne said that 13 men, 16 women, and 9 children died at the Washita (Greene 2004, 136). On the Army side, two officers and 18 troopers

were killed. Three officers and 12 enlisted men were also wounded, and two enlisted men subsequently died from their wounds. Custer's losses occurred primarily when Major Elliott and 17 cavalymen ventured beyond Black Kettle's village during the fight. They never made it back to Custer's command. Only one officer and three enlisted men died while fighting in the village itself (Greene 2004, 135).

There are several controversies surrounding the Battle of the Washita (Barnard 2010, 245; Greene 2004, 164, 188–191; Hardorff 2006, 29–31; Linenthal 2001, 42–51). In assessing Custer's command, scholars have asked: Was the fight actually a battle or a massacre? Cheyenne Agent Edward Wynkoop, when he learned that the military was conducting a winter campaign to punish the Cheyenne, resigned his commission. After hearing of the fight on the Washita, he likened Custer's victory to a massacre (Hoig 1976, 189). Historian Edward Linenthal summed it up this way: "What narrative of Custer one chooses will partially define how one answers the question of whether it was a battle or a massacre" (Linenthal 2001, 43). After carefully examining standard definitions of "massacre" and "battle," historian Jerome Greene concludes that the former term is not suitable for what happened at the Washita. The fighting was "ruthless and remorseless" but not "indiscriminate slaughter" (Greene 2004, 189–191).

Was Black Kettle's village an enemy village? Were his warriors actively pursuing war prior to Custer's arrival on the Washita? This is a difficult question to answer, for clearly Black Kettle himself did not condone any war acts. On the other hand, the warriors who did were confederated into warring bands, mostly Cheyenne, but from many villages, Black Kettle's included (Kraft 2010, 241). Historian Greene probably gives the best interpretation of Black Kettle and the Washita, describing the finding of a war party trail that took Custer's soldiers to Black Kettle's camp as an act of "pure chance." Black Kettle had no blame in respect to the events that precipitated Custer's attack, because Cheyenne culture kept him from being able to directly control the young warriors. Ultimately, the Washita "represented something of a cruel twist in the vicissitudes of fortune" (Greene 2004, 186).

What happened to Major Joel Elliott and his command of 17 men, all killed together more than two miles from the battle site? Their bodies were not discovered until two weeks later, when Sheridan accompanied Custer's command and returned to the battlefield. The death of Elliott angered some members of Custer's command, and a legend grew that a persistent rift with subordinates played a role in his eventual defeat at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Some officers felt Custer abandoned Elliott when he left the Washita, knowing Elliott's party remained missing. The evidence shows that the abandonment of Elliott did cause a rift that remained unhealed, although it probably did not contribute to Custer's demise nine years later on the banks of another river (Barnard 2010, 293–294).

Were Custer's actions at the Washita sound or reckless, and to what extent did the Washita fight influence Custer's thinking on June 25, 1876? First, Custer's attack at the Washita was an attack on an Indian village that spread out for several miles and was much larger than the shorter-spread village congregated at the Little Bighorn in 1876. Custer's victory was enhanced by his ability to locate and to capture so many women and children early in the Washita fight. The numerous congregating warriors appearing just out of rifle range after Custer secured Black Kettle's village may have outnumbered the Indians who later defeated him at Little Bighorn. To attack Custer's column likely meant losing the 53 women and children Custer's men held hostage, which the warriors were unwilling to risk in 1868.

It is likely that Custer's strategy at the Little Bighorn in 1876 was based on his experience at the Washita in 1868. If he could surprise the village and capture as many women and children as possible, then victory at the Little Bighorn would be assured as it had been at the Washita. However, when the 7th Cavalry initiated its charge into Sitting Bull's village, the Indians knew that he was coming. In fact, many women and children were several miles in the opposite direction from Custer's point of attack. Clearly, the element of surprise aided Custer at the Washita.

One more question persists from the Washita: How did Custer and his officers treat their captives? Evidence surfaced later that the women captives were assigned to each officer's tent. Captain Frederick Benteen wrote that Custer invited all officers to "avail themselves of the services of a captured squaw, to come to the squaw round-up corral and select one!(?) Custer took first choice, and lived with her during winter and spring of 1868 and '69" (Carroll 1974, 271). Benteen added to this the claim that Custer was "criminally intimate with a married woman, wife of an officer of the garrison." He also claimed that Custer's wife Libbie knew it, and that "she was about as cold-blooded a woman as I ever knew, in which respect the pair were admirably mated" (Carroll 1974, 262). Benteen frequently criticized the Custers over the years.

Following Sheridan's winter campaign of 1868–1869, the 7th Cavalry remained in Kansas until early 1871, at which time the regiment was transferred to Kentucky. Another series of raids were made by Cheyenne Dog Soldiers under Tall Bull in the spring of 1869, resulting in the abduction of two more pioneer women, taken from the same vicinity as the attacks that precipitated the Washita campaign. This time Custer's regiment was recovering from their harsh winter campaign, so the 5th Cavalry, under Brevet Major General Eugene A. Carr, was assigned expedition duties. Carr caught Tall Bull in northeastern Colorado on July 11, soundly defeating the Cheyenne at Summit Springs. One female captive was killed by Tall Bull, although the other woman was rescued but gravely wounded. The Cheyenne defeat at Summit Springs ended the annual spring and summer raids that Indian warriors had been making along the stage roads and

outlying settlements in Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado Territory since 1864 (Broome 2009a, 163–185; Broome 2013, 433–468). By 1871, the 7th Cavalry was ordered east of the Mississippi, where they were assigned post-Civil War reconstruction duties until shortly before the Yellowstone Expedition in 1873. Custer's headquarters during this two-year hiatus from service on the Great Plains was in Elizabethtown, Kentucky.

### Custer and the Yellowstone Expedition

When the 7th Cavalry was ordered to Dakota Territory in the spring of 1873, their first duty was to lend support to a railroad survey through the Yellowstone valley. It had long been the goal of the federal government to support a railroad link from the east coast to the west coast, and two earlier survey excursions in 1871 and 1872 into the Yellowstone as well as the tributaries joining with it indicated the likelihood of a successful Northern Pacific Railroad link through Dakota Territory. The route would extend from Duluth, Minnesota, to Seattle, Washington. With this in the background, a third expedition was planned. It would be the biggest of the three, at least in terms of men and supplies.

Colonel David S. Stanley of the 22nd Infantry was assigned to command the Yellowstone Expedition. The expedition left Fort Rice on June 20, 1873. The command consisted of 1,500 soldiers from the 17th and 22nd Infantry and 10 companies of the 7th Cavalry. In addition, there were 450 civilians hired to manage 250 wagons. Two steamboats were contracted to carry supplies, which were transferred when needed to the expedition wagons. *Custer and the 1873 Yellowstone Survey*, which was skillfully edited by M. John Lubetkin (2013), tells the story of the expedition through the words of the participants.

During the Yellowstone Expedition, forces other than Indian tribes played a role in bringing controversy Custer's way. One was directly related to Custer, but another was not. Another West Point graduate, William B. Hazen, a colonel of the 6th Infantry, had been finding fault with federal government and civilian reports that extolled the agricultural value of the land. The railroad survey and the flood of promotional literature incensed Hazen, while Custer and others connected with the surveys championed the development of the land. Hazen published an account stating that the land was not worth a "penny an acre" (Frost 1986, 5–6).

Another controversy occurred due to a national depression that followed the Yellowstone Expedition, which put the railroad out of business and delayed for several years the completion of the line to the Pacific coast. Lubetkin forcefully argues that it was Custer's report of his skirmish with Indians during this expedition that scared investors on Wall Street, the result of which was the Panic of 1873. The downturn severely hampered

the finances of the Northern Pacific. The effects stalled the building of the railroad until it began again in 1879 and was finally completed in 1883 (Lubetkin 2006, 277, 286).

Custer was in command of the 7th Cavalry, but he remained under Stanley's orders. Conflict arose between the two officers: Stanley for his excessive drinking and Custer for acting without consulting Stanley. At one point, Stanley ordered Custer arrested for keeping a cook stove, because its morning use delayed the day's march. The next day, Custer was released, and Stanley apologized (Frost 1986, 60–61). Custer opined that Stanley's drunkenness caused his arrest, and when Stanley sobered up, he apologized. Stanley had written his wife in June, noting that he "had seen enough of him [Custer] to convince me that he is a cold-blooded, untruthful and unprincipled man." He added that Custer "is universally despised by all the officers of his regiment excepting his relatives and one or two sycophants." At the same time, Custer wrote his wife and described Stanley as "acting very badly, drinking, and I anticipate official trouble with him." He reported that the "officers are terribly down on him" (Hatch 1997, 190).

During the expedition, Custer's men were involved in three separate engagements with Indians. The first skirmish occurred on August 4, 1873. Custer, with two companies comprising about 80 men, was several miles in advance of the main column and decided to bivouac in a cluster of trees near the Yellowstone River. Six Indians emerged from the nearby timber, seemingly intent upon taking some cavalry horses. In truth, the Indians were interested in drawing the men out in the open and near another grove of trees, where more than 300 warriors had been secreted. Reasoning the Indians were a decoy to draw the cavalymen out, Custer with a handful of soldiers proceeded beyond the main body and into the open. The hiding warriors charged at Custer's small advance. He immediately withdrew back to where he had left the rest of the cavalymen. A brisk skirmish ensued, and when it was over, one soldier and two horses were wounded. Indian casualties are unknown. The warriors were Sitting Bull's Hunkpapa band. While this skirmish occurred, other warriors killed two civilians and a soldier, who were detached from the main column and were caught without protection. One civilian was the expedition's sutler, the other was a veterinarian (Frost 1986, 64–69; Lubetkin 2006, 244–249; Lubetkin 2013, 219–234). The next winter, Rain-in-the-Face bragged of killing the civilians, and Custer sent out a detail to capture him on the Standing Rock Reservation, where he had earlier made his murderous boasts. Rain-in-the-Face eventually escaped from confinement at Fort Abraham Lincoln and later appeared at the Little Bighorn.

The second Yellowstone skirmish began one week after the first. In the early morning of August 11, 1873, Indians fired across the Yellowstone into the tents of the sleeping soldiers. Thirty cavalry marksmen were quickly stationed among the trees alongside the river, and they returned fire. Soon,

numerous warriors crossed the Yellowstone and began to engage the soldiers on the same side of the river. About 200 warriors confronted 120 of Custer's men. More Indians crossed the river, as the fight extended for several miles. The Indians eventually withdrew, but several cavalrymen pursued the warriors for a few miles. One soldier was killed in the skirmish.

The third skirmish occurred on August 16, 1873. It was not a skirmish as much as an incident. Indians began firing across the Yellowstone at Pompey's Pillar and attempted to hit members of the 7th Cavalry bathing in the river. No soldiers were wounded in this incident (Frost 1986, 83–87, 90; Lubetkin 2006, 256–267; Lubetkin 2013, 247–263).

When the Yellowstone Expedition ended on September 22, 1873, Custer was assigned to the newly constructed Fort Abraham Lincoln, which stood outside of present-day Bismarck, North Dakota. Fort Lincoln remained Custer's headquarters for the duration of his deployment in the northern Plains (Frost 1986, 4–5). Similar to the situation in Kansas, the various companies of the 7th Cavalry were assigned to different posts in Dakota Territory.

### **Custer and the Black Hills Expedition**

With the end of the Yellowstone Expedition, Custer reported to Fort Abraham Lincoln. During the summer of 1874, Custer was ordered to conduct an exploratory expedition into the Black Hills. Such excursions could be quite expensive for the federal government, but Custer produced a report showing that the expedition would actually save money, even after employing so many teamsters and other civilians necessary to make the effort a success. Indeed, a newspaper reported at the conclusion of the summer trip that the federal government had a savings of over \$16,000. The main cause for the savings was eliminating the cost of forage for the hundreds of horses and mules employed for the expedition (Frost 1979, xvi).

Under Custer's direction, the Black Hills Expedition left Fort Lincoln on July 2, 1874. His command returned on August 30 after covering 883 miles, not counting additional miles incurred in small excursions away from the main command. Ten companies of the 7th Cavalry joined the expedition. In addition, there were two infantry companies, teamsters to drive 110 wagons, and several civilians, including four scientists, three journalists, a photographer, and two miners. In all, the expedition was comprised of nearly 1,000 men (Jackson 1966, 110, 143–144).

The purpose was to explore the Black Hills and to identify possible sites for the erection of a future military post. Non-reservation Indians for some time had been traveling south to join other "hostile" warriors in raids along the Platte River in Nebraska and Colorado Territory, and the War Department anticipated that a fort established in the Black Hills would help to terminate this annual problem. Sheridan described the objective succinctly: "By holding

an interior point in the heart of the Indian country, we could threaten the villages and stock of the Indians” (Jackson 1966, 14–15).

This land was sacred to the Lakota, who noted the abundance of game and firewood in the Black Hills. The federal government previously recognized their rights under a treaty. However, a report about the discovery of gold attracted miners to area. The gold rush created a military problem. The Lakota refused to sell the land, but the Grant administration eventually decided to clear the area of Indians. The decision would lead directly to Custer’s defeat at the Little Bighorn. Because the commander of the Black Hills Expedition helped to spread the rumors of riches, historian Donald Jackson dubbed it “Custer’s Gold” (Jackson 1966, 73, 104).

Eight different newspapers published updates on the expedition (Krause & Olson 1974, iv). Outside of surprising a small group of Indians with just five tepees, there were no hostile encounters with any Lakota or other tribes on this field excursion. From the military perspective, the purpose of the expedition was reconnaissance. From the perspective of many civilians, it was to determine if gold awaited them in the Black Hills.

In early August, efforts were made by the two miners accompanying Custer to look for gold, which they reportedly found. Custer’s report confirmed the presence of gold in several places and that it would likely be found in paying quantities if miners could begin to work the area. However, he cautioned that no opinion should be formed based only upon what was discovered at that time. Custer entrusted Charley Reynolds, who died on the valley floor at the Little Bighorn two summers later, to deliver his report. By August 13, Reynolds had arrived in Sioux City, and the local newspaper editor took it from there. The news headline stated: “STRUCK IT AT LAST. Rich Mines of Gold and Silver Reported Found by Custer.” That was all that was needed to generate interest. The Black Hills gold rush was underway (Jackson 1966, 87–89). Prior to Custer departing on the Black Hills Expedition, Indian chiefs evidently warned the commander that it would produce a war (Frost 1979, xvii).

After the press sensationalized the prospects for gold in the Black Hills, miners came to the area in droves. Throughout 1875, the 7th Cavalry was tasked with catching the miners, who ventured into the area in large groups. Troopers tried to protect the trespassers from Indian attacks. The efforts at catching the miners, destroying their materials, and ordering them out of the Black Hills proved futile, though. The Interior Department resolved to negotiate a land purchase, but the Lakota promptly refused. They branded Custer’s trail through their land as “thieves’ road.” As tensions mounted, the War Department drew up plans for a pending campaign that would remove from the area all Indians living off their reservations.

Under Custer’s leadership, the Black Hills Expedition encountered forested slopes, grassy meadows, and vibrant streams. William Ellingworth’s stereo photographs from the expedition are stunning and only recently

have been published together, alongside modern photographs taken from the same sites. Although he apparently took over 80 photographs, Ellingworth provided the federal government with a set of just 55 images (Frost 1979, xx). While penning long letters from his tent at night, Custer declared with confidence: “We have discovered a rich and beautiful country” (Grafe and Horsted 2002, 162).

## Conclusion

What may be concluded about Custer’s life from the formation of the 7th Cavalry until the Black Hills Expedition of 1875? While experiencing an identity crisis at first, Custer gradually learned that commanding the volunteer soldier in the frontier was very different from commanding the Union soldier of the Civil War. While Custer could rally his men together during the final campaigns of the Civil War, the precepts of conventional warfare did not apply to campaigns and expeditions on the Great Plains. Placing himself in danger at the front of a cavalry charge would not develop a special *esprit de corps* among the rank-and-file but would most likely lead him and his men nowhere. He emerged from the experience in the American West with a reputation for command, but he seemed ill-prepared for the Indian Wars of the late nineteenth century.

Given that training ground, Custer nonetheless developed into a renowned Indian fighter while commanding the 7th Cavalry. He excelled at horsemanship, tracking, and hunting, which were skills that he observed and praised among the Indian warriors. Of course, this was the impression that he wanted to give by authoring numerous publications, most notably *My Life on the Plains* (1874). “If I were an Indian,” he famously declared in his book, “I often think that I would greatly prefer to cast my lot among those of my people who adhered to the free open plains, rather than submit to the confined limits of a reservation, there to be the recipient of the blessed benefits of civilization, with its vices thrown in without stint or measure.” Though often cheered in the press, Custer detractors noted his observations on Indians and Indian policy with scorn. The Indian-fighter found himself embroiled in a host of political controversies by 1876.

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# Chapter Thirteen

## THE 7TH CAVALRY

*John R. Dreyer*

The history of the 7th Cavalry would likely have mirrored the history of the other 10 cavalry regiments during the Indian wars on the Great Plains: numerous actions punctuated by long stretches of intense boredom. The 7th's destiny changed in the summer of 1876 with the battle of the Little Bighorn, one of the most debated battles in American military history. The history of the regiment is largely colored by the battle and the man who led them into the valley, George Armstrong Custer. His legend towers over the rest of the regimental history, thus making it difficult to see how the regiment developed and how the cavalymen served their country. Only Melborne C. Chandler's *Of Garryowen in Glory: A History of the US Seventh Cavalry* (1960) offers a comprehensive history of the outfit until 1960.

To find the history of the 7th Cavalry, it is necessary to dig through biographies of major figures such as Custer, Frederick Benteen, and Marcus Reno. In addition, operational histories of various campaigns and expeditions exist. The fame of the Little Bighorn has opened other avenues of scholarship that can be classified as minutiae in regard to the regiment. For example, Harry H. Anderson described the sports enthusiasts of the 7th Cavalry in "The Benteen Base Ball Club" (1970). Benteen's interest in baseball was well known, and his club was one of the best in uniform. It competed until the battle of the Little Bighorn and did very well in competition with both military and civilian teams.

The best introduction to the regiment is Utley's *Frontier Regulars* (1973), which ends with the 7th Cavalry's participation in the incident at

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Wounded Knee. Charles Mills's even-handed biography of Frederick Benteen, *Harvest of Barren Regrets* (2011), also traces the history of the regiment until Benteen's transfer in 1881. Benteen was opinionated, harbored a dislike of just about everybody above the rank of captain, and was insistent that his methods were the correct ones. Once these issues are taken into account, Mills's biography is essential to understanding the regiment and how it developed as a fighting force. *The Custer Reader* (1992), edited by Paul Hutton, contains numerous primary and secondary articles regarding the regiment. It provides a good introduction to the regiment, its famous commander, and the events that shaped it.

### Early Years: Origin and Organization

After the surrender of Confederate forces in April of 1865, it became clear to Congress and the War Department that a permanent force would be needed to undertake the important roles of policing the West and the South. The reliance on volunteer troops had primarily been based on short-term enlistments and cash bounties (Stewart 2005). The absence of incentives made the regular Army unattractive to most volunteers. In response to an expanded mission set in 1866, the Army received authorization from Congress for organizing regiments. The cavalry was expanded to 10 regiments in total: the existing six, plus the new 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th (Stubbs & Connor 1969, 14). The 7th Cavalry was officially activated on September 10, 1866 at Fort Riley, Kansas, with a nominal strength of 888 officers and men. The regiment was organized into 12 companies, A through M with no J on the rolls. The official term for the basic unit of organization in the cavalry was company until 1889. However, many contemporary writers used the term of company and troop interchangeably. For information on uniforms, weapons, and equipment, researchers should consult *The US Army in the West, 1870–1880: Uniforms, Weapons and Equipment* (2006) as well as *Uniforms, Arms and Equipment: The US Army on the Western Frontier 1880–1892* (2007), both by Douglas C. McChristian. Another useful resource is John P. Langellier's *More Army Blue: The Uniforms of Uncle Sam's Regulars, 1874–1887* (2001).

The large number of Civil War veterans provided an ideal recruiting pool for the new regiment. Emphasis was placed on recruiting men whose terms of enlistment were set to expire or had just recently expired. Enlisted men of good character and honorable service records provided the bulk of the unit. Officers went through a similar, though more rigorous, process. Benteen's biography gives an account of officer recruitment (Mills 2011). Benteen filed an application in September of 1866 and wrote to both General Grant and President Johnson asking for their support. Officers needed sponsors and letters of recommendation. Upon initial acceptance,

the officer was given a proficiency test and a physical. After passing these Benteen was offered a commission as a captain in the 7th Cavalry (Ladenheim 2007). New officers could expect to receive an annual starting salary between 2,000 and 2,600 dollars. Serving regular officers were assigned to tasks as needed, as evidenced by Custer's varied assignments.

Despite being the nominal second-in-command, Custer often took command of the unit. This was due to the small size of the frontier army and the need for second officers such as Andrew Smith and later Samuel Sturgis elsewhere. In addition, Custer held favor with senior commanders such as General Philip Sheridan. Utley's *Frontier Regulars* (1973) explores the organizational problems for the Army in great detail. Ege's 1966 article on Miles Keogh provides an example of a subaltern, who rarely served with the outfit until the Little Bighorn due to the pressing need for officers at other posts.

The first posting of the 7th Cavalry was to the southern Plains, and like most Army regiments at the time, it was scattered to a series of posts in small detachments. The unit acted as a rapid response force capable of dealing with the hostile raiding parties that plagued settlers throughout the semiarid region (Mills 2011). Their first action as a regiment occurred during Hancock's Punishment Expedition in the spring of 1867. Winfield Scott Hancock, commander of the Department of the Missouri, decided to act on unsubstantiated reports of hostile Sioux and Cheyenne in western Kansas. This prompted the formation of a 1,400-man expedition designed to awe the tribes into submission.

Leckie's 1963 work, *The Military Conquest of the Southern Plains*, provides a comprehensive military history of Hancock's failed expedition and the 7th's participation. All 11 available companies of the 7th were included in this force. The column left Fort Harker on April 3, 1867, and arrived at Fort Larned on the Arkansas River four days later (Leckie 1963, 39). Hancock's first goal was to meet with Cheyenne leaders to present a show of force. This meeting went poorly, and subsequently Hancock marched upriver to the Pawnee Fork in search of a large Cheyenne camp. On April 13, Hancock deployed his column against a vast number of warriors, but no fight took place. A peace agreement was reached before blood was spilled. Nevertheless, this tenuous accord did not stop Hancock from burning the now deserted village and sending Custer and the 7th in pursuit of the fleeing Cheyenne.

The event that colored the otherwise failed pursuit of the Cheyenne was Custer's dash from Fort Wallace back to Fort Riley. Though Hancock and Smith regarded it as desertion, his intent in all likelihood was to reunite with his wife. According to his letters to Libby in Merington's *The Custer Story* (1957), his effort to obtain fresh horses certainly appears as a convenient excuse. As a result, Custer was placed under arrest and court-martialed, leaving him sidelined for the next year. Major Joel Elliott took

command in the interim, since Andrew Smith was still on detached duty. Hancock's expedition was unsuccessful, and Sherman relieved Hancock. The final peace negotiations took place with 500 troopers of the 7th escorting the negotiators, which filled many Cheyenne with anxiety. They had seen the same soldiers burn their village. The Medicine Lodge Treaty was signed and overt hostility ceased temporarily.

### The Washita

The military action on the Washita River was pivotal in the history of the 7th Cavalry. Both Stan Hoig (1976) and Jerome Greene (2004) give the same reason for the events leading up to the Washita: the failure of the federal government to fulfill its end of the 1867 Medicine Lodge Treaty. The treaty granted the southern Plains Indians two tracts of land as reservations and provisions in the form of clothing, food, and ammunition (Greene 2004, 37). Congress did not ratify the treaty, and thus the provisions were not forthcoming. Combined with intertribal warfare and lingering suspicions over Hancock's expedition, the tensions between the Army, the tribes, and the settlers increased. In early 1868, Cheyenne warriors began to conduct raids again. The new commander of the Department of the Missouri, Philip Sheridan, decided to begin another winter campaign in late 1868.

The 7th Cavalry was once more scattered to various forts across Kansas. In early August, an attack on a farmstead along the Saline River saw two young girls kidnapped. In response, H and M companies under the command of Benteen went in pursuit. Benteen undertook an 80-mile march with about 40 men and engaged the hostiles near Elk Horn Creek on August 13. In a running pursuit that lasted until dark, Benteen rescued the two girls and dispersed the hostile war party (Mills 2011, 150–151). This action made Benteen somewhat of a hero and represented a real success for the unit. Benteen was brevetted to full colonel by Congress for his leadership, one of the very few brevets awarded during the Indian Wars. Brevet ranks were the sole recognition beyond the Medal of Honor for merit in the post-Civil War army. When two officers of equal substantial rank were in contention for command, the higher brevet generally won.

In September of 1868, eight companies of the 7th gathered at Fort Dodge as part of an expedition under Colonel Alfred Sully. Sully's expedition left Dodge on September 8 and headed toward an Indian village on the banks of the Cimarron River, about 40 miles southwest of Fort Dodge (Greene 2004, 61–62). On the night of September 10, the expedition was attacked by Cheyenne warriors at the juncture of the Cimarron and Crooked Creek. The next day, two troopers were kidnapped but later rescued by the rear guard under the command of Captain Louis Hamilton. Typical of forays throughout early September, the command was never able to position

itself within striking distance of the village. Sully left the 7th under the command of Major Elliott to patrol the area south of the Arkansas River before returning to Fort Dodge.

The fruitless action by Sully did little more than provoke reprisals from the tribes in the area. Sheridan and Sherman believed that they needed the dramatic leadership of Custer to counter the Indian threat. Fresh from his year of half-pay and punishment, Custer returned to his unit on October 11, 1868. He immediately began to restore the morale of the 7th, including the coloring of the horses by company and the establishment of a sharpshooter platoon of 40 men under the command of W. W. Cooke (Donovan 2008, 60–61). Many in the unit, among them Benteen, opposed the coloring of the horses. In effect, it removed troopers from their former mounts to achieve little more than improving their appearances on parade. Others, including Cooke, supported it. Cooke's sharpshooters were jokingly termed Custer's "Corps d'Elite" and numbered about 40 men. They were exempt from fatigue duties to allow more time to drill and to train (Greene 2004, 79).

For most historians, the Washita represents a prelude to the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Donovan 2008; Philbrick 2011). Understanding what happened at the Washita is essential to the story of how the Little Bighorn unfolded, especially through the eyes of the participants. On November 23, 1868, Custer left Camp Supply with 800 men. His Indian scouts, mostly Osage, picked up the trail of a Cheyenne war party. The trail led to the village of a peace chief, Black Kettle, who was camped a short distance from the main Indian village on the banks of the Washita River. In violation of military precepts, Custer prepared the 7th Cavalry to attack an enemy of unknown strength upon an unknown terrain (Greene 2004; Hoig 1976).

On the morning of November 27, Custer split the regiment into four detachments for his attack (Greene 2004, 112; Hoig 1976, 123–124). The first detachment of three companies (G, H, and M) under Major Elliott would move to the left of the main force and encircle the village's rear. Captain William Thompson, senior company commander, would march two companies (B and F) to the right of the main detachment and cross the river while coordinating his attack with Elliott. Captain Edward Myers would take his force of two companies (E and I) to the right of the main force and strike the village from the west. At the same time, they were to block any escape by the enemy. Custer would lead the main force (A, C, D, K, and the sharpshooter contingent) and ride down from what was termed Discovery Ridge, which was roughly northeast of the village. The primary objective was to destroy the ability of the Cheyenne to feed, to clothe, and to house their people, thereby forcing them to submit that winter.

Custer signaled the band to strike up "Garry Owen" and charged down the ridge. Cooke's sharpshooters had been arrayed in a skirmish line forward of Custer's vanguard battalion and had checked the initial rush of

warriors from the village (Godfrey 1992). Louis Hamilton, commanding A Company, was one of the first casualties, felled by a shot to the neck. As the battalions made their way into the village, a gap between Thompson's and Myers's troops allowed many fleeing Cheyenne to escape. Seeing this, Elliott took 19 men and shouted "for a coffin or a brevet!" and rode off in pursuit, never to be seen alive again (Greene 2004, 120–121; Hoig 1976, 129–130). Black Kettle himself was killed on the western edge of the village, as he dove into the river in a desperate attempt to escape.

The next phase of the battle began as both cavalry troopers and Indian scouts rooted out Cheyenne from their lodges and hiding places. The firing and sounds of battle caught the attention of the much larger Indian village up river, where warriors began to gather for battle. As the 7th rounded up surviving Cheyenne, Lieutenant Edward Godfrey and K Company forded the Washita west of the village to guard the village's pony herd from the warriors not yet killed or captured. As Godfrey rounded up the ponies, he spotted several warriors making their way along the north side of the valley. Following their trail for three miles, he scaled a small rise and was able to see the valley beyond the village. The officer saw hundreds of lodges and teams of warriors streaming toward the gunfire (Greene 2004, 121).

The size of the Indian villages beyond Black Kettle's group represented a grave danger to the 7th. After the initial attack, the outfit was spread out, low on ammunition, and occupied with many tasks. Custer replenished ammunition from the supply train and deployed a line of skirmishers against the distant but advancing warriors. Custer sent Benteen, Myers, and Captain Thomas Weir to scatter the enemy (Greene 2004, 124–125; Hoig 1976, 137–139). Major Elliott and his men had not been seen since his ride down the Washita, and a search party sent out by Custer found no trace. Custer knew that any respite from the larger villages was only temporary and that the 7th was in danger of being overwhelmed. The pony herd represented a major liability for the outfit; it was large and the animals were absolutely unwieldy. In what would be a very controversial move, Custer ordered his troopers to shoot every animal in the herd. They also selected some women from the survivors and held them as hostages (Greene 2004, 135; Hoig 1976, 144–150).

The main controversy about the Washita is whether it was a battle or a massacre. Hardorff's sourcebook of primary and secondary material presents the testimony of soldiers, scouts, tribal members, and government officials. Most historians in recent years consider it a massacre, because the engagement was so one-sided (Hardorff 2006). Paul Hutton, editor of *The Custer Reader*, attempts to dispel what he believes is a myth about a peaceful, innocent village. He insists that the reason the 7th found the village was that they tracked a hostile war party back to it (Hutton 1992). There is little sign that the discrepancy between the points of view will be settled. Given that eyewitnesses often disagree with each other, there is no definitive answer.

Whatever historians call it, there is no doubt that the Battle of the Washita marked an important milestone for the 7th Cavalry. It resurrected Custer's credibility in the wake of his court-martial and elevated his reputation as an Indian fighter. Accordingly, the 7th was perceived, post-battle, as a crack outfit. Sheridan was pleased at the outcome, because it provided punishment against the Indians for the troublesome raids on settlers along the frontier. Most of all, it destroyed their livelihood. It demonstrated that the tactic of surrounding and corralling a large body of Indians during the winter campaign was effective.

### Garrison and Expeditionary Duties

In June of 1869, Colonel Andrew Jackson Smith retired, and command of the 7th was assumed by Colonel Samuel Sturgis. Sturgis's regular rank was that of lieutenant colonel, and he was serving in that capacity with the 6th Cavalry when Jackson's retirement opened up the command slot in the 7th (Carroll 1993). Sturgis's arrival saw the 7th once more spread among the forts of the Southern Plains.

In March of 1871, the 7th was ordered to garrison duty in the South. The outfit was scattered across Kentucky, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Louisiana and subject to constant redeployment depending on the needs of the federal government. Two tasks occupied the 7th while in garrison. First was protection of local, state, and federal officials from organizations like the Ku Klux Klan (Mills 2011, 202). Second was the enforcement of Reconstruction policies that included securing civil rights for freedmen (Carroll 1982, 36–37). Thus, the 7th was split into small detachments suitable for police work (Merington 1957, 240–245).

Though disparaged by Custer, Major Lewis Merrill of the 7th distinguished himself while commanding in the South. Researcher J. Michael Martinez in *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan* (2007) highlights the civil actions of Merrill, who vigorously investigated Klan violence in South Carolina. When President Ulysses Grant designated nine counties as being in a state of rebellion during 1871, he authorized the 7th to detain hundreds of suspected Klansmen. In particular, Merrill uncovered the identity of key participants in an insurgency. He gathered vital information for one of the largest federal prosecutions in American history (Martinez 2007, 126).

The stretch of Southern garrison duty ended in April of 1873 with the reassignment of the 7th to the Department of the Dakotas. They were assigned to the Yellowstone Expedition of 1873 to escort the Northern Pacific surveying parties and to guard against hostile Indian tribes. Much of the history of the expedition can be found in primary sources such as Charles Larned's letters or Colonel Stanley's report (Larned 1992;

Stanley 1874). Custer also wrote a short piece on a brief clash between elements of the 7th and the Sioux bands in the area (Custer 1992). The expedition reached the Yellowstone River on August 15, 1873, and remained there for a month, building stockades and escorting the surveying parties (Chun 2004).

Another expedition was the first step in the military invasion of the Black Hills (Brininstool 1951). In July of 1874, General Alfred H. Terry was tasked by Sheridan to establish a military presence in the area. Terry charged Custer with forming an expedition. Donald Jackson's *Custer's Gold* (1972) provides a compelling account of the 7th in the Black Hills. Custer's hiring of geologists and experienced gold miners suggests that there was more to the expedition than simply reconnaissance. A recent, definitive history of the Black Hills Expedition is Grafe and Horsted's *Exploring with Custer* (2002). It contains a "then and now" comparison with photography and draws on a wealth of newly discovered sources.

The 7th Cavalry was tasked to provide security for the Black Hills Expedition. To ensure the safety of the civilian elements, the 7th turned out 10 companies. Also included were two companies of infantry from the 17th and 20th Infantry regiments, three Gatling guns, and a single rifled cannon. This made for a powerful force that was thought to be fit to respond to any hostiles (Buecker 1997). Military preparations were largely wasted, as Custer encountered nothing in the way of resistance. Historian Robert Utley called it a "grand picnic" with glee club concerts and champagne dinners (Utley 1973, 244). The Black Hills Expedition was deemed a success by many Americans, as gold was found in abundance. Custer's reports paved the way for more expeditions and led to the establishment of Deadwood in 1876 and Fort Meade in 1879.

### The Centennial Campaign

The Centennial Campaign occurred during 1876, which was a conspicuous year in American history. The Grant administration declared that any Indians not on the reservation by January 31 would be considered hostile. As with the Washita, the original plan of the War Department was for the Army to conduct a winter campaign against an immobile opponent. Poor weather, bad intelligence, and heavy snow forced them to delay taking action and instead to embark upon a summer campaign. The 12 companies of the 7th Cavalry were the primary striking force of General Terry's column, which advanced toward the Little Bighorn River.

The 7th was, like many Army units at the time, understrength with only about 650 men and officers fully participating in the Centennial Campaign. Nearly every company lacked sufficient troops, and many only had one officer due to detached service within and without the regiment. While many

privates may have had little experience riding and shooting, the core of the outfit, the noncommissioned officers and the commissioned officers, were generally experienced and considered more than up to the task. The public perception of the 7th as an elite outfit has been questioned by authors like James Donovan, who asserts that the recruits were ill-trained and incapable of fighting effectively against the Indians (Donovan 2008).

Based on the reports of Indian scouts, Terry tracked the Indians to the vicinity of the Little Bighorn River. On June 10, 1876, he sent out Major Marcus Reno with six companies of the 7th Cavalry to reconnoiter the Tongue and Rosebud valleys to the west of the supply camp. Reno estimated over a thousand people in different lodges, much too big for his command to handle. Upon his return, Reno received a harsh rebuke from Terry and Custer for not pressing home the attack (Nichols 2000). Custer's disdain for his second-in-command only increased, and Reno was not included in any subsequent planning. On June 15, Terry and Custer began planning for what they hoped would be the final push against the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne.

Terry pushed ahead, joining the Dakota and Montana columns on June 21. With a good idea as to the location of the village, Terry cut orders for Custer on June 22 to take the 7th and to trace Reno's northern route into the valley of the Little Bighorn (Gray 1976, 148). With the Crow and Arikara scouts ranging ahead of a stripped down outfit, Custer moved north with haste. On June 24, the Indian scouts reported a large, abandoned village, which served as a campsite that night for the outfit. Many within the unit, including Custer and his entourage, desecrated and looted various objects; it was seen as a bad sign by the Crow and Arikara scouts for the upcoming battle.

With scouts reporting that the village was close, the 7th ceased all bugle calls and campfires. The morning of June 25 saw Custer at the Crow's Nest, which was high enough that the Indian scouts could see the village about nine miles away. The original plan to reconnoiter the valley and to gather as much intelligence as possible was replaced, as Custer was determined to act quickly to ensure that the village did not escape.

Custer's attack split the regiment into three battalions. Reno would take companies A, G, and M and nearly all the scouts for a total of 140 men. The second battalion under Benteen took D, H, and K companies for a total of 125 men. Custer would take E, F, C, I, and L as the vanguard column with a total of 225 troops. Custer divided his battalion into two wings, one under George Yates and a second under Miles Keogh. The remainder of the unit was with the pack train and Thomas McDougall. Custer's plan was to use Benteen to swing south and clear the upper valley of the Little Bighorn then swing back and join Custer's battalion. Meanwhile, Custer would advance up the right bank of Reno Creek, while Reno's men advanced up the left bank to where the creek joined the Little Bighorn

River. As Custer and Reno reached the confluence of the two bodies of water, Custer would flank his battalion to the rear of the village and surround it. He expected to repeat his success at the Washita.

As Custer advanced along the hills to the north of the village, Reno's charge petered out once the size and scope of the village became apparent. Retreating to the timber, Reno's command became unhinged along the creek. On what is known today as Reno Hill, the command began to reform, with only 91 men struggling through the woods, across Reno Creek, and up the hill successfully (Gray 1976, 175–176).

Meanwhile, about four miles to the northwest of Reno Hill, Custer split his wings and took Yates's across the Little Bighorn River at the Medicine Trail Coulee in order to attack the village itself. Keogh's wing was stationed on a nearby hill to provide fire support and to act as a beacon for the expected arrival of Benteen's battalion. As Reno's battalion was scattered and routed, the Indian warriors turned their attention to Custer and his troops descending toward the village. Most likely what occurred next was that Custer and Keogh were overwhelmed by an ever growing number of foes. Keogh and his wing were overrun first, allowing the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne warriors to concentrate on Custer and the remainder of the battalion. The fighting to the north ended in as little as a half-hour (Fox 1993).

Instead of following Custer's trail, Benteen followed the original trail, which led him to Reno's battered and confused battalion on Reno Hill. Reno stopped Benteen and begged him for assistance (Mills 2011, 258; Gray 1976, 179; Graham 1953, 181). Benteen obliged, and Thomas Weir led off with his company in an attempt to find Custer. This plan quickly dissipated. With a skillful rear action led by Edward Godfrey, the column retreated back to Reno Hill and began to make preparations for an extended defense. The fighting lasted until nightfall, when the warriors broke off their assault.

The morning of June 26 saw renewed fighting on Reno Hill that lasted all day. Indian warriors were engaged in a holding action to allow the village to escape. By nightfall, they moved to a more defensible location closer to the creek. Early on June 27, the combined Dakota and Montana columns reached the battlefield. As the morning progressed the full extent of the disaster became known. Of 650 troopers, about 367 survived under Reno's command. The next day, they tended to the dead and wounded.

Much of the historical literature seeks to determine responsibility for the 7th's defeat in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. This is generally broken up into pro- and anti-Custer factions. The Reno Inquiry in 1879 did little to settle the debate, since the officers of the 7th tended to rally around Reno's flawed but plausible testimony. Among the numerous works that carefully examine the 7th's defeat, Larry Sklenar's *To Hell with Honor* (2000) places the "last stand" within the context of "a dirty little war."

The 7th maneuvered with the Dakota Column to a prearranged location on the Powder River. The regiment was borne back to the base camp along the Yellowstone River, where around 150 extra personnel of the 7th had stayed, including dismounted troopers and the regimental band. The regiment had lost nearly a third of its strength. The campaign, however, was not over, and the 7th was soon brought back up to strength and sent back out with Terry and Gibbon. The setback had convinced Congress to allocate money and manpower to finally subdue the “hostile” Indians. The 7th was reorganized into seven companies with Reno in command.

In late July, a more cautious Terry began preparations for renewing the campaign. The Dakota Column now numbered in the realm of nearly 2,100 men with a massive logistical tail (Gray 1976, 214). On August 8, the Dakota Column met with Crook’s troops and combined their numbers. Nearly 4,000 men strong, there were 25 companies of infantry and 36 of cavalry along with the reduced, though still large, pack train. On August 18, Terry’s men separated from Crook’s troops and returned to the Powder River camp. The Centennial Campaign ended amid hunger, rain, mud, and misery (Mills 2011, 235).

### **The Nez Perce Campaign**

The Nez Perce Campaign in 1877 involved an Indian tribe that refused to bow to a treaty that was patently unfair. The Nez Perce lived in the Pacific Northwest and sought to escape General O. O. Howard’s attempt to force them on to a reservation. This was a result of an 1855 treaty, which was modified against their favor in 1863 due to the discovery of gold in their traditional homeland (Utley 1973, 297). The non-treaty Nez Perce refused to recognize this arrangement during the summer of 1877. Along with 800 Nez Perce, Chief Joseph and Looking Glass began to flee east toward Montana and the Dakotas. Howard was unable to catch them and requested assistance from General Terry.

Historian Elliott West in *The Last Indian War* (2011) provides the most complete account of the Nez Perce Campaign. General Nelson A. Miles commanded a combined force that included units of the 7th Cavalry as well as Sioux and Cheyenne scouts. Under Samuel Sturgis, the 7th moved west along the Yellowstone River and south along the Clark’s Fork of the Yellowstone, northeast of modern Yellowstone National Park, to intercept the tribe. As the outfit moved southward, it caught sight of the Nez Perce moving northward. The soldiers lost track of the warriors on September 7, yet picked up their trail again on September 13, which resulted in the Battle of Canyon Creek.

Sturgis split the command up into two battalions, one under Merrill and the other under Benteen. Three battalions under Captain Owen Hale were

detached to the north with Miles and his troops (Mills 2011, 298). The Battle of Canyon Creek occurred just to the northeast of the confluence of the Yellowstone and the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone, where after a forced march the 7th caught up to the Nez Perce. Fording Canyon Creek, the 7th was caught on the floor of the canyon, while the Nez Perce warriors held the high ground. Sturgis directed his troops to open fire and to engage, but this proved futile. Benteen took G and M Companies up the plateau to cut off the tribe's escape. However, a confusion of orders left his charge unsupported, as Merrill and the rest of the regiment had dismounted and advanced on foot. Benteen made contact and proceeded to dismount and skirmish with the warriors. Nez Perce snipers pinned down Benteen's men, as they began another charge against the rearguard. As darkness fell, Sturgis ordered his men back to the canyon floor, thus allowing their foes to escape (Forcznyk & Dennis 2011).

The three companies under Owen Hale (A, D, and K) were part of Miles's attack on September 30 at the Battle of Bear's Paw just south of the Canadian border. In this engagement, Hale was killed, along with another officer of the 7th, bringing the total casualties for the campaign to five killed and 11 wounded (Mills 2011, 308). The outfit provided troops at the surrender site, while Sturgis and Merrill took the wounded back to Fort Lincoln. The regiment was parted out with assigned companies providing escort to Cheyenne prisoners, eventually returning to Bismarck in October of 1877.

In mid-1879, the 7th left Fort Lincoln for the final time and moved west to the newly designated Fort Meade in the Black Hills. On July 17, 1879, Sturgis and the 7th arrived at the post. The Sioux had either settled onto reservations or fled into Canada. By 1880, there were few holdouts on the northern Plains left for the 7th to pursue (Lee 1991).

### **Wounded Knee**

The incident at Wounded Knee in present-day South Dakota on the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation was the last act for the 7th Cavalry during the Indian Wars. By 1890, the Army's mission had changed to guarding the reservations. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, which operated within the Interior Department, was judged incompetent by the Indians on the reservations as well as by the officers of the War Department. The broken promises and ration reductions mixed together to create a toxic situation. Two prominent Sioux, Short Bull and Kicking Bear, embraced the Ghost Dance movement to revitalize their people. Their militant version of the Ghost Dance alarmed the non-Indian residents of the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Montana.

The 7th Cavalry, commanded by Colonel James Forsyth, was sent to intercept Big Foot, one of the two chiefs who had taken up the Ghost

Dance (Gitlin 2010). First contact was made by Major Samuel Whiteside and four troops on December 28, 1890. Big Foot's followers agreed to follow an escort into Pine Ridge. Forsyth and the rest of the outfit joined them, and the next morning the Sioux found themselves surrounded by about 500 soldiers.

A medicine man named Yellow Bird started to dance and to chant, calling for resistance. As tensions mounted, a rifle shot echoed through the area. Immediately, the 7th opened fire with the resulting action turning into an artillery barrage. More than 150 Sioux were killed outright, including Yellow Bird and Big Foot. On the Army side, 25 troopers were killed and 39 wounded, including George Wallace, a former regimental engineering officer, who had survived the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Many of the Army casualties had been from the crossfire caused by Forsyth's encirclement of Big Foot's camp. Another Little Bighorn veteran, Captain Edward Godfrey, directed his troops to chase down a group of women and children, who fled the scene after the incident (Green 1996).

Wounded Knee was immediately regarded as a serious blunder by Miles, the division commander. Colonel Forsyth was relieved of command and brought up on charges stemming from the killing of women and children as well as the disposition of his troops. He was later cleared and restored to command, though not by Miles. On January 21, 1891, Miles held a review of his forces at the Pine Ridge Reservation. The 7th rode to the tune of "Garry Owen" in front of a group of Sioux watching from a nearby hill (Green 1996).

Much like the Little Bighorn, Wounded Knee is an event that stirs debate about the 7th Cavalry. The primary focus of the literature is on how the event impacted the Indians. Robert Utley noted that the incident marked the "last days of the Sioux nation" (Utley 1963). More recent scholarship has swung toward framing the incident as a massacre by exploring previously unused primary sources (Andersson 2009). Attentive to the actions of the Army as well as the Sioux, Jerome Greene recently completed the definitive work titled *American Carnage* (2014).

### Beyond the Indian Wars

The end of the Indian Wars saw the Army slowly shift its mission toward the acquisition of territory overseas. The 7th Cavalry was part of this push, beginning in 1899 with garrison duty in Cuba after the conclusion of the Spanish-American War. The 7th then served in the Philippines after the insurrection, first from 1904 to 1907 and later from 1911 to 1915. After returning to the United States, the outfit was stationed along the Mexican border just in time to take part in the failed Punitive Expedition in 1915 and 1916 to apprehend Pancho Villa.

America's entry into World War I expanded the overseas mission of the Army. The 7th joined the 15th Cavalry division, an administrative unit that never saw action due to the lack of duties for horse cavalry on the western front in Europe. In 1921, the 7th was assigned to the First Cavalry Division at Fort Bliss, Texas, to once more garrison and patrol the southwestern borderlands. While initially sitting out the first years of World War II in 1943, the outfit was unhorsed and formed into an infantry unit with a cavalry designation. This new role was for deployment with General Douglas MacArthur's push in the southwest Pacific theater of operations. The 7th took part in the invasion of the Philippines in late 1944, landing on Leyte Island and pushing north toward Manila. After the reconquest of the Philippines, troops performed occupation duty in Japan.

During the Korean conflict, the 7th Cavalry fought from start to finish. They earned battle honors at the Pusan Perimeter and the push into North Korea across the 38th Parallel. The outfit was involved in controversy surrounding its participation in the No Gun Ri massacre about 100 miles southeast of Seoul, where the regiment's Second Battalion killed approximately 163 South Korean civilians (Daily 1992). The regiment was broken up in 1957 to conform to a new tactical doctrine. The battalions were either reassigned to new parent units as reconnaissance squadrons or back to the First Cavalry Division in Korea. In 1965, both the First Cavalry's battalions of the 7th were returned to the continental United States, where they underwent a transformation to air assault formations equipped with Bell UH-1 helicopters. They were mobile cavalrymen once more, albeit with choppers instead of horses.

In August of 1965, the two battalions of the 7th and its parent unit, the Eleventh Air Assault Division, were transferred to Vietnam. Their first action was at the Ia Drang Valley with the First Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore. The resulting battle at Landing Zone X-Ray was joined by the Second Battalion three days later at Landing Zone Albany. The battle for the Ia Drang valley saw about 450 troopers engaged with approximately 4,500 People's Army of North Vietnam regulars. They engaged the PAVN troops while supported by American artillery and air strikes. They pulled back on November 16, 1965, when Second Battalion landed at LZ Albany and engaged a fresh regiment of PAVN regulars. Again, the concentrated use of American firepower played a vital role. On November 19, the Americans were evacuated. Many regard the battle of the Ia Drang as a successful demonstration of American air assault formations. There is little doubt that it was a tactical victory. The last unit of the 7th Cavalry left Vietnam in August of 1972.

During the Cold War, the squadrons and battalions of the 7th were posted to American bases throughout Europe and Asia. In the mid-1980s, units of the 7th were mounted on armor and once more assigned a reconnaissance designation. The 1990–1991 Operation Desert Shield/Storm

saw the 7th as part of the First Cavalry Division and functioning in a vanguard role during the invasion of Kuwait and Iraq. Various units of the 7th were deployed to Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom, with their duties ending in 2008 (Rodgers 2005).

Recently, certain squadrons were reassigned to conduct ongoing missions in the Global War on Terror. Others were rotated through Afghanistan and assigned to various parent units, including First Cavalry and Second Infantry divisions, as reconnaissance elements. Reminiscent of the 7th's historic service, reporters still hear troops greet them with the catchphrase: "Welcome to Injun Country" (Kaplan 2006).

### Conclusion

The 7th Cavalry has attracted attention from historians over the years primarily due to the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Nevertheless, the regiment has contributed to military operations from its inception in 1866 to the present day. Historian Michael Tate argues that they, much like other regiments in service, were part of a "multipurpose army" that made many contributions to the history of the United States (Tate 1999).

While active in the southern and northern Plains, the 7th Cavalry created its own unique history that spanned decades. The microscopic detail in which the regiment has been examined within the context of the Little Bighorn has left a gap in the broader story of the regiment, especially after 1876. The post-1876 history offers great potential for a detailed examination of how members of the unit recovered during the 1890s and redefined their mission beyond the American frontier. The wealth of biographies and primary sources could serve as a basis for new studies. Placing the Battle of the Little Bighorn in the context of the 7th Cavalry's history – rather than the other way – represents a challenging task for future military historians.

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## Chapter Fourteen

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### ELIZABETH BACON CUSTER

*Tonia M. Compton*

Elizabeth Bacon Custer, like so many “western” women of the late nineteenth century, might be remembered only by her family or as one of any number of so-called pioneer women. However, Libbie is not one of the nameless personages whose story is recalled by only a handful of people or whose life has been forgotten in detail. She is remembered as part of a larger whole. The reason for that is Libbie herself, but not because she sought to preserve her own story. We know Libbie Custer because she insisted that we know a specific version, a heroic and larger than life version, of her husband, George Armstrong Custer. Libbie is important for her work as a historian, yet Libbie’s role in myth-making extends far beyond how Americans remembered the death of her husband. She is best understood as one of the insistent voices responsible for crafting an American myth. Libbie’s voice resonates with the works of Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, Frederic Remington, and others who invented the American West of legend and lore (Murdoch 2001).

There has been much written about the life and legacy of Elizabeth Bacon Custer. She inevitably appears in accounts of George Armstrong Custer and the plethora of books and articles that analyze the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The most important biography is Shirley A. Leckie’s *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth* (1993). Leckie’s thorough exploration of Libbie’s life reveals the ways in which she actively contributed to the public’s memory of her husband, situating Libbie’s extensive work in the context of nineteenth-century gender roles. Leckie’s book is grounded in both western and women’s history, an approach that

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is unmatched by other biographers of Libbie. While there is little that can be added to this understanding of Libbie Custer as an individual, this chapter seeks to recognize the scope of Libbie's influence by positioning her as a creator of the broader myth of the American West.

### **Libbie's Background**

Elizabeth Bacon grew up in Monroe, Michigan. Her father, Daniel, had made his way to what was then Michigan Territory's frontier in 1822. Daniel Bacon spent his days teaching school and his evenings and nights farming and studying law. He eventually opened a law practice focusing on territorial land transactions, becoming a significant landowner in his own right and eventually entering politics. Bacon remained a bachelor until he was nearly forty. When he married, his bride, Eleanor Sophia Page, was nearly 20 years his junior, the daughter of a successful nursery owner. Perhaps Libbie's later success at selling a public image came in part from her maternal grandfather, Abel Page, who experimented with the "love apple," which was believed to be a poisonous fruit. She successfully marketed it as the tomato (Merington 1987, 19).

Daniel and Eleanor had four children: Edward, Elizabeth, Sophia, and Harriet. Only Elizabeth, who was born April 8, 1842, survived into adulthood. Sophia and Harriet both died as infants, and Edward, who had recovered from a spinal injury, succumbed to an unknown disease a year later (Leckie 1993). Libbie's childhood was shaped by these losses as well as by her parents' religious beliefs.

While Monroe had been a frontier settlement when Daniel Bacon arrived, Libbie grew up in a thriving town as the daughter of a successful lawyer and politician. Libbie's comfortable world came crashing down around her in 1854 when her mother died, leaving a grieving husband and daughter. Libbie spent several months in Grand Rapids with her aunt before entering Monroe's Boyd Seminary. Libbie remained there for four years, becoming a young woman who loved to read while struggling with the religious pressures of the seminary. In 1858, Libbie continued her education at the Young Ladies Institute in New York, now separated from her father by a great distance yet living close to an aunt. She apparently settled her religious questions and accepted the reality of her own transition to young adulthood and her father's remarriage to Rhoda Wells Pitts (Leckie 1993).

When Libbie returned to Monroe in 1859, she was a young woman of 17 who enjoyed a good relationship with her stepmother. Libbie graduated in June of 1862, delivering the valedictorian's address on a subject that was "very simple," she noted, "as was my style" (Merington 1987, 44). Libbie's graduation formally marked the end of her girlhood, and certainly the pressure to select a husband increased for her at this point. Libbie appeared to

be in no hurry to settle down in the summer of 1862, but a chance meeting at a Thanksgiving dinner set in motion the events that would make her Mrs. George Armstrong Custer.

The year 1862 brought Custer, a young lieutenant, to Monroe to visit his sister and resulted in a formal introduction to Miss Elizabeth Bacon at a Thanksgiving gathering hosted by the principal of Boyd Seminary. Both Libbie and George, whom she called Autie, vividly remembered their initial meeting. Just a year later Libbie wrote to Custer, recalling the event and declaring "I suppose it was *willed* that we should meet." Custer recalled that he "watched her every motion, and when she left ... went home to dream" (Merington 1987, 46–47).

After their initial meeting, the courtship proceeded slowly. Libbie's father worried about her numerous suitors, men that he described as being of the "mustached, gilt-striped and Button kind" (Merington 1987, 48). He was particularly suspicious of Custer, whom he had once seen stumbling out of a local tavern. Libbie herself proved reluctant to enter into a relationship with Custer. In the month after their first meeting, his calls to her home were refused. Undaunted, Custer followed Libbie around the town, attempting to convince her to accompany him to various events and allow him to call on her.

These early days of courtship proceeded through chance meetings rather than a formal relationship, because Libbie knew her father objected to the match. At one point Custer began courting her rival, Fanny Fifield, an arrangement that Libbie claimed was her own idea to throw her father off. Libbie seemed uncertain herself, declaring at one point that she did not "like C— so well after I had become acquainted with him" (Leckie 1993, 26). In April of 1863, Custer returned to his military duties, and Libbie returned to her other suitors. She had not forgotten Custer, nor had he forgotten her. The two corresponded occasionally through a mutual friend. In September, Custer returned to Monroe, now a brigadier general and bearing a slight wound received at Brandy Station. Upon his return to the front, Libbie gave her consent to a courtship, and shortly thereafter her father approved Custer's request to correspond with Libbie, marking an unofficial engagement between the two. On February 9, 1864, Libbie Bacon married her beau and became a military wife.

The young couple traveled to New York and Washington, DC on their honeymoon trip. In the nation's capital the "boy general" and his beautiful young bride entered into the whirlwind social scene before Custer's military duty required him to return to action. At this time Libbie began what would be her habit throughout their marriage: she joined Custer in the field whenever possible. Custer's household included two servants, a young boy Johnny Cisco, and a runaway slave, Eliza, who had claimed her freedom after hearing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Eliza remained with the Custers for five years, accompanying them on their early western adventures.

During the Civil War years, Custer's military assignments kept the couple in close proximity to or within the capital city. Custer continued to distinguish himself in battle, and as command of Union forces shifted to Ulysses S. Grant, sought promotion and command of his own division. Libbie's socializing with members of Congress and other political leaders put her in a position to lobby on her husband's behalf, exhibiting her devotion to Custer's advancement. As the war intensified, Libbie often faced separation from Custer, but she remained in Washington, DC ever vigilant for any opportunity that might allow her to rejoin Autie. The two managed occasional reunions in the closing months of the war, though probably none so joyous to Libby as their meeting in Richmond at the war's end.

Following the war's end, Custer was transferred to Alexandria, Louisiana, and tasked with organizing an excursion into Texas. Libbie accompanied Custer and the men on the overland march to Hempstead, Texas, a journey of 19 days that she described in *Tenting on the Plains, or General Custer in Kansas and Texas* (1887). While in Texas, Custer learned in early 1866 that his rank had been reverted back to captain, news that prompted Custer and Libbie to return to Monroe, arriving there in March. From Michigan, Custer traveled to Washington, DC, where he testified before the Joint Committee on Reconstruction and sought either a promotion within the military or a high-paying civilian job. While Libbie awaited him in Monroe, Custer was the toast of the town, attending parties and balls and sitting for the artist Vinnie Ream to sculpt a bust of him. Custer also spent several days in New York on this trip. In Monroe, Libbie's father fell ill and died on May 18; Autie was not there. Yet his absence resulted in success when he was appointed a lieutenant colonel in the newly created 7th Cavalry. While this marked a demotion from his wartime rank of major general, it was a substantial improvement over a captaincy (Leckie 1993).

The new appointment sent the Custers to Fort Riley, Kansas. Libbie traveled with Custer to his western postings, establishing homes at Fort Riley and finally at Fort Abraham Lincoln. The duties of the 7th Cavalry meant that, despite their home in Kansas, the couple faced separations for long periods of time. The unit was dispatched on various campaigns, and wives were not always allowed to accompany their husbands. As she had during the Civil War, Libbie willingly traveled from her home at Fort Riley to join Custer in other locations whenever possible. In 1869, the couple made their way to Fort Hays. Custer finally came home from his winter campaign, which had included the attack on Black Kettle's Cheyenne encampment at the Washita River. Libbie briefly met the native women and children, who were being held captive.

After an extended leave, Custer and the 7th Cavalry were dispatched to Elizabethtown, Kentucky, a post that Custer accepted for Libbie's sake. However, her first impression of the new posting was not favorable. During this southern sojourn, Custer again gained national attention when he accompanied the Russian grand duke Alexis on a western buffalo hunt.

Though she did not accompany the men on the hunt itself, Libbie became a part of the excitement when the royal entourage traveled to Kentucky, where Libbie danced with the grand duke at a ball. This marked the high point of the Kentucky years for both Custers.

In the winter of 1873, Custer received word of a new appointment, one that would return him to the plains to protect crews constructing the Northern Pacific railroad in the Dakota Territory. Though Libbie accompanied him on the journey, the lack of suitable housing forced her out of Dakota until the officers' quarters at Fort Abraham Lincoln were complete. Where the Kentucky years had threatened to mire Custer in obscurity, his exploits in Dakota revived Libbie's hopes for a future political career. "I tell you, Autie," she declared in a letter that summer, "I have never felt more ambitious for you nor more confident of your success than this summer" (Leckie 1993, 158–159). When Libbie finally joined Custer in Dakota Territory, they arrived together at the fort to occupy a bright new home. The couple enjoyed their home for only a few months before they were awakened in the night by the smell of fire. While awaiting the rebuilding of their home, the Custers lived with Autie's brother Tom.

At Fort Abraham Lincoln, Libbie worked to create a welcoming environment for the officers and their wives. The Custer home boasted dinners and card games, elegant dances, and theatrical productions on a regular basis. Despite this social scene, the constant unrest among the territory's native population meant summers of separation as Custer lead his regiment on campaigns. After the 1875 summer campaign, the Custers traveled east, first to Monroe, then on to New York, where they spent much of the early winter months living on Fifth Avenue in rented rooms. Their return to Dakota Territory proved to be an adventurous one, because their train was stuck in a blizzard and for nearly a week the passengers could do nothing but wait for rescue. The blizzard interfered with the winter campaign but did not stop the hostilities.

As the spring arrived, Custer and his regiment departed Fort Lincoln on the morning of May 17; Libbie and her sister-in-law Maggie accompanied their husbands on that first day, encamping with them that night before returning to the fort the next morning. It was the last time she saw her husband. She recalled the moment, a "splendid picture," when her "husband rode to the top of a promontory and turned around, stood up in his stirrups and waved his hat" (Leckie 1993, 182).

### Autie's Death

Libbie waited anxiously at the fort. The first news of the summer campaign that they received indicated the Army's defeat in the Battle of the Rosebud, a loss which meant that Sitting Bull's forces would be swelled with the ranks

of victorious warriors. It was, Libbie recalled in *Boots and Saddles*, “a death-knell to our hopes” (Custer 1885, 267). Libbie recounted the events at the fort on June 25, 1876, painting a picture of dejected and fearful women unable to find solace. It was “at that very hour the fears that our tortured minds had portrayed in imagination were realities, and the souls of those we thought upon were ascending to meet their maker.” Libbie and her companions did not learn of the disaster at the Little Bighorn until July 5, a day she described as one where “the sun rose on a beautiful world, but with its earliest beams came the first knell of disaster.” Libbie ended her account of that day by noting that “this battle wrecked the lives of twenty-six women at Fort Lincoln, and orphaned children of officers and soldiers joined their cry to that of their bereaved mothers. From that time the life went out of the hearts of the ‘women who weep,’ and God asked them to walk on alone and in the shadow” (Custer 1885, 268–269).

Following Custer’s death, Libbie and her fellow widows returned to Monroe. Libbie struggled financially, finding out about significant debts Custer owed, initially being denied his insurance benefits and waiting on Congress to approve an increase in her pension. The insurance problem was resolved in Libbie’s favor, and the *Army and Navy Journal* had started a fund that generated money for all of the Little Bighorn widows. Libbie’s share was \$4,750, which alleviated the worst of her immediate financial burdens (Leckie 1993).

The first Custer memorial service occurred in Monroe on August 13, a community event meant to recognize all of the town’s lost soldiers, including Custer’s brothers Thomas and Boston, his nephew Harry Reed, brother-in-law James Calhoun, and George Yates. The speakers lauded Custer, declaring him a hero and celebrating his commitment to duty, declaring that “his countrymen will vindicate his honor” and “will build a monument to the memory of so brave a son” (Leckie 1993, 205–206). Already, it seemed, this was true, given the headlines of newspapers and the speeches of politicians of all ranks. However, there were different recollections of Custer, ones that began to blame him for the events of Little Bighorn. Libbie’s first indication of this came with a statement from President Grant, which declared the events of June “a sacrifice of troops brought on by Custer himself, that was wholly unnecessary” (Leckie 1993, 206–207). Libbie, grieving and worried about finances, now faced the possibility that her beloved Autie would not be remembered as the hero that she recalled and celebrated.

Libbie had already demonstrated her devotion to Custer’s professional success, and now, in his absence, she continued to carry out that duty. Perhaps her determination to do so was reinforced by the sentiments and encouragement in a letter she received from her cousin Rebecca, who was both friend and family, shortly after she learned of Custer’s demise. In the

letter Rebecca pondered the “imposing monuments of the event which will be erected by the sculptor, by poet, by painter, and historian.” She concluded her missive with an observation and admonition: “When I read in the papers the brief line saying you were in the hospital ministering to the wants of the wounded I thought the mantle of your heroic husband had fallen upon your shoulders. Wear it, Libbie, for his sake!” (Leckie 1993, 199).

Libbie took up that mantle and wore it with pride for the remainder of her life. She became a noted author, writing three books that described Custer’s military life. Writing for Libbie was both a means to construct her desired picture of Custer and a way to make sense of his death. “If I can only learn to write more of my hero and keep him before his country,” she explained, “I shall not have lived after him in vain” (*Perrysburg Journal* 1896). Libbie’s writings about Custer successfully accomplished both of these tasks. Yet, for all the hero-making of her accounts, Libbie never wrote explicitly about the events at the Little Bighorn. Instead, she actively worked to influence how Americans understood these events by calling on friends to be her voice on those matters.

The first biography of Custer, which appeared in the fall of 1876, depicted him as a hero while placing the blame for the fiasco at the Little Bighorn on Major Marcus Reno. *A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer* (1876), though authored by Frederick Whittaker, was indelibly influenced by Libbie Custer. Whittaker, a dime-novelist, had met Custer at the offices of the publisher Sheldon & Company. In September of 1876, Whittaker published an article in *Galaxy* that favorably depicted Custer’s actions and laid the blame at the feet of Terry and Reno. While it is unclear if Libbie asked Whittaker, or vice versa, the author began work on a full-length biography shortly after the *Galaxy* article appeared. The book, much more than the article, exonerated Custer of any wrongdoing and pinned the fault squarely on Reno, with additional blame to spare for Captain Frederick Benteen and President Grant. The book was criticized for its lack of analysis and its hagiographic approach to Custer’s life (Leckie 1993).

Shortly after the book’s release, Libbie departed her widow’s life in Monroe for a new adventure in New York City. Unsure of exactly how she would support herself, Libbie volunteered at local hospitals and considered pursuing nurse’s training. Libbie became acquainted with the city’s leading philanthropic families, connections that led her to employment as the secretary for the newly founded Society of Decorative Arts. As she established herself in New York City, Libbie continued to actively shape her husband’s memory in various ways, including his West Point burial and the first monuments in his honor. Yet, Libbie did not publicly comment on the growing controversy surrounding Custer’s actions at the Little Bighorn.

Whittaker had continued his investigation, and his efforts to prove Reno responsible for the disaster expanded to include pressuring Congress for an inquiry into the Battle of the Little Bighorn. In 1879 a military court convened in Chicago to gather testimony from dozens of witnesses, a tribunal called at Reno's request in an attempt to clear his name. The tribunal neither blamed nor exonerated him. Following the court's findings, Whittaker argued that the officers who had testified failed to tell the real story in an attempt to protect the Army. Libbie did not publicly comment on the outcome of the investigation.

While the exact nature of Libbie's role in Whittaker's work is unclear, in later instances when criticisms of Custer's actions at the Little Bighorn emerged Libbie quite clearly asked her friends to intervene on her behalf. In 1890, Charles King published an article in *Harper's New York Monthly Magazine*, which placed blame for the defeat on Custer. King, whom Libbie had considered an ally based on his favorable review of *Tenting on the Plains*, explained that the article had been written years earlier and that he no longer held that to be true. Libbie complained that in addition to failing to include new testimony from Edward Godfrey, the story had been published "without a word to me from the editors" (Leckie 1993, 258). In an effort to combat the negative effects of the King article, Libbie asked Major General Nelson Miles to write in defense of Custer. Miles refused, so Libbie turned to Godfrey for help. When Godfrey attempted to plead exhaustion, Libbie contacted C. C. Buel, assistant editor of *Century Magazine*, to inform him that Godfrey would soon be submitting an essay.

Though caught in a controversy over his actions at Wounded Knee later that year, Godfrey did submit an article in February of 1891. When *Century Magazine* published Godfrey's essay in January of 1892, it was accompanied by an article from Colonel James B. Fry, who also believed Custer innocent of wrongdoing at the Little Bighorn. Libbie's plea to the editor had resulted in the simultaneous publication of these essays. Libbie's victory was short-lived, since Godfrey's article included a single quotation that questioned Custer's judgment on that day. Though she had appealed to the editors to strike the offensive quote, it remained when Godfrey's article appeared (Leckie 1993). Despite this disappointment, Libbie remained a supporter of Godfrey, and in 1921 for the forty-fifth anniversary of the battle and the dedication of a monument to Custer at Hardin, Montana, Libbie penned an introduction to a reprint of Godfrey's article, one which did not contain the offensive quote. It was her hope that the article would "serve to dispel every last, lingering doubt or criticism that might even *tend* to dim the glory of that band of troopers and their beloved general, heroes all" (Godfrey 1923).

Libbie continued her vigilant protection of Custer's reputation. In January of 1896, the *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* published an article by Colonel Robert Hughes. Hughes

argued that Custer's failure to follow orders were the real cause of the defeat at the Little Bighorn. Elizabeth again entered the fray. She had a pamphlet, "Mrs. Custer's Letter: Quoting an Unnamed Officer's Reply to Col. R. P. Hughes' Charge that Custer Had Disobeyed Orders," privately printed. In her introduction to the pamphlet, she declared that, rather than enter the debate herself, "I deem it best to submit a portion of a letter written me by an officer who held the closest personal and official relations with General Custer during the civil war." The anonymous letter proceeded to defend Custer's actions and argued that Terry's exact orders of the day were unknown, but that Terry believed in Custer's abilities (*Bismarck Tribune* 1921).

Libbie associated her own sense of self and belonging with Custer, even after his death. Her connection to his career as part of her own identity shines through in her writings. For example, in *Tenting on the Plains*, she noted that Custer did not travel home immediately after the Civil War's end, thus he was not granted a hero's welcome.

We missed all the home-coming, all the glorification awarded to the hero. General Custer said no word of regret ... I however, should have liked to have him get some of the celebrations that our country was then showering on its defenders ... But the cannon were fired, the drums beat, the music sounded for all but us. (Custer 1887, 22)

While Libbie makes it clear that the celebrations belonged to her late husband, her regret stemmed as much from her own inability to access these celebrations as from her belief that Custer had not received his due. In fact, Libbie's own identity became so closely tied to that of her Autie, that it is likely she did feel some level of personal anguish. Over the course of her career as a widow and author, Libbie carried very explicit ideas about how to best honor Custer, and reacted as if she herself had suffered a personal affront when those expectations were not met.

### Memorials

When it came to questions about the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Libbie did not claim her own authority, relying instead on others to defend Custer. She did, though, openly use her influence to manipulate events when they concerned public memorials. In 1879, shortly after the Reno court of inquiry officially cleared him of any wrongdoing, Libbie approached Vinnie Ream, a well-known artist and sculptor in Washington, DC and friend of Autie, about commissioning a bust of Custer. Ream had cast a model of Custer in 1871, and Libbie hoped to have her complete a

marble or bronze bust that glorified the general (Cooper 2004). Libbie's finances prevented her from purchasing a bust, even at the discounted price offered by Ream.

Libbie's disappointment at being unable to afford the bust was amplified when she learned that a committee had begun the process of commissioning a statue of Custer for West Point. As Leckie notes, "Not only had [Libbie] never been consulted, she had been ignored." Leckie argues that this slight indicated to Libbie that her status as a widow was not given the respect it deserved (Leckie 1993, 223). While there is certainly truth to this, when viewed in line with Libbie's insistence on securing and basking in glory for Custer, it is likely that Libbie saw this as a deliberate attempt to prevent her from controlling her husband's legacy.

Libbie had already demonstrated her ability to wield power in the memorialization of her late husband. During 1877, arrangements were made to have the bodies of the slain officers removed from their graves at the site of the battle and reinterred. Custer was to be buried at West Point, and Libbie began communicating with General John Schofield, the school's superintendent, regarding a location and date. When she learned that the body would arrive in the summer, she insisted on a fall burial, heeding Schofield's advice that a summer burial would mean that very few would be in attendance. When Custer was laid to rest at West Point on October 10, thousands attended the service (Millbrook 1974).

In Monroe, a local committee had been working to raise funds for a statue, an effort that coincided with, but was separate from, the *New York Herald's* fundraising efforts for the same purpose. The Monroe committee raised only \$1,000, while the *Herald* was able to enlist celebrity donors like John Jacob Astor, Albert Bierstadt, and Theodore Roosevelt to contribute more than \$8,000 in donations. While the local committee had hoped to use their donations to raise a statue of Custer in Monroe, John L. Bulkley, secretary of the Monroe association and a lifelong friend of Custer's, reported that two factors halted the local efforts. First, the local committee came to understand that Custer had requested that he be buried at West Point upon his death, making it a natural selection for a commemorative statue. The second factor, Bulkley noted, was that "Mrs. Custer preferred to have the monument at West Point or in New York" (Millbrook 1974, 23). The local committee in Monroe ended its efforts and donated the \$1,000 to the *Herald's* funds.

On this point, Libbie seemed to win the battle, but she would not win a statue of her choosing. The *Herald's* funds precluded an equestrian statue. The committee proceeded to solicit artists to commission a monument for West Point. They selected J. Wilson MacDonald, who had created statues of Thomas Hart Benton and Fitz-Greene Halleck. However, he was unacceptable to Libbie. When MacDonald's statue was unveiled on the West Point campus in 1879, Libbie was conspicuously

absent from the ceremony. Libbie's disappointment with the statue festered, and she continued efforts to have her own commissioned, noting in a letter to Ream:

I was never consulted and did not even know about it until it was done. The bitter disappointment I feel is such a cross for me to bear it seems to me I cannot endure it. I shall not see the statue until I can do something to counteract the effect that such a face as Mr. McDonald [*sic*] has modelled, must surely produce. (Leckie 1993, 226)

Libbie had found a formidable ally in her quest. Ream, a Washington insider and successful sculptor of American heroes such as Abraham Lincoln and Admiral Farragut, hoped to secure her own commission for a statue of Custer. She utilized her Washington connections and began the process of having a bill introduced to secure a Congressional commission for a Custer statue. She and Libbie collaborated, with Vinnie sending suggestions to Libbie and requesting her feedback and help. Despite their planning, however, Libbie and Vinnie failed to beat MacDonald to the punch. He had friends in high places as well, and those friends submitted a proposal directly to the Secretary of War to replicate the West Point statue. When Libbie learned of this she responded with anger, noting in a letter to Ream: "My blood boils at the thought of that wretched statue being repeated. ... I cannot think the statue else than a great insult to Autie's memory" (Millbrook 1974, 29). Libbie and Vinnie launched a campaign to prevent MacDonald's plan for a replica.

Both women leveraged their political connections. News of Libbie's objection soon appeared in the press, a move that Vinnie helped to facilitate. The *New York Times* declared:

Mrs. Custer does not object to the erection of a statue in Washington, but protests against employing MacDonald as the sculptor. Commenting on the Custer Monument at West Point, Mrs. Custer says ... The statue could not be worse than it is ... the statue is a failure as a likeness, as the representation of a soldier and as a work of art. It seems as if I could not endure the thought of this wretched statue being repeated ... (Cooper 2004, 237)

As Libbie's finances improved, she continued to desire a copy of the Ream bust, and she again requested an estimate, noting that "if I could only have the bust of General Custer that you have so faithfully made from his features, I would think my home so blessed" (Cooper 2004, 239). Vinnie provided her the information, but the quote from a local foundry for casting the bust shocked Libbie. Her response to Vinnie made it clear that she could not afford it. Vinnie and her husband, Richard Hoxie, made the decision to gift a plaster casting of the bust to Libbie, who later wrote

to Vinnie, "My little home is indeed a home now owing to your kindness. Just above my desk, that grand face looks up as if ready to face the future" (Cooper 2004, 239–240).

Libbie had prevented the replication of the hated West Point statue, but her anger over the original had not disappeared, nor had her determination to see it removed. She appealed first to the Secretary of War, Robert Lincoln, who would not take action without the approval of General Wesley Merritt, the commandant at West Point. Upon learning of Lincoln's reluctance, she approached General Sherman, hoping that he could leverage his power with the Secretary of War. In a letter to Sherman, Libbie indicated her belief that the statue remained in part because General Merritt personally disregarded Custer.

I tell you frankly I do not believe that General Merritt will interest himself to aid the Secretary of War in hiding that statue unless you ask him to do it, dear General Sherman. A wife's love sharpens her eyes and quickens her instinct and years ago I knew (not from my husband) that General Merritt was his enemy. ... I am afraid he will not care whether General Custer's memory is insulted by such an audacious and conspicuous representation as that surely is. (Millbrook 1974, 30)

Even as she was working to shape a particular version of Custer in the public mind, she asserted that this image came not from her own biases but was based in the truth of the historical record. In Libbie's mind, Merritt had proved his disloyalty when presiding at the Reno inquiry, thus he was unlikely to be an ally in her quest to preserve the Custer of her memory and remove the West Point statue.

While Sherman did not provide Libbie the help she sought regarding the statue, Leonard Swett did. Swett had met Libbie when he visited Fort Abraham Lincoln in 1875, and he had important connections that would serve her purpose. He had been a friend of the slain president and maintained a friendship with Lincoln's son Robert, the Secretary of War. He became a go-between for Libbie and Secretary Lincoln (Leckie 1993). Secretary Lincoln was not unwilling to act on Libbie's request but felt himself bound by the origins of the piece. He noted in a letter to Swett that had the statue been commissioned by Congress it would be a simple matter for him to intervene. The fact that it was a gift of private donors, however, made him hesitant to take action. Libbie remained dauntless and set about persuading the major donors to the statue fund that it should be removed, a task which she accomplished (Millbrook 1974).

In November of 1884, just five years after the statue's dedication on the West Point campus, Secretary Lincoln notified Swett that he had ordered General Merritt to have the statue removed, boxed, and placed in storage, a decision he attributed in part to "Mrs. Custer's urgent application."

Libbie was gratified. When removal of the statue was commented upon in the *Army and Navy Register* the next year, it was declared that it would “never be placed in position again as a memorial of the valiant deeds of General Custer, and the reason is that Mrs. Custer looked upon it as being very objectionable” (Millbrook 1974, 31).

### The Romantic West

While Libbie consciously and continuously worked to shape America’s memories and memorialization of Custer, she also contributed much to the romance of the West. Her memoirs of life with Custer did more than celebrate him; they also described military life, the role of the military in western expansion, and her own views of western landscapes. The popularity of these books ensured that readers often incorporated Libbie’s view of the West into their own.

*Tenting on the Plains* covers the Custer years in Kansas and romantically contemplates the West as a place of settlement. In its pages Libbie celebrated the heroes of western expansion. She declared that “a braver class of men never followed a trail” than wagon train masters whose “tender care of women who crossed in these slow-moving ox-trains, to join their husbands, ought to be commemorated” (Custer 1887, 228). Libbie saw white men as protectors of white women, a common theme in American perceptions of the West. She recalled the story of one such man, who expressed concern at transporting women overland in the face of threats from supposedly dangerous Indian enemies. Evidently, he “knew with what redoubled ferocity the savage would fight, at sign of the white face of a woman” (Custer 1887, 229).

Just as she underscored a belief in the vulnerability of white women to violence by natives, she also romanticized overland travel, replete with the threat of Indian attack on the trains, explaining:

It makes the heart beat, even to look at a picture of the old mode of traversing the highway of Western travel. The sight of the pictured train, seemingly so peacefully lumbering on its sleepy way ... recalls the agony, the suspense, the horror with which every inch of that long route has been made. The heaps of stone by the wayside ... collected to mark the spot where some man fell from an Indian arrow, are now disappearing. (Custer 1887, 229).

While Libbie and Autie had traveled to Kansas by boat and train, she painted a vivid picture of the wagon train and the threat that Indians posed to them. Her descriptions bemoaned the constant peril that native populations presented to white women. She declared of the wagon trains: “Instantly I recall

the hourly vigilance, the restless eyes scanning the horizon, the breathless suspense, when the pioneers or soldiers knew from unmistakable signs that the Indian was lying in wait." The threat, Libbie explained, too often became realized (Custer 1887, 229, 231). It is the picture of a scene repeated hundreds of times in Hollywood movies, if not in the actual experiences of overland travelers.

From Fort Riley, Libbie had a front-row seat to the Indian Wars on the Great Plains, and her writings vividly describe the experiences. Just as she had romanticized overland travel and created and perpetuated stereotypes about the threat of violent attacks by Indians, her discussions of these encounters did much the same. Libbie noted in *Tenting on the Plains* that when Custer's regiment departed Fort Riley for a campaign against natives in the region, the action was prompted by news of "outrages committed on the settlers, the attacking of the overland supply-trains, and the burning of the stage-stations" (Custer 1887, 303). Libbie observed that these acts had affected even the Custer family, relating the tale of Johnnie Cisco, Custer's servant during the Civil War. With Custer's help, Johnnie secured a post as a messenger for the Wells Fargo Company, and he remained a regular visitor to the Custer home at Fort Riley. When too many months passed between visits, Custer's inquiries revealed that "Poor Johnnie had gone like many another brave employee of that venturesome firm" and had been "killed by the Indians" (Custer 1887, 305–307). Between the rumors of Indian attacks that regularly reached them at Fort Riley, the loss of Johnnie, and the inescapable reality that her husband would soon be leaving the safety of the fort to undertake a campaign against the Indians, Libbie declared that "no one can enumerate the terrors, imaginary and real, that filled the hearts of women on the border in those desperate days" (Custer 1887, 308). In this language, Libbie was reinforcing the stereotype of the vulnerability of white women in the face of the native population on the frontier.

Libbie often, was able to depict American women on the frontier as simultaneously vulnerable and strong. While Custer was away, Libbie recounted, she and the other women of the fort endured their own series of battles and adventures. "We had gone through prairie-fire, pestilence, mutiny, a river freshet, and finally an earthquake," she recalled. "Yet in these conclaves, when we sought sympathy and courage from one another, there was never a suggestion of returning to a well-regulated climate" (Custer 1887, 326). Though she had been fearful at her husband's departure, she flourished in his absence, demonstrating her own strength and fortitude just as pioneer women must. In *Boots and Saddles*, Libbie recalled that "a woman on the frontier is so cherished, because she has the courage to live out there" (Custer 1885, 126).

Just as she portrayed pioneering white women in stereotypical ways, her attitudes toward native women also echoed popularly accepted ideas. In

discussing the young Cheyenne woman Mo-nah-se-tah, Libbie commented on the treatment of married native women, explaining that the “idle lolling of the young girls about an Indian village is in strange contrast to the untiring industry of the married women. Work of the most exhausting kind becomes their portion after marriage.” That work, according to Libbie, included “the hauling of wood and water, the pitching of tepees, the packing of camp equipage, and the braiding and embroidery of the war garments, tobacco-pouches, and gun-cases of the warriors, besides cooking the food and the care of the children,” so that “the freshness of youth soon departed from the face of a bride” (Custer 1890, 91–92). These sentiments echoed and reinforced common assumptions at the time that accused native men of overworking native women, who endured lives of drudgery.

While Libbie’s works mainly focus on the activities of her husband, she was also aware that her memoirs of the frontier were growing increasingly important in the late nineteenth century. It was her goal to explain both the contours of pioneer life and the role that the Army played in the settlement of the West. She noted: “I find it impossible to make the life clear to citizens ... unless they may have been over the Plains in their journeys.” Even then, she declared, they were more likely to have experienced the frontier “from the windows of the Pullman car” than from wagon or horseback (Custer 1887, 327). And, in Libbie’s mind, the stories of the pioneers were being lost, making her voice that much more important. Though she wrote with a tone of humility – “A desperate sort of impatience overcomes me when I realize how incapable I am of paying them [western pioneers] tribute” – she also saw herself as their voice. She mused: “And yet how fast they are passing away, with no historians! and hordes of settlers are sweeping into the western States and Territories, quite unmindful of the soldiers and frontiersmen, who fought, step by step, to make room for the coming of the overcrowded population of the East” (Custer 1887, 331).

Libbie claimed for herself something of a pioneer heritage in her discussion of these early western heroes, which helped to solidify her voice as that of an expert. She noted that her father was a pioneer by virtue of his settling in Michigan. “He was,” she explained, “not only a great while in making the trip, but subject to privation, illness and fatigue.” She was careful, however, not to assert this lineage too strongly, continuing this description of her father’s experiences with the caveat that “the man who went over the old California trail fared far worse.” Yet, Libbie reminded her readers, individuals “who pioneer in a Pullman car little know what the unbeaten track held for the first comers” (Custer 1887, 331).

For Libbie, the railroad represented a significant legacy of Custer’s military service. When she was invited to attend the unveiling of a monument to the men of the 7th Cavalry in Montana on the forty-fifth anniversary of the Little Bighorn, Libbie declined, stating “I have never been back to Montana since that day ... But I am with this western spirit. Progress and development were

the things for which General Custer, gave his life. And that is the spirit of the west today" (*Bismarck Tribune* 1921). Certainly, Libbie expressed that spirit in her writings.

All of Libbie's books enjoyed success and were favorably reviewed. *Boots and Saddles* received praise upon its 1885 release. Reviewers recognized it for the hero-worship that it was, but did not find it off-putting. The *New York Independent* declared it to be so well written that "the reader becomes attached to the author, her gallant husband, the servants, the soldiers, and indeed, to nearly every character in the volume" (Leckie 1993, 239). *Boots and Saddles* sold 15,000 copies in its first year. This success netted Libbie royalties of \$217.50 that year. With the warm reception of *Boots and Saddles*, Libbie found new opportunities to earn her keep by the pen, and for several years contributed columns to newspapers around the country.

Libbie's voice resonated with the Gilded Age. The success of her first book was followed by the release of *Tenting on the Plains* in December of 1886. Again, Libbie's work was received with praise. This book told the story of Custer's boyhood, his Civil War exploits, his time in Texas, and his arrival on the Plains at Fort Riley. Reviewers noted that while she praised her husband in its pages, the most impressive result was "the unconscious revelation of her own character as a heroic woman and the perfection of a wife" (Leckie 1993, 249). Another book, *Following the Guidon*, appeared in 1890 and solidified her financial security. Its publication also brought her first invitation to the lecture circuit, a task she undertook to tell her husband's story in a more personal way.

## Conclusion

While Libbie wrote and lectured to create and preserve the memory of her husband, it was also the most practical means for her to care for herself, and, in fact, allowed her to become very comfortably situated. By the mid-1890s, she was able to leave her apartment for a new home in Bronxville's Lawrence Park. Before the end of the decade, she constructed a second new home, The Flags, at Onteora in the Catskills, where she befriended many other female writers who were a part of America's artistic and literary elite. Historians observe that her work gave her a community of like-minded women and created an atmosphere of support.

Libbie's success also allowed her the freedom to travel the world. She first visited Europe in 1883, but after the publication of her books, she traveled even more extensively. In 1903, she embarked on a journey to Egypt, Turkey, China, and Japan. Two years later, she undertook a voyage to France, Germany, and Russia. In 1911, she again traveled abroad, visiting India on board the royal transport to Delhi that carried British

officers and their families to the coronation of King George V and his queen as the emperor and empress of India. On one of her world tours, Libbie traveled the Khyber Pass from Afghanistan to India on horseback; she was in her seventies.

Neither Libbie's travels nor her advancing age distracted her from her life's work of crafting and maintaining Autie's image for the American public. In 1906, Libbie, apparently having ameliorated her intense hatred of the MacDonald statue, requested that the head and shoulders, which had been separated from the rest of the statue, be displayed at West Point. While that request went unfulfilled, Libbie did influence the creation of an equestrian statue of Custer in Monroe. When the state appropriated funds for such a monument, they consulted Libbie about both the location and the artist. Libbie indicated her preference for Edward Potter, ignoring the pleas from her friend Vinnie Ream.

The Monroe monument was the last of Libbie's great efforts to preserve the memory of her husband as a hero. She supported plans to establish a museum at the site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, but she did not live to see it accomplished. Libbie suffered a heart attack on April 2, 1933, and died just days before she would have turned 91. Laid to rest beside her husband at West Point, Libbie's gravestone reads simply: "Elizabeth Bacon, wife of George A. Custer" (Leckie 1993, 305).

Libbie's death marked the end of her struggle to protect Custer's reputation. Libbie's devotion to her husband inspired respect for her and her beliefs, if not for Custer himself. Such care for Libbie's feelings did not prevent a rapid revision of Custer scholarship after her death. Historians soon began to rewrite the story of the Little Bighorn in ways that would have angered Libbie. No longer was Custer simply a chivalrous knight who faced overwhelming odds, instead he became a brash and stubborn leader who disregarded orders and his men's safety. This revision of scholarship began almost immediately after Libbie's death, suggesting that many writers withheld their criticisms of Custer out of respect for her.

Frederic Van de Water, whose 1934 biography of Custer was highly critical of the "boy general," wondered "how much of true historical importance has been omitted by those who have written of him, out of consideration for his widow." Van de Water was correct in his supposition. For example, Luther Hare, who had served with the Indian scouts, believed that "*General Custer was to blame for the entire disaster*, but because of the great regard he held for Mrs. Custer, he would not permit himself to be quoted to that effect" (Leckie 1993, 304–305).

Libbie Custer may, in some ways, be seen as a failure. Her vision of the heroic Custer no longer remains untarnished in either popular or academic literature. Her depictions of a victorious white American conquest of the savage natives is one that has been consistently rewritten in the twentieth century. And yet, something of Libbie's myths remain. George Armstrong

Custer is arguably one of the best known of America's military figures, and certainly the Battle of the Little Bighorn remains a much debated event in history. While scholars acknowledge the complexity of western expansion, the American public remembers the stereotypical portrayals of the frontier that reflected Libbie's passion.

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## Part IV

### INTO THE VALLEY



## Chapter Fifteen

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### THE CONVERGENCE

*Debra J. Sheffer*

Most Americans during the nineteenth century believed that any well-armed body of soldiers could always defeat a larger number of Indians. Most of the time, experience supported this view, but incidents arose to warn of the error of this thinking. The American military did not heed these warnings about its approach to Indian fighting. On June 25, 1876, at the Battle of Little Bighorn, George Armstrong Custer did not heed these warnings either, and chances are, most of his fellow commanders would probably have ignored them, too. This widespread belief in military superiority was one of the key elements of US military tactics and strategy against the Plains Indians in the nineteenth century.

Historians tend to dwell on the assumptions of military superiority demonstrated by Custer that day. Jerome A. Greene in *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War* (1993) and Robert M. Utley in *Cavalier in Buckskin* (1988) agree that Custer possessed more than his share of confidence, even bordering on arrogance, but his thinking regarding military action against Indians reflected the general military concepts of the time. Like his peers and superiors, he believed that any number of Indians would fall to smaller American forces on the battlefield. The challenge was forcing the Indians to commit to such an encounter. Historians such as Wayne Michael Sarf in *The Little Bighorn Campaign* (1993) and James Donovan in *A Terrible Glory* (2008) also agree that Custer made egregious errors in judgment. His greatest fear was that the Indians would skedaddle. Past experience supported his belief that he could gain victory if he could just engage the enemy and cut off their escape. News that the enemy far outnumbered him was of lesser

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consideration. Advice from his scouts that he should be cautious reflected their lack of confidence, a condition he did not possess. Indians had too often eluded him, and he knew that he could not allow them even a moment to flee. Time was the most critical element. Custer was not alone in his desire to earn a reputation as a cavalry commander and an Indian fighter. His peers sought the same. Experienced officers might have practiced an element of caution, but most would have acted much as Custer did.

Along with this confidence, the Army developed and refined practices, beginning in the 1850s, which dominated the campaigns against the Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyenne. The Army was haphazardly using some of these practices before General Philip Sheridan became Commander of the Department of the Missouri on September 5, 1867, but Sheridan transformed them into a "hard war" strategy against the Indians in the 1860s and 1870s. Furthermore, he added some of his own methods based upon his Civil War experiences, especially from the Shenandoah Valley Campaign in 1864. His Civil War experiences had taught him a valuable lesson: "reduction to poverty brings prayers for peace more surely and more quickly than does the destruction of human life" (Sarf 1993). Sheridan's campaigns would feature converging columns to attack Indian villagers in their winter camps. After each battle, troopers would destroy all Indian property and capture their pony herds. Taking the war to the enemy at their most vulnerable, involving non-combatants in the violence, and impoverishing the entire population were all part of the plan to bring complete subjugation and relocation of Indians onto reservations. The plans and actions of the Army did not exist in a vacuum. They were often in response to the plans and actions of the Indians, who, in return, developed and refined their own behaviors in the battlefield.

The traditional Indian concept of war was highly individualistic, reflecting the importance of the warrior in their culture. The path to status and standing as a man or a leader in the community lay in warfare. In other words, war was at the heart of their society, with a longstanding tradition of the importance of individual accomplishment and valor. Conflicts with other groups, if not for defense, were for revenge, to steal horses or captives, or to steal food and other goods. A major objective was to gain the necessary personal honor through counting coup. The most honorable coup was touching an armed enemy without harming him. This individual style of warfare often did not include group strategy or tactics. This style of war also kept casualties to a minimum, since warriors also served as hunters. War with American soldiers brought new aspects to battle for which the Indians needed to change their concepts and methods to prevail in sharp engagements. Individualized war gave way to concerted actions. War became more deadly, with honor necessarily playing a lesser role in warfare. This essay examines how and why both sides developed new strategies and tactics over time.

### Mounting Pressure

By the 1850s, armed conflict between the United States and the Lakota Sioux was decades old, but the California Gold Rush increased contact between them. The 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty contained promises from both sides. The Lakota would allow safe passage of whites on the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails and would allow construction of roads and forts in their territories in return for annuities. During August of 1854, violence erupted again due to the “skinny cow” incident along the Oregon Trail. High Forehead, a Lakota Sioux, shot a broken-down, straggling cow belonging to a member of a Mormon wagon train. Lieutenant John Grattan, just out of West Point and itching for a fight to launch his military career, took 29 men, two howitzers, and an alcoholic interpreter from Fort Laramie in Nebraska Territory to Conquering Bear’s camp to arrest the perpetrator. When High Forehead refused to surrender, Grattan ordered the troopers to fire the howitzers, mortally wounding Conquering Bear, who had attempted to find a peaceful settlement and had even offered one of his best horses to replace the cow the Indians had eaten. In the ensuing fight, Grattan, the interpreter, and all 29 troopers died.

Officials in Washington, DC called the incident a massacre and sent General William S. Harney and 600 men from Fort Leavenworth to punish the Sioux. Harney implemented previous practices into a strategy that included identifying Indians as friendly or hostile, using converging military columns to find and trap the Indians, attacking the village simultaneously from several directions at dawn in winter weather, preventing escape from the battlefield, forcing warriors to stand and fight in protecting their families, and destroying the camp, its contents, and pony herd to leave the Indians poor and helpless. The outcome would force the Indians to surrender to reservation life. Thomas S. Twiss, the newly appointed Indian agent of the Upper Platte (1855–1861), offered the Sioux a choice in the weeks before Harney’s expedition. He directed Sioux who wanted to be on friendly terms with the United States to locate south of the Platte River, leaving all hostiles to the north of the Platte. They would be the target of military action. Separating the Indians into factions became a common US military practice, especially under Sheridan after the Civil War.

As Harney’s men attacked on September 2, 1855, at Blue Water Creek, they discovered families escaping. Harney used deception to increase his chances of killing the maximum number possible. He called a truce as a ruse to allow his men time to surround Conquering Bear’s village of 41 lodges, now under Little Thunder, before more women and children could escape. Once the troops surrounded the village, Harney broke off negotiations and renewed the attack, killing 86 people and capturing 70 women and children, nearly half the village. The US troops suffered four killed and

seven wounded. Harney's plan to surround the village to prevent escape became another standard practice of the military, which targeted families in an effort to force the warriors to battle. In March of 1856, Harney gave the Lakota an ultimatum, requiring each band to assign a chief to be responsible for individual groups. Each chief would sign a new treaty or receive the same treatment as Little Thunder's village at Blue Water Creek. The idea of assigning authority to select Indians appealed to officials in the War Department, even though Indian custom did not recognize the idea of representative leaders.

Along with frequently labeling Indian factions as hostiles and killing as many as possible, the War Department encouraged the destruction of property. Harney ordered all property destroyed in 1855. In 1857, Colonel Edwin Summer and three cavalry companies began an expedition to punish the Cheyenne for depredations against western emigrants in Colorado Territory. The Cheyenne retreated, abandoned their village, and scattered out of Summer's reach, as was their preferred response. He ordered the troopers to destroy the 170 lodges as well as large stores of buffalo meat, clothes, blankets, and everything else they found. This impoverished the Indians and made them unable to care for themselves.

In the summer of 1864, Colorado territorial governor John Evans, in response to continued Cheyenne raids against settlers, called for friendly Indians to identify themselves. Consequently, he wanted to target the others for military action by Colonel John M. Chivington's Colorado Third Infantry of Volunteer Cavalry. Black Kettle identified himself as friendly in a genuine effort to procure peace for his people, who made winter camp on Sand Creek. Chivington knew Black Kettle was a peace chief but considered all Indians as hostiles and subject to extermination. Officials at nearby Fort Lyon confirmed that Black Kettle had surrendered and that he and his people were prisoners of war. Regardless, Chivington was determined to attack. Captain Silas Soule received orders to accompany Chivington and his 700 men, who attacked at dawn on November 29, 1864. Soule ordered his men not to fire and became a witness to the carnage. Even though Black Kettle waved both the American flag and a white flag of surrender, the massacre at Sand Creek continued until the afternoon. Chivington and his men killed and mutilated between 150 and 200 of the approximately 500 Cheyenne, two-thirds of whom were women and children. Chivington's men continued the next day, mutilating the dead, looting what they could, and destroying almost everything else. Citizens in Denver hailed Chivington and his men as heroes and marveled at their many trophies, which included scalps and body parts. The Indians suffered repeated incidents of similar violence and destruction, and they adjusted their thinking in response. Whenever possible, they relied on evasion, but events progressed to make that option less viable.

Through the 1840s and 1850s, the Lakota watched emigrants pass through the Platte River region. Though the whites promised not to disturb the region's resources, the Lakota witnessed alarming destruction and depletion of grass, wood, and wildlife. During the 1860s, the whites wanted to pass through the Powder River region, again promising not to disturb or use resources as they traveled the Bozeman Trail to reach the gold fields in western Montana. The Indians knew better than to believe them and determined to keep all whites out of the region. Avoiding whites became more and more difficult. Whites were entering the last Lakota lands, prompting the Indians to think and act in more desperate terms. The Indians still avoided armed conflict, if possible, but frequent warrior raids and ambushes became more common. The Army's mindset, however, did not change in light of these new behaviors, and forcing the Indians to stand and fight was still their major focus. The evasiveness and dispersion of warriors in battle strengthened the widespread belief that whites could defeat any Indians they encountered.

The United States sought a military solution to the Lakota problem in the Powder River country and sent General Patrick E. Connor and 2,500 troopers to subdue all the Indians they could find. Previously, Connor had been in charge of 200 California Volunteers in the January 29, 1863, massacre of Shoshoni at Bear River, Idaho, with nearly identical behaviors as those evinced by whites at Sand Creek. Connor surrounded the Shoshoni village and attacked from multiple directions, killing 250 of chief Bear Hunter's 450 people, including at least 90 women and children. After the battle, soldiers raped women, used axes to finish off the wounded, and destroyed the camp and all its contents. Connor's large, cumbersome 1865 expedition into the Powder River region found no Indians, who had ample warning and relied on their preferred action of scattering. Connor's men were caught in early snowstorms and nearly starved.

As the years passed and incidents mounted, both sides altered behaviors to become more effective against new threats from the enemy. The Indians relied less on evasion and more on raids and ambush, but they still avoided a pitched battle if possible. The War Department continued with methods to prevent Indian escape and force them to fight but needed a more effective approach than columns traveling deep into enemy territory from distant forts. The columns all too often experienced hardship without finding or fighting Indians in wide, open spaces. Accordingly, the Army built three additional forts along the Bozeman Trail to protect whites and enable their entry into the territory: Fort Reno, Fort Phil Kearny, and Fort C. F. Smith. Red Cloud's Lakota began months of sporadic fighting with the December 20, 1866, Fetterman Massacre, known to the Indians as the Battle of the Moon of the Popping Trees and the Battle of the Hundred Slain. Maneuvering at the base of the Bighorn Mountains on Little Piney Creek near Fort Phil Kearny, Crazy Horse employed the deception of appearing to run.

When the soldiers gave chase, the Indians used surprise and ambush to kill Captain Fetterman and all his 80 men. The Army wanted revenge, and General of the Army William Tecumseh Sherman vowed to kill 10 Indians for every soldier slain in the massacre. He wanted his men to kill all – including women and children – even if they had had no part in the attack. He served along side Harney and General Alfred Terry as members of the Indian Peace Commission. They urged complete subjugation of Indians using military intervention. The majority of the commission disagreed and decided the United States would offer a new treaty and annuities. The Indians, however, refused to go to Fort Laramie to negotiate. Both the Indians and the Army saw the futility in additional treaties.

Two incidents in 1867 further impacted Indian tactics. On August 2, hundreds of Lakota and Northern Cheyenne under Red Cloud and Crazy Horse simultaneously attacked Fort Phil Kearny and Fort C. F. Smith. The attack on Fort Phil Kearny became known as the Wagon Box Fight. Twenty-six soldiers and six civilians repulsed the much larger enemy force using new breech-loading Springfield rifles. Crazy Horse and Red Cloud knew their warriors would need powerful rifles as well as new tactics. The old offensive tactics often necessitated bold charges on foot or horseback using bow and arrow, which quickly evolved into individual fights. New tactics by Indians would involve larger numbers of warriors and would include mobility and ambush to isolate troops individually or in small groups. Thus, American soldiers would be vulnerable to surprises.

The United States again invited Red Cloud and other leaders to Fort Laramie for peace negotiations. Red Cloud refused, demanding that troops abandon the three forts. In July of 1868, the soldiers left, and Red Cloud's warriors burned the forts. Red Cloud did sign the 1868 Fort Laramie peace treaty that fall. As the 1851 treaty had done, it included a plan for peace, boundaries for the Great Sioux Reservation, and promises of annuity payments. The reservation included all of present-day South Dakota west of the Missouri River, part of present-day North Dakota, and part of recently admitted Nebraska. To the west, the Powder River country remained as unceded territory that the Sioux could use to hunt buffalo. The treaty contained assimilation language, of which the Sioux were probably unaware. Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and others rejected the treaty, leaving the federal government and military with continuing Indian resistance.

As the years passed, even with the new nature of Indian warfare, the biggest difficulty for the United States remained finding the Indians and defeating them before they could escape. The Army needed commanders who could force the Indians to fight. George Armstrong Custer, who went from brevet major general in the Civil War to lieutenant colonel after the war, reported to Fort Riley, Kansas, in October of 1866. In the spring and summer of 1867, Custer served as cavalry commander with Hancock's 1,400-man expedition against the Indians of the southern

Plains. The warriors eluded the officer at every turn. In 1868, Custer claimed, "I can whip the Indians if I can find them" (Lehman 2010). Since Custer had served under Sheridan in the Shenandoah Campaign, he was Sheridan's first choice as commander in the field.

### New Plans

Sheridan determined to solve the problems of Indian fighting. A significant part of the military's ineffectiveness against the Indians was the Army's conventional practices, which meant sending columns of infantry and cavalry with cumbersome supply trains after the highly mobile warriors. Expeditions had repeatedly failed, leaving men and horses worn out and unfit for duty. These practices were no match for the Indians, who could easily detect and evade them. Before Sheridan, the United States had no standard military doctrine for the unconventional warfare of Indian fighting. He and Sherman both believed their mission was complete subjugation of all Indians through military might.

In response to Cheyenne and Arapaho raids in Indian Territory in 1868, Custer led 800 men of the 7th Cavalry to find the hostiles along the Canadian and Washita Rivers during a winter campaign. He used the 1868 campaign to test Sheridan's strategy and tactics against the Cheyenne in Indian Territory. The bluecoats took the war to the Indians in their very homes at the time of year they were most vulnerable, to counter Indian capabilities to maneuver, and to make the Indians stand and fight. The Indians would be far less mobile in the winter, with shortages of adequate food for themselves and their horses. They would lose the ability to flee in cold weather. They would also have to fight to protect their families. This meant dawn attacks on villages, preferably in the worst of winter, to kill or capture warriors, to capture women and children for removal to reservations, and to destroy all property – lodges, pony herds, food, clothing, and weapons. The result was starvation, poverty, and helplessness. Similar attacks against villages had occurred throughout American history, but previous commanders had incorporated these methods in a haphazard fashion. Sheridan, however, planned to attack villages in winter months and incorporate the Civil War's "hard war" strategy into the very doctrine of military action against the Indians.

Sheridan's plan in 1868 involved not only a winter campaign but another strategy that would come to mark his approach to Indian fighting – converging columns. The winter camps of most of the Indians, he believed, lay on the Canadian and Washita Rivers in Indian Territory. Against this area he intended to launch three expeditions: one, under Major Eugene A. Carr, southeast from Fort Lyon, Colorado; a second, under Major Andrew W. Evans, westward from Fort Bascom, New Mexico. These

would act as “beaters in” for the third and strongest, marching southward from Fort Dodge (Utley 1988, 61). Sherman believed the Cheyenne should “be soundly whipped, the ringleaders ... hung, their ponies killed, and such destruction of their property as will make them very poor.” According to Sheridan, “people must be left nothing but their eyes to weep with over the war.” In a letter crafted in 1873, he wrote: “If a village is attacked and women and children killed, the responsibility is not with the soldiers but with the people who necessitated the attack” (Lance 1995).

Sheridan established Camp Supply on November 18, 1868, in Indian Territory as a base of operations for Custer. The cavalry officer departed from there on November 23, receiving orders to “destroy their villages and ponies; to kill or hang all warriors, and bring back all women and children ... to show the Indians they would have no security, winter or summer, except in obeying the laws of peace and humanity” (Greene 2004). The 7th Cavalry marched out with a foot of snow on the ground and heavy snow still falling. On November 26, they struck a trail leading to a village on the Washita River.

To prevent an Indian escape at the Washita, Custer divided his command into four columns, to attack from four directions at dawn the next day. The village was part of a larger camp of approximately 6,000 people and belonged to Cheyenne peace chief Black Kettle, who had barely escaped Sand Creek alive. Black Kettle had 51 lodges with approximately 250 people. The soldiers indiscriminately shot all Indians fleeing from their homes that morning, including Black Kettle and his wife, Medicine Woman. They committed atrocities against the noncombatants. The battle lasted 10 minutes, with soldiers such as Captain Edward Myers and Company E pursuing and killing fleeing women and children. Major Joel Elliott and 17 men went after fleeing Cheyenne but lost their lives to warriors from other camps in the area. The soldiers destroyed Black Kettle’s lodges, all their contents, and more than 600 ponies. Wounded ponies ran in terror and made the snow red with their blood, which is why the Cheyenne called this the Battle of the Red Moon.

Some Indians and some whites saw Washita as another Sand Creek. Sherman and Sheridan saw it as a successful implementation of their new plan of attack. They sent Custer out on two subsequent campaigns that year: on the Washita against the Kiowa in December and around the Wichita Mountains against the Arapaho. News from the Washita Campaign established Custer as the country’s premier Indian fighter.

The Washita Campaign also revealed the importance of logistics in Indian fighting. Winter campaigns were hard on troopers and horses. Supplying columns was difficult even in less challenging conditions. Usual supplies for an army on the march included a daily trooper ration of one pound of hardtack, three-quarters pound of bacon or salt pork, one-sixth pound of beans, and a quarter pound of coffee and sugar, for a total of five pounds a

day. Horses received 12 pounds of grain a day. Ammunition weighed 105 pounds per 1000-round box. Large campaigns typically required as much as eight tons of supplies a day. A column traveling with wagons four abreast was half a mile long. Sheridan's plan for winter campaigns and converging columns meant that they would have to use pack mules rather than wagons to follow scattering Indians, who were very fast and mobile most of the year. The only realistic target was the village in harsh winter weather, which permitted soldiers to take the Indians by surprise at their most vulnerable. However, the villages were in remote locations far from forts, which created the problem of supplying and equipping columns while making them more mobile.

The toll on men and horses was a lesson evident during the Washita Campaign. Colonel Samuel J. Crawford's column of 19th Kansas Volunteers left Topeka, Kansas, on November 5 for Camp Supply. They exhausted their supplies, lost horses in a stampede, endured a blizzard, and arrived at Camp Beecher on the Arkansas River too late. By the time they did reach Camp Supply on November 28, they were fortunate to be alive and were in no condition to travel or fight. Those members of the column too weak and disabled to make it to the camp were rescued by Captain Allison J. Piley and 50 volunteers, and they arrived at Camp Supply on December 1. Winter campaigns were an integral element of Sheridan's plans, but he would have to make sure his columns were capable of conducting them in remote areas. Sheridan needed better ways to supply and to equip his forces while making them more mobile at the same time.

Another outcome of the Washita Campaign led to a practice that spelled disaster in later operations. Historian Robert Utley explained that "Custer violated a fundamental military precept: he attacked an enemy of unknown strength on a battlefield of unknown terrain" (Utley 1988, 76). Fortunately for Custer on the Washita, he far outnumbered the enemy, the terrain offered no negative obstacles, and he left the battlefield before warriors from the downstream village could attack. Utley surmised: "The hardest task in Indian warfare was catching the Indians, not defeating them once caught. Given the chance, Indians would almost always flee, especially if their families were threatened. They rarely fought unless clearly favored to win, and even then not if casualties seemed likely. For the soldiers, victory, even battle, thus depended on surprise" (Utley 1988, 76). The Army needed to find the enemy quickly and hit without warning. Custer did not want to chance discovery, given the time it would take and the risk involved for a reconnaissance. Officers strongly believed that small but disciplined teams of soldiers could overwhelm large concentrations of Indian warriors. A surprise attack on a village containing women and children would nearly always cause flight. John Gibbon commented before the Little Bighorn battle: "The idea pervading the minds of all of us was to prevent the escape of the Indians" (Utley 1988, 177). The Indians' habit of fleeing was coming to an end, making

Custer's laxity in not conducting reconnaissance dangerous and eventually deadly. The Washita Campaign buoyed the Army's confidence in operating against Indian villages. Their main concern continued to be preventing the Indians from scattering and avoiding battle. Of course, Indian leaders took careful note of the habits of their enemy.

Sheridan used the winter column strategy against the Comanche in late 1868, culminating successfully with the December 25 Battle of Soldier Spring in which Major Andrew W. Evans's New Mexico column hit a Comanche camp on the Red River. In 1874, Sheridan used converging columns against Comanche and Cheyenne in the Texas Panhandle, with two columns from Fort Sill, and other columns from Texas, New Mexico, and Kansas. A campaign that began in August culminated in success when Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie's Texas column destroyed all the ponies, possessions, and combined camps of Comanche, Cheyenne, and Kiowa in Palo Duro Canyon, thereby forcing the Indians onto the reservation. Clearly, the Army was gaining confidence with each success.

In August of 1869, a Pikuni Blackfoot named Owl Child murdered Montana rancher Malcolm Clarke. In response, Sheridan planned a winter attack on Mountain Chief's camp on the Marias River. As Colonel Eugene Baker and his 200 dismounted cavalymen prepared to attack, their scouts alerted Baker that this was the camp of two peace chiefs, not the hostile camp they sought. Baker attacked anyway. Villagers died from bullets and from being burned alive in lodges. Death toll estimates of the Marias Massacre ranged from 173 to more than 200, mostly women and children, since the warriors had been absent while hunting. Once again, Sheridan and Sherman were pleased with the military action and the success of their approach.

### Total War

In addition to waging war against the Indians by using converging columns, Sheridan promoted the great buffalo slaughter in the 1870s, one more step toward a modern concept of total war. He viewed the development of western railroads as the greatest aid to the military effort against the Indians, because improvements in transportation enhanced the logistical capabilities of the Army. President Ulysses S. Grant, however, still sought a peaceful approach to Indian affairs, touting reservations and assimilation as the humane alternative to extermination. Sheridan and Sherman had to fulfill their military mission and constantly defended their actions against those who accused them of cruelty.

Between the 1840s and 1870s, pressure from white intrusion led to increased centralization and authority in the Lakota, especially the Hunkpapa under Sitting Bull and the Oglala under Crazy Horse. Centralization was a combined result of the US military strategy, reduced

herds for hunting, and the construction of railways and roads, which made avoiding the whites increasingly difficult and hostilities more likely. The railroad route to the Pacific was to follow the Yellowstone River, which the Lakota called the Elk River. In 1872, two summer infantry expeditions to protect railroad crews failed as a result of Indian attacks. The War Department sent Custer and the 7th Cavalry on the 1873 Yellowstone Expedition. Once again, the old problem appeared: the Indians avoided battle. These expeditions, however, sent a clear message to the Indians that avoiding battle would become increasingly difficult.

Pressure for economic stimulus in the face of the Panic of 1873 increased national interest in pursuing rumors of gold in the Black Hills. In 1874, Sheridan sent Custer with cavalry, infantry, scouts, and geologists, 1,000 men in all, on another summer expedition, to find a location to establish a new fort. In addition, he wanted to investigate the rumors of gold, which the expedition confirmed. The federal government's offer to buy the Black Hills was rejected by the Lakota, so the Grant administration turned to military might. Even though 15,000 miners already were in the area in violation of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, the War Department used Indian attacks on miners as an excuse for punitive action. The United States further violated the treaty with an ultimatum issued from Commissioner of Indian Affairs Edward P. Smith on December 3, 1875, ordering all Lakota, even the ones who had not touched the pen, back to the reservation by January 31, 1876, or face military action. Some villages did not receive the message in time to comply, and winter weather made it impossible for the Indians to report to the reservation by the deadline. Warriors knew of the order, however, and they knew that the bluecoats were coming.

### **The Road to the Little Bighorn**

Sheridan wanted a quick winter strike against the hostile factions, who roamed approximately 100 miles west of Fort Abraham Lincoln around the mouth of the Little Missouri River. Sheridan devised a familiar plan for the 1876 campaign, a convergence of three columns. Colonel John Gibbon would lead a Montana Column east from Fort Ellis; Brigadier General George Crook would lead a Wyoming Column north from Fort Fetterman; and Custer would lead a Dakota Column with the 7th Cavalry and a battalion of infantry and artillery west from Fort Abraham Lincoln. If executed with speed and mobility, a winter campaign would catch the Indians with weak horses and fewer warriors.

Sheridan wired his departmental commanders, General Alfred Howe Terry, Commander of the Department of the Dakota, with headquarters in St. Paul, and General George Crook, Commander of the Department of the Platte, with headquarters in Omaha, on February 8 regarding orders for the

operation. Crook was enthusiastic; Terry was not. Sheridan expected his commanders to capture the enemy before they could scatter and escape. According to Sheridan, "Unless they are caught before early spring, they cannot be caught at all" (Sarf 1993, 47). Officers and enlisted men alike thought that any of the columns, especially Terry's Dakota Column, could easily defeat any Indians they encountered. Historian James Donovan described the Army's approach: "Widespread thinking was confident, because apart from the 1866 Fetterman Massacre at Fort Phil Kearny in which 1500 warriors had ambushed and killed 80 soldiers under Captain William Fetterman, Plains Indians had never successfully defeated a larger disciplined force" (Donovan 2008, 99). Whites firmly believed that a few disciplined, well-armed troops could defeat vastly larger numbers of Indians.

Officials in the War Department shared supreme confidence in cavalrymen such as Custer. This confidence especially applied to the 7th Cavalry, since Custer had led forces that had singlehandedly destroyed Indian villages. To bring the 7th to its full strength of 12 companies for the campaign, units stationed in the Department of the Gulf traveled to Fort Abraham Lincoln. Terry also needed time to procure sufficient guides and scouts. These conditions and other events, however, would jeopardize Terry's readiness for a winter strike.

The widespread belief that whites could defeat any Indians bolstered the confidence of all the columns. In addition, the size and resources of the three columns for this campaign added to their confidence. Crook left Fort Fetterman on the North Platte River on March 1, 1876, with 662 men, 30 officers, five troops from the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry regiments, two companies of the 4th Infantry, 86 mule-drawn wagons, three or four ambulances, 45 head of cattle, a mule train with 62 packers and 400 mules, 200,000 pounds of fodder, 31 civilian scouts under Paymaster Thaddeus H. Stanton, and two newspaper correspondents. When Crook refitted and entered the field again on May 29, he had the largest of the three columns, with 10 companies of the 3rd Cavalry, five companies of the 2nd Cavalry, and 300 men from the 4th and 7th Infantry for a total of 51 officers and 1,000 men. With him were five reporters, three civilian guides, a pack train of 81 men and 250 mules, and a wagon train of 106 wagons and 116 men. Gibbon led six companies of infantry, four troops of the 2nd Cavalry, 23 Crow scouts, four quartermaster guides, a surgeon, and 20 civilian employees, for a total of 477 men. He also had 36 wagons and a muzzle-loading Napoleon 12-pound howitzer. The Dakota Column under Terry had all 12 companies of the 7th Cavalry, men from Company B of the 6th Infantry, 12 men from Terry's headquarters, two companies of the 17th Infantry, men from the 20th Infantry to man the Gatling gun, 200 packers/teamsters/herders, 114 six-mule supply wagons, 36 two-horse supply wagons, a mule train, and a beef herd. Terry had a total of 52 officers, 870 men, and five surgeons. Specifically, Custer's command included 39 Indian scouts.

All three columns were massive, well equipped, and well supplied. Their confidence was not unfounded, but the size and strength that contributed to this confidence also made engaging the Indians difficult if not unlikely. The Indians consistently relied on the slow movement of large Army expeditions to allow them to detect and evade troops. Given the scale and scope of these operations, the Indians had to change their traditional responses.

By February 21, Terry informed Sheridan of his plan to create a base for the Dakota Column up on the Yellowstone. Steamers up the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers would provide supplies. The Dakota Column would depart Fort Abraham Lincoln on April 5. Due to snow and Custer's absence to testify before the House Committee on Expenditures in the War Department's Clymer Committee on March 29, in which he implicated both Secretary of War William W. Belknap and Grant's younger brother Orvil in a scandal, departure of the Dakota Column was first delayed to April 15 and then to early May. Instead of rushing back to Fort Abraham Lincoln after testifying, Custer made a trip to New York City, arranging writing deals with the *New York Herald*, attending theater, and dining. He planned to board the train back to Fort Abraham Lincoln on April 24 but received a summons to return to Washington, DC for further testimony. He returned to the capital on April 27. President Grant, upset with Custer for implicating his brother in the proceedings, ordered Terry to exclude Custer from the campaign completely. Sheridan, however, wanted Custer to command the Dakota Column. After much persuasion, Grant withdrew his objections regarding Custer on May 8. Custer and Terry finally arrived at Fort Abraham Lincoln on May 10, but by this late date, hopes for a winter campaign were dashed.

With the arrival of large numbers of whites, the progress of the railroad lines, Sheridan's new successful military strategy, and the December 3 ultimatum, the Cheyenne and Sioux knew they were fighting for their existence. They discovered large numbers of soldiers in the field by early March. Evasion was becoming impossible since the Army was invading and occupying the last Indian sanctuaries. The Indians recognized that they needed to abandon some of their traditional tactics and to employ a more unified, offensive approach to white encroachment, beginning with the first encounter with Crook in March.

Crook's Wyoming Column mistakenly identified Northern Cheyenne from the Red Cloud Agency in southeastern Montana Territory as Oglala Sioux under Crazy Horse, and on March 17 the Battle of Powder River began. Four hundred of Crook's men under the command of Colonel Joseph J. Reynolds attacked Chief Old Bear's village of approximately 450 people in 65 lodges with as many as 150 warriors. Crook had instructed Reynolds to confiscate as much food as he could, to destroy the rest of the village, and to capture the ponies. Reynolds destroyed all the contents of the village, including the food. He captured the pony herd but

failed to properly guard it, and the Cheyenne regained their ponies in a counterattack that left more US troops than Indians dead. Suddenly, Reynolds left his dead and one wounded to fall into the hands of the enemy. Three days later, the surviving Cheyenne arrived at Crazy Horse's camp in poor condition. Survivor Kate Bighead recalled that after the Battle of Powder River, the bands traveled together for defense (Greene 1994). Both groups went north and joined Sitting Bull's Hunkpapa Sioux. Others arrived in surging numbers, and the bands chose a single leader, something they rarely did. They chose Sitting Bull (Welch & Stekler 1994). Reynolds's attack, though bungled, confirmed Indian expectations that soldiers were coming to enforce the ultimatum. In response, the Cheyenne and Sioux coalition altered their strategic and tactical approach from raids and ambushes to bold attacks with a unified front.

As a result, they banded together in a convergence of their own, deciding to stay together through the summer to strengthen their forces and to begin taking the offensive against the Army. In addition to bands uniting for stronger offense and defense, Sitting Bull sent runners to the reservations calling for agency Indians to join them in his war. They also increased the frequency of their attacks against troops, beginning with an attack on Crook – who had taken time after Powder River to return to Fort Fetterman to file charges against Reynolds and others before returning to the field on May 29 – on June 9 on the upper Tongue River. The Indians implemented their new strategy against Crook again at the Battle of the Rosebud on June 17, attacking in waves from several directions, forcing Crook's column to retreat south to his base camp at Goose Creek instead of continuing north from Fort Fetterman to converge with the other columns. This rare attack knocked Crook's column out of Sheridan's campaign and sent them reeling. To make matters worse, Crook did not notify Terry or Gibbon that he was out of the campaign. The results emboldened their enemies in the field.

A vision from Sitting Bull also bolstered Sioux confidence. For two days in early June, the Sioux held that year's Sun Dance in the midst of a large village camped along the Rosebud, the largest gathering many could recall. After 50 pieces of flesh were cut from each arm, Sitting Bull prophesied of Indian victory over many soldiers. This vision, combined with the recent victories over Crook, confirmed the wisdom of the new way of war. On June 18, the Indians moved their growing village of about 1,000 lodges with approximately 7,000 people and as many as 2,000 warriors to the valley of the Little Bighorn River, where they would soon use their strength against Custer.

The second column to enter the field was Gibbon's Montana Column, which headed east down the Yellowstone River from Fort Ellis on April 3. He commanded six companies of the 7th Infantry and the 2nd Cavalry under Major James Brisbin. Gibbon's scouts found evidence of large camps

on May 16, but Gibbon did not communicate that information to Terry until June 9. Based on Gibbon's information, Terry sent Major Marcus Reno with three companies of the 7th Cavalry to scout the Tongue and Powder River valleys and rejoin the command at the supply depot at the mouth of the Tongue. Had Terry suspected Indians in the area, he would most certainly have sent Custer instead. Reno disobeyed Terry's order and scouted to the Rosebud, where he found an abandoned village. This indicated that the Indians were not where Terry expected.

On June 21, Terry shared his revised plans with Custer, Gibbon, and Brisbin aboard Captain Grant March's steamboat, the *Far West*, on the Yellowstone. None of these commanders knew of Crook's withdrawal from the field. In all likelihood, the information would not have changed their thinking or their plans for Custer's march. In the lead, Custer would follow the Indian trail Reno had discovered and strike from the south. Gibbon would block Indian escape into Canada at the mouth of the Little Bighorn. Terry did not plan for the columns to converge precisely, but he did set a date of June 26 for the two commanders to make some kind of contact with one another. On June 22, Custer and 12 companies of the 7th confidently headed up the Rosebud and found the trail. Upon departure, Gibbon told Custer: "Don't be greedy, but wait for us," to which Custer replied, "No, I will not" (Donovan 2008, 183).

Custer's confidence might have faltered had he known the sheer numbers of Indians. By June 25, in the Little Bighorn Valley, the Indians were gathered into one of the largest villages ever known in the northern Plains, with 8,000 people and as many as 2,500 warriors, including agency and non-agency Indians. In addition to his failure to gather adequate intelligence, Custer's eagerness to trap the Indians contributed to his carelessness.

When Custer believed on the morning of the 25th that the Lakota were aware of his presence, he canceled his previous orders for further reconnaissance and decided to attack immediately. He was determined to prevent the Indians from escaping. When a small village between Custer and the main camp dispersed, it confirmed Custer's suspicions that the Indians would run as usual. Actually, those Indians headed to the main camp to regroup for the fight. Custer's scouts, however, understood the size of the gathering and that it was too large for Custer's column alone. His scouts knew the column had lost the element of surprise, because Indians had discovered a box of hardtack that had fallen off one of the column's wagons. The scouts advised caution and more reconnaissance. This advice angered Custer, and he disregarded it (Greene 1993, 47).

Even though the column had marched through the night, Custer planned for an immediate attack, using the same battle plan that he had successfully implemented at the Washita. He split his command into three components. Captain Frederick W. Benteen with three companies would head south and block any Indians escaping upriver. If he discovered none, then he would

rejoin the column. Major Marcus A. Reno and three companies would head south down Ash Creek until they could cross the Little Bighorn and attack the village from the south. Custer and five companies would go to the north end of the village and block the escape route of the Indians.

### Conclusion

Convergence did not work. Neither Benteen nor Reno implemented their part of the plan according to his instructions. Even had they done so, however, the attack still probably would have failed and ended badly for the Dakota Column.

The idea of converging columns had resulted in victory in earlier campaigns. The attacks were more coordinated, the attacks successfully implemented the idea of surprise, and the belief that cavalry and infantry could handily defeat any group of hostiles they encountered proved true. That was then. Conditions had changed, however, and the Army failed to note the early warning signs of these changes. Custer failed to order proper reconnaissance, which his scouts urged, and he refused to wait for Gibbon to arrive and place his column in a blocking position from which he could also mount an attack in support of Custer's forces. None of the US commanders noted the changes in their enemy's battle behavior, making the outcome of even a well-coordinated attack doubtful. Gibbon and Terry were in disbelief when they discovered the gruesome aftermath. Sheridan and Sherman refused to believe early reports of the defeat. Indeed, Americans reacted in stunned disbelief at the news.

The Indians, unlike the whites, did not fight to annihilate the enemy but to gain victory at a specific time and place. Afterward, they separated and moved out in different directions. Keeping a large village together for more than a few days was simply impossible. The large numbers of people and horses depleted resources quickly, forcing villages to be smaller in size and to remain continually on the move. They knew they had achieved a stunning victory, but they also knew the whites would keep coming in larger and larger numbers. Though the Indians triumphed at the Little Bighorn River, the defeat of the Army galvanized the United States and would ultimately end in mounting losses for the Indians.

The idea of converging columns was militarily sound and had a proven track record, but US commanders needed to understand their enemy to achieve success. Instead, they underestimated the threat at nearly every turn. Even when scouts warned them of the perils ahead, they did not alter their thinking. In contrast, the Indians had learned lessons from encountering converging columns in the past and had adjusted their actions. They would fight tenaciously to maintain the Black Hills. Sheridan's plan for a winter campaign encountered one delay after another until it

became a summer campaign. The later campaign date meant that Indians and their ponies would not be on winter rations, that they would once again be mobile, and that the agency Indians would be among their numbers. Although many factors undermined the convergence on the Little Bighorn, the most important factor was the critical thinking of the enemy.

Historians generally agree that Custer's arrogance and flamboyance contributed to the rash and unwise decisions that day, but examination of the evidence shows that he was not alone in his thinking. Research into Indian accounts reveals the strategic failure of the United States in anticipating their actions that day. Further examination of the failure of his fellow officers adds to the claim that Custer was not simply seeking glory at any cost. The Army forgot a basic rule of war: the enemy gets a vote.

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## Chapter Sixteen

### THE RENO-BENTEN SITE

*Wesley Moody III*

At noon on June 25, 1876, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer divided his command at the Little Bighorn River into four parts. Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen were each given command of three companies of about 120 men. Custer took personal command of the other two battalions, totaling five companies in all or around 210 men. Under the command of Captain Tom McDougall, Company B was left with the mule-borne supply train (Donovan 2008, 212). For the men and officers who survived, the battle that day would become the defining moment of their lives.

After Custer divided his command, Benteen and his battalion moved south. His command included Companies D, H, and K. His orders were to scout the area to the south, prevent any escape in that direction, and drive the Indians he came in contact with back toward the village and what Custer hoped would be the main battle. Benteen was frustrated with this order. He had hoped that his own Company H would lead the column in the attack on the village. They had been in the front when the 7th Cavalry had broken camp that morning. When Custer divided the command, Benteen felt that he was being sent away from the action because of the ill-will that existed between him and his commander (Donovan 2008, 213).

Captain Frederick Benteen, like most of the officers of the 7th Cavalry, was a veteran of the Civil War. Benteen was born in Virginia in 1834, but at 14 his family moved to St. Louis. When the Civil War broke out,

he joined the 1st Missouri Cavalry. Like most southerners who joined the Union, this caused problems within the Benteen family. Benteen was elected lieutenant in the newly created unit. He spent his first few years fighting guerrillas in Missouri and Arkansas, an experience that would serve him well in the campaigns against the Plains Indians. In 1863, Benteen and the 1st Missouri took part in Grant's Vicksburg campaign. Benteen would also serve under General James Wilson during his cavalry raid through Alabama and Georgia. Wilson, arguably the greatest cavalry general of the Union, recommended that Benteen be brevetted Brigadier General. The Civil War, however, ended before this could happen. Benteen would end the war as a colonel and inherit the job of occupying Atlanta. In 1866, Benteen was offered the position of major in the 9th Cavalry; he instead accepted the position of captain in the 7th Cavalry, because it was a white unit. Perhaps he came to regret his decision, for he often clashed with his commander in the 7th (Windolph 1947, 15–17).

Meanwhile, Reno and Companies, A, G, and M, would move toward the Little Bighorn valley. As the second ranking officer in Custer's command, Major Marcus Reno was not new to combat. Reno was born in Illinois in 1834. He graduated from West Point in 1857, three years ahead of Custer. During the Civil War, Reno fought at Antietam and Gettysburg and had an active role in Grant's overland campaign. In the last month of the war, Reno was brevetted Brigadier General. Unlike Custer, neither Reno nor those around him ever referred to him as general. Like most officers after the war, Reno's experiences were diverse. He served as an instructor at West Point and in the Freedman's Bureau. He also struggled against the Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina and served on the frontier in the Pacific Northwest (Sandoz 1966, 68).

As Benteen and his three companies headed to the south, Reno and his men remained close to Custer's battalion. A few miles ahead, Custer's scouts came upon an abandoned Indian campsite. It was obvious that the camp had been left in a hurry, as some of the tepees were still standing. Inside of one was a warrior, who had died of his wounds from the battle with Gibbon's column. There appear to be conflicting reports of whether this tepee was set on fire by Custer's order or whether by the Arikara scouts (Steed 2009, 96; Taylor 1996, 35).

One of the scouts reported to Custer that mounted hostiles awaited at the Little Bighorn River. Even though Custer and his men were beginning to realize that any hope of surprise was gone, the main concern was that they were scattering. Custer ordered Major Reno's battalion to attack. According to Private Charles Windolph, who was part of Benteen's command, Custer's orders to his subordinate officers "has been one of the most gnawed-over bones of contention of all the disputed points of the tragedy" (Windolph 1947, 91).

### Reno's Charge

Reno was ordered to cross the Little Bighorn and charge up the valley toward the village, which was still about two miles away. Reno was told he would be supported by the whole outfit. Reno would later claim that he expected Custer to give him direct support as opposed to opening a second front (Reno 1876, 2). This seems an odd assertion. If Custer were planning to add his portion of the command to the charge, it seems likely that he would have taken personal command instead of following behind Reno. What seems much more likely was that Custer was planning on striking the village in three places at the same time. This was the strategy used repeatedly against the Plains Indians (Steed 2009, 105–108).

After a three-mile ride, Reno and his men reached the Little Bighorn. He crossed the river with his three companies and 17 Arikara and Crow scouts. The river was close to 100 feet wide and a few feet deep. The horses and men were allowed a little time in the fresh cold water before they assembled on the other side. The men formed a skirmish line that reached nearly across the narrow valley (Donovan 2008, 216).

A number of the Arikara scouts spied part of an Indian pony herd down the river. They broke away to stampede and to capture the herd. Taking horses was the most effective thing that the scouts could have done to force the Sioux and their allies to capitulate that day. Around 10 of the Arikara chose to stay with Reno's men (Donovan 2008, 217).

Reno arranged his men in a column of fours with Companies A and M in the front and G in reserve, while the Arikara scouts formed on the left of the line. Reno's men saw about 50 Indian warriors ahead creating a huge dust cloud. Some of the men sighted Custer and his men on a hilltop. From the first biography of Custer by Frederick Whittaker to more modern writers like James Donovan in *A Terrible Glory*, writers have argued that if Reno saw Custer, then he should have realized that Custer was planning on striking the village down the river (Donovan 2008, 220–221). It is perhaps a leap of faith to assume that the sight of Custer on a hilltop would automatically translate into a flank attack in time to affect the outcome of the battle.

Reno ordered his men forward. There are a number of sources that claim this order was slurred. None of that evidence is unimpeachable, nor is it unlikely. Canteens filled with alcohol were by no means uncommon in nineteenth-century armies. Reno was eventually dismissed from the US Army for "conduct unbecoming an officer." Although not the stated reason for the charge, alcohol was definitely a problem (Donovan 2008, 140, 217, 228, 229, 236; Taylor 1996, 36). It is, however, ahistorical to use Reno's post-Little Bighorn drinking problem as evidence that he was incapacitated during the fight in 1876. The underlying charge against Reno was cowardice. That he was drinking perhaps indicated that he was afraid. No one at the time claimed that Reno made bad decisions due to impairment by

alcohol, yet such claims have been made by his critics – the bottle was proof that he was afraid and needed “Dutch courage.”

The Indians ahead in the valley were firing in their general direction while advancing nearly two miles toward the village. The soldiers were beginning to catch glimpses of the village, but few grasped how large a foe they faced. It was, however, becoming clear that this was a much larger village than they had expected, for the men on the far left could see at least 400 tepees. The Indians in their front were heavily reinforced by mounted warriors. Reno in his official report stated that “the very earth seemed to grow Indians.” Reno felt as if he was being drawn into a trap (Reno 1876, 2). Hundreds of Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne warriors, with their friends and families directly behind them, “maddened and desperate by the terrified cries of their wives and children whose lives were put in jeopardy for the third time within a few weeks,” were riding toward Reno and his men (Taylor 1996, 45).

Three of the cavalry horses panicked and took their hapless riders well ahead of the skirmish line. Two of the three troopers were able to regain control of their mounts and, though wounded, were able to return to the command. The third trooper was not so lucky, and his horse carried him forward to certain death, the first fatality of the 7th Cavalry on that day (Windolph 1947, 93).

As resistance stiffened, Reno ordered his men to dismount and to form a skirmish line facing the village. They were about a mile and half from their target. The decision to dismount has been another “bone of contention.” Many of Reno’s critics claimed that his order to fight with his cavalry on foot was a mistake that led to disaster. Had Reno ordered his men to continue the charge, they point out, the warriors might have panicked and rushed back toward the village to defend the women and children. Small forces of determined whites had defeated large numbers of Native Americans in the past (Fox 1993). This day of battle, however, was different. Reno faced a more determined foe, one that was fresh from another victory against the Army only a few days earlier (Windolph 1947, 93; Steed 2009, 106–108).

Considering the fate of Custer’s detachment, it seems an odd argument for writers like Whittaker in 1876 or Cyrus Brady in 1904 to say that Reno should have acted more like his commander (Brady 1904, 398). Reno’s force was greatly outnumbered, and dismounting his men was a very effective way to resist. His men were not only smaller targets, but they could fire quicker and more accurately without having to control their horses. It would be impossible to argue that this action did not have a major effect on the outcome of the battle, although it probably only determined which detachment, Custer’s or Reno’s, was wiped out. Another reason Reno may have called a halt to his charge was the large prairie dog village that spread across the valley. If a horse were to put a foot into one of the deep holes, both horse and rider would have been thrown to the ground (Taylor 1996, 42).

Around three o'clock in the afternoon, the three companies formed their skirmish line across the valley with around five to ten feet between each man. The right flank of Reno's line touched a small wooded area on the river. After the woods were checked for Indians, every fourth man led his and his comrades' horses into that area for safety. There were only about 100 men on the skirmish line, which only stretched about halfway across the valley. The order was given to move forward. The soldiers fired at the growing number of Indian warriors at the extreme range of their Springfield carbines. After advancing around 100 yards, Reno gave the order to halt. The soldiers continued to fire either kneeling or lying down, with little effect (Steed 2009, 96; Donovan 2008, 230).

Reno's left flank was not anchored, and his opponents began riding around into the rear of his position. This flank was made up of Reno's Arikara and Crow scouts, and many early writers such as Whittaker and Brady blamed them for not holding their position, implying that Army regulars would have held the flank thus preserving this position (Brady 1904, 238–239). However, the image of the left flank being crushed is false, as Reno gave the order to withdraw to the timber before overwhelming pressure could be applied to his line. Only one soldier from the skirmish line was left dead in the valley (Donovan 2008, 236).

Reno ordered his line to reform at the edge of a grove comprised of cottonwood trees. Reno personally led G Company to the edge of the wood nearest the village to defend against the warriors infiltrating the woods behind the main line. In the valley, mounted Indians rode within range, using their horses as shields. They shot at the troopers, who returned fire from a prone position. Having exercised very poor fire control in the valley, the soldiers were running out of ammunition. The men carried 50 cartridges on their person, and the rest remained with the horses. Lieutenant Charles Varnum, a West Point graduate and chief of Custer's scouts, brought Company A's horses toward the line, thus allowing the men to retrieve more ammunition and for some of the horse holders to add their carbines to the fight (Donovan 2008, 236–237).

The same writers who criticized Reno for abandoning the charge also argued that the wood line was a tenable position that could have been held indefinitely and that his order to withdraw again was another blunder on his part. According to Reno, he was facing odds of five to one. He left the woods and followed the inclination of all soldiers to move to higher ground (Brady 1904, 240; Reno 1876, 2). His hasty decision led to hardship for the men, who were exposed to enemy fire and faced water shortages. Since the majority of his losses occurred during the withdrawal to the bluff, abandoning the woods seems questionable. However, his command was overrun, his ammunition was running low, and his men were taking heavy casualties in the woods.

So Reno ordered his command to remount and to abandon the woods. Reno did not have a trumpeter with him, so not all of the men heard the

order. Most heard it by word of mouth, which only led to more confusion. As men abandoned the line, the Indians took advantage of the fact that so few soldiers were on the firing line. A group of warriors fired a volley into the woods from as close as 30 feet away. Among those killed by the shots was the Arikara scout Bloody Knife (Donovan 2008, 240).

Reno led his soldiers out of the woods toward the river and the higher ground. No consideration was given to the wounded or the dead. There were no orders given to fight a rearguard action. Men who had not heard the order or found themselves without a horse were left behind. Company A, under the command of Captain Myles Moylan, was closest to Reno when he gave the order, so most of them withdrew in some semblance of order. Company M, under the command of Captain Thomas French, followed close behind. French was one of the last of Company M to leave the woods (Donovan 2008, 241). Company G, under the command of Lieutenant Donald McIntosh, did not hear the order until the other two companies were already on the move. By the time he was able to mount his troops, there was a large gap between his company and the other two companies. McIntosh was one of the last to leave the woods. He did not make it across the river. The Canadian-born officer was knocked from his horse and killed. His badly mutilated body was found two days later (Windolph 1947, 94). Reno was responsible for a disorganized retreat, to say the least.

In Reno's report immediately after the battle, he referred to his initial action as a charge. Writers ever since have referred to Reno's "charge" in mocking tones and with quotation marks. It is obvious that almost immediately he was ashamed of the nature of his retreat away from the woods. Dr. Henry Porter, one of the 7th Cavalry's surgeons, reported a conversation that he had with Reno immediately after the charge. After Porter commented on the demoralized state of the men, Reno responded defensively with "That was a charge, sir!" The guidon bearer of Company M, Private Frank Sniffen, obviously did not consider it a charge, since he had ripped the guidon, or company flag, from its staff and stuffed it into his shirt. The other two companies lost theirs, the most dishonorable thing that could happen to a military unit (Porter 1879).

In all likelihood, the Indians were surprised to see the soldiers come out of the woods. With little order, the men raced along the river looking for a place to cross. It was four to five feet deep and nearly 40 feet wide where they forded. The horses had to jump a five-foot bank into the river. As they crossed it, the soldiers were extremely vulnerable to enemy fire. They were greatly slowed by the deep water (Donovan 2008, 247). It was in the river crossing that Reno's failure to order a rearguard action had the most damaging effect.

The soldiers who made it across the river faced a flat clear area, 100 yards wide, and beyond that the high bluffs. They raced their tired horses across the clearing and up the ravines and draws that had been cut into the sides of the bluffs. At the top of the bluffs, Varnum began trying to rally the men to make a stand. It was obvious to him that if they continued to run they

would all be slaughtered. Lieutenant Luther Hare also tried to rally the frightened and exhausted men. It was here that he earned his lifelong nickname, for he announced: "I'm a fighting son of a bitch from Texas." Reno ordered Moylan to dismount his men and prepare to fight for the high ground. Moylan's men with much encouragement threw out a skirmish line. The rest of Reno's command began streaming onto the hill. Most fell to the ground in exhaustion (Donovan 2008, 247–248).

For a reason unknown to the men on the hill, the enemy soon withdrew to the north. It seems likely that they rushed away to confront Custer's battalion. Had the Indians pressed their attack, it was very likely that the men on Reno's hill would have been overrun. During this lull, men who still had their presence of mind went back to the river to fill their canteens. Reno's command had lost three officers and 29 enlisted men. They could see the bodies of bluecoats strewn along the route they had just taken. The bodies were looted and mutilated, and the men on the hill had no idea if their fallen comrades were wounded or dead (Donovan 2008, 247–248; Windolph 1947, 96).

Ironically, the 19 men who were left behind in the woods probably enjoyed an advantage over those who had made the mad dash up the hill. Seventeen of the 19 reached the new position within a few hours of the retreat. The last two, the Italian-born Lieutenant Charles De Rudio and Private Thomas O'Neill, did not make it until 36 hours later (Windolph 1947, 95). They had not taken the advice given to all new cavalry recruits that if they "were ever wounded in an Indian fight and left behind and in danger of being captured, that we must save our last cartridge to blow out our own brains." If captured alive by the enemy, they would be tortured to death. In Reno's official report, he gave the reason for De Rudio's late appearance as "some trouble with his horse," which provides a much more casual feel to the escape from the woods than most narratives of the flight (Reno 1876, 2; Windolph 1947, 6).

### **Benteen and the Defense of Reno's Hill**

Reno's men were only on the bluff about 10 minutes before the arrival of Benteen and his battalion. Upon Benteen's arrival, Reno's men were still in the process of forming a skirmish line. Men who had fought in the valley were still straggling up the hill on foot and horseback into the new line (Windolph 1947, 96–97).

Since the 7th had been divided up at noon, Benteen's command, H, D, and K Companies, had seen no signs of the enemy. As this force moved away from the rest of Custer's command, Benteen would send an officer a quarter mile ahead to signal back. For two hours this process was repeated with no sign of anything. Benteen's units had traveled seven or eight miles

since they had split from the rest of the 7th. They only had to travel around two or three miles to reach the valley. Even with this long detour, Benteen was still ahead of Captain McDougall and the mule train. As Benteen's men entered the valley and passed the still burning tepee in the abandoned village, they could hear a distant battle (Windolph, 1947, 80–81).

It was just after passing the burning tepee that a messenger arrived from Custer. Sergeant Daniel Kanipe had been sent with an order for Captain McDougall to bring up the pack train as fast as possible. The messenger was also told that if he saw Benteen to tell him to come quickly. Kanipe had been dispatched on his mission as soon as Custer had seen the size of the village. The message was not sent by a desperate officer but rather by an excited hunter afraid that his prey would escape (Kanipe 1903). The messenger was directed toward the supply train, and the column moved forward. They had not traveled far before they encountered another messenger from Custer. Giovanni Martini, or John Martin as he is sometimes identified, was the trumpeter for H Company, but he had been temporarily assigned to Custer. Written by Custer's adjutant Lieutenant William Cooke, the order stated simply and hastily: "Benteen. Come on. Big village. Be Quick. Bring pack. W.W. Cooke. PS bring packs" (Donovan 2008, 257).

Benteen questioned Martini and learned that Custer was three miles ahead and preparing to charge the village. The last he had seen of Reno's command, Martini said, was in the valley, where they prepared to form a skirmish line. Martini was ordered to rejoin Company H. Benteen did not bother to send him on to McDougall, since the new message did not differ from the one carried by Kanipe (Windolph, 1947). Evidently, Martini was ordered to go to McDougall and then returned to H Company before they reached Reno's hill. This was what was recorded as Martini's testimony during Reno's Court of Inquiry. Martini, an Italian immigrant, would report in later interviews that he had been misunderstood because of his poor English. Nathaniel Philbrick in his popular history *The Last Stand* believes Martini stayed with H Company, as he used other sources for this encounter besides Martini (Philbrick 2010, 203–204; Graham, 1925).

When they reached the point where Custer and Reno's forces had divided, they followed Custer's path to the right. As they followed the trail, the gunfire grew louder. They passed a group of Crow scouts driving away part of the pony herd as ordered. Pointing from the direction they had come, the scouts shouted "many Sioux" and "soldiers" in their own language (Donovan 2008, 258; Windolph 1947, 89).

Benteen gave the order for his men to draw pistols, as they charged up the hill expecting to face hostiles at any moment. When they reached the crest, the whole scene opened up in front of them. Benteen and his men were about 150 feet above the valley and a mile and a half from the main battle. When soldiers mounted and on foot were seen on a knoll to their north, they rode quickly toward them (Windolph 1947, 90).

Private Charles Windolph of Benteen's command described Reno and his men as "disorganized and downright frightened." Reno was clearly shaken. Once they were on the knoll, Benteen ordered his men to dismount and directed his company commanders to form the men into a skirmish line. Since Reno's men had exhausted most of their ammunition, Benteen's men were ordered to divide theirs. It was clear to the men on the hill that Benteen had taken command from Reno. Benteen's men, unlike those under the direction of Reno, were unshaken and unbloodied (Windolph 1947, 97).

Benteen, however, only took tactical command. Reno still held overall command, and it was his decision to hold the position. Benteen showed Reno his order from Custer. Reno ordered Benteen to stay with him and to wait for McDougall and the pack train to arrive. Benteen has often been criticized by early biographers of Custer like Whittaker. Whittaker wrote that if Benteen had continued on toward Custer's position, perhaps Custer and his five companies would have been saved. Philbrick most recently suggested that Benteen did not continue on to Custer, because of his severe dislike for his commanding officer (Philbrick 2010, 220).

The tension between Custer and Benteen was not an invention of post-battle writers. It was obvious to the most casual observer that they did not like one another. Both men attacked each other anonymously in newspaper articles. According to fellow officers, one altercation between the two men came very close to gunplay. It was over an article that Benteen had written about Custer and the Battle of the Washita (Mills 1985, 183–184).

During the famous Washita battle in the winter of 1868, Major Joel Elliott, a friend of Benteen, led 16 men, some from Benteen's company, in pursuit of a handful of fleeing Indians. Elliott and his men found themselves facing more than their original quarry. Like Reno eight years later, Elliott ordered his men to dismount and to fight on foot. Cut off from the rest of the 7th Cavalry, Elliott and his men were all killed. Benteen claimed that Custer had abandoned Elliott to his fate. Whether Elliott and his detachment could have been saved or were still alive when Custer ordered the withdrawal is a debated point. Benteen believed that Elliott had been abandoned, and he was not reluctant to share his views in public (Mills 1985, 180–183).

To suggest that Benteen did not come to the aid of Custer due to a personal grudge is an extremely unfair criticism for numerous reasons. First, Reno was Benteen's superior officer, and his orders to Reno took precedent over orders that may have been written before the situation drastically changed. Also, it would have been unthinkable that Benteen would have abandoned three companies that were in trouble to reinforce five companies that may or may not have been in trouble. What is often overlooked is the fact that Benteen had obeyed his orders from Custer. He had been ordered to "come on." In other words, he had been ordered to join the battle.

Benteen had done just that. There were two major fights on that day. In other words, Benteen had attached his command to the first battle he encountered. While Benteen and Reno may not have done anything to help Custer personally, it is an unreasonable claim that two decorated senior US Army officers would endanger the lives of over 200 soldiers and the success of their mission due to a personal grudge.

Along the path of Reno's retreat, wounded men faced death and mutilation at the hands of the enemy. Reno did not send anyone to rescue the wounded or recover bodies during this lull in the fighting, seriously affecting the morale of the men. The 180 men on the hill formed a loose circular skirmish line. As they helplessly watched, some debated where Custer and the remaining five companies were. It was inconceivable to these men that their counterparts along the Little Bighorn had been killed in a battle to the last man (Donovan 2008, 260).

Dr. Porter set up a makeshift hospital in a depression in the middle of the position and did the best he could to care for the wounded. Lieutenant Hare was sent southward to hurry the pack train. Within 20 or 30 minutes, he returned with the first few mules carrying ammunition. Reno's men were desperately low on ammunition. The arrival of McDougall and his command added 24,000 rounds of ammunition and another 130 troopers to the defense. There were around 310 effective on the hill (Windolph 1947, 98).

At around 4:30, Captain Thomas Weir rode alone north toward the sound of gunfire, followed quickly by Lieutenant Winfield Edgerly and the rest of D Company. Weir's men had been with Benteen's column and had not yet seen any real combat. After about 30 minutes, the entire command of Reno and Benteen began moving in the direction that Weir and D Company had moved. The wounded who could ride did so, but the others were carried on blankets by six of their comrades. Within an hour, the main body was in sight of Weir's men. They could see large groups of mounted Indians and could hear rifles firing. These warriors began moving toward them. The men were ordered back to the original position on the hill. K Company under the command of Lieutenant Edward Godfrey, a West Point graduate and veteran of the Civil War, dismounted and acted as a rear guard in the slow withdrawal. The Indians attacked hard, and many of the veterans gave full credit to K Company for having "kept disaster from overtaking us" (Steed 2009, 96; Windolph 1947, 98–99).

On Reno's hill, the major was again actively in command, preparing the position for a coming attack. In the center of the position was a slight depression in which the mules and horses were kept. There was also a field hospital established on the open ground. This hill was not the highest ground in the area, and Indians from a higher position to the east were able to fire into the lower position with alarming accuracy. Whereas Plains Indians greatly prized horses, they knew their key to victory was keeping the US Cavalry dismounted (Windolph 1947, 99).

The soldiers were formed into a circular position with a man about every 20 feet. They quickly attempted to make their position as defensible as possible. They used pack saddles and boxes of supplies to form makeshift cover. Had the Indians charged the position they would have overrun it in all likelihood. A constant fire was sustained by the warriors. Small groups would move as close as possible to fire from concealed or protected positions. They would show themselves briefly or wave blankets or feathered headdresses to draw the soldiers' fire. Some of the warriors ran forward to "count coup" on the cavalry dead left outside the skirmish line. They were targeted and shot down (Windolph 1947, 101).

The sun set on a moonless night. With the exception of random shots, the firing stopped. There was a great deal of fear and dread over what sunrise would bring. There was also growing concern that the troops had been abandoned by Custer. What had actually happened to Custer was still unthinkable to the men on Reno's hill (Windolph 1947, 101–102).

More than a dozen men had been killed, and three times that number had been wounded in the three hours before sunset. The wounded cried out for water during the night, but there was none. Trying to reach the river would have been suicidal. Under the cover of darkness, the men dug. Lacking shovels, most men dug with their mess kits and hands. They did little better than to create shallow pits (Windolph 1947, 102–103).

When the sun came up on the next morning, the firing began again. The Indians continued their unorganized strikes. Some Indians as far away as 1,000 yards took shots from the knobs of various hills. This was out of range for the soldiers' carbines. Many of the soldiers foolishly assumed that these distant marksmen must have been white, since they "could shoot too well to have been a full-blood Indian" (Windolph 1947, 104).

The wounded men on Reno's hill desperately needed water. It had been 16 hours since they had water, and it was doubtful how long the command could hold out without fresh water. Captain Benteen called for volunteers from his H Company to make an attempt to reach the river. Nineteen men came forward. The four best shots, including the company sergeant, stood on the ridge firing into the positions of the Indians and drawing their fire. This went on for more than 20 minutes, as the other volunteers scrambled down to the river to fill canteens and anything else that would hold water. Several of these men were severely wounded in the desperate attempt (Windolph 1947, 105).

During the morning of the second day, it appeared to Benteen that the Indians were massing to charge the southern end of the position, where his H Company was positioned. As it became clear that an Indian charge was inevitable, Benteen rushed to the north side of the position to get reinforcements from Reno. He was told to take as many men from M Company as he wanted. Both Reno and Benteen feared that the whole position might collapse at any moment (Windolph 1947, 105).

When Benteen returned with the men, he ordered a charge. The men ran forward while yelling and firing their carbines. The Indians were driven back about 100 yards, and the soldiers were called back (Windolph 1947, 105). There was a similar charge made by Companies D and K. Reno accompanied this charge but did not claim to have led it in his official report (Reno 1876, 4).

In the early afternoon the siege began to be lifted. The soldiers observed heavy smoke drifting in the valley. The Indians had set fire to the grass to screen the relocation of the village. As the firing had all but stopped, soldiers began to leave their positions to see the Indian camp moving away to the south. Sergeant Windolph, who had received a battlefield promotion, described it as a “Biblical exodus, the Israelites moving into Egypt; a mighty tribe on the march” (Windolph 1947, 106). Reno, perhaps less romantically, described the retreating village as resembling “a large division of the Cavalry Corps of the Army of the Potomac as I have seen it on the march” (Reno 1876, 4).

It was late the next morning before scouts from Gibbon’s column made contact with Reno’s command. Reno and Benteen learned about the fate of Custer and his battalion at the Little Bighorn. Reno ordered Benteen to take a small detachment of a few officers and 14 men to ride to what has become “Last Stand Hill.” Benteen identified Custer for the burying party that would return the next morning (Windolph 1947, 108).

Reno wrote his official report a few days later, which noted the reasons for Custer’s failure. He criticized Custer’s decision to attack so late in the day with a divided command. He also noted the false belief that the Indians would flee. However, he felt the major reason for the defeat of the 7th Cavalry was simply “the great number of Indians” (Reno 1876, 5).

### Court of Inquiry

It did not take very long for the search to begin for scapegoats. Initially, the military leadership blamed everything on Custer. President Ulysses S. Grant and the commanding General of the Army, William T. Sherman, both quickly noted his errors. Even Custer’s good friend and mentor General Philip Sheridan, commander of the Division of the Missouri, concurred with their assessments. Nevertheless, the idea of the disaster being Custer’s fault was distasteful to the American public. What was also extremely distasteful at the time was giving credit to the Indians for the victory (Donovan 2001, 184–185).

The British-born poet and dime novelist Frederick Whittaker rushed to market a biography of Custer. Whittaker had served as a cavalryman during the Civil War and wrote with the air of an expert in military matters. Whittaker worked closely with Elizabeth Custer on *A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer* (1876), which was published six months after the Little

Bighorn battle. It portrayed a dashing Custer who could do no wrong. According to Whittaker, Custer had been betrayed by others: President Grant and General Terry as well as Major Reno and Captain Benteen. Indeed, the caricatures of Reno and Benteen that emerged from the biography took hold thereafter in books, newspapers, and magazines. Eventually, even movies and television made Custer a victim of their actions (Langellier 2000, 13–14).

Whittaker did not stop at writing about Custer and the battle but pushed for a court-martial or congressional hearing into the conduct of Reno. Although the frustrated Whittaker had no success, Reno himself requested and was granted a court of inquiry to clear his name of the charges. The court of inquiry met in Chicago, Illinois, in January of 1879. Whittaker and many Custer defenders were disappointed. After a string of eyewitnesses were called, the picture that emerged of Benteen and Reno was that of competent officers faced with adverse circumstances (US Court of Inquiry 1879, 556).

According to the official findings, “the conduct of the officers throughout was excellent” and “the defense of the position on the hill was a heroic one against fearful odds.” The statements did not sit well with Whittaker, who invented a military cover up. It was based solely on the fact that men who belonged to the same regiment and were veterans of the same horrific experience socialized with one another while staying at the hotel where the hearings were held. In other words, they decided to “close ranks” to protect their reputations (US Court of Inquiry 1879, 556; Donovan 2008, 365–367).

Reno’s court of inquiry is a treasure trove for researching the Battle of the Little Bighorn. It cannot, of course, be taken completely at face value. Although the officers and men probably did not conspire together as Whittaker alleged, they all had numerous reasons to alter the testimony they gave. First and foremost was the pride of the unit. It would not have been fitting, as the soldiers might have said, to “air their dirty laundry in public.” Also, regardless of the outcome of the hearing, those giving testimony would eventually find themselves serving under the same officers that they had testified against. It is most likely, however, that the soldiers truly believed that Custer’s subordinates acted properly under the circumstances. The testimony for the most part accounted for their actions upon the battlefield. A researcher can use the testimony to determine what transpired under the auspices of Reno and Benteen, though their state of mind in the heat of the moment might remain debatable.

## Conclusion

The Battle of the Little Bighorn demonstrates many common mistakes made by historians. Perhaps one of the largest obstacles that historians must overcome is the simple fact that we know how the story ends. Custer

and his detachment were completely wiped out, while other members of the 7th Cavalry survived on a hill. This leads many historians to falsely believe that the participants themselves would have known the final result. If Reno and Benteen knew that Custer and more than 200 officers and men were fighting for their lives, then remaining on the hill was dereliction of duty of the worst kind. Because we know what happened to Custer, it is tempting to read more into Custer's hastily written order to Benteen than what was intended. The actions of the Indians on those two days was unprecedented, and we should not be surprised that the officers did not expect to face such a battle.

Reno may or may not have been drunk during the battle. It is a debated point. Philbrick's bestselling *The Last Stand* and Donovan's equally popular *A Terrible Glory* portray a drunken Reno. However, Paul Hutton's *The Custer Reader*, written with a more academic audience in mind, seriously downplays Reno's drinking habits (Donovan 2008, 236–241; Philbrick 2010, 189–191; Hutton 1992, 258). A drunken Reno, however, is a mainstay of most accounts of the battle. This is not because the evidence supports it, though. Historians are storytellers at heart, and a drunken Reno simply makes for a good story.

Benteen's grudge against Custer is another example of the mistakes that historians make. If we assume that Benteen knew that Custer was in trouble, we must look for a reason that he did not do what those with hindsight believe he should have done. The "Major Elliott affair" is a popular answer to this question that requires no evidence for assertion. The notion of a personal grudge also makes a good story even better.

Few historians will argue that Major Elliott was not on the mind of Benteen on June 25 and 26. To some, it was obvious that Benteen refused to come to the aid Custer as a result of what had happened at the Battle of the Washita. Biographies of Benteen such as Terrence Donovan's *Brazen Trumpet* and Charles Mills's *Harvest of Barren Regrets* are probably more accurate in characterizing Benteen's mindset. They assume that he and Reno believed that they had been abandoned to their fates much as Elliott had been. They decided to fight for their own survival on the hill (Donovan 2007, 162–163; Mills 1985, 264).

There are few events in American history that have been as examined as much as the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Primary sources have been scrutinized by numerous historians. The battlefield still invokes a crime scene for a television drama, where the location of a spent shell casing gives that all important clue.

There are few if any historical events that do not deserve a fresh examination. Before a new narrative of the battle is written, a historiographical study is sorely needed. A careful examination of how each generation's concerns have shaped the story of Benteen, Reno, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn would go a long way toward a more accurate narrative.

There is a massive amount of material on this event that is both primary and secondary. As is the case with all such sources, they have their biases. Source authors rarely set out to mislead, but their frame of reference affects what they write. This is by no means a condemnation, and these sources are still necessary and useful if the writer understands the bias. This is the importance of a historiographical study that begins with Reno and Benteen.

Reno and Benteen are forever linked with Custer's death. As the reputation of Custer rises or falls, their reputation seems to be inversely related to his. For decades, Custer was portrayed as a hero whose failure was the fault of incompetent and vengeful subordinates. For the historian who realizes that Reno and Benteen have been unfairly portrayed, there is a strong urge to err in veering to the other direction. To portray the two as heroic and faultless is also inaccurate. The true challenge for the historian is to avoid the swinging pendulum while striving to portray the events as accurately as possible. Although a daunting task, a history that reflects the true events of that fateful day is a worthy goal.

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## Chapter Seventeen

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### CUSTER'S FIGHT

*Bob Reece*

The Battle of the Little Bighorn is a homegrown, all-American story with its own version of angry gods, betrayals, and lost souls. This battle and its ground have become nothing short of numinous mythos. Its power, an enigma that permeates every angle, along every coulee, and inside each ravine, will always remain.

Today, more than 300,000 visitors enter the battlefield gates each year. Many seek answers to the battle's multitude of unanswered questions. What was General George Armstrong Custer thinking? Why did Custer divide his command? Why did Custer not attempt to reunite with his other companies that were spread across a four-mile area? What was Custer's plan? These questions, and countless more, inspired a massive historiography that no other battle on American soil can surpass, excepting only Gettysburg.

The mission of this essay is to reflect on the Custer fight at the Little Bighorn, which began with the Custer battalion entering the Medicine Tail Coulee and concluded with the firing of the last shots on what is known as Last Stand Hill. Though other facets of the battlefield impacted what happened, the Custer fight on June 25, 1876, remains central to the story. Because it is impossible to address all relevant publications in the space allotted, the focus of this essay will be the landmark works published since 1973.

Why start with works from the year 1973? Jerome A. Greene's *Evidence and the Custer Enigma: A Reconstruction of Indian-Military History* was published in that year. Greene made a valuable and original contribution by being the first to interpret Indian accounts with artifact data discovered in the late 1940s and 1950s. *Evidence and the Custer*

*A Companion to Custer and the Little Bighorn Campaign*, First Edition.

Edited by Brad D. Lookingbill.

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*Enigma* transformed the Indian accounts, archaeological data, and the soldier testimonies into a rich narrative that remains timeless.

Nevertheless, many of the earlier classics still illuminate the Custer fight. Originally published in 1951, and reprinted in 1994, is Charles Kuhlman's *Legend into History*. Although Kuhlman relied mostly on the soldier markers to draw his conclusions, he is still highly regarded because of his painstaking research. William Graham's 1953 *The Custer Myth* contains first-person accounts from the Crow and Arikara scouts as well as Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors. Graham also delves deep into the soldier accounts from Reno, Benteen, Godfrey, and Edgerly. Published in 1955, Edgar I. Stewart's *Custer's Luck* is a superb source for research into the causes that led to the battle. Outstanding analysis on the legends born from Custer's actions can be found in *Custer and the Great Controversy: The Origin and Development of a Legend* by Robert M. Utley (1980). Today's student can also read edited versions of primary sources, including but not limited to the reminiscences of Lieutenant Edward Godfrey, Private Charles Windolph, Elizabeth Custer, Wooden Leg, and Black Elk.

Still in print and highly respected is John Stands In Timber and Margot Liberty's *Cheyenne Memories*, which was first published in 1967. Liberty was a young anthropology student when she met Stands In Timber, the oral historian of the Northern Cheyenne tribe. They became friends, and soon she began to interview him. He knew many of the warriors who fought against Custer; together they walked the battlefield where warriors shared memories of the fight. Stands In Timber shared with her what he had learned. The result for *Cheyenne Memories* is a rich narrative not only of the battle but also of Cheyenne culture. For the record, this is the original source for scholars interested in the theory that some of Custer's troops continued further northwest of where Custer was found on Last Stand Hill.

Several important factors contributed to the quality of the landmark works since 1973. First, the acceptance and inclusion of the Indian accounts into the interpretive narrative; after all, they were survivors of the battle. Second, soldier accounts of the location of the Custer dead. Third, the archaeological surveys first launched in 1984 found thousands of battle-related artifacts. Finally, the discovery, study, and interpretation of historical photographs of the battlefield have lent a new perspective to the events when viewed through a modern, forensic eye. As we will see later in this essay, careful study of photographs, especially with modern comparisons, offers clues to some of the mysteries.

### Custer's Battalion

"Soldiers are coming" was the warning spread throughout the Indian village, as Reno's attack in the valley – and the gunfire that followed – gave birth to a flood of humanity fleeing in all directions. Imagine this

Indian village – a small town of about 7,000 to 10,000 individuals – abruptly taking flight, and the chaos that erupted from the panic. Most of the noncombatants escaped north down river (Liddic 2004, 101–102). With families retreating, warriors also had to take significant time in retrieving horses from their herd on the western bench lands so that they could mount for the fight. All of the confusion at the Indian village bought more time for Custer to enact his plan.

Before Custer had fired a shot, he dispatched two couriers. His first was Sergeant Daniel Kanipe of C Company, who attempted to hurry the mule pack train along. These mules carried boxes of extra ammunition while trudging along slowly, causing tedious work for their handlers. Not long afterward, Custer's last message to Benteen was carried by Trumpeter John Martin (Giovanni Martini). Because he was a recent immigrant from Italy, who still struggled with the English language, Custer's adjutant, First Lieutenant William W. Cooke, quickly scribbled Custer's order (Graham 1953, 299): "Benteen. Come on. Big village. Be quick. Bring pack. W. W. Cooke. P.S. bring pacs." Custer did not know where Benteen was exactly, except that he had ordered him to scout to the southwest to ensure there were no satellite villages. That had been more than 10 miles back on the trail. If Martin could find Benteen, then perhaps Custer's luck would hold.

One of the most widely respected examinations of Custer's actions is John Gray's *Custer's Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed* (1991). A tenacious researcher, Gray provides a multitude of tables and graphs that allow the historian to view where every principal character was at crucial moments in the battle. The result is remarkable in scope and of superior intellect, considering the complexity of the scenario. Indeed, Gray's *Custer's Last Campaign* is a reference used in all major works since.

While Reno's men were charging down the valley toward the Indian village, Custer's battalion was concealed in the hills to the east of the Little Bighorn, where he divided his five companies of the 7th Cavalry into two wings. Richard A. Fox makes the best case from the 1874 cavalry tactics, which called for wing composition to be based on commander seniority. His hypothesis is that Yates would command F and E and attempt to strike the northern end of the Indian village at the ford. Remaining in the hills were C, I, and L led by Keogh (Fox 1993, 139–142). Custer distinguished his companies as much as possible by the color of their horses: Company C rode sorrels; E had the grays; F, I, and L rode bays (Taunton 1986, 6).

James Willert chronicles the different commands of the Sioux and Cheyenne War of 1876 on a daily basis in *Little Bighorn Diary: Chronicle of the 1876 Indian War* (1982). By Willert's interpretation, Custer intended to use several battalions to attack the Indians quickly from various places. The combined actions would help to confuse the enemy, making it difficult to determine where the best place for defense might be (Willert 1982, 264).

### Strategic Move to Medicine Tail Ford

In *A Terrible Glory: Custer and the Little Bighorn* (2008), James Donovan explains Custer's plan to support Reno. "Custer was never one to follow another man's charge," Donovan explains, "and he decided to implement an age-old cavalry maneuver that he had used time and again [...] hit the enemy's flank while the main attack occupied his front" (Donovan 2008, 219–220). Donovan's *Terrible Glory* was the first book on this subject read by a larger audience since Evan Connell's *Son of the Morning Star* in 1984, probably because of its engaging prose not found in most history books. Like many who write on this subject, Donovan falls into the trap of the need to find blame for Custer's defeat in one or more persons. For Donovan, that person was Reno. An example of Reno's faults, according to Donovan, was his behavior during his charge down the valley. Reno is described as drinking from a flask and then handing it to the man beside him, all accomplished while riding on a charging horse and shouting orders to his troops (Donovan 2008, 221).

In Gray's *Custer's Last Campaign*, Custer's plan was to send Yates's (left wing) to the ford strictly as a feint to draw warriors away from their attack on Reno. Custer and Keogh (right wing) crossed Medicine Tail Coulee and ascended its northern ridges. From there, Custer could continue to monitor Yates's progress while waiting for Benteen. After the feint and if Benteen was not to arrive, the two wings would reunite in the Calhoun Hill area, continue to move north while searching for a river crossing, and then charge south into the village over the open plain. It was the ideal terrain for a traditional US Army cavalry charge (Gray 1991, 358–361).

Donovan concurs with Gray's theory of a feint at the ford but differs somewhat in Custer's other strategy. If Benteen did not arrive as quickly as Custer needed, then Custer would order a volley fire as a signal for Yates to return north. Accordingly, the two wings would reunite in the Calhoun Hill area (Donovan 2008, 252).

Bruce Liddic's *Vanishing Victory: Custer's Final March* is more specific and adds that Custer deployed Company E to a ridge closer to Medicine Tail Ford in order to provide covering fire for Yates (Liddic 2004, 106–107). Liddic elaborates that after capturing the noncombatants, Custer would utilize Benteen's battalion to control the village (2004, 106).

One of the most respected historians of the American West, Robert Utley, presented an outstanding, albeit traditional, view of Custer's plan. Utley's *Cavalier in Buckskin* (1988, revised 2001 as *Custer: Cavalier in Buckskin*) is a superb Custer biography. Custer maneuvered his 7th Cavalry through a "stratagem born of desperation and a faint hope," and with dramatic prose from Utley, Yates marched to Medicine Tail Ford "with bugles blaring and guidons snapping" to distract and unbalance the enemy (Utley 2001, 147–148). Utley's view of Custer as a commander is one who could not turn back even though the situation before him was serious.

Telling the battle story solely from the Indian point of view is Gregory Michno's *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat* (1997). Michno's premise is unique and suggests that Yates approached the ford, not via Medicine Tail but from the ridges above; specifically, down Nye-Cartwright and Butler Ridge, because Custer wanted the Indians to see him. When the time came for Yates to pull back, he covered the same ground to reunite with Keogh on Nye-Cartwright, not Calhoun Hill (Michno 1997, 139–140). In *Lakota Noon*, Michno follows warriors throughout the battle with analysis at the conclusion of each segment of the fight. The structure of the book is unique; one can follow a single warrior through successive chapters while tracking his movements and actions. Michno's only weakness is the staunch defense of his theories. Thomas Powers, in his magnum opus *The Killing of Crazy Horse*, describes Michno as one who "parses this question with characteristic rigor" (Powers 2010, 514 n. 3). Powers also credits Michno for "the best summation of Indian accounts of the day of the battle" (Powers 2010, 514 n. 1).

### Action at Medicine Tail Ford

It is generally agreed that as Yates approached Medicine Tail Ford, his troops encountered gunfire from warriors ensconced along the river's west bank. A skirmish at the coulees followed. Soon, cavalrymen began to pull back to reunite with Custer and the right wing on Calhoun Hill.

In *Evidence and the Custer Enigma*, Greene theorizes the two wings marched down Medicine Tail Coulee, but Keogh purposely lagged behind because his right wing was held in reserve. As Company E approached the ford, its cavalrymen dismounted and formed a skirmish line. However, gunfire from the west bank of the river forced the entire left wing to retreat diagonally north towards Calhoun Hill via Deep Coulee (Greene 1973, 14–15). Deep Coulee flows south along the west slopes of Nye-Cartwright Ridge and empties into Medicine Tail Ford through a wide, and sometimes, boggy plain. To the south of this juncture, Medicine Tail Coulee enters the ford as well. As warriors fired on the left wing, Keogh also received fire from warriors in the ravines on the east side of the Little Bighorn, which further separated the two wings.

In attempts to reunite the two wings, Keogh moved up to Nye-Cartwright Ridge and then dismounted. From this high ridge, about one mile east of the ford, the right wing fired at warriors concealed in Medicine Tail Coulee. They also fired several volleys to cover the withdrawal of the left wing from the ford as it moved along Deep Coulee. Greene further suggests these volleys might be those heard by Reno's soldiers (Greene 1973, 21–22). After this defensive fire, the right wing remounted then moved down Nye-Cartwright Ridge, crossed Deep Coulee, then ascended to the Calhoun

Hill area (Greene 1973, 22). Meanwhile, Yates's left wing dismounted while retreating from the ford and ascended the northern banks of Deep Coulee with each cavalryman holding his horse and firing back to cover the retreat (Utley 2001, 149). It is possible that some of the first troops to fall in battle were from the Yates battalion while conducting this retreat and reunion with the right wing on Calhoun Hill.

Michno suggests a theory very different from the others. As Yates pulled back up to Nye-Cartwright Ridge and reunited there with Keogh's wing, warriors were already crossing the ford and moving diagonally up Deep Coulee. It is this warrior movement that drew the entire Custer battalion off of Nye-Cartwright towards Calhoun Hill (Michno 1997, 149).

### Attack on Custer's Right Flank

The young Cheyenne warrior Wolf Tooth led a band of about 50 warriors in the hills north of Custer's battalion near present-day Highway 212. They were searching for soldiers and found them in Keogh's right wing. Wolf Tooth first opened fire while Keogh was already covering the left wing's retreat from Medicine Tail Ford. Wolf Tooth's tenacious harassment of the troops would continue while paralleling their movements from the north.

John Stands In Timber and Margot Liberty first made the world aware of the significance of Wolf Tooth's actions in the aforementioned *Cheyenne Memories*. Wolf Tooth was Stands In Timber's step-grandfather and one of the warriors who accompanied him on the battlefield (Donahue 2008, 241). The phrase "Wolf Tooth was there" appears often in *Cheyenne Memories*.

The Wolf Tooth story is fully chronicled in one of the most impressive books in our historiography. *Drawing Battle Lines: The Map Testimony of Custer's Last Fight* (2008) by Michael Donahue provides John Stands In Timber's account with careful analysis as well as the Cheyenne oral historian's interview with the battlefield's former historian, Don Rickey. Additionally, Liberty granted Donahue permission to publish Stands In Timber's original color map that chronicled the soldiers' and Wolf Tooth's movements throughout the battle (Donahue 2008, iv). Donahue has found possible answers to important mysteries of this battle. Several maps show a ford near the mouth of Deep Ravine, though there is not one today (Donahue 2008, 70, 75, 352, 354). Several document that Custer continued north of Last Stand Hill (Donahue 2008, 73, 233, 241, 250) and that soldiers fought in the area of the present-day Custer National Cemetery (Donahue 2008, 87, 210).

A mystery that shrouds the battle is the missing 28 troopers, who fell near or inside Deep Ravine. To this day, their remains have yet to be found. One of the civilian maps in Donahue's book is by Walter Camp, who sketched it with input from Sergeant Daniel Kanipe during one of their

visits to the battlefield. Camp drew a line from Last Stand Hill south to Deep Ravine, which he noted as Deep Gully. He also noted on the map, "28 men found here," where Kanipe recalled seeing the remains of bodies (Donahue 2008, 275). During the mid-1990s, Gerard Baker, the superintendent of the battlefield site for the National Park Service, arranged for a survey of Deep Ravine employing ground-penetrating ultrasonic technology. This survey identified anomalies in the same spot as noted on Camp's map. Only further archaeological surveys within this area will reveal the source of the anomalies.

### **The Geography and Soldier Marker Distribution**

"Greasy Grass" is an Indian name for the Little Bighorn River, a short stream located within a large geographic span of the American West. The Lakota and Cheyenne migrated there each summer to hunt, to practice their religion, and to marry. The battlefield encompasses more than 600 acres of a tortuous maze constructed of ravines and coulees. It was a grouping of uneven terrain covered in big sage, prickly cacti, and waist high grass, all sprouting from a sunbaked earth next to the cool northerly flowing river.

The US Army would not have approved using this rugged land for a mounted attack. It was the kind of terrain that could break a charge, or worse, cause a horse to tumble and fall. The 7th Cavalry would have to fight mostly dismounted – a procedure the troops were trained to execute – but in this circumstance would contribute to their ultimate downfall.

If one walks the battlefield today and observes the positioning of the nameless white marble markers denoting where soldiers fell, one can easily begin to form personal theories about the battle. These markers were placed in 1890; the archaeological surveys during the 1980s concluded they are mostly accurate in indicating where soldiers fell.

There are five distinct groups of these markers that the National Park Service and the majority of historians familiar with the battlefield have named. First, Calhoun Hill – the southern extremity of Battle Ridge – was defended by L Company and commanded by First Lieutenant James Calhoun. Second, Finley-Finkle Ridge is a southwesterly extension of Calhoun Hill, where it is commonly agreed C Company made its final stand. The third section is midway between Calhoun Hill and Last Stand Hill. This extensive cluster of markers is located below the ridge top and east of Battle Ridge. Known as the Keogh Sector, all historians agree that this is where Captain Keogh and I Company made their final stand. Fourth, Last Stand Hill is the northern extremity of Battle Ridge. It was at the top of this hill that soldiers found Custer surrounded by most of F Company. The South Skirmish Line – laid out along today's Deep Ravine Trail – is the final group of markers. It extends southwest from Last Stand Hill to its end

at Deep Ravine. Soldiers from several companies were found in this area with most from E Company in Deep Ravine. E Company was commanded by First Lieutenant Algernon E. Smith, although Smith's body was found within the cluster of men on Last Stand Hill.

The white marble markers standing sentinel over the battlefield have forever remained silent. Until recently, they alone could not tell historians the names of the soldiers they represent, or which companies fought where. Reno and Benteen's surviving soldiers buried their friends where they lay on June 28, 1876. These survivors were able to identify some of the dead, despite the terrible condition of the corpses following three days under the intense Montana sun.

While visiting the battlefield in 1908, Camp, Sergeant Kanipe, and Custer's youngest scout, Curley, entered Deep Ravine to investigate where 28 troopers had perished (Donahue 2008, 273). Kanipe, with Camp noting locations on the survey map, identified the area where he had discovered the remains of C Company Sergeants Jeremiah Finley and August Finckle on today's Finley-Finckle Ridge. He also took Camp to the Keogh Sector and the area, where he remembered finding First Sergeant Edwin Bobo of C Company (Donahue 2008, 278–279).

Over time, and with more visits to the battlefield, Camp identified additional soldier death sites and landmarks important to the story. After Camp's death, his research material was all but forgotten until 1976, when Kenneth Hammer edited some of Camp's interviews into one of the most significant books, *Custer in '76: Walter Camp's Notes on the Custer Fight*. Included are interviews with 7th Cavalry officers and men, Indian scouts, and several warriors. *Custer in '76* is important in that it was the first to note Camp's locations of fallen cavalymen, especially around Finley-Finckle Ridge and the Keogh Sector.

Hammer created a crack in the dam of the Camp material, but Richard Hardorff busted it wide open starting in 1985 with *Markers, Artifacts and Indian Testimony: Preliminary Findings on the Custer Battle*. This small book only whetted Hardorff's appetite for Camp material, because he followed it with additional publications that included Camp's research. Two are the most complete accounting of identification and location of the Custer dead: *Custer Battle Casualties: Burials, Exhumations, and Reinterments* (1989) and *Custer Battle Casualties, II: The Dead, the Missing, and a Few Survivors* (1999). Furthermore, Hardorff has an additional seven books that focus on or include Camp's research.

It was Camp's intention to write a book on the historic battle, but he died before its completion. Hardorff's *On the Little Bighorn with Walter Camp* (2002) presents a collection of Camp's opinions on key aspects of Custer's fight, including a draft of his preface for the unpublished book. Lastly, we are fortunate that Michael Donahue's book, *Drawing Battle Lines*, includes the various maps that Camp produced.

### Reunion on Calhoun Hill

From Calhoun Hill, where the two wings reunited, Custer could look ahead along today's Battle Ridge, which extends in a northerly direction for nearly three quarters of a mile until it reaches Last Stand Hill. From there, Battle Ridge dips out of sight and continues as today's Custer Ridge Extension for another three quarters of a mile until it almost reaches Highway 212. There, it bends to the northwest until it finally ends against a grassy plain beside the Little Bighorn River.

Looking behind, Custer could see the river at Medicine Tail Ford with warriors on horse streaming across and galloping in his direction. Weir Point, with its slight saddle, stood high above the ford. Across the river was a broad open plain with low bench lands above. And, of course, he could see and hear the chaos from thousands of people moving quickly along the valley to the north. There was most likely panic within this crowd of non-combatants, as the word spread to look to their right, where the soldiers were seen. From his experience at the Washita battle, Custer knew he had to capture the noncombatants. There was no other way to defeat the enemy quickly with minimal casualties.

Kingsley Bray in *Crazy Horse: A Lakota Life* (2006) depends on the Curley accounts to explain the early action on this southern end of Battle Ridge. Custer held an officer's conference, and the decision was made for the regiment to find a suitable place to fight until the rest of the command could reunite with them and win the day. Custer ordered Keogh's right wing to hold Calhoun Hill, while he and the left wing continued north along Battle Ridge with "the dual objectives of securing a crossing and a defensive position in uneasy balance" (Bray 2006, 225). Liddic explains that Custer prepared Calhoun Hill to help Benteen reunite with the command (Liddic 2004, 144). Tim Lehman and Thom Hatch agree with the theory that L Company was to hold Calhoun Hill for Benteen's arrival (Lehman 2010, 116; Hatch 2002, 186).

Liddic is ultimately critical of Custer for dividing his five companies at Calhoun Hill. The two wings are left "without either having sufficient manpower to accomplish their objective," an error that was compounded by "Custer's failure to grasp the Indians frame of mind." The two wings would make their last stands alone (Liddic 2004, 149).

The brilliant photographic study *Where Custer Fell: Photographs of the Little Bighorn Battlefield Then and Now* (2005) by James Brust, Brian Pohanka, and Sandy Barnard argues that Calhoun Hill was an ideal spot for five companies to defend. Brust places L Company on Calhoun Hill, which has command over the northern sectors of Deep Coulee. C Company on Finley-Fickle Ridge could control warriors who might attack across Greasy Grass Ridge, and Keogh's I Company was to be ready to move in any direction while in reserve in the low ground behind Calhoun Hill (Brust, Pohanka, & Sandy 2005, 96).

It is generally accepted that the right wing was arranged as Brust suggests. The reason for this agreement is the identification of the dead. Keogh was recognized along with men from I Company. Both Calhoun and Second Lieutenant John Crittenden of L Company were found on Calhoun Hill. Kanipe showed Camp the general area where the two sergeants of C Company, Finley and Finckle, were identified. It is rare that two sergeants would fall so close to each other and not stand with their respective companies.

### Custer and the Left Wing Pursue the Noncombatants

Custer and the left wing moved north through the low land east of Battle Ridge while remaining out of sight from the Indians in the valley. Nathaniel Philbrick writes in *Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn* about an unnamed group of Cheyenne warriors shooting at the left wing during this maneuver (Philbrick 2010, 262). Because Philbrick is a great storyteller, his book became the first best seller on this battle in years. However, he provides nothing new for well-read students. *Last Stand's* accomplishment is its inspiration for a new generation to learn more about Custer's fight.

Father Peter Powell in his exceptional two-volume study of the Northern Cheyenne way of life and culture, *Sweet Medicine: The Continuing Role of the Sacred Arrows, the Sun Dance, and the Sacred Buffalo Hat in Northern Cheyenne History* (1998), follows Wolf Tooth and his close friend Big Foot during the battle. Many warriors followed these two friends, as their group continued to harass the right wing (Powell 1998, 128).

Custer continued north beyond the present Last Stand Hill while following the Custer Ridge Extension (Scott 2013, 114). To the south of this ridge is Cemetery Ridge, which is the current home of the Custer National Cemetery, the visitor center, administration buildings, and staff homes (Fox 1993, 70). Southwest of Cemetery Ridge is an area today named The Flats, which terminates at Deep Ravine's steep western bank and the bluffs overlooking the river.

Liddic explains Custer's move north as an offensive move not for the capture of the noncombatants. Instead, the warriors north of him were crossing the river to take his right flank (Liddic 2004, 145). Liddic might be correct, though Custer's actions seem to support the theory that his objective was to capture the noncombatants – just as he did at the Battle of the Washita.

From the Custer Ridge Extension – where it begins to bend northwest and points to the Ford D area – the noncombatants were about three quarters of a mile away and could have been visible to Custer. As the sound of gunfire emanated from the region of Calhoun Hill, Custer spurred his horse Vic down the ridge toward the ford. Finally, after five weeks of moving men, horses, and supplies, Custer was ready for action.

## Retreat from Ford D

Fox, Donahue, and Scott provide the most comprehensive history of the events at Ford D. Fox contends the entire left wing attempted to cross Ford D but was repulsed by warriors protecting the noncombatants (Fox 1993, 182). Michno and Bray disagree with Fox and argue that only F Company attempted to reach the ford (Michno 1997, 183; Bray 2006, 226). Philbrick believes this move was another reconnaissance mission like the one at Medicine Tail Ford (Philbrick 2010, 263). Donahue clearly documents the route based on the detailed maps of John Stands In Timber and Lieutenant Philo Clark (Donahue 2008, 99 and i, 245 and iv).

Most historians agree with the premise that Custer retreated from Ford D. Why he would retreat is an intriguing question. It appears that only a small number of Cheyenne warriors crossed the river at Ford D and fired at the troops (Donahue 2008, 241). All of the Lakota warriors were south of Custer, fighting Reno and then Calhoun. The only body discovered in the Ford D area belonged to the newspaper reporter Mark Kellogg (Philbrick 2010, 263). However, John Stands In Timber's account as given to Rickey and reported by Donahue stated two soldiers were killed during the Ford D incident (Donahue 2008, 246).

For reasons that will forever remain a mystery, the left wing pulled back from Ford D and halted for 20–30 minutes below the present-day staff housing (Fox 1993, 182, 185). If a fight at Ford D was the reason Custer pulled back, why would he have paused for a half-hour less than one mile away? Fox makes a thorough attempt to answer this question. Ford D's location, according to John Stands In Timber, resided on a north–south bank with the river flowing west at that point before turning north again. From the north side of Ford D, Custer and his officers had an unobstructed view up the valley and the northern extremity of the village. Custer had all the answers he sought in order to execute his ultimate strategy. He would return and pause to wait for Benteen. After Benteen's arrival and with the reunited two wings, Custer expected to lead them to a suitable ford to capture the noncombatants (Fox 1993, 304–305). Philbrick agrees simply that Custer was giving more time for Benteen to show (Philbrick 2010, 263).

This moment of respite was not a picnic for the left wing. Powell tells the story of two Cheyenne warriors, Yellow Nose and Low Dog, crossing the ford and harassing Custer by riding across his front while giving and taking fire. Additionally, Wolf Tooth's band of warriors moved in closer and fired on Custer from the ridge in front of the Stone House (Powell 1998, 115–116; Donahue 2008, 247).

Was this pause the pivotal moment for Custer, a gift of time for more warriors to infiltrate the battlefield? What made Custer finally move after halting? Brust contends Custer was forced to move back toward the direction of Battle Ridge, because the right wing was beginning to fall

(Brust 2005, 114). Scott argues that the right wing had already disintegrated while Custer was moving toward Ford D (Scott 2013, 117). Fox disagrees completely: he reports that the right wing was well intact up to the time Custer retraced his steps (Fox 1993, 182). Most likely, the final scenario as described by Brust was “one of a pitched battle in all sectors of the field” (Brust 2005, 114). The two wings did not tumble like a row of dominoes but rather collapsed from the edges inward.

### **Left Wing Deployment into the Battle Ridge Sector**

The wait ended when Custer attacked Wolf Tooth to recapture the higher ground and pushed forward across Cemetery Ridge. Wolf Tooth had to retreat, eventually digging in on today's Wooden Leg Hill north of Last Stand Hill (Liberty 1967, 200; Donahue 2008, 247). Fox vehemently argues against Wolf Tooth leading a formidable force, insisting that “evidence points toward either an absence altogether or nothing more than a paltry collection of timid warriors” (Fox 1993, 175).

Interestingly, Powell suggests and Fox elaborates that Custer crossed The Flats to the western bank of Deep Ravine, turned left, and followed along the ravine to its furthest point north where it then bends to the east near its head. There, in the lower basin of today's Deep Ravine Trail, the left wing separated for the first time. E Company dismounted and led its horses up to Last Stand Hill, while F Company remained in the basin in reserve. Fox says E ascended to the southeastern edge of Cemetery Ridge, while F remained hidden in the lower basin (Powell 1998, 116; Fox 1993, 186).

Until this time, Custer had been on the offensive. Suddenly, everything changed. Fox confidently positions the Custer Battalion into its final formation. Accordingly, E and L protected the flanks, while C, I, and F were in reserve in the low-lying areas (Fox 1993, 186).

### **Fight for Calhoun Hill**

Theories for the defense and subsequent collapse of C, I, and L Companies on Calhoun Hill and its environs are diverse. Most agree that the defeat of the right wing would come slowly (Brust 2005, 91). This was the only location on the field that showed any signs of a strong defense (Taunton 1989, 11–12; Hardorff 1985, 51). James Calhoun's L Company held the high ground on the southern flank of Battle Ridge facing south. They targeted warriors creeping up Deep Coulee from Medicine Tail Ford (Scott 2013, 111).

The firefight in its early stages was mostly long range and intermittent with L Company doing most of the heavy lifting while C and/or I held the

horses in reserve (Fox 1993, 158–159). Michno agrees with Fox and adds one new specific location for the horse holders: C and I held in the commonly believed Horse Holder Ravine – located between Calhoun Hill and the Keogh Sector – while L Company held in the upper reaches of Calhoun Coulee (Michno 1997, 182). It is agreed by most that Keogh was originally placed in reserve, where he would fall, although Willert and Hatch place Keogh on Battle Ridge (Willert 1982, 345; Hatch 2002, 186). Scott makes a strong argument against I being in position on top of Battle Ridge early in the fight, because of little artifact material found on either side of the current road (Scott 2013, 113).

After defeating Reno, more warriors began to enter the field while bypassing Deep Coulee, choosing instead to follow behind a long bluff that extends northwesterly from the ford. This route led them to another ridge from behind, where they congregated. In their rear was a gentle slope bordered by coulees on each side with enough space to conceal their horses. After letting loose their horses, warriors crept forward low to the ground until they reached the military crest provided by Greasy Grass Ridge. Before them was a panoramic view of Battle Ridge. Just ahead and to their right was Calhoun Hill and its southwestern Finley-Finckle Ridge.

On Calhoun Hill, someone in L Company – maybe a sergeant – looked to his right and saw what must have sent shivers down his spine. Seven hundred yards to the southwest, warriors on foot advanced over Greasy Grass Ridge and slowly moved in Calhoun's direction. This was serious enough to pull C Company from the rear and to push them into the battle.

Several works within our historiography are keys to a better understanding of the events on Calhoun Hill. First, Hammer's *Custer in '76* lays the groundwork with Camp's identification of the dead and their general locations. Hardorff's important work, *Markers*, analyzes the Camp material as well as Indian accounts and archaeology to chronicle specific locations of the Custer dead. Moreover, Englishman Francis Taunton adds to their analysis with his small but powerful *Custer's Field: "A Scene of Sickening Ghastly Horror"* (1986). Taunton, a long-time student of this battle, is superb in his chronicling of the locations of the identified dead based mostly from Camp's interviews and a reproduction of his map. His description of the fallen is detailed. He makes a stellar attempt at reconciling the longstanding and very troubling issue regarding the number of soldier markers on the field compared to the actual number of soldiers. Taunton is also a great resource for the command structure specific to the Custer battalion.

Once again, the best research on this portion of the fight can be found in Brust, Pohanka, and Barnard's *Where Custer Fell*. Together, the authors and photographers spent a decade researching historical photos of the battlefield, locating where the photos were taken in the field and then taking modern comparisons. Their findings have significantly enhanced interpretation of the

battle story, especially for Calhoun Hill, where they identified the soldier marble markers for C Company's Sergeants Jeremiah Finley (Soldier Grave Marker 131) and August Finckle (Soldier Grave Marker 139) on Finley-Finckle Ridge, and Edwin Bobo (Soldier Grave Marker 190) in the Keogh Sector (Brust et al. 2005, 92–94, 108–109). Brust explains the significance of these markers: "Given the nature of the 1870s cavalry tactics, the presence of two of the three Company C sergeants implies that the company was deployed on Finley-Finckle Ridge" (Brust et al. 2005, 91).

The photographic research was significant for more than just Calhoun Hill. Also confirmed was the marker location for where I Company First Sergeant James Butler fell as well as where Custer deployed skirmish lines to push Wolf Tooth off Last Stand Hill. Thankfully, *Where Custer Fell* confirmed that the battlefield is in a superb state of preservation.

### C Company Falls on Finley-Finckle Ridge

Modern historians agree that C Company, or a platoon from it, deployed on Finley-Finckle Ridge to check the warriors crossing over Greasy Grass Ridge. Early scholars, Gray in particular, place C there as the rear guard, while the remaining four companies appear in their traditional locations (Gray 1991, 392). Utley is an early advocate of only one platoon from C on Finley-Finckle Ridge, while the second platoon remained with Keogh in reserve (Utley 2001, 149). Greene has a different opinion with C spread along today's Deep Ravine Trail (Greene 1973, 33, 36).

C Company was briefly successful in pushing the warriors back into the coulees. Many scholars propose that the veteran Southern Cheyenne warrior Lame White Man encouraged his younger warriors to follow him and to kill all the soldiers. A most thorough accounting of this theory is discussed by Fox. Accordingly, Lame White Man overtook Finley-Finckle Ridge, and the momentum of his charge flowed over Battle Ridge to the east. With victory came death for Lame White Man near Battle Ridge (Fox 1993, 348 n. 85).

Michno, on the other hand, agrees with an older theory first developed by Charles Kuhlman in his 1951 *Legend into History*. Michno suggests that Lame White Man's charge occurred against E Company along today's Deep Ravine Trail in an area Kuhlman coined the South Skirmish Line. E was forced into Deep Ravine, where all the soldiers perished (Michno 1997, 192–193). Michno's book was well received, although his frequent criticisms of other historians' theories are overplayed in attempts to win debates. An example is his statement that the National Park Service had to excuse the cost of the archaeological surveys of the 1980s by devising the new theory of Lame White Man's charge against Finley-Finckle Ridge (Michno 1997, 212 n. 390). Michno apparently forgot that one cannot really win an argument when it comes to theories of Custer's fight.

Nevertheless, Sergeants Finley and Finckle did fall on the ridge that will forever carry their names. Lame White Man will never be forgotten. In a private ceremony on Memorial Day 1999, Lame White Man was the first warrior honored by the National Park Service with a red granite marker. The inscription reads, "VE'HO'ENOHNENEHE, Lame White Man, A Cheyenne Warrior Died Here On June 25 1876 While Defending His Homeland and the Cheyenne Way of Life" (<http://friendslittlebighorn.com/Cheyennemarkers.htm>).

Some soldier survivors of C were cornered in Calhoun Coulee, where they died fighting alone. The mounted C Company survivors pulled back toward Calhoun Hill. Company L was dismounted and formed into a skirmish line while engaging in a long-range firefight against warriors to the southeast. Brust's superb analysis explains that Calhoun had to shift part of L's line west to support C Company's retreat from Finley-Finckle Ridge, leaving fewer men to face the growing threat from the southeast (Brust et al. 2005, 97). That threat was Gall and hundreds of warriors. Some warriors had slipped around Calhoun's left and eventually concealed themselves in a ravine behind Company L, east of Keogh. Brust includes a noteworthy aerial photo of this ravine, which was taken on June 25, 1951, during the 75th commemoration ceremonies (Brust et al. 2005, 169).

*Gall: Lakota War Chief* (2007), by Robert Larson, portrays the battle from one warrior's perspective. Larson documents the long-held theory that the Hunkpapa played a predominant role in the Indian victory on Calhoun Hill by leading the successful charge to stampede L's horses (Larson 2007, 131). Michno wholly disagrees: "Gall did not participate in the Reno fight, and he was late to the Custer fight" (Michno 1997, 168).

### **Crazy Horse Enters the Battle**

Where and when Crazy Horse entered the fight is hotly debated. Michno suggests he crossed at Medicine Tail Ford and followed Deep Coulee to Calhoun Hill, where he would eventually charge from the east side of the Keogh Sector (Michno 1997, 165, 191). Michno's theory of Crazy Horse at Little Bighorn differs from Kingsley Bray's biography of the warrior. Masterfully written and impeccably researched, the Englishman Bray has become close friends with many Lakota families. Bray explains that after Reno's retreat, Crazy Horse returned north through the village and paused at Medicine Tail Ford with Flying Hawk and others to carefully watch Custer and his cavalymen still in the Nye-Cartwright area. While waiting for Custer's next move, they made plans for the attack. Crazy Horse's friend, He Dog, described Crazy Horse as contemplative: "He didn't like to start a battle unless he had it all planned out in his head and he knew he was going to win" (Powers 2010, 414).

Whatever plans Crazy Horse had made, they came to a head once Custer marched toward Calhoun Hill.

Crazy Horse reined his horse left and swiftly followed along the west bank of the river, using his warriors as a safety buffer between the noncombatants and the soldiers (Bray 2006, 224). Crazy Horse crossed the river at a ford near Deep Ravine, where within the shadows of its steep walls, he was able to follow a north and then southeasterly path to Calhoun Hill. There, Flying Hawk observed Crazy Horse firing his Winchester. Eventually, Crazy Horse crossed over Battle Ridge to fight the right wing from its northeast side (Bray 2006, 227).

Joseph Marshall III's *Journey of Crazy Horse: A Lakota History* (2004) is required reading to fully understand "His Crazy Horse" or "His Horse Is Crazy" (Tasunke Witko) and the fight against Long Hair (Pehin Hanska) wholly from the Lakota perspective (Marshall 2004, xiii, xiv, xxi). Marshall, an Oglala and a Vietnam War veteran, is also a descendant of two warriors in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Marshall describes the fall of Calhoun Hill in a masterful yet succinct matter:

Gall and his men, Crazy Horse heard later, stayed in pursuit of the running soldiers even though they did gain a ridge. At first the soldiers were organized, even managing to dismount and form skirmish lines to fire at the oncoming Lakota. But, Gall's relentless pursuit broke their lines and after that they were running away and their fire was no longer effective. (Marshall 2004, 228)

### Chaos Sweeps Keogh

Liddic provides exceptional analysis of Keogh's dilemma and the grave choices before him. Whom should his right wing support? If he moved north with the right wing to support Custer, then Benteen and Reno could be ambushed in Medicine Tail Coulee. Alternatively, if Keogh moved south to support Reno, then Custer could perish. Lastly, if he stayed where he was, he was sure to be cut off. For Liddic, Keogh chose to stay exactly where Custer ordered him (Liddic 2004, 149–150).

As if trapped in a narrow canyon during a raging flood and the rocky walls too steep to climb, Keogh's I Company braced for the chaos of cavalymen and horses that advanced toward them from Calhoun Hill. Behind them rushed a wall of swift and angry Lakota. Suddenly, the warriors behind the ridge east of Keogh sprung their attack with a charge led by Crazy Horse and White Bull. Willert writes that the anvil squeezed Keogh when more warriors charged over Battle Ridge from the west (Willert 1982, 351). Lehman concludes that Keogh's I Company was cut in two (Lehman 2010, 118).

Historians agree that the final collapse of Keogh's right wing happened in just minutes, although Philbrick gives him time enough to fire one or

two volleys (Philbrick 2010, 261). Donovan describes warriors picking up weapons and ammunition from the dead soldiers (Donovan 2008, 272–273). Fox, once again, captivates while describing the Keogh slaughter as “a stunning picture of mayhem” (Fox 1993, 162). Fox continues: “What we see today in the Keogh Sector memorial stones resulted from panic and fear, not from a determined exploitation of tactical alternatives” (Fox 1993, 170).

Whether it was full disintegration or a determined stand, all agree that Keogh’s fight was fierce and hand-to-hand. Warriors remembered soldiers using the carbine as a club, because there was no time to reload. Some unholstered and fired the Colt revolver – a powerful .45 caliber weapon for close fighting – until its chambers were empty. Impossible to reload in this situation, the soldiers threw their revolvers away or even at the warriors. Warriors grasping clubs, knives, and hatchets began to overpower their foes (Fox 1993, 171–172). Greene imagines soldiers on the north end of Keogh’s line fleeing north to reunite with Custer on Last Stand Hill (Greene 1973, 37). Today, the white markers reflect that attempted breakout.

### **The Left Wing Begins to Crumble**

Could the last maneuvers for Custer and the left wing have been an attempt to reunite with Keogh? Liddic, Brust, and Fox believe so (Liddic 2004, 148; Brust et al. 2005, 114; Fox 1993, 191). If true, the warriors prevented it. The eventual outcome was the left wing crumbling in Deep Ravine – also known as the South Skirmish Line – and Last Stand Hill.

Bray believes E and F were positioned on Last Stand Hill before the complete fall of Calhoun Hill (Bray 2006, 227). Liddic has F on the northern extension of Battle Ridge and E defending Cemetery Ridge (Liddic 2004, 149). Greene has E holding Last Stand Hill while C and F counter warriors in the basin (Greene 1973, 36). Utley believes the hill was defended by E and F (Utley 2001, 151). Interestingly, Hatch describes Crazy Horse sweeping over the hill from the north and continuing south to destroy what was left of Keogh’s right wing (Hatch 2002, 186).

Fox’s collapse of the left wing begins with E Company’s horses stampeded from Cemetery Ridge as the right wing began to disintegrate. Hardorff contends the E horse stampede occurred on Last Stand Hill (Hardorff 2004, 114 n. 14). Even with the loss of their horses, E remained intact but moved down into the basin to reunite with F (Fox 1993, 189–190). Fox continues with the left wing’s move to Last Stand Hill because of the appearance there of survivors from the right wing. Still mounted, F was first to reunite with the survivors on Battle Ridge, while E covered F’s ascent in a desperate struggle to reach the heights on foot (Fox 1993, 192).

## Deep Ravine

No one doubts the fact that soldiers died between Last Stand Hill and Deep Ravine. Survivors of the 7th Cavalry buried the remains of 20 or more soldiers in the ravine. As mentioned, Donahue provides vital evidence for the location of these still missing soldiers in the ravine (Donahue 2008, 275). The great mystery is why they fell in this area.

The Cheyenne warrior, Two Moon, heard a bugle call coming from Last Stand Hill; and then about 40 men – some on horseback – “started toward the river” (Graham 1953, 103). Several other warriors were witness to this event near the end of the battle, and they described the soldiers fleeing from the high ground. Most warriors did not fully understand US military tactics, so a repositioning might be misinterpreted as flight. During the Hilltop Fight four miles south, the 7th Cavalry initiated two successful charges on foot to push warriors back from their breastworks, and Custer might have attempted the same.

Gray believes these soldiers were attempting a breakout (Bray 2006, 232). Gray considers it a strategy to control the field (Gray 1991, 181). Donovan elaborates further and suggests Mitch Boyer led this breakout toward the river but fell midway (Donovan 2008, 276). Lehman adds Boston Custer to the mix of fleeing men (Lehman 2010, 119). Michno suggests no more than a dozen fled and made their last stand about halfway to the river (Michno 1997, 271–272). Hardorff suggests this was nothing but an act of desperation near the end “after the complete collapse of the command structure – undoubtedly after the death of Custer – and the few men left behind on Custer Hill fired upon these fleeing soldiers” (Hardorff 1985, 61–62).

Fox suggests that this was tactical, although he believes it was C Company charging from Calhoun Ridge against the warriors in Calhoun Coulee. His reasoning is unique and is understood “only within the context of the Cheyenne way of reckoning direction (Sioux informants also used this scheme)” (Fox 1993, 150–151). No matter the reasons, all that remained of the Custer battalion were on Last Stand Hill.

## The Last Stand

For 117 years after Custer's fight, historians have agreed that the survivors grouped together at the top of Last Stand Hill. They barricaded themselves behind dead horses and fought until the last man fell. It was a spectacle for the ages.

Custer buffs received a rude awakening in 1993, when Fox theorized differently about where the last stand occurred. In his treatise based on the data recovered during the archaeological surveys of 1984 and 1985, he suggests that it occurred in Deep Ravine – not on Last Stand Hill. Fox

interprets the absence of army cartridge cases on Last Stand Hill as evidence of the breakdown of command structure and eventual tactical disintegration. It is a fact that park visitors have picked up spent cartridges and other “souvenirs” throughout the area.

Fox’s colleague during those surveys was Douglas Scott, who presents a completely different conclusion based on the same data. Accordingly, the end came on Last Stand Hill – not in Deep Ravine. Archaeologists uncovered impacted Indian bullets on and around Last Stand Hill. They also recovered army bullets probably fired by captured weapons. Custer’s men returned fire, and their bullets’ orientation came from Last Stand Hill (Scott 2013, 118). Scott concludes his argument: “Care must be exercised in devising interpretations based on the presence or absence of cartridge cases alone” (Scott 2013, 119).

Still debated are the number of soldiers who perished on Last Stand Hill, how they died, and who they were. If there is one example of the best attempt to answer these questions, it must be *Where Custer Fell*. Superbly documented and analyzed, Brust lists all those who were identified, and where they were found, including some cavalymen from the right wing who survived long enough to reach the hill. Brust also elaborately describes how the last moments might have occurred (Brust et al. 2005, 126–131). Using photographic evidence, he presents an original theory that identifies the *exact location* of Custer’s position. At the top of Last Stand Hill, Custer and about 10 soldiers and “six horses lay in a convex perimeter on the east side.” The 7th Cavalry Monument presently stands only six feet from where Custer fell (Brust et al. 2005, 131–133).

## Conclusion

Today, the National Park Service conscientiously protects and preserves the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. When visitors stand on Last Stand Hill, the view that welcomes them is remarkably pristine and much like it was in 1876. Down the hill from where Custer fell, one can research a vast library of publications. The historiography of Custer’s fight is far from lethargic, and it grows almost daily.

Historians must grasp the numerous reasons for Custer’s defeat at the Little Bighorn: the battlefield terrain, the overwhelming number of warriors, and the weaponry. In *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876*, John Gray wisely submits that “Custer’s decisions, judged in light of what he knew at the time, instead of by our hindsight, were neither disobedient, rash, nor stupid” (Gray 1976, 182–183). However, for a superior analysis of why Custer and his officers made the decisions that they did, one must investigate Roger Darling’s *Sad and Terrible Blunder: Generals Terry and Custer at the Little Bighorn* (1990). Darling is a rare master of reasoning without

hindsight. Though much of his work is beyond the scope of this essay, one must study Darling's examination of the key events that transpired before Custer's fight began.

At the time of this writing, several fresh publications on Custer's fight have appeared. Michael O'Keefe has released a new bibliography, *Custer, the Seventh Cavalry, and the Little Bighorn* (2012), which documents nearly 8,500 books, periodicals, and magazines. Douglas Scott's 2013 study is titled *Uncovering History: Archaeological Investigations of the Little Bighorn*, which is the only one-volume record of all archaeological surveys conducted on the battlefield, including summaries of their reports. Thom Hatch released *Glorious War: The Civil War Adventures of George Armstrong Custer* in 2013 and has another volume on the way. Also published in 2013, Margot Liberty's *A Cheyenne Voice* contains the complete interviews with John Stands In Timber. It is a tremendously significant body of material regarding Cheyenne history and culture, most of it never seen before. Additionally, a recently discovered map drawn by Stands In Timber detailing the Wolf Tooth fight around Nye-Cartwright Ridge is included along with commentary from Michael Donahue.

Perhaps the most anticipated manuscript – already promising to be nothing short of stellar – is Donahue's view of Custer's fight. Donahue, at the time of this writing, has served 24 summers as a seasonal Park Ranger Interpreter at the battlefield. His battle talks, presented on the visitor center patio and Last Stand Hill, are always in high demand. Pending publication, his battle book promises to awaken the passions of old Custer buffs. It will surely inspire new ones.

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# Chapter Eighteen

## THE AFTERMATH

*Alan M. Anderson*

After defeating Custer's elements of the 7th Cavalry and battling Reno and Benteen's troopers on June 25 and for most of June 26, 1876, the Northern Cheyenne and Lakota forces became aware of the approach of General Terry's column from the north. The Native Americans struck their encampment and quickly moved off toward the south, traveling throughout the night. By June 27, when Terry's column arrived at the battlefield, not a single Indian foe remained in the area. The various Cheyenne and Sioux groups dispersed, looking for suitable grazing areas and food, which was not otherwise available to a single large body (Welch & Steckler 1994). Terry's troops and the soldiers under the command of Brigadier General George Crook, who had achieved at best an indecisive outcome at the Battle of the Rosebud less than 10 days earlier, awaited orders and reinforcements. Without interference from the bluecoats, the Native Americans celebrated their victory for most of July (Ambrose 1975).

But the Indians' defeat of Custer at what they called the Battle of the Greasy Grass would prove to be pyrrhic. The United States was outraged by news of the disaster that had befallen Custer. By August, Terry and Crook's forces had received reinforcements and had grown to approximately 2,000 men (Yenne 2006). The US Army took the field with a vengeance, intending to put an end to a troublesome enemy once and for all. Over the next 14 years, culminating in the action at Wounded Knee in 1890, the Army engaged in a long war, ensuring that as William Tecumseh Sherman, the commanding General of the Army, directed at the time, "hostile savages like Sitting Bull and his band of hostile Sioux ... must feel the superior power of the Government" (Marszalek 1993).

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Thus, for the Northern Cheyenne and Sioux warriors, the Battle of the Little Bighorn proved to be a tactical victory but a strategic defeat. While the adage “history is written by the victors” has numerous exceptions, the historiography of the Battle of the Little Bighorn is an especially apt example. Not only did early historians ignore the Native Americans’ name for the clash, but also Custer’s defeat came to dominate the historiography of the era to an astonishing degree (Potts 1994). So many volumes have been written regarding Custer’s defeat, which was part of a larger war, that the complete history of the aftermath of the battle was obscured for many years. Indeed, recent scholarship suggests that even the name for the conflict of which the Battle of the Little Bighorn was only part – “The Great Sioux War” – should be considered more properly the white man’s nomenclature and not that of the Native Americans. For some, the cultural struggle continues. (Liberty 2006).

This essay will review the historiography of the Battle of the Little Bighorn by focusing on the aftermath. Understanding the transformation in the research that has occurred in the nearly 150 years since the battle provides an essential foundation for evaluating the available secondary sources and their biases. A number of excellent studies have been published, especially in the last 20 years, that provide a detailed analysis of the often ignored fights and skirmishes that followed the Little Bighorn. Volumes on the fate of Native American resistance will be considered. These biographical studies illustrate the consequences of the Indian victory over Custer not only for leaders but also to the bands who participated in the battle. The culminating event of the long war is the military action at Wounded Knee. Still a highly politicized and controversial event, Wounded Knee is best understood in the larger context of the Battle of the Greasy Grass. Finally, several excellent bibliographic sources and overviews of the era will be identified as useful entrees into the literature on the important 1876–1890 era in Native American history. Consideration of each of these categories also reveals areas for further research.

### **The History of the End**

From the beginning, the Native American side of the Battle of the Greasy Grass suffered from fact that the Indian participants did not write or record history in the way whites did. Instead, they usually remembered it through traditions and stories passed from generation to generation (Liberty 1996). For white historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the lack of documentation or written records caused them to generally denigrate or ignore the Native American side of the story (Krupat 1995). This view of course has long since been rejected; oral histories now offer a rich and complementary record to more traditional sources. Often, such recollections provide the best or only evidence for investigating historical events. The lack

of a written history in the white tradition provided a basis for disregarding the Native American side of the story and a rationalization for some scholars to present one-sided views.

To the extent that efforts were made to obtain historical facts from Indian participants, groups of Indians often sought to accommodate the demands of their white inquisitors, frequently with results that undermined the credibility of their shared traditions and stories. One example is the question of who killed Custer. In 1909, in response to queries from white investigators, a group of surviving warriors selected Brave Bear, a Southern Cheyenne chief, as Custer's killer (Dixon & Swanton 1914; DeMallie 1993). Fifteen years later, another group of survivors identified White Bull, a Sioux, as the individual responsible for Custer's death on the battlefield. Later published as an autobiography, White Bull's position became, in effect, an established – although certainly questionable – fact (White Bull 1968).

This presumed vacuum on the Native American side allowed traditional historians to bend history and create “a non-Indian, Amerocentric point of view” that marginalized Native Americans (Fixico 1996). Frederick Jackson Turner fostered this approach when he proclaimed: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (Turner 1893). In doing so, Turner effectively eliminated the Native American experience from the broader scope of US history (Cronon 1987; Edmunds 1995).

With rare exceptions several generations of historians generally ignored Native Americans and their unique and active roles in the history of the United States. American Indians were “the noble savage” and “the redman” as characterized and shown in Hollywood westerns of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. A few individuals recorded the Native Americans' narratives and oral histories, thereby preserving their records. Often scorned and criticized for their biases by traditional historians, these volumes now are recognized as valuable sources for contemporary studies of the Battle of the Little Bighorn and its aftermath.

George Bird Grinnell's *The Fighting Cheyennes* (1915) represents perhaps the first effort at preserving and presenting the Native American side of the story. Although the book covers the history of the Cheyenne generally, it includes much of the years following the Little Bighorn. Reprinted most recently in 1983, the book is based upon accounts Grinnell gathered during his years with the Cheyenne, primarily the Northern Cheyenne. While slanted in favor of the Indians, Grinnell's work provides many first-hand accounts not otherwise available. He details the skirmishes and battles fought by the Cheyenne after Custer's defeat, their surrender, the escape led by Dull Knife from Fort Robinson in 1879, and the employment of young Cheyenne as scouts by the Army, ending with their presence during the “Ghost Dance excitement” in the fall of 1890.

In the 1920s, Thomas B. Marquis gained the trust of the Northern Cheyenne and recorded their recollections as well as his observations of

their way of life. Living close to the Indians' reservation, Marquis patiently interviewed survivors of "The Great Sioux War" and often visited nearby battlefields with them. His various writings were collected, edited, and published in 1978 as *Cheyennes of Montana*, which includes a number of first-person reminiscences of Native Americans. Like Grinnell's volume, Marquis provides a collection of otherwise unavailable sources for reconstructing the aftermath of the Little Bighorn from the Indian perspective. Marquis's research showed that the Cheyenne played a much more prominent role in "The Great Sioux War" – at least in the eyes of the Sioux – than previously conceived.

In 1934, Stanley Vestal, the *nom de plume* of Walter S. Campbell, published a collection of materials he gathered in connection with preparation of his biography of Sitting Bull (Vestal 1932). He shared information not included in his earlier work in *New Sources of Indian History, 1850–1891* (1934), which was divided into two parts. The first included materials relating to the rise of the Ghost Dance among the Sioux and the death of Sitting Bull. The second presented eyewitness accounts from the Sioux to the various events leading up to and following Wounded Knee. A subsequent book (Vestal 1948) presents an account of the northern plains Indians and their 40 years of struggle from 1851 to 1891. The volume is based upon his collected materials from surviving Native Americans and presents a chronological discussion of the various skirmishes and battles, including many during "The Great Sioux War." These two books of first-hand accounts again provide underutilized sources for modern historians investigating the aftermath of Custer's defeat.

George E. Hyde (1937) presents a history of the Oglala Sioux from their early migrations to the conflicts that eventually culminated in Wounded Knee. His volume is a counterweight to Grinnell, Marquis, and Vestal, as he generally denigrates the questionable recollections, years after the events, of the Native Americans. In his later book (Hyde 1956), he continues his exploration and describes life for the Indians on the reservation between 1877 and 1890, ending with the actions at Wounded Knee. While revealing some prejudices toward the Sioux, Hyde's later book averred that the Native Americans were the victims of dishonest and unethical government officials and foolish but well-meaning missionaries.

The development of ethnohistory after the 1950s allowed historians to utilize innovative approaches to the study of Native Americans. New scholarship granted Native Americans a status in historical narratives they had not previously enjoyed. "Designed to place the tribal communities within the broader American perspective, this history also illustrates how Native American people were motivated by their unique cultural patterns and how those patterns adapted to change" (Edmunds 1995). This approach embraced the Indian-centered perspectives of Grinnell, Marquis, and Vestal while rejecting Turner's view that had erased the Native Americans from history.

By the late 1960s, the study of Native American history had been transformed. Propelled by the rise of the Civil Rights movement, African American activism, increased ecological concerns, and the anti-Vietnam War protests, the study of American Indian history was in vogue. The result was the development of Native American studies as a specialty within colleges and universities and its recognition throughout the United States (Edmunds 1995). The consequence, however, was that the proverbial pendulum swung from one extreme to the other, with histories of the aftermath of the Battle of the Little Bighorn becoming overly biased toward the Native American point of view and often based on a questionable historical foundation. Consequently, the reservation era represented a kind of apocalypse for Indian people.

This historiographical trend is epitomized by Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1971). More a political work than a historical reference, the book was a massive best seller, but it suffers from considerable methodological flaws and errors. Ralph K. Andrist's *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indian* (1964) provides a sympathetic account of the wars of the northern Great Plains beginning with the Dakota War of 1862 and ending with the Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890. The volume is presented from a decidedly Native American perspective, sometimes to an extreme extent. Although relying on limited and traditional sources, Andrist highlights the tragic end of Wounded Knee and provides the reader with a general overview of the apocalyptic years following the Battle of the Greasy Grass. Written using a colorful, journalistic style, Andrist's volume, while readable, added little new material to the history of the aftermath.

Within the last 20 years, Native American history, particularly as it relates to the period 1876–1890, has come of age. Second- and third-generation historians of American Indian history have emerged to stand side by side with those figures who had carried the subject area for years. Many fine histories have been published, which often combine the older, once ignored or minimized oral histories of Native Americans with existing documentary evidence to present more balanced and more accurate narratives.

### **The Great Sioux War of 1876–1877**

The Battle of the Little Bighorn was just one battle – and not a decisive one – in what became known as “The Great Sioux War of 1876–1877.” The military campaign against the Northern Cheyenne and Lakota had its genesis in early 1876, when all were ordered to return to the reservation by January 31, 1876. When some Native Americans failed to do so, the Army launched an expedition to force them to return (Gray 1976; Donovan 2008).

Following Custer's defeat on the Little Bighorn, the Army spent about a month receiving reinforcements, being resupplied, and awaiting orders

(Donovan 2008). In August, the troopers under Crook's command began to pursue the Native American warriors, but his men soon ran short of supplies. In what became known as the "horsemeat march," Crook's soldiers turned back toward the Black Hills to seek food. On September 9, 1876, an advance company discovered a minor Indian encampment at Slim Buttes. Reinforced by Crook's main column, the Army attacked and defeated the Indians (Greene 1982). The United States had claimed its first revenge.

At the same time, the 4th Cavalry under Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie began the Powder River Expedition to pursue any Cheyenne and Sioux they might find. On November 25, 1876, Mackenzie's cavalry discovered and defeated the Northern Cheyenne village of Chief Morning Star, destroying lodges, supplies, and taking the Indians' horses. Without a viable means to survive the coming winter, the Northern Cheyenne surrendered and were forced to relocate to the Southern Cheyenne reservation in the Indian Territory (Greene 2003).

The Southern Cheyenne reservation was not acceptable to a number of the Northern Cheyenne. Led by Little Wolf and Dull Knife, less than 300 of the Northern Cheyenne escaped from the reservation and tried to return to the north beginning in the autumn of 1878. After an initial skirmish that allowed Little Wolf and Dull Knife's band to continue their northward trek, the Army organized a much larger force to pursue them. By October, the band had traveled as far as Fort Robinson, Nebraska. There, Dull Knife's group was captured and imprisoned under incredibly harsh conditions. When most of Dull Knife's band escaped on January 9, 1879, the Army hunted them down, recapturing the majority but killing the last 32 escapees in what became known as the Fort Robinson massacre (Boye 1999; Greene 2003; Grinnell 1915; Maddux 2003; Monnett 2001; Sandoz 1953). Meanwhile, Little Wolf's group continued its epic 1,500-mile trek that winter to Montana Territory, where they were captured on March 27, 1879. Thanks to the intercession of Colonel Nelson Miles, Little Wolf's band was allowed to stay in Montana, where they eventually were joined in 1880 by the remnants of Dull Knife's group (Yenne 2006).

The "Cheyenne Exodus" has been the subject of numerous histories, including several from a decidedly Native American perspective. Mari Sandoz (1953) first presented the story of the journey in *Cheyenne Autumn*. Acclaimed when it first appeared, Sandoz's work primarily was based on her interviews of survivors conducted in the 1930s. John Monnett (2001) provides a more balanced and less romanticized approach to the subject than Sandoz, incorporating the views of the Cheyenne, the Army, and ordinary citizens. Similarly, Vernon Maddux (2003) tells the story from all sides, including settlers along the path taken by the Cheyenne, and utilizes considerable research from primary and secondary sources. In contrast, Alan Boye (1999) relates the story clearly from the standpoint of the Cheyenne. He retraced Dull Knife and Little Wolf's

steps with descendants of Dull Knife and describes not only the original trek but also the modern one that he undertook.

After the Battle of Slim Buttes, Colonel Miles and the 5th Infantry established a fort near the Tongue and Yellowstone Rivers. Miles was an aggressive commander and a recipient of the Medal of Honor for actions during the American Civil War. He later became the senior commander of the Army during the Spanish-American War. Known as “Bear Coat” for his winter attire, he adopted a “scorched earth” approach toward the Native Americans, relentlessly attacking and harassing the Sioux led by Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull throughout their fall bison hunts and into the winter. In October of 1876, Miles negotiated with Sitting Bull for two days near Cedar Creek in Montana. When the discussions broke down, Miles attacked. However, the Native Americans disengaged and escaped. Miles broke off the chase, having forced the Sioux to abandon a large part of their supplies and horses (Greene 1991).

Depriving them of food, clothing, and shelter, Miles fought the Lakota Sioux of Crazy Horse throughout the winter. He conducted military actions at Ash Creek, Clear Creek, and Spring Creek. At the Battle of the Wolf Mountains in January of 1877, Miles successfully used his artillery to repel numerous attacks by Crazy Horse’s forces during a blizzard. Miles kept his forces in the field despite harsh conditions and continually pressured the Sioux. Crazy Horse finally surrendered his band on May 5, 1877. Two days later, Miles defeated Indians led by Lame Deer at the Battle of Little Muddy Creek, in which a firefight erupted when negotiations broke down (Greene 1991; Yenne 2006). The other band of Sioux led by Sitting Bull fared little better. Harassed and chased by the cavalry, Sitting Bull’s group crossed the border into Canada in May of 1877 (Greene 1991; Manzione 1991). “The Great Sioux War” was largely over.

One of the lingering issues that new scholarship must address is whether the description of “The Great Sioux War” is appropriate or another example of early historians ignoring the Native American perspective. Recently, at least one scholar has argued that “The Great Sioux War” should be more properly labeled “The Great Cheyenne War.” Based on her review of sources of traditional Indian histories (Grinnell 1915; Marquis 1978), Margot Liberty presents a strong argument that from the Native American view of the conflict, it was far more a Cheyenne war than a Sioux war (Liberty 2006). Indeed, the Indians attacked in the first action of the war were Cheyenne, not Sioux (Vaughn 1961). This is a prime example of the need to reconsider and review long-held beliefs and to revise views regarding the aftermath of the Battle of the Little Bighorn in light of the Native American perspective. Perhaps the conflict represents “coalition warfare.”

Moreover, the conflict involving the Cheyenne and Sioux was not the only “war” against Native Americans following the Little Bighorn. The Nez Perce War of 1877 began after some “non-treaty” Nez Perce killed

several white settlers upon being ordered to go to the reservation. Bands of Nez Perce, led by Chief Joseph, White Bird, and Looking Glass, embarked on an arduous 1,500-mile journey to try to join Sitting Bull's band in Canada (Hampton 1994; West 2009). Dogged by troopers led by Brigadier General Oliver O. Howard, the Nez Perce fought valiantly and consistently defeated or avoided superior forces. Believing they had escaped from their pursuers, the Nez Perce camped near Bear's Paw Mountain in late September 1877, a mere 40 miles from the Canadian border. However, newly promoted Brigadier General Miles led a combined force of infantry and cavalry and attacked the Nez Perce on the morning of September 30. Following a standoff, Howard arrived with his column and the Nez Perce surrendered on October 5, with Chief Joseph allegedly announcing he would "fight no more forever" (Greene 2000; West 2009). Throughout the conflict, recently surrendered Cheyenne and Sioux scouts assisted the Army, revealing a different aspect of the conflict (Dunlay 1982; West 2009). Some of the Nez Perce escaped the surrender and made their way to Canada. Greene (2010) provides a detailed historical account of those who avoided surrender at Bear's Paw Mountain and their journey to Canada. The relationship of the Nez Perce War to the Battle of the Little Bighorn and its aftermath remains an area ripe for comparative analysis.

Jerome A. Greene is a former National Park Service historian and a prolific author of well-researched and well-written volumes on the campaigns and battles that followed the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Several offer useful original source materials for students and researchers. One of the most important is *Lakota and Cheyenne: Indian Views of the Great Sioux War, 1876–1877* (1994). This book presents a number of previously unpublished Lakota and Cheyenne informants, who provided their individual recollections of events that occurred during the conflict. Organized chronologically and beginning with the Battle of Powder River and ending with the death of Crazy Horse, this volume provides further materials to be considered along with those of Grinnell (1915), Vestal (1934), and Marquis (1978). This volume should be considered in conjunction with Greene's other edited compilations, which include recollections of participants in the Army's Indian Wars and more general memoirs of the campaigns (Greene 1993; 2006).

Paul L. Hedren, another retired National Park Service employee, gathered together 15 now generally unavailable articles, written by established historians and previously published in *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*. His collection (Hedren 1991) provides a useful background to the scholarly debates regarding "The Great Sioux War." Hedren describes the conflict from the Army's perspective. His most recent book presents "a historical geography of the northern Great Plains" while considering the consequences of the climactic war in 1876–1877 "that set the stage for all that came next in the late 1870s and 1880s" (Hedren 2011).

Several comprehensive histories of “The Great Sioux War” exist. John Gray (1976) published a noteworthy history of the Army’s campaigns in 1876. His book was the first attempt to present a broader history of the conflict, and one not solely focused on Custer’s defeat. But Gray’s book oddly ended his consideration of the conflict in 1876 and did not review the important events of 1877. Charles Robinson (1995) offered the first comprehensive attempt to present “The Great Sioux War” in its entirety, although it was based primarily on published sources. His work extended the coverage from Gray’s truncated book, but it suffers from a tendency to stereotype Native Americans.

In sum, no single volume in print adequately considers the entire conflict beyond 1877, especially from the Native American perspective. An Oglala writer and Vietnam War veteran, Joseph Marshall III offers a foray into a “Lakota history” of the subsequent events with *The Day the World Ended at Little Bighorn* (Marshall 2007). But a comprehensive scholarly history of “The Great Sioux War” that not only fully utilizes the numerous Native American sources now available but also effectively explores the aftermath of the Little Bighorn is still needed.

### The Waning Resistance

Less than a year after defeating the 7th Cavalry at the Little Bighorn, the Northern Cheyenne and Lakota were captured, returned to the reservation, or driven across the Canadian border. The fates of Indian leaders and those who followed them has resulted in a significant and informative body of work that further rounds out the impact of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Less than four months after surrendering his band, Crazy Horse was dead. He was killed on September 4, 1877, allegedly while trying to escape, bayoneted by a guard during a scuffle (Powers 2010; Sandoz 1942). Richard G. Hardorff edited a valuable and interesting volume of interviews, recollections, and accounts relating to the death of Crazy Horse and covering the period from May through September of 1877 (Hardorff 1998). Hardorff’s *The Death of Crazy Horse* consists of materials compiled from a variety of sources, all documented in various archives, as well as copies of official records and contemporaneous newspaper reports. Each interview is preceded by an introduction describing the archive or source of the interview and individual providing the information. This volume also indicates where further materials may be found.

For decades, the definitive biography of Crazy Horse was written by Mari Sandoz (Sandoz 1942). In print continuously since its first publication, Sandoz’s work, while the source of most modern conceptions of Crazy Horse, cannot be considered scholarly history. While the volume

contains a bibliography of published and unpublished sources, notes or references are nonexistent. Much of her writing is fictionalized descriptions of events that cannot be documented in even the most basic manner. Written entirely from the Native American point of view, Sandoz ignored incidents and individuals that are necessary to provide a more complete picture and analysis of Crazy Horse.

Historian Stephen E. Ambrose sought to capitalize on the centennial of the Battle of the Little Bighorn by offering a dual biography of Crazy Horse and Custer (Ambrose 1975). But his volume broke no new ground, was built on previously existing research, and his analysis of Crazy Horse was based to a great extent on Sandoz's earlier biography. It was popular history for general readers.

Joseph M. Marshall III first challenged the primacy of Sandoz's biography (Marshall 2004). Having grown up on the reservation, Marshall based his biography of Crazy Horse on tribal traditions and recollections of elders. He wove those stories into the broader background of the Lakota culture and tribal history. Because of its purely Native American perspective, Marshall's biography of the warrior presumed a base of knowledge that non-Indian readers likely would lack. Nevertheless, it was an improvement over Sandoz's earlier work.

Other biographies of Crazy Horse highlight the months following the battle of the Little Bighorn. Kingsley Bray's *Crazy Horse: A Lakota Life* (2006) presents a complete story of the Sioux leader and rectifies the older, idealized interpretations of him. This biography provides a distinctly different view of Crazy Horse as an individual anchored squarely within his tribe. With greater focus, Thomas Powers (2010) examines the final days of Crazy Horse's life to provide an account of what happened when he was killed. Simply stated, Bray and Powers provide the best studies of the man called Crazy Horse.

Black Elk's autobiography provides a useful first-person account of a Sioux religious leader (Black Elk 1932). Republished several times, most recently with an introduction by Native American writer Vine Deloria, Jr. and several appendices, Black Elk's autobiography provides personal reflections and sketches of Indian leaders. It also offers eyewitness descriptions of various skirmishes and battles during "The Great Sioux War" and the incident at Wounded Knee. The volume provides important insights into the Sioux religion and culture as well as the effects of the defeat of Custer on that culture.

The Sioux chief Gall also has been the subject of a biographical treatment (Larson 2007). Gall played a leading role at the Battle of the Greasy Grass, for he was a feared foe of the Army. He followed Sitting Bull into Canada but then broke with him, returning to the United States and surrendering before Sitting Bull. After his return, Gall cooperated with the United States and adapted to life on the reservation. Larson's biography of

Gall focuses on the last 14 years of his life and attempts to present a balanced view of this well-known Sioux leader.

A different set of insights can be gleaned from one of the few memoirs authored by a non-Indian, who was present during the seminal events leading up to the military action at Wounded Knee. Elaine Eastman was a white woman, who came to the Great Sioux Reservation in 1886 as a teacher and later became known as a proponent of Indian assimilation. She stayed at the reservation until 1891 and observed the rise of the Ghost Dance religion and the killings at Wounded Knee. Her memoirs (2004), based on journals she maintained, cover the period from 1885 through 1891 and provide testimony on Sioux life during the post-Little Bighorn era.

The band of Sioux led by Sitting Bull that managed to cross the border into Canada ultimately suffered a fate only marginally different than those led by Crazy Horse or the Northern Cheyenne. Sitting Bull's crossing of "the Medicine Line" into Canada threatened to spark an international incident. Once over the border, Major James Walsh of the North-West Mounted Police came into Sitting Bull's camp and told him that he would be allowed to stay in Canada as long as he complied with its laws. Walsh, in effect, became Sitting Bull's "boss" in Canada. Walsh's experiences with Sitting Bull are recounted in a short biography by Ian Anderson (2000).

Several books offer detailed narratives on Sitting Bull's time in Canada. For instance, Joseph Manzione (1991) crafted a well-researched volume covering Sitting Bull's life from 1876 to 1881. Written while a doctoral student, the book is based on extensive archival and other research. Others employ invented fictionalized dialogues and are based on a few pieces of previously published material (Hollihan 2001).

Sitting Bull and his band remained in Canada until the depletion of the available bison and difficulties with local tribes caused them to return to the United States in 1881. After surrendering, they were treated as prisoners and eventually returned to a reservation in 1883. In 1885, Sitting Bull joined Buffalo Bill Cody's "Wild West Show" for four months before returning to the Standing Rock reservation. Concerned that Sitting Bull might flee or fight, the local agent attempted to have him arrested on December 15, 1890. During the ensuing melee involving a number of individuals, Sitting Bull was shot and killed (Anderson 1996; Vestal 1932; Yenne 2009).

Sitting Bull has generated a considerable collection of works on his life and death. Much like Mari Sandoz's biography of Crazy Horse, Stanley Vestal's early biography of Sitting Bull was the standard reference on the Sioux leader for decades (Vestal 1932). Vestal's work was based primarily on the recollections of surviving members of Sitting Bull's band of Sioux. More recent works have eclipsed it. Robert Utley's biography (1993) quickly

became a new standard reference. His research was in depth and utilized Vestal's interviews and original source material. He concluded that Sitting Bull was a "towering figure," who tried to preserve and to protect the Native American way of life during the years leading up to Wounded Knee.

### **Wounded Knee**

Described as a "battle" or a "massacre" depending upon one's point of view, the culminating event in the aftermath of the Battle of the Little Bighorn occurred at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota, on December 29, 1890. Earlier that year, the United States breached its treaty with the Sioux and broke up the "Great Sioux Reservation" into five smaller areas. Although promised food and other assistance during the transition period, the federal government failed to deliver. The Sioux turned to the Ghost Dance, a religious ritual that was supposed to return prosperity to the Native Americans. Mooney (1896) provides the essential starting point for any researcher into the origins, nature, practice, and history of the Ghost Dance. Based upon his research immediately following Wounded Knee, Mooney's anthropological analysis describes the Ghost Dance comprehensively and without modern parallel.

Raymond DeMallie argues that the Ghost Dance was not a singular development but rather a stage in the growth of the Indians' spiritual beliefs that had been emerging for generations. He challenges the traditional view of it as an isolated phenomenon and places the dance firmly within Native American culture. He asserts that the Ghost Dance "needs to be seen as part of the integral, ongoing whole of Lakota culture and its suppression as part of the historical process of religious persecution led by Indian agents and missionaries against the Lakotas living on the Great Sioux Reservation" (DeMallie 1982).

After Sitting Bull's death during the ill-fated attempt to arrest him on December 15, 1890, 200 of his band left the Standing Rock Agency and joined Chief Spotted Elk at the Cheyenne River Reservation. On December 28, troopers from the 7th Cavalry intercepted Spotted Elk and 350 Indians with him. The cavalry men escorted the Native Americans five miles to the banks of Wounded Knee Creek, where they camped for the night. Joined by the remaining units of the 7th Cavalry that evening, on the morning of December 29 the commander of the 7th Cavalry ordered the Indians to disarm. It is not entirely clear what triggered the ensuing fight, but when the shooting ended, more than 150 Indian men, women, and children, including Spotted Elk, lay dead. Twenty-five troopers of the 7th Cavalry died, mostly from friendly fire (Brown 1971; Greene 2014; Utley 1963). Wounded Knee was the final defeat for the Native Americans in the aftermath of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Brown (1971) brought the incident at Wounded Knee to the forefront of American consciousness in his popular, best-selling book. Despite its title, it covers the mistreatment of Native Americans by whites primarily from 1860 to 1890. Only 18 pages are devoted to the Ghost Dance, and only a six-page chapter to the incident at Wounded Knee itself. With many factual errors and a flawed historical methodology, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* should not be considered a complete history (Edmunds 1995). Similarly, Burnette and Koster (1974) present a one-sided history of Indian–white relations culminating in the American Indian Movement’s action at Wounded Knee in 1973. It too is a product of the overly biased era of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Native American history.

Robert M. Utley’s *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (1963) remains an essential history of Wounded Knee, the events leading up to it, and the treatment of the Native Americans by the government. Written in the 1950s but not published until 1963, Utley builds upon Mooney’s anthropological analysis from 1896 and presents the history of the events preceding Wounded Knee as well as the incident on December 29. Unlike Hyde (1956), who blamed Wounded Knee on the government’s misunderstanding and overreaction, Utley contends that the incident occurred due to misinterpretations and misapprehension on both sides and that the massacre was unintended. Utley concludes that Wounded Knee was “a regrettable, tragic accident of war ... for which neither side as a whole may be properly condemned” (Utley 1963, 230). His analysis weighs the facts in an even-handed fashion yet does not ignore contrary evidence.

Jeffrey Ostler (2004) challenges this analysis, contending that Wounded Knee must be viewed as an act of American conquest and colonialism that began with Lewis and Clark’s expedition in 1803. He views the Ghost Dance and the events at Wounded Knee as efforts at anticolonial resistance. In the process, he attempts to indict Brigadier General Miles, despite evidence to the contrary, as responsible for Wounded Knee. His reinterpretation of the aftermath of the Little Bighorn continues with his recent volume focusing on the Lakotas’ efforts to regain their territory in the Black Hills (Ostler 2010). Jeffrey Means (2007; 2011) studies the ability of the Lakota to adapt their culture to the changes wrought by the encroachment of whites by moving from hunting bison to raising cattle in the years preceding and following Wounded Knee.

Finally, a recently published volume by Greene (2014) provides the first comprehensive examination of Wounded Knee since Utley’s seminal work. *American Carnage* explores what triggered the violence that erupted in the snow-covered field. Based in part on previously unavailable first-hand accounts, this updated history of Wounded Knee examines the final event in the aftermath of the Battle of the Greasy Grass from both Native American and non-Native perspectives. It places Wounded Knee in the context of broken treaties, white expansion and settlement, and the

Ghost Dance. Greene's work is an example of what new scholarship can accomplish when utilizing all available resources.

### Bibliographic Sources and General Surveys

For students and researchers, two excellent bibliographic volumes exist as starting points for individuals desiring to study the aftermath of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Francis Paul Prucha, a well-recognized historian and a Catholic priest, compiled guides to research published on American Indian and white relations through 1980 (Prucha 1977; 1982). Though several decades old, they provide a useful starting point for research on the years following the Battle of the Little Bighorn. In addition, the *Michigan Historical Review* published the results of a survey of historians in the field of Native American history, asking them to identify books as the most important, best surveys and of the greatest appeal to general readers (Hall 1997). The results also provide a useful starting point for beginning researchers of the Indian Wars.

Furthermore, a number of general overviews provide valuable introductions and descriptions of the battles and conflicts that followed Custer's demise and place them in the larger context of the history of Native American-US relations. Gregory F. Michno (2003) has created an impressive encyclopedia of the battles, large and small, that occurred during the 1850-1890 period. Michno's encyclopedia is an extremely useful reference and starting point for consideration of any of the battles that immediately preceded or followed the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The volume should be part of any advanced student or interested researcher's library.

Utley (1973) presents a well-written, balanced history, albeit from the viewpoint of the US Army, of its campaigns against Native Americans. His description of the battles that followed the Little Bighorn ties them together with the government's policies and tribal responses. He also places them within the larger historical narrative of the conflicts with tribes other than the Northern Cheyenne and Lakota.

Utley's *The Indian Frontier, 1846-1890*, originally published in 1984 and republished in a revised edition in 2003, is directed toward the beginning student. Although written within Turner's conceptual framework, Utley's frontier does not consist of whites on one side and Native Americans on the other. Rather, he writes of "zones" in which whites and Indians crossed boundaries. This volume provides a similarly balanced and sweeping review of the era, but it focuses less on the battles and more on government policies and the consequences for Native Americans. In doing so, Utley moves Native American history well beyond the simplistic framework of analysis posited by Turner. The revised edition also contains a very useful historiography and bibliography of secondary sources.

Similarly, Yenne (2006) offers an informative description of the “whats and hows” of the battles that occurred between Native Americans and soldiers from 1848 to 1890. The last four chapters, which comprise a large portion of the book, describe the final 14 years of conflict between the United States and all the tribes in the Trans-Mississippi West. It also provides a useful overview of the aftermath of Custer’s defeat and the consequences to Native Americans.

## Conclusion

Given the extensive literature that exists regarding the Battle of the Little Bighorn and its aftermath, one might reasonably question: What remains to be written? Certainly, the historiography has advanced since the days of Frederick Jackson Turner and the revisionist counternarratives of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done.

Scholars are beginning to envision a new kind of synthesis. The oral traditions of the Native Americans can be used alongside more traditional research sources to develop a fuller, more complete narrative of the years following the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The long-ignored or marginalized recollections of participants must be cross-checked against the other available evidence to identify those particular details that can fill in the gaps in the narratives of the aftermath.

More importantly, future research on the long war should focus on the standpoint of the Native Americans within their own, unique culture. Viewing the impact of the Battle of the Little Bighorn on Indian leaders within their tribal groups and the efforts of those leaders to respond to those consequences with subtle forms of resistance also could provide viable avenues for further investigation. As suggested by the name for the battle, the Little Bighorn and the years following it have been viewed far too long primarily from a single perspective: the side that lost the battle but won the war. Such myopic study does not do justice to history. The aftermath of the Battle of the Little Bighorn should be revised to create a new synthesis that contemplates the aftermath of the Battle of the Greasy Grass.

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#### FURTHER READING

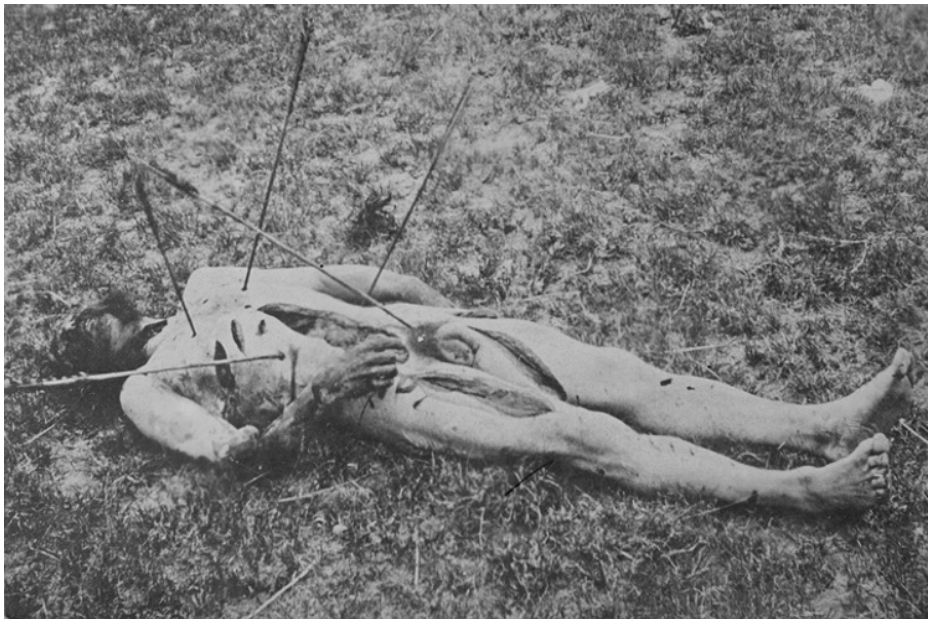
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**Figure 1** Major General George Armstrong Custer, 1865. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



**Figure 2** Sitting Bull, 1884. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



**Figure 3** Victim of Indians, 1869–1878. Record Group 57: Records of the US Geological Survey, 1839–2008, National Archives.

[illegible]

The Sioux War of 1876  
The Battle of the Little Bighorn, 25–26 June 1876

**Figure 4** Map of the Great Sioux War, from *Cavalier in Buckskin*, by Robert M. Utley. Copyright 1988 University of Oklahoma Press. Reproduced with permission.



**Figure 5** Red Horse pictographic account of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, 1881. Manuscript 2367-a, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution (NMNH-2367A\_08569200).



**Figure 6** Otto Becker, *Custer's Last Fight*, 1896, chromolithograph based on Cassilly Adams's painting. Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.

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The Immense Armies, the Long, Long and Warlike, the Epic, the  
the Immense Armies, the Long, Long and Warlike, the Epic, the  
the Immense Armies, the Long, Long and Warlike, the Epic, the

**THE WILD WEST AND THE WILD EAST UNITED**  
SETTLEMENTS FROM THE SEVEN OF THE WORLD.  
**THE FIRST EQUESTRIAN OF EUROPE, ASIA, AFRICA AND AMERICA**  
SABER, BOW, AND REVOLVER, AND ALL THE  
SOME SAVAGE GORGEOUS TROUPE IN TRIUMPH OF EQUESTRIAN  
Maneuvers, such as they Frontier Life and Warfare, another chapter  
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REALITIES OF BORDER A TIME LOST TO THE



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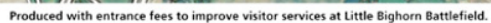


**DANCING DELIGHTS OF DIFFICULT EQUESTRIAN.**  
COWBOYS, WILD WEST GIRLS AND SAGACIOUS BRONCOS.  
**The Virginia Reel on Horseback,**  
EVERY FEET OF THE OLD-FASHIONED DANCE AND RODEO DANCE  
HOLD, HONORED IN PERFECT HONOR TO THE LITTLE REEL OF  
**THE FAMOUS COWBOY BAND**

**IT ENTAILS**  
**THE ILLUSTRIOUS TABLEAU OF GUSTE'S LAST STAND**  
**AND HEROIC FALL.**  
**IT ENTAILS**  
**IT IS A LESSON IN THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN HEROISM**  
**TO BE VIVIDLY REMEMBERED FOR A LIFETIME.**



**Figure 7** *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*, 1898. Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming. James Wojtowicz Collection, MS327.OS2.07.001.



**Figure 8** Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior.



Part V

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THE LAST STAND OF MYTH  
AND MEMORY



# Chapter Nineteen

## NATIVE TRADITIONS

*Carole A. Barrett*

High Bull, a Cheyenne warrior and participant in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, came into possession of a memo book taken from a dead soldier, First Sergeant Alexander Brown of G Troop from the 7th Cavalry, who died during Major Marcus Reno's initial attack. In this book, Brown made notations reflecting his military life – the times his troop had stable and police duty, marksmanship records, and lists of horse equipment. This book also served as a sort of diary. The last entry was dated June 24, 1876, the day before Brown died, and it recorded a brief note about a fellow soldier who lost his carbine while on the march.

During the five months after fleeing the Little Bighorn, High Bull repurposed this memo book to make pictographic records of his exploits in battles, including his deeds repelling Custer's troops. Ironically, some of the battle drawings were overlaid on pages where Brown had recorded his lists and diary entries. When High Bull was killed in Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie's raid of a Cheyenne camp on November 25, 1876, Brown's memo book was recaptured by Army soldiers. They later sought out Cheyenne warriors who took part in the Battle of the Little Bighorn to interpret the events recorded by High Bull (Powell 1975; Ganteaume 2010).

Today the High Bull-Brown manuscript is interesting more for its ironic history rather than as a precise record of events. Though fascinating as a primary source, it does not provide definitive answers as to what occurred at the Little Bighorn. Even with careful interpretation, historians of the battlefield often regard pictographs as having limited utility as sources of history (Berlo 1990, 1996; Powell 1981; Viola 1999).

*A Companion to Custer and the Little Bighorn Campaign*, First Edition.

Edited by Brad D. Lookingbill.

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The point that the memo book illustrates is that many eyewitnesses to history survived: the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, who participated in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. As soon as these warriors began drifting back to their agencies in late summer and fall of 1876, military men, agency officials, newspaper reporters, and others were anxious to gather their testimony about events at the Little Bighorn. Interest in Indian eyewitness accounts extended well into the 1940s until most of the old warriors died. Despite great interest in collecting Indian testimony about the battle, the accuracy and worth of the warriors' tales from the battlefield has been questioned and too often dismissed as significant sources of history by many scholars of the Little Bighorn. William A. Graham (1953), though he did use select Indian testimony in his book, *The Custer Myth*, found the Indian narratives about the events at the Little Bighorn to be contradictory and unreliable. He attributed this to the notion that Indians are an "alien race" that differed from most Americans in point of view, culture, approach, psychology, and perception of the world. His frustration centered on the fact that, taken together, the Indian eyewitness accounts of the Battle of the Little Bighorn did not constitute one cohesive story. In other words, they did not answer the myriad questions that historians pose about what happened on the battlefield and why.

### Problems with Indian Testimony

Many of the written Indian records from the Battle of the Little Bighorn exist only in pictographic format. They present certain challenges as sources of history, because they do not conform to conventional concepts of historical documentation. Moreover, a difficulty many historians and scholars cite in regard to Indian eyewitness accounts is that the testimony is limited to what an individual warrior saw and experienced on the battlefield that day. The Indian narratives follow cultural norms, and so the focus is on individual deeds of valor with no particular attention paid to chronology or what other combatants were doing. As a result, no single integrated view of the battlefield emerges from the Indian accounts. For the most part, they are autobiographical and provide slices of action in discrete areas of the battlefield.

Adding to the frustration of military historians, the accounts generally lack clear space and time continuums for a panoramic overview of the battle. Richard Hardorff succinctly identifies the frustration of many historians: "The Indian recollections of the Custer Battle are basically personal recountings of incidents which rarely present an overall view" (Hardorff 1991, 18). However, the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho combatants were eyewitnesses to the destruction of Custer's command, and their narratives, though always problematic, are constantly undergoing

reexamination and reevaluation by scholars. In the latter decades of the twentieth century scholars increasingly turned to the Indian accounts in attempts to develop a new perspective of the battle. By the 1990s, some historians of the Little Bighorn validated Indian accounts through archeological evidence uncovered on the battlefield as well as closer examination of the Indian testimony and even pictographs for clues about time and geography (Connell 1984; Gray 1991; Hardorff, 1991; Miller 1992; Welch & Steckler 1995; Michno 1997; Powers 2011).

Gregory Michno in his book, *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*, stresses that historians of the Battle of the Little Bighorn must seriously study the Indian testimony as a rich and valid source of knowledge. He posits that Indian narratives are more valuable than the speculation featured in secondary sources:

Most of the Indian accounts begin making sense when we consider their very personal and specific nature. They tell us just what went on in their limited field of vision, which is exactly what we desire from eyewitnesses. From a number of specific accounts, we can reconstruct the general battle. The Indian accounts do interlock. They stitch together like Aunt Martha's old patchwork quilt. They are not irreconcilable when placed in a proper framework. (1997, xi)

Michno attaches a chronology to the warriors' stories by determining where they were on the battlefield and what they witnessed. He then uses the stories of Indian participants to reconstruct the battle in 10-minute intervals. At the conclusion of each segment Michno analyzes the information and the progression of the battle. The book is organized so that one can follow a single warrior through successive chapters while also tracking his movements and actions. Michno's use of Indian narrative respects the cultural milieu and conventions of Plains warfare and provides layered insight into what occurred at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Nonetheless, Indian eyewitness testimony from the Battle of the Little Bighorn continues to be viewed by many historians as problematic. It often disagrees with known facts and theories of what occurred. Major criticisms of the Indian testimony center on the inconsistencies of the accounts; even basic information about the time of day, the duration of the battle, and the size of the Indian village vary considerably among informants (Hardorff 1991; Kuhlman 1994; Hardorff 1995; Hardorff 1997; Michno 1997; Hutton 1992). For example, it was well known that many soldiers were scalped or mutilated, stripped of their uniforms, and horses and guns were taken from the battlefield, yet most of the Indian eyewitness accounts omit any personal details implicating themselves in these activities on the battlefield. This contributed to widespread speculation that the Indian informants feared reprisals and so deliberately hid many facts, intentionally changed

details, or distorted the truth for the sake of self-preservation (Graham 1953; Greene 1986; Greene 2000). The Red Horse pictograph, drawn in 1881, shows dead and scalped soldiers on the battlefield, dead horses, and Indian men, some in soldier's uniforms, leading horses from the battlefield. However, in the oral accounts which interpret his drawings of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Red Horse does not specifically credit himself with taking part in these events. He broadly recounts, "The Sioux took the guns and cartridges off the dead soldiers" and then added, "the Sioux men took the clothing off the dead and dressed themselves in it" (Mallery 2012). Wooden Leg, a Cheyenne warrior, is uncharacteristically straightforward in his account. He admits he took trousers and a jacket from a soldier he killed, and even though the uniform was snug and ill-fitting, he wore it the remainder of the day after his grandmother indicated he "looked good dressed that way" (Marquis 2003). Most of the Indian informants are generally quite circumspect in providing specific detail about individual accounts of killing and mutilation of soldiers. Generally, they mentioned the death and destruction on the battlefield but often attributed the scalping and mutilation to women and children, who swept across the battlefield after the fight to seek revenge (Marquis 1933; McLaughlin 1910; Neihardt 2008). In 1930 John Neihardt interviewed old men on the Pine Ridge Reservation who fought at the Little Bighorn, and though he continually prodded them to reveal if they had killed anyone on the battlefield, he noted that they either changed the subject or indicated they did not like to speak about the fight (DeMallie 1984; Neihardt 2008).

Scholars of the Little Bighorn note that the eyewitness accounts change over time. However, it is not clear if this is due to issues with translation or with intentional editing of narratives done by either the informants or the interpreters. Variations have been noted when the same warrior retells his story multiple times and over many years. Inconsistencies are most often identified in minor details that are added or deleted. Despite the revisions, many stories remain more or less the same over time (Howard 1968; Hardorff 1991; Hardorff 1995).

The quality and accuracy of the English translations of Indian eyewitness accounts is a significant area of concern mentioned repeatedly by historians. Many who acted as interpreters, generally tribal members attached to the Indian agencies or the military, had limited fluency in English, and inevitably inaccuracies resulted. In addition, many who sought eyewitness testimony suspected that interpreters, who most often were fellow tribesmen or even relatives of informants, edited the stories to prevent retaliation. Added to questions about the accuracy of translations are variations in how the Indian narratives were recorded. Descriptions of the events at the Little Bighorn were sometimes transcribed as they were delivered and translated at the same time, but many accounts were reconstructed after the fact from notes or memory (Graham 1953; Howard 1968; McLaughlin 1910; DeMallie 1984;

Hardorff 1991; Hardorff 1995; Michno 1997; Hardorff 2002). Persistent questions about accuracy of translations have caused many historians to mistrust the Indian accounts or to use them with great caution. Hertha Dawn Wong (1992) discussed the process of bicultural compositions in which the Indian narrator's story is reshaped through translation and recording and what emerges is a new collaborative product; the original story has been transformed. This adds a further layer of complication in using Indian statements and testimony as sources of history.

Many scholars of the Little Bighorn have found Indian accounts deficient in solving the popular mysteries of the fight: What was Custer's strategy? Did the troops seek to cross the creek and head into the Indian village? Where did the troops go? Was there a "last stand"? The unanswered questions go on and on, and though Indian testimony sheds light on some of these matters, the Indian battle accounts do not definitively answer the big questions. The eyewitness narrations give specific details of what a single warrior saw and experienced on the battlefield but not accounts that analyze battle tactics or the troop deployments. As a result, many historians find the Indian eyewitness testimony tantalizing but ultimately insufficient for developing a sequence of events on the battlefield or gaining deep insight into strategic mistakes of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer (Dustin 1969; Connell 1984; Gray 1991; Hardorff 1991; Miller 1992; Michno 1997).

### Pictographs and Oral Accounts

Indian eyewitness accounts of the Battle of the Little Bighorn need to be understood as cultural artifacts, which can reveal something about what occurred on the battlefield and can provide insight about Plains Indian war customs and conventions. The Indian stories are full of details about counting coup and rescuing comrades and indicate what occurred from the perspective of individual warriors. Indian accounts shed little light on troop deployment or battlefield tactics, and they simply do not give a whole picture of the battlefield or solve the mysteries of how and why Custer and his men suffered such total defeat (Dippie 1976; Greene 1986; Hammer 1976; Hardorff 2002; Brown 1971; Fox 2011).

In keeping with Plains Indian customs, many of the survivors of the Battle of the Little Bighorn produced eyewitness testimony in the form of pictographs of the events they saw and experienced on the battlefield that day. The importance of the pictographs was in the stories they represented; artistic skill was secondary. These personal chronicles of battle exploits, sometimes jokingly referred to as "brag skins" by the old Lakota warriors, were an important means of preserving family and tribal history. Among the Plains tribes, the warrior role was expected of most men, and

war deeds were the means of gaining prestige and honor. Warriors maintained illustrative records of their brave deeds and accomplishments in encounters with enemy tribes or in skirmishes against the United States military (Mallery 2012; Neihardt 2008; Marquis 2003; Berlo 1990; Tillett 1989; DeMallie 1984; Bad Heart Bull & Blish 1968).

Among the Plains tribes, individualized war exploits were recorded in pictorial form on tanned hides, robes, or the inner lining of tipis. They were frequently viewed by tribal members and served as a constant visual reminder of the collective ideals and achievements of the people. After contact with traders, soldiers, and settlers, personal war records were often recorded on large sheets of muslin cloth or paper as well as ledger books. It has been suggested that the bound ledger books encouraged individuals to provide more detailed scenes of a single event (Fox 2011; Berlo 1996). Although the medium for the drawings may have changed over time, the purpose and the conventions of the pictographs remained the same – to preserve the memory of an event (Mallery 2012; Fox 2011; Berlo 1990; DeMallie 1984; Wong 1992).

Pictographs were made to be read, and they utilized standard conventions to transmit essential information. Many drawings consisted of only a few strokes; characters and objects were represented by depicting the single striking feature or quality of a person, place, or thing. In Plains Indian sign language, the Cheyenne were represented by running fingers horizontally across the lower arm; in Lakota brag skins, the Cheyenne were depicted with hash marks across the arm. Hairstyles also provided shorthand ways of representing other tribes, so the Crow, who wore their hair in a pompadour at the front, are depicted with a knot of hair in pictographs. White men are usually pictured with hats, since the term for them was “hat wearers.” These conventions allowed pictographs to communicate information to tribal members (Mallery 2012).

A deeper understanding of the information and events preserved pictographically came from oral recitations, where the warriors recounted their acts before the people. In many ways, the pictographs served as mnemonic devices. The public recitations were entertaining and dramatic. They also reinforced the virtues of bravery and fortitude among the people. Truthfulness was insisted upon in the preservation and recounting of these acts of valor. The men swore that the events depicted on their brag skins were absolutely true and correct, and they also swore to tell the truth in recounting them to the people. Before a man could speak publicly about his exploits in battle, he was required to have at least two witnesses who could testify to the veracity of the events. Truthfulness and accuracy were insisted upon, or a man would be exposed in public as a liar and would bring great dishonor on his family and relations.

Walter Stanley Campbell, who published under the name Stanley Vestal, spent three summers, 1928 to 1930, on the Standing Rock Reservation

while interviewing old warriors who had known Sitting Bull. He recounted that when he sought information about events in warfare the old men followed Lakota custom and refused to recite a battle account unless eyewitnesses were present to verify the stories. Vestal described this verification process in *Sitting Bull*:

Very few of those old-timers could be induced to repeat hearsay; I was often compelled to drive half a day to visit some eye-witness to an event with which my first informant was perfectly familiar, but of which he would not speak because he had no first-hand knowledge. And in matters of warfare, old warriors generally insist on having two witnesses to attest their statements, so important are the battles in their eyes. (1932, 24)

As Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho people reported to their agencies after the summer of 1876, military men, agency officials, clerks, physicians, judges, and local settlers began to solicit testimony from those who had been eyewitnesses to the Centennial Campaign. There was a great deal of interest in gathering information in order to understand how five companies of soldiers under the command of a decorated military officer experienced such utter defeat. Some Indian men were persuaded to provide accounts of their exploits at the Little Bighorn in the form of pictographic renditions, oral testimony, or sign language. Less often, the Indian informant was able to write his own story in English or the tribal language. White Bull, a Miniconjou, produced two pictographs of his exploits at the Little Bighorn and wrote his own commentary in Lakota. By the time he produced his accounts in the 1930s he was able to write in the Lakota language, a skill he learned from Christian missionaries (Vestal 1934; Burdick 1937; Howard 1968; Vestal 1957). In most instances, warriors transmitted their accounts of the battle in the tribal language, and then it was interpreted into English. Likewise, sign language stories were translated into English. A sizeable body of Indian testimony of about the Battle of the Little Bighorn was collected and recorded over the years (Howard 1968; Russell 1968; McLaughlin 1910; DeMallie 1984; Hammer 1976; Graham 1953; Michno 1997; Hardorff 1991, 1997, 2002).

The High Bull-Brown memorandum book, which Cheyenne warrior High Bull took from a dead soldier from the Reno fight, is now part of the National Museum of the American Indian. Cheyenne scholar Gordon Yellowman placed High Bull at a meeting with Custer in 1869, when he negotiated peace with the Cheyenne. Among others, High Bull and Cheyenne Arrow Keeper, Stone Forehead, met to negotiate a peace agreement. Those leaders present informed Custer that by smoking the sacred pipe he agreed to terms of peace with the Cheyenne. Custer is said to have pledged, "I will no longer attack or kill a Cheyenne." Before Custer left the council tipi, the Arrow Keeper took the pipe and emptied the tobacco on

Custer's boots. If Custer broke his word, it was said, then he would turn into ashes (Powell 1975; Ganteaume 2010).

This story of Custer's betrayal of the Cheyenne is repeated in many of the Cheyenne accounts of the Little Bighorn, and it is cited as the reason Custer met with such astounding defeat. Antelope Woman, later known as Kate Big Head, a witness to the Battle of the Little Bighorn and a refugee from the Battle of the Washita, told Thomas Marquis a similar version of this story. Custer promised with the sacred pipe never again to fight the Cheyenne, so after the fight at the Little Bighorn, Cheyenne women who came upon Custer's dead body pushed an awl through his ears. Antelope Woman explained this was done "to improve his hearing in the afterlife, as it seemed he had not heard what our chiefs said to him when they smoked the pipe of peace with them." She added: "They told him that if he ever again broke his word and fought the Cheyennes, the Everywhere Spirit would surely cause him to be killed" (Marquis 1933; Powell 1981; Viola 1999). Given the corroboration in separate accounts, the stories have become prominent in the Cheyenne tradition.

### The Red Horse Accounts

The Indian records of the Battle of the Little Bighorn in pictographic format pose challenges, because they do not conform to western notions of history or documentation. They also need a great deal of interpretation to be understood. Red Horse, a Miniconjou Lakota veteran of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, produced a pictographic version of his battle experiences in 1881, as well as two accounts, one oral in 1877, and one in sign language in 1881. Soon after reporting to the Great Sioux Reservation, he gave a verbal account of his exploits at the Little Bighorn in Lakota on February 27, 1877, to Colonel W. H. Wood, commanding officer at Fort Bennett Agency in Dakota Territory. His verbal account was translated into English. Four years later, Red Horse completed the visual account of his experiences at the Little Bighorn. He also delivered a sign language interpretation to the agency physician at Fort Bennett, Dr. Charles McChesney. Soldiers and ethnologists found the multiple accounts of Red Horse to be remarkably consistent (Mallery 2012).

Red Horse's rendering portrays the broad sweep of events he witnessed and experienced that day. His account consists of a panoramic map of the Indian encampment along the Little Bighorn River and 41 episodic drawings done on separate sheets of paper, 24 by 26 inches. This pictograph, drawn in ink and colored pencil, is housed in the National Anthropological Archives, and the entire set of drawings is reproduced in Herman Viola's *Little Bighorn Remembered* (1999). Red Horse's pictograph of the Battle

of the Little Bighorn is a premier example of a brag skin or autobiographical record of events he personally saw and experienced in war. It is unusual for its serial manner of portrayal. The pictograph provides a comprehensive scope of events in chronological sequence from the appearance of Reno's men approaching the Indian village, and it ends with the victorious Sioux on the battlefield. Each set of events is portrayed in five drawings. Taken together, the cumulative effect of his images leads one to understand the whirling confusion and turmoil of the battle. Red Horse initially fought in the Reno battle and then took part in the fight with Custer's troops (Graham 1953; Bad Heart Bull & Blish 1968; Mallery 2012; Viola 1999).

Many Indian survivors of the battle told of being involved in performing mundane daily tasks just before the soldiers attacked. Families were eating midday meals, young boys were tending ponies, and young girls were minding children, but suddenly their world was turned upside down (Fiske 1917; Burdick 1937; Howard 1968; McLaughlin 1910; Milligan 1972; Sandoz 1978; DeMallie 1984; Hammer 1976; Hardorff 1991, 1995, 1997; Michno 1997; Brown 1971; Neihardt 2008). In his 1881 signed account, Red Horse related that he was involved with ordinary routine until the attack:

The day of the attack I and four women were a short distance from the camp digging wild turnips. Suddenly one of the women attracted my attention to a cloud of dust rising a short distance from camp. I soon saw the soldiers were charging the camp. (Mallery 2012)

Red Horse related that the men of his camp gathered in the council tipi to make decisions, but the "soldiers charged so quickly we could not talk. We came out of the council lodge and talked in all directions." Many Indian accounts testify to confusion in the Indian camp once the soldiers were detected. The women and children were told to leave camp and seek safety, while the young men were told "to go and meet the troops." Similarly, Red Horse's pictographic account begins with Reno's troops approaching the village. The soldiers are depicted generically, conforming to Lakota pictographic conventions; they all wear hats and have beards, and they are shown in full cavalry uniforms charging into battle arranged in parallel lines. In sign language, soldiers were indicated as "all in a line," since they often went to battle and drilled in formation. Many of the soldiers did not wear full regulation dress during the battle that day; it was very warm and the woolen uniforms were hot. Pictographic stylization, which allows the drawings to be read, has caused many scholars of the battle to reject the scenes as symbolic representations and not factual. It is important to see that Red Horse envisions not only his experience but also a day in the life of his people (Mallery 2012).

In the next set of drawings, rows upon rows of tipis fill the pages. Interestingly, Red Horse did not depict any people amidst the tipis. However, the drawings imparted information to Lakota contemporaries of Red Horse. The decorated tipis indicated the large number of families camped along the banks of the Little Bighorn River, and these families contained women, children, and elderly.

Furthermore, Red Horse depicted the Lakota driving the soldiers of Reno's battalion out of the village and back across the Little Bighorn River. He reported in sign language: "All the Sioux now charged the soldiers and drove them in confusion across the Little Bighorn river, which was very rapid, and several soldiers drowned" (Mallery 2012). In the pictograph there are images of soldiers and also crescent-shaped markings representing the soldiers' horses leaving the Indian village; the Indian ponies are shown with the tails tied up, a custom observed by most Plains tribes when they went into battle; and the Indian warriors are depicted with distinctive clothing, headdresses, sashes, lances, and accoutrements of war. The conventional trappings of each warrior society were well known and easily understood by tribal members, who were able to read the drawings at a glance (Bad Heart Bull & Blish, 1968). Throughout the pictographs, a member of the Strong Heart society appears mounted on a horse in varying shades of red. Very likely Red Horse is this Strong Heart, since the intent of brag skins was to record personal exploits and achievements on the battlefield. Consequently, Red Horse never related any personal war deeds in either his oral or signed accounts.

Reno's troops retreated to a hill and then word passed among the warriors "like a whirlwind" that "different soldiers were seen" (Mallery 2012). Red Horse's next series of five drawings depicted the fight with Custer's column, a fierce battle with much confusion and death. Soldiers and warriors are locked in mortal combat amidst guns, trumpets, and guidons scattered about the battlefield. In one image, a soldier's gun is pointed upward with smoke swirling around the barrel. There were reports that rounds jammed in the breech of Springfield carbines issued to the 7th Cavalry, and this image may depict such an event (Fox 1993; Greene 1986; Michno 1997). In this set of drawings, the Strong Heart society member appears on a red horse killing a soldier with an arrow, and then in another image he kills a trooper with a war club.

In one particular drawing, a soldier has turned his gun to his head. Indian accounts of the Custer fight consistently mention that some soldiers committed suicide. Cheyenne warriors who were in the thick of the battle with Custer's companies reported soldiers turning their guns on themselves (Marquis 2003). In addition, Antelope Woman (Kate Big Head) was on a horse at various spots observing the battle. In the waning minutes of the rout of Custer's troops, she reported seeing a soldier shoot himself in the head with a revolver, and then she observed other soldiers turning guns

to their heads. At the same time, she observed soldiers attempting a final defense, some hunkered down behind dead horses; in the end, the troopers were overwhelmed by the Indian warriors (Marquis 1933; Marquis 2003; Michno 1997). Red Horse's final drawing in this set showed scalped and mutilated dead soldiers, underscoring the finality of the encounter with Custer's troops. Red Horse interpreted these images:

... the Sioux charged the different soldiers [i.e., Custer's] below, and drove them in confusion; these soldiers became foolish, throwing away their guns and raising their hands, saying, "Sioux, pity us; take us prisoners." The Sioux did not take a single soldier prisoner, but killed all of them. None were left alive even for a few minutes. These different soldiers discharged their guns but little. (Mallery 2012)

Through sign language Red Horse reported fierce fighting among Custer's troops. Upon reflection, he conjectured, "Had the soldiers not divided I think they would have killed many Sioux." Then he indicated that Custer's troops made five brave stands, but "the Sioux charged right in the midst of the different soldiers and scattered them all fighting among the soldiers hand to hand." He also tells of surrounding the soldiers while officers tried to rally the troops, but in the end, "The Sioux killed all these different soldiers in the ravine" (Mallery 2012). One can imagine that he noted their fate with emotion. Taken together Red Horse's drawings of the battle are full of tumultuous activity, confusion, and death.

The next series of five pictographs contains images of dead cavalry horses. These pages of dead horses seem a bit monotonous and repetitious, yet they indicate the magnitude of the fighting and the finality of events. The Lakota were known for their fine horsemanship, and horses were important culturally; so the large number of horses killed in this fight was notable and memorable. In these drawings, Red Horse reflected his culture and its values.

The next set of images depicts the casualties on the battlefield. Red Horse reported through sign language that "the soldiers killed 136 and wounded 160 Sioux" (Mallery 2012). Most historians indicate the number of Indian dead was not that high, but Red Horse's drawings of the Indians killed by Custer's column serve as obituaries of sorts. The clothing of the dead warriors would have enabled Lakota or Cheyenne contemporaries to read the identities of those who died. Red Horse did not chronicle all 136 dead; rather he likely drew only the deaths of the men he fought near and knew as friends or relations.

The next sequence of five drawings represent the dead men of Custer's column strewn across the battlefield. Once again the soldiers are generic – all have beards and uniforms – but now the soldiers' hats are beside their bodies. Since the soldiers were scalped, indicated by red at the crown of

their heads, they no longer had need of their hats. Many of the soldiers were stripped of their uniforms at the Little Bighorn, and Red Horse signed that "Some of the Sioux took the clothing off the dead and dressed themselves in it." In his account, Red Horse also noted among the dead there were "white men who were not soldiers" (Mallery 2012). Mutilation of bodies was a war custom among the Plains tribes and was said to prevent the spirits of the dead from avenging their deaths or returning to harm the people again. He did not mention or explain scalping or mutilation, however he represented it pictographically.

In his final set of pictographs of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Red Horse detailed the victorious Lakota leaving the battlefield. Indeed, all the warriors lead captured cavalry horses, and some are depicted as already arrayed in articles of soldiers' clothing. The Strong Heart warrior, who appears on horses in various shades of red, leads a reddish horse from the field of battle. Red Horse signed to Dr. McChesney, "I took a gun and two belts off two dead soldiers; out of one belt two cartridges were gone, out of the other, five" (Mallery 2012). Many Indian accounts of the battle mention taking guns and ammunition from soldiers during and after the fight with Custer's companies. This windfall of horses was important to the Plains Indians.

Although not part of his pictographic account, Red Horse testified that he returned to the hill where the troops under Reno and Benteen were entrenched. He recounted that the Lakota finally abandoned the area "when the walking soldiers came near, the Sioux became afraid and ran away" (Mallery 2012). In all likelihood, he meant infantry soldiers under Terry arrived.

In the 1877 interview with Colonel Wood, Red Horse stated that after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, "We kept moving all summer, the troops always being after us." He ended his testimony to Colonel Wood by stressing his uneasiness about discussing the fight against the Army: "I don't like to talk about that fight. If I hear my people talking about it I always move away" (Graham 1953). Red Horse's brag skin coupled with his oral and sign language accounts of the Battle of the Little Bighorn constitute important historic documents based on eyewitness testimony.

### Neihardt's Informants

In the summer of 1930 John Neihardt went to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota to collect stories from old men who had participated in the Plains Indian wars. His intent was to publish a book. In the process of searching for informants, Neihardt met and interviewed Standing Bear, an old man born in 1859, who remembered Little Bighorn. Though Neihardt did conduct some interviews with veterans of the wars, the direction

of his research changed when he met Nicholas Black Elk, a spiritual man who became his principal informant about surviving on the reservation and the loss of the traditional way of life. Nevertheless, Standing Bear provided Neihardt with a detailed oral account of his experiences at the Little Bighorn without using or producing a pictograph. A full version of Neihardt's notes were published in *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John C. Neihardt* (DeMallie 1984).

Standing Bear's narrative began at daybreak on June 25, 1876, when he was awakened by his father. As was customary in the mornings, he and a cousin took the family horses to graze, and when they returned, Standing Bear ate meat cooked by his grandmother. He recounted that people in camp were engaged in ordinary activities; many women were digging turnips, people were swimming in the river, and boys were taking horses to the water to drink. Standing Bear recalled a foreboding feeling coming over him, "that in an hour or so something terrible might happen" (DeMallie 1984). Many Lakota traditions indicate that some in the village had premonitions of trouble that morning.

Soon after eating, Standing Bear learned soldiers were being driven from the Hunkpapa village; this was the attack by Reno's command. What followed was immediate confusion: "There were voices all over and everyone was saying something" (DeMallie 1984). Standing Bear reported that he hurriedly readied himself for battle by tying a redbird skin in his hair as a protective talisman. Since time was running short, he went barefoot in search of his horse. As the men readied themselves for battle, they gathered at one end of the village on their horses. From this vantage point, they noticed even more soldiers coming and so, as a group, they charged toward what he came to learn was Custer's column.

Standing Bear mentioned that it was customary for the Oglalas to go into battle led by "fronters," the bravest men who charged first against the enemy. Soldiers and Indians "were all mixed up" on the battlefield, and he stressed "how crazy everyone was at this time" (DeMallie 1984). Chaos and confusion led to "friendly-fire" incidents. Many Indian accounts, Standing Bear's included, mention that soldiers got off their horses, and one man would hold the bridles for many soldiers who then attempted to mount a defense (Fox 2011; Michno 1997; DeMallie 1984). Standing Bear described a fierce and deadly encounter, and when it was all over, he said, "I smelled blood all over" (DeMallie 1984, 187).

Neihardt queried Standing Bear directly, "Did you kill anyone?" Initially, Standing Bear dodged the question and instead reiterated the confusion and terrible carnage on the battlefield. "Probably every person doesn't quite know what he is doing during this kind of a time," responded Standing Bear, adding that "we would shoot at soldiers but we did not know whether we hit them or not" (DeMallie 1984). Ultimately, Standing Bear admitted that he joined directly in the fray, charging up a hill as bullets rained down.

He even engaged in hand-to-hand combat with a soldier: "I took my pistol and hit a soldier on the head and knocked him down and then I killed him" (DeMallie 1984). He credited the redbird skin tied in his hair for providing protection while on the battlefield. In concluding his account, Standing Bear reiterated the fight was so horrific that it left him unable to sleep that night. He lamented: "I kept recalling the horrible things I had seen" (DeMallie 1984).

While historians still debate the degree to which Neihardt manipulated his informants, the Indian narratives that he collected remain invaluable. Of course, anything written in the aftermath the Little Bighorn became entangled with memories, recollections, and emotions. The key thing to consider regarding these types of sources is how Neihardt came by them. Did he hear their versions of events second hand? If he heard them directly from the informants, then who was the interpreter of what was said? Do other sources corroborate?

## Conclusion

The Native traditions include a wide array of testimony from the Battle of the Little Bighorn. One of the biggest shortfalls of citing them was that no definitive meta-analysis seemed possible from these very individualized accounts. For years, historians regarded them as interesting and intriguing artifacts but not as major resources for the study of the battlefield. More commonly, the Indian narratives detailing exploits of the Little Bighorn battle were enfolded into autobiographical accounts of a warrior's life. The as-told-to narratives became a rather popular genre of autobiography. Authors and scholars such as Stanley Vestal (1932, 1934), Thomas Marquis (2003), John Neihardt (2008), and many others interested in the Plains Indian wars captured the life stories of individual warriors and retold their deeds at the Little Bighorn to modern audiences.

In recent years, the consideration of minority voices and viewpoints has influenced the historical constructions of the past. A new methodology, referred to as ethnohistory, has encouraged the inclusion of Indian voices in almost all studies of the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Edmunds 1995). Ethnohistorians analyzed Indian eyewitness testimony for clues about the chronology of the battle, the number of warriors, the movement of troops, and the dispersion of Indians, among other things. Perhaps the best example of ethnohistory's potential comes from Michno, who incorporated some of these methodologies when analyzing numerous Indian narratives of the Custer defeat and attempted to construct an Indian perspective on the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Michno 1997).

After archeological explorations of the Little Bighorn Battlefield in the 1980s confirmed the accuracy of many Native traditions, historians who

had discounted these stories as confusing or inaccurate began to take another look at the Indian viewpoints (Greene 1986; Fox 1993; Fox 2011; Michno 1997). Jerome Greene (1986) insisted that the archeological surveys of 1984 and 1985 “give added credibility to Indian verbal renderings of a century ago.” In addition, Native historians are making contributions to the knowledge base by interpreting tribal culture while insisting that Indian voices are necessary in the interpretation of the Battle of the Little Bighorn as well as its aftermath. Joseph Marshall, Ernie LaPointe, and many other voices maintain that it is only through the art of traditional storytelling that one can make sense of what happened in the past and understand what Indian history is in the contemporary world (LaPointe 2009; Marshall 2007; Viola 1999). Today on any of the northern Plains reservations when the people come together for social or spiritual gatherings, one will still hear songs honoring warriors who fought at the Little Bighorn and memorializing those who fell on the battlefield. Among the Arikara people, who served as military scouts at the Little Bighorn, songs honor Custer and the fallen soldiers as well as the Indians who died that day.

Despite the many books written about the Battle of the Little Bighorn, controversies about the clash of cultures still abound. The Indian accounts in various forms comprise a historic record that needs to be examined for deeper understanding of the events that transpired that hot June day on the Greasy Grass. The testimony by the Native combatants and bystanders can and should be used to shed light on the events on the battlefield. It also provides insight into Indian warfare customs and broadens everyone’s understanding of the impact of violence on Plains Indian life. Indian eyewitness testimony points toward understanding the tragedy of battle – the fate of common people on both sides, who were pushed headlong into a fight neither side wanted.

For many years, Indian testimony was not integrated into historical studies of the Little Bighorn. Pictographic images graced the covers of books or provided illustrations for articles on the Centennial Campaign, but they, like the oral testimony, were viewed largely as artifacts and reflections of Plains Indian culture, not reliable sources to understand this event. Now, books of the Indian accounts, both oral and pictographic, are being published for their contribution to understanding this event (Berlo 1996; Calloway 2012; McLaughlin 2013; Viola 1998). More scholars and historians of the Battle of the Little Bighorn are reconsidering what is known and examining the Indian accounts for what they can tell us about this battle, what happened on the battlefield that day, what happened in the Indian villages that day, and what were the immediate and long-term consequences of this turning point for all the Plains tribes. These Indian eyewitness drawings and accounts of the occurrences in the past offer a deeper understanding of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

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## Chapter Twenty

### THE PRESS

*Hugh J. Reilly*

Journalist Alan Barth wrote that “news is only the first rough draft of history.” This was certainly the case with the frontier newspapers of the late 1800s. They did more than simply record the story. They provided insight into the opinions and attitudes of the people, place, and time. The Battle of the Little Bighorn was big news, and it was in the frontier newspapers that the story originated and spread across the country. In a sense, the frontier newspapers first printed the legend that still exists today.

With the possible exception of Gettysburg, no single battle fought on American soil has been written about more than the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Several factors combined to generate interest in the press. First, there were no white survivors at “Last Stand Hill.” Every man under Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer’s immediate command was killed. Second, the defeat took place on the eve of the American centennial. A nation celebrating its first 100 years was forced to turn its eyes from Philadelphia, New York, and Washington, DC and focus its attention on a remote battlefield in Montana Territory. Third, the death of Custer, who had become a larger-than-life figure, added to the mythic quality of the battle. Custer had gained notoriety during the Civil War and added to his reputation during the Indian Wars.

Historian Robert M. Utley summarized the shock felt at the news of Custer’s defeat:

Custer Dead? To the generals as well as all who read the papers that morning, the story seemed preposterous. For more than a decade George Armstrong Custer had basked in public adulation as a national hero ... By 1876 the public

saw him as the very embodiment of the Indian-fighting army ... Even to hard-eyed realists like Sherman and Sheridan, the vaunted Custer could hardly fall victim to a calamity such as the newspaper reported. (Utley 1988, 4)

Utley's description of Custer as "the embodiment of the Indian-fighting army" was based upon the extensive coverage of Custer and his activities in the national press since the end of the American Civil War.

In addition to being the subject of newspapers' stories, Custer also had been an occasional correspondent for the *New York Herald* and other newspapers. According to Utley, following the battle at Little Bighorn, the press "plunged into a bitter controversy over the character and actions of the star player in the drama ... With the 1876 presidential-election contest heating up, editorial writers chose sides according to their paper's political affiliation" (Utley 1988, 5). Likewise, historian Brian Dippie observed: "So virulent were the accusations that flew back and forth that it seemed for a while as though the election of 1876 might be fought over Custer's corpse" (Dippie 1976, 11). Custer became a national symbol.

Custer was not unique in serving as a correspondent for newspapers. Several other military men wrote for newspapers large and small. There is also a rich history of newspapers on Army posts across the frontier. The first regular newspaper west of the Missouri River may well have been at Fort Atkinson in Nebraska, where the garrison published a weekly tabloid in 1822 (Tate 1999, 261). According to historian Michael Tate, the Army post newspapers were "mostly filled with local news of the soldiering life in addition to a smattering of national news borrowed from other publications. If a printing press was available, the commanding officer approved the project, and someone was willing to take on the work, an army newspaper could spring up overnight" (1999, 261).

Another newspaper, *The Frontier Index*, was originally published in Fort Kearny, Nebraska in 1865. It was later dubbed the "press on wheels" because it moved with the Union Pacific Railroad as it headed west and was eventually published in 20 different locations. Other post newspapers included *The Frontier Scout*, published at Fort Union in Dakota Territory and the colorfully titled *The Flea*, published in Fort Richardson, Texas (Tate 1999, 264, 267). All of them offered a soldier's view of life on the frontier.

### Campaign Coverage

Federal government policies in 1876 appeared to make the confrontation between the United States and the Sioux and Cheyenne inevitable. According to Utley, the basic aim of the government was to neutralize the "hostiles" by forcing them to merge with their more "dependent brethren" on the reservation. To mask their plan and soften their naked aggression,

the Indian Office decided to notify all of the hunting bands and request that they report to the agencies. Runners were sent to all of the winter camps to tell the Indians to come to the agency by January 31, 1876, or US soldiers would march against them. Newspapers across the country noted an impending military campaign, though the coverage was partial and fragmentary (Utley 1993, 128).

The deadline came and went. Although most of the Indians had heard of the ultimatum, according to Utley, it probably puzzled the tribes more than it angered them. Most of the runners brought back no reply, though one who did said the tribes were peaceful but were busily hunting buffalo. They would come in to trade in the spring, just like always following a hunt. The press indicated that the Indians seemed to have no intention of fighting (Utley 1993, 129). It is interesting to note, however, that the *Omaha Republican* predicted the gathering of the tribes that would occur the following summer. They also predicted the awesome power of the Indians that would emerge from an alliance of the Sioux and Cheyenne. While it may have simply been a strategy to attract more readers, months before the military campaign against the Indians began, a few newspapers sounded the alarm.

During March of 1876, the *Omaha Bee* ran a puzzling story about a successful attack that General George Crook led on the village of Crazy Horse. According to the *Bee*, Crook had "fought with Crazy Horse and completely annihilated his force of 500 men after a five hour fight." There were four soldiers killed, and most of the Indians' food and other supplies were destroyed (*Omaha Bee*, March 27, 1876, 1). The *Bee's* reporting of the story was far from accurate.

The village Crook attacked was not Crazy Horse's but an allied camp of Northern Cheyenne under Two Moons as well as some Oglala under He Dog and a few Miniconjou. Altogether the camp contained 735 people, including 210 fighting men. Far from being annihilated, the Indians suffered only light casualties, including two dead and several wounded. While half of the Indians' pony herd was stolen, it was retaken from the soldiers the next day. The most grievous loss was the provisions, which were destroyed. Short on food, shelter, and clothing, the Indians stumbled through the snow and bitter cold until they reached the haven of Crazy Horse's camp (Utley 1993, 130).

The attack not only stunned the Indians but also made many of those who had professed peace hunger for revenge. They recognized that the soldiers were attacking their people. Utley writes: "Chiefs previously opposed to war now harangued their young men to attack undefended trading posts and obtain the arms and ammunition needed to wage all-out war" (Utley 1993, 130).

In the early summer, the news of Crook's battle at the Rosebud on June 17, 1876, began to appear in the Omaha newspapers. The *Omaha*

*Daily Herald* was the first with the news, although it offered few details. It confirmed that the Sioux had attacked in force and that Crook had lost nine men killed and reported more than 20 wounded. However, it feared the battle was not decisive. The *Herald* preferred “a decisive battle, if any was to be fought,” because such an outcome would bring the war to a quick end. “If defeated and severely punished,” the newspaper opined, then “they would skulk back to their reservations, become more tractable and be willing to return to their reservations” (June 24, 1876, 2).

Utey disputed Crook’s claim of victory at the Rosebud. He posits that “the true victory, both tactical and strategic, lay with the Indians.” Evidently, they had attacked a force twice as large as their own and eventually sent it in a stunned retreat back to the security of the base camp. Crook would not be a factor in the strategic equation for the next six weeks. Utey concluded that the Indians knew they had won the battle. “On the way back to their village,” he stated, “while mournfully burying their dead, they also feasted in triumph” (Utey 1993, 142). Crook’s battle with the Sioux and their allies was a precursor of the major battle to come that summer, when Custer would meet many of these same Indians in the valley of the Little Bighorn.

The story of that confrontation would be largely told by the frontier newspapers. According to historian Elmo Scott Watson, the correspondents who covered the Indian wars were a rare combination of adventurers and journalists. Because many were “volunteer correspondents more gifted in imaginative writing than in accurate reporting, they spread before their readers the kind of highly-colored accounts of Indian raids and ‘massacres’ that the most sensational yellow journal of a later period might have envied” (Watson 1940). Historian Barbara Cloud agrees, stating that “the prince of Western journalism was not the skilled assembler of facts, but the juggler who could ram fiction down the public throat and have it digested as news” (Cloud 1992, 150).

While only one journalist, Mark Kellogg, traveled with the Army to the battle of the Little Bighorn, there were several others who played a notable role in covering the Indian wars. Charles F. Lummis reported on the Apache wars of the 1880s for the *Los Angeles Times*. DeBenneville Randolph Keim was a correspondent for the *New York Herald* and covered General Phil Sheridan’s 1868 campaign against the southern Cheyenne that culminated in Custer’s destruction of Black Kettle’s village along the Washita River. Henry Stanley, who later earned lasting fame for tracking down Dr. David Livingstone in Africa, was a reporter for the *Saint Louis Missouri-Democrat*. He was with General Winfield Scott Hancock during his 1867 expedition in Kansas (Tate 1999, 271).

Four correspondents accompanied Crook’s campaign against the Sioux and Cheyenne in the spring of 1876. John Finerty was a correspondent for the *Chicago Times* and was probably the best of the lot. His writing was brisk, accurate, and compelling. Robert E. Strahorn, Joe Wasson, and Reuben

Davenport also covered the expedition. Strahorn was only 24 when he covered the action for the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Rocky Mountain News*. Joe Wasson had a long association with Crook, having also been with him during the Snake Indian war of 1868. According to Tate, the least popular was Davenport, a reporter for the *New York Herald*. He was reviled by Crook and his soldiers due to Davenport's criticism of their performance in the field (Tate 1999, 271).

### Breaking News

While the battle of the Little Bighorn began on June 25, 1876, the first published word of the Army's loss did not appear until E. S. Wilkinson's special edition of the *Bozeman Times* on July 3, 1876. According to historian Rex Myers, this "extra" became the initial source for many local newspapers (Myers 1976). The remainder of the country heard about the battle after the fourth of July. The country was just catching its breath from the raucous centennial celebration when the news of Custer's defeat made headlines. Following closely on the heels of a celebration of the nation's progress, the killing of a national hero by the Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne was a shock to the nation. The news was wholly unexpected.

Within the region, the response of the Omaha newspapers was typical. They were as shocked as the rest of the country. The *Omaha Daily Herald* said that the news "created a profound sensation throughout the entire city, and a deep feeling of pity was manifested for the brave men who had been thus ruthlessly destroyed" (July 7, 1876, 1). The *Omaha Bee* wrote: "The shocking intelligence of terrible disaster which has overtaken Gen. Custer and his ill-fated command in a deadly encounter with the hostile Indians of the Yellowstone region, cannot but produce the most profound sensation that has in many years been experienced in this country" (July 6, 1876, 2). The *Omaha Republican* stated that the news of the Custer defeat "carried a thrill of horror through the heart of every reader. It was the absorbing topic of conversation through the morning" (July 8, 1876, 2).

After the initial jolt, the reaction to Custer's defeat was mixed. For example, some of the Democratic papers in Montana criticized the Grant administration for pursuing a course of skimping on frontier troops while keeping sufficient troops in the Reconstruction South to influence upcoming national elections. The *Helena Daily Independent* accused the government of sacrificing lives for profit. One column announced:

The government appears to have sent just enough troops into the Indian country to be butchered. An adequate force would have saved to the country the gallant lives which perished on the Little Horn and taught the remorseless and bloody Sioux obedience to a constituted authority. But the administration

and its partisans are so tender about the Indians that they much prefer the butchery of our soldiers to interfering with the horrible passions of the savages. The sacrifice of a score of lives is nothing in comparison to selling a post tradership to advantage. (July 6, 1876, 1)

The press initially highlighted a national debate over the "Indian question." A few Republican papers in Montana criticized the Quaker policy and advocated "extermination" of the Sioux. In contrast, R. N. Sutherlin of the *Rocky Mountain Husbandman* believed the Indians had been mistreated by the Indian agencies, and the Indians' uprising was justified. The *Western Home Journal* of Detroit, Michigan, also asserted that the Indians were justified in their armed resistance. In an editorial published on July 8, 1876, it criticized the military expeditions of the Army as leading to a "bloody, fruitless and expensive war." The newspaper contended that the Sioux were only defending the land that was rightfully theirs, adding that "our troops have long looked on the killing of a red skin with the same nonchalance as a street boy on the killing of a wharf rat" (Myers 1976).

Among the historians to examine the newspapers, Dippie demonstrates how supposedly informed persons combined misinformation with misjudgment in the reports. Since newspapers were the only mass media in the late nineteenth century, they had a dominant role in helping to shape opinion. Their propensity for "sentimentalizing disaster and enshrining martyred heroes was perhaps in itself enough to make a national myth of Custer's Last Stand in 1876" (Dippie 1976, 132).

For example, Custer made the perfect foil for Southern editorialists. He had been a dashing leader of the US cavalry, his sympathy remained with the South before and after the Civil War. He also was in disfavor with President Grant, for accusing Grant's brother Orville of corruption in his involvement with selling of operating licenses to Indian traders. Southern newspapers tended to emphasize that the Army possessed sufficient strength to defeat the Sioux if the troops were employed properly. In other words, they tended to blame Custer's death on Grant. The president "had neglected the army on the frontier in order that bayonets might preside over Southern ballot boxes." With romantic overtones, the *Richmond Whig* raised Custer to heroic status in its editorial pages by declaring:

The North alone shall not mourn for this gallant soldier. He belongs to all the Saxon race; and when he carried his bold dragoons into the thickest of the ambuscade, where his sun of life forever set, we behold in him the true spirit of that living chivalry which cannot die, but shall live forever to illustrate the pride, the glory and the grandeur of our imperishable race. (Dippie 1971)

In contrast, Northern editorials painted a more balanced portrait of Custer. The *New York Herald* commented: "Rising to high command early in life he lost the repose necessary to success in high command." The newspaper went

on to state that “we all liked Custer and did not mind his little freaks in that way any more than we would have minded temper in a woman.” Even if “Custer’s glorious death and the valor of his men will become a legend in our history,” the article concluded that “he sacrificed the Seventh Cavalry to ambition and wounded vanity” (July 7, 1876).

Mark Kellogg, the only reporter known to have been with Custer at the Little Bighorn, had worked as an assistant editor for the Council Bluffs *Democrat* in 1868 (Saum 1978). By 1873, he was a correspondent for the *Bismarck Tribune* and the *St. Paul Dispatch*, writing under the *nom de plume* of “Frontier.” In August of 1875, Kellogg made his opinion on the “Indian question” clear. He wrote about the killing of a homesteader by an Indian raiding party:

And thus they go, making raids here and there, killing inoffensive White citizens, raiding off stock, and doing pretty much as they please, with the utmost impunity – and yet the present Indian policy calls out for Peace! Peace! – Christianize the poor unfortunates, treat them with kindness, and all that sort of bosh. Bah! I say, turn the dogs of war loose, and drive them off the face of the earth, if they do not behave themselves. (Saum 1978, 20)

In the spring of 1876, Kellogg was in Bismarck. His friend, Clement Lounsberry, the editor for the *Bismarck Tribune*, expected to join Custer on the Army’s summer campaign against the Sioux and their allies. Lounsberry decided not to accompany Custer on his military expedition when his wife became very ill. Instead, Kellogg was an enthusiastic substitute and rode out with Custer’s troops on May 17, 1876 (Saum 1978, 21). In addition to working for the *Bismarck Tribune* on this campaign, Kellogg also was a correspondent for the *New York Herald*.

Kellogg used a diary format to write about Custer’s march to the Little Bighorn. In a prophetic dispatch written on June 21, 1876, aboard the steamboat *Far West*, Kellogg wrote: “We leave the Rosebud tomorrow, and by the time this reaches you we will have met and fought the red devils, with what results remains to be seen. I go with Custer and will be at the death” (Saum 1978, 21). Indeed, he was with Custer “at the death,” though probably not in the way he anticipated. He was killed by the Indians, and his body was found on the battlefield. Though not mutilated, his scalp was removed (Utley 1988, 21).

It was left to Lounsberry to complete Kellogg’s work as a correspondent of the campaign. He developed the first major story of the battle. Lounsberry’s article was a complete account of 15,000 words and took the telegraph operator almost a day to transmit over the wire. It had been forwarded to the *New York Herald* at an estimated cost of \$3,000. Lounsberry started with the material Kellogg had prepared to compose the lead story, which ran to about 7,500 words in the *Herald* (Knight 1960, 216).

Lounsberry also found time to compose a story for his own *Bismarck Tribune*. The editor circulated a single sheet extra on the morning of July 6, 1876. Historian James Donovan described the first run: "The oversized single-word headline, followed by ten subheads, read: MASSACRED" (Donovan 2008, 318).

The first detailed reports of the battle of the Little Bighorn did not appear in the Montana newspapers until July 6. Accordingly, 12 days had passed since Custer and his men were killed near the valley the Indians called the "Greasy Grass." The *Helena Daily Independent* reported that Custer led five companies of cavalry, and that he "attacked the Indian village alone, without Generals Terry and Gibbon, and in disobedience of orders." The newspaper announced that the warriors numbered about 2,500. "Nearly every man in Custer's command was killed," the *Daily Independent* lamented, and "hardly a man was left to tell the tale" (July 6, 1876, 1).

The *Omaha Daily Herald* headlined their story with "The Savage War." The subheads included "The Army of the North Who Were to Sweep the Indians from the Field Meet With Fearful Disaster," and "Three Hundred Soldiers Killed and Fifteen Wounded Strew the Battle Ground, Presenting a Sad and Sickening Sight." Passages briefly described the battle, stating that "the Seventh fought like tigers and were overcome by more brute force" (July 6, 1876, 1). While it was certainly a large gathering of Indians, the *Daily Herald's* report exaggerated the size of the village. Indeed, Utley noted the pattern of sensational coverage: "Over a span of only six days Sitting Bull's village more than doubled, from 400 to 1,000 lodges, from 3,000 to 7,000 people, from 800 to 2,000 warriors" (Utley 1988, 179).

The *Omaha Bee* featured the same wire story about the Little Bighorn battle as had the *Daily Herald*. It described the battle ground as a "slaughter pen, as it really was, being in a narrow ravine." While noting that "the dead were much mutilated," the newspaper warned that "the situation now looks serious" (July 6, 1876, 1). The *Bee* still questioned the news from the Little Bighorn but was inclined to believe it.

The effort to explain Custer's defeat to a reading public was occurring all over the country. The Butte *Miner* claimed that the Indians had been lying in wait for Custer and his men. "The Indians had everything prepared to make a desperate resistance to an attack," the *Miner* declared. The Indians reportedly piled logs into breastworks. The river banks were hollowed out to provide them cover, which made the area "impenetrable for Cavalry" (July 8, 1876, 1). This report by the *Miner* seems to be a complete fabrication. There is no evidence that any such preparation took place along the Little Bighorn. In fact Reno, in his attack on the south end of the camp, was able to sweep in almost unimpeded until ordering his men to dismount.

The *Republican* did not publish the wire story on the battle until July 8, which was two days after the story appeared in the *Daily Herald* and the *Bee*. It added that the news of the "massacre of Custer and his command by the

hostile Sioux carried a thrill of horror through the heart of every reader." It became the absorbing topic of conversation throughout the morning. When additional news came "that Major Reno and the remaining seven companies of the 7th Cavalry had shared Custer's fate, the excitement was intense, and nothing else was heard on the streets except the Indian news." Moreover, the *Republican* reported: "If anything was needed to add to the excitement it was the report that General Terry had also fallen into the hands of the savage red men" (July 8, 1876, 1). While the Army certainly suffered numerous casualties, the *Bee* and the *Republican's* reports about the massacre of Reno and his men was sensationalistic and inaccurate.

As for the *Republican's* speculation about the fate of General Alfred Terry, he was not killed by the Sioux and their allies. In fact, he did not even arrive on the scene until June 27, two days after the battle. The *Daily Herald* also noted the rumor about General Terry's death, dispatching one of its reporters to investigate by contacting Army headquarters. It soon learned that the rumor was unfounded and relayed this information to its readers (July 7, 1876, 2).

### The Coverage Expands

Stories about Custer and the battle of the Little Bighorn dominated the news columns of the western newspapers for a few weeks. Historians exploring the various and sundry reports will find similar sentiments expressed repeatedly. Correspondents tended to reinforce anti-Indian hysteria among readers, which in turn underscored the need for the Army to conduct a large-scale campaign against the Sioux and the Cheyenne in the northern Plains.

The press generally trumpeted Custer's story, though the local coverage began to examine certain details about the battle. The *Bee*, for instance, confirmed that Custer had been killed. It added: "No doubt Custer dropped into the midst of no less than 10,000 red devils, and was literally torn to pieces" (July 7, 1876, 1). Doubts about Custer's judgment started to circulate in the reports. "The movement made by Custer was censured to some extent at military headquarters," because several of the older officers "say it was brought about by foolish pride (July 7, 1876, 1). The Butte *Miner* echoed the *Bee* in regard to Custer's judgment or his lack thereof. Within days, the *Miner* reported: "The blame for this terrible disaster is laid on Gen. Custer; as he disobeyed orders in attacking the Indians before the arrival of his superior, Gen. Gibbon" (July 13, 1876, 2).

The *Daily Herald* indicted the Army's campaign more broadly. One report claimed that General Sherman himself would have to admit that the Sioux were capable of much more than a simple "scalp hunting war." Furthermore, the *Herald* expected "that the Government will prove itself as craven and cowardly as it has already shown itself to be corrupt and

imbecilic,” especially if it did not “instantly call for ten thousand volunteers for two years’ service” in order to put an end to Indian resistance. It chastised critics for not believing its warning that the “Sioux exterminators were a set of dunces,” and claimed the officers and men of Custer’s command “sold their lives dearly, and that at least twice their number of savages fell in the same battle” (July 7, 1876, 2).

The newspapers generally rejoiced in squelching one popular rumor with the announcement that Reno and most of his command had survived. Ironically, the man who many, including Elizabeth Custer, would later call a “coward” was singled out as a hero. The *Daily Herald* declared: “The real hero of the battle on Little Horn is the valiant Reno.” It praised him for “facing that storm of death when surrounded by the blood-thirsty savages, all hope of succor gone,” but he somehow “led his men and cut his way through the murderous lines by which he was hemmed in, and saved his command” (July 8, 1876, 2). Though later tried by an Army court of inquiry, Reno was judged by his peers not to be at fault during the battle (Connell 1989, 11).

Perhaps motivated by political allegiances, the *Daily Herald* looked for other possible scapegoats. It found what it was looking for in the Grant administration. It claimed the war had been “instigated by Grant and the gang of thieves who have robbed the Indians and the government of hundreds of millions of dollars.” Full of scorn for “Grantism,” it concluded that “the lives of Custer and his men, and of all who have been lost in this bloody business, are upon the hands of Grant and his corrupt and imbecile administration, and the country will soon understand the fact” (July 9, 1876, 2).

The *Bee* added to the Custer legend with a report on Custer’s death allegedly brought to them by some agency Indians, who heard it from their relatives who had fought in the battle. According to this hearsay, Custer had shot three Indians with his pistol and killed three others with his saber before he was killed, shot through the head by the Sioux warrior Rain-in-the-Face. The newspaper described the fighting as hand-to-hand, and it claimed the Indians had lost 70 warriors killed, many of them prominent chiefs (July 13, 1876, 1). Once again, no other account corroborated the fantastic claims that soon became legendary.

The Butte *Miner* painted a striking image of the hero riding to his doom in battle. Quoting from a supposed eyewitness, it described the last glimpse of Custer. “Reno was already engaged in the valley-below,” it stated, “and as Custer rode along the ridge above him, he raised his hat, and a cheer to their comrades burst from the throats of the 250 men who were following the standard of their beloved commander.” As Custer and his battalion disappeared from sight, “that cheer was the last sound we ever heard from their lips” (August 26, 1876, 1). It was sheer fantasy.

A different approach was taken by the *Daily Herald*. It suggested that while the war was caused mostly by the miners’ illegal occupation of the

Black Hills, the military disaster at the Little Bighorn made it imperative that “a war with the northern Sioux must be prosecuted until they shall be driven into subjection.” Styling itself the “friend and defender of this perishing race,” the *Daily Herald* opined that along with the war policy toward the “hostile Sioux” should go a peace policy toward the friendly tribes. The newspaper claimed that Red Cloud, Spotted Tail, and their people were ready to leave their reservations in the Dakotas and move to Indian Territory (July 12, 1876, 2).

While their editorial columns were philosophical, the *Daily Herald's* front page joined most other newspapers in praising Custer as “The Dead Hero.” It added additional details to the story regarding the gallant officer, who allegedly killed six Indians before he himself was killed by Rain-in-the-Face. “Rain-in-the-Face cut the heart from Custer’s dead body, put it on a pole and a grand war dance was held around it,” reported the *Herald* (July 13, 1876, 1). The claim that Custer was killed by Rain-in-the-Face persisted yet lacks merit. Custer biographer Evan S. Connell believes that Rain-in-the-Face could have killed Custer, but so could have hundreds of other warriors. It soon became an obsession among many Americans as to who had actually killed Custer (Connell 1989, 374).

The Colorado Springs *Gazette* added to the Custer myth with its story of a glorious battle, which was provided by “one who saw it.” It is unclear exactly who this “witness” was, but the detail included in the narrative was certainly imaginative:

At last when half his command had been killed, he called on those who remained to follow him, and dashed boldly through the red devils. It was running the gauntlet of at least 2000 rifles for the whole distance. His men did not follow him and when he got through he found himself alone with a single Crow Indian, one of his scouts. He would not leave his men to perish alone, and turned to go back, but the Crow recognizing that such a move would be fatal, grabbed his horse and implored him not to go back. Custer only laughed and putting the reins of his horse between his teeth, with a revolver in each hand, he gave a wild cheer, and dashed through the hell of smoke and flying bullets. As if by a miracle, he reached the remnants of his command, which was now reduced to 40 men. Calling on these survivors again to follow him, which the example and success of his former charge disposed them to do, he led them from their place of peril and over the path of his solitary charge. (August 12, 1876, 1)

With each retelling of the story, the newspapers found creative ways to turn factual recitations into spectacular dramas. Most accounts of Custer’s death reported that he was not mutilated except for having the tip of one finger cut off. Some accounts added that his ear drums were pierced by two Cheyenne women, so that he could hear better in the next world. Of course, these contrary accounts tended to refute the story that Rain-in-the-Face

danced with Custer's heart on a pole. Almost every account agreed that he was not scalped, although the reasons given for it varied. Some accounts said that it was a token of respect given by the Indians to a brave enemy. Some said that his hair was cut short and receding, which made a poor scalp. Still others claimed that his corpse was guarded from mutilation by various Indians (Connell 1989, 410).

Although accounts disagreed about the number of Indians killed in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, it must have been shockingly low in comparison with the bluecoats. Artist and author David Humphreys Miller (1957), who consulted with Indian warriors after the fight, produced a list of 32 dead. Utley cites a similar figure, noting that "White Bull's enumeration of 27 falls short of the true total by no more than a dozen" (Utley 1993, 160). Whatever the exact body count, hundreds were wounded. Perhaps it was difficult enough to deal with the fact of Custer's annihilation without also admitting he and his men clearly had been out-fought by the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors.

Although newspapers continued to call for revenge against the Indians, the *Daily Herald* offered a more philosophical stance. It editorialized:

The next settlement of the Sioux should be made final by their removal from a country which they will never be allowed to live in peace. ... We must accept the facts of the situation. The brave men of a dying race who guide in its councils must be made to see, and many of them already see, that this conflict is hopeless as the results are inevitable for them. An enlightened regard for their own welfare demands that they should yield to their fate and make the best terms possible with their enemies. No adjustment can be permanent that is not based upon their removal from the country they have inhabited. This done, the best welfare of the red man will be gained, the future civilization of the continent ensured, and the Indian, hunted down no longer by the merciless spirit of the superior race, will be allowed the poor privilege of perishing in peace. (July 13, 1876, 2)

The *Daily Herald's* obvious agenda was to remove the Indians from western lands, insisting that they were a vanishing population in North America.

The *Daily Herald* also worried that there would be no final great battle to crush the Indians until the United States sent more troops into the field. The Indian tribes would likely scatter and the soldiers would be forced to embark on a "wild goose chase" unless some way could be found to "conquer them by starvation" (July 15, 1876, 2). Indeed, this proved to be a remarkably accurate prediction of what transpired in the coming months.

After attaching blame for Custer's defeat to the Grant administration, many newspapers moved on to speculate about the Indians' next course of action. There was widespread fear that, emboldened by their recent success, the Sioux and their allies would go on a rampage. The *Daily Herald* reiterated its call for an army of frontiersmen and noted: "The boys are fairly itching for a chance

to avenge our Custer, and if the government only says the word, will march on very short notice." It also promoted the idea, because they believed that the regular Army was not up to handling the Sioux. With westerners in arms, Generals Terry and Crook could surround the Standing Rock, Red Cloud, and Spotted Tail Indian agencies and "every red skin found outside of the limits should be sent to the happy hunting grounds at once." A letter sent to the *Daily Herald*, from a correspondent at the Red Cloud Agency, complained that the Indians at the agency were becoming "sassy" and were very eager to get arms and ammunition. The correspondent claimed that Sitting Bull, "Grant's pet Indian," had left the agency on the "morning of the 18th" ostensibly to get his gun and to "bring his friends back with him" (July 23, 1876, 2). The claim of Sitting Bull's perfidy is ridiculous, since he had been away from the agency for most of the year.

The rumors were driven to a new height by a report that General Crook had been attacked by Indians on Goose Creek. The *Daily Herald* alleged that nearly 300 of his men had been killed, while his command had been driven across the creek in disarray. It quoted an Indian named Lame Deer, who stated that more soldiers were killed than were lost at the Little Bighorn (July 29, 1876, 1). The *Daily Herald* was wrong. There was no battle between Crook and the Indians at Goose Creek. The only confrontation of any size in the immediate aftermath was the inconclusive battle at Slim Buttes fought on September 9, 1876. Contrary to sensational reports in the newspapers, the exodus from the reservations had occurred before the battle of the Little Bighorn, not after it.

Unable to admit that their hero Custer was overwhelmed by "primitive savages," supporters created a legion of fanciful theories to explain his defeat. One of the most bizarre appeared in the August 1 edition of the *Omaha Bee*. Purporting to be a news update from the Little Bighorn, this unfounded story claimed that Custer was betrayed by a scout and that the Indians were aided by renegade whites:

The Indians were fully informed and aware of Custer's intentions, and had made every preparation to give him a warm reception. Everything was done and breastworks of willow were thrown up, behind which the Indians could pick off the soldiers without being seen themselves. Further evidence has been obtained proving that white men were with the Indians. Reno's men say they heard English being spoken frequently in the Indian ranks. During the fight one of the Indians shot by Reno's men was found to be a white man with a long gray beard and wearing an Indian mask. A bugler who was honorably discharged from the Second Infantry in 1869, is also believed to have been with the Indians during the fight. He blew the calls on the trumpets several times. (August 1, 1876, 1)

Newspapers offered their own views concerning the battle and who was ultimately responsible for his defeat. Editors tried to discover how an army

led by one of the nation's most famous officers had been utterly defeated by Indian warriors. It seemed beyond belief that they could have destroyed Custer and so many of his men.

Some of the theories expounded in the press were incredible. Speculation arose that Confederate officers had led the Indian warriors in battle. Others claimed that Sitting Bull, also known as a student nicknamed Bison, had been a graduate of West Point (Connell 1989). John William Howard, a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, wrote that Sitting Bull had learned French from the Jesuit missionary Pierre-Jean De Smet and had read in French the history of Napoleon's campaigns. In other words, the Sioux leader had modeled his generalship on Europeans (Knight 1960). No matter what fantastic theory was advanced, they often revealed stereotypes and long-held beliefs in the nation about the Indians. While possibly fierce, brave, and even noble in a fair fight, it was beyond belief that Indian warriors could defeat a well-armed, well-trained army of white men.

The story of the battle of the Little Bighorn soon faded from the pages of the western newspapers. Historian Rex C. Myers wrote that, "at a time when it was attracting major attention elsewhere in the nation, the region most affected by the outcome relegated the actual engagement – and Custer – to a place of relative insignificance" (Myers 1976). Ironically, coverage of the battle by the newspapers in other parts of the country kept the controversy and the imagery alive and turned the disaster into "Custer's Last Stand." Custer and his men were more often portrayed in the press as glorious heroes and the Indians as fearsome demons. The reports were filled with inaccuracies, yet they created vivid pictures of a lost battalion under siege at the Little Bighorn. In the hands of future generations of historians, the story took on a life of its own.

## Conclusion

The press provided fascinating primary source materials but did not shed much light on what actually happened to Custer at the Little Bighorn. Utley says that despite the numerical odds against him, it seems that Custer could have won the battle. Custer came close to surprising the Indians along the river banks, Utley contended, and they had little time to prepare (Utley 1988, 200). In recent years, the archeological studies of the battlefield support the contention that the Indian forces at Little Bighorn were well-armed and ready to fight (Scott 2013, 209). An important study published in *Military History Quarterly* concluded "that a series of opportune tactical movements by the Sioux and Cheyenne, rather than a simple imbalance of forces, were crucial factors in the Custer fight" (Silverman 1990, 88).

Unfortunately, these are not the sort of reasoned findings that readers would have found in the columns of newspapers in 1876. It flew in the face of

their long-held stereotypes regarding the military prowess of Native Americans. Still, most newspapers seemed to understand the ultimate significance of the Little Bighorn battle. Newspapers featured little separation between editorial and news columns; opinion colored almost all articles. Political loyalties influenced coverage of events. According to recent books like *Bound to Have Blood* (Reilly 2011) and *Shooting Arrows and Slinging Mud* (Mueller 2013), whatever their errors in respect to details, the press represents an invaluable resource to gauge the opinions and ideologies of the time.

The press brought controversial issues to the forefront and told stories that captured the imagination of the public. They speculated about the whys and wherefores of government and military decisions in ways that would rarely, if ever, be discussed in official government records. For historians, these newspapers provide insight and context for momentous historical events. Of course there is a flip side to the coin. The newspapers could be notoriously unreliable and full of inaccuracies. They occasionally created stories out of whole cloth and reported in detail on battles that never happened. Political bias was not only prevalent, it was predominant.

John Martin and Harold Nelson outlined four basic measures used to judge the historical quality of a newspaper story (Martin & Nelson 1956). First, *accuracy*; is the report factual, unambiguous, up-to-date, and precise? Second, *prediction*; does it accurately predict the effects of the event on the future of those involved in the event? Third, *selection*; is the news story significant, balanced, and comprehensive? Fourth, *judgment*; are the opinions and analyses based on and grow logically from facts and do they show a good grasp of the meaning of events? Scholars using newspapers to determine a context for events need to carefully evaluate and cross-check the facts.

If scholars agree with Alan Barth that journalism is the first draft of history, then it is incumbent on them to properly evaluate their sources in the press. That “first draft of history” must be taken for what it is, a snap shot of a time and place. As more information emerges the outlines of the story may change and initial conclusions may be proven false. Nevertheless, those first vibrant impressions have intrinsic value.

Scholars owe a debt of gratitude to journalists, who often risk life and limb to get their readers, viewers, or listeners the story. They provide us that first draft of history as a foundation upon which others may build and improve. From the American Civil War to modern wars like Afghanistan, journalists have provided a “first draft” for historians of every armed conflict. A few days after the news from the Little Bighorn was published, the *New York Herald* offered an editorial to honor correspondents of war:

The army Correspondent often holds the post of honor in Journalism because he holds the post of danger. It is his duty to share the risks and the dangers of battle, and for the sake of the pen to defy the dangers of the sword. His services are not merely those of a historian, but are rendered to the power which now

makes history possible. Caesar wrote his own commentaries and Napoleon dictated his own memoirs, but the correspondent must record the fight the moment it is fought, not wait for the slow official reports. The anxious eyes that watch a distant army where every soldier is a husband, brother or son, the impatient heart of the country that beats for victory, cannot wait till the government chooses to give its cold, calm dispatches. The press must speak, and it is the press, and through it the nation, that the war correspondent serves (July 10, 1876).

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# Chapter Twenty-One

## POPULAR CULTURE

*Rebecca S. Wingo*

When he died, George Armstrong Custer had short hair. The golden, flowing locks Americans so strongly associate with the “Boy General” are a product of popular culture. Positive and negative portrayals of Custer depend entirely on America’s need for a hero, as well as a few key players working to keep the icon alive. While the reality lies somewhere between haircuts, Custer’s myth stands as a testament to his death – his subsequent resurrection reflecting society’s shifting sentiments. Of course, it is impossible to actually change the outcome or the known facts of the Battle of the Little Bighorn (spoiler: he dies!), but popular culture has changed the way in which Americans remember Custer.<sup>1</sup>

Audiences approve through popularity or disapprove through reproach the version of the Custer myth they choose to believe. Tracing the iterations of Custer since his death in 1876 through various genres reveals not only a shift in the mode of disseminating new portrayals but also shifts in popular sentiment evidenced by books, paintings, theatrical productions, film, and even videogames. Following the Custer myth through print, literary, visual, and digital genres, this chapter addresses the modal and social changes in American perception of Custer since his defeat along the banks of the Little Bighorn River.

A discussion of popular culture regarding Native Americans in the United States requires a discussion of hegemony, or “the relations between culture and power” (Storey 2003). Using Antonio Gramsci’s theory on cultural hegemony as a lens, popular culture dictates the dominant perspective. Within the context of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, this perspective

oscillates between favoring mainstream society and Native American tribes, in particular the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Crow, who participated in the battle. As a hegemonic power, the United States marginalizes Native Americans and exalts men like Custer – but popular culture is not that black-and-white. Cultural participants have agency in what they choose to represent and essentially construct “the meaning of what is represented” (Storey 2003). Again, what is represented is not fixed but rather shifts alongside the culture viewing it. In this way, the dominant culture used Custer to represent prevalent needs, desires, and criticisms throughout the nearly 150 years since his death.

The original version of the Custer myth vaulted him into legend and iconography by marginalizing and exaggerating the “savagery” of tribes in North America, but it also justified a growing sense of Manifest Destiny. More recently, Native peoples have used Custer’s hero status to their advantage to oust demeaning videogames and to increase tourism. These latter uses of Custer’s image result from an increasingly sympathetic non-Indian culture more willing to examine and analyze history from a wider, more inclusive perspective. The emergence of Red Power in the 1960s and 1970s augmented this cultural shift and heralded a new generation of American thinkers, who were not so quick to dismiss increasingly audible Native voices. The frontier – once full of “uncivilized” tribes and “savages” – was suddenly full of understandably angry recipients of innumerable misguided federal policies and harmful stereotypes. It is in this context that Vine Deloria, Jr. published *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969), a title which conjures the rhetoric of Custer’s “last stand” while simultaneously placing the burden of his death upon non-Indians. A full inversion of the Custer myth yields as much historical inaccuracy as his glorification does – for example, Arthur Penn’s film *Little Big Man* (1970), where Custer is portrayed as an egotistical moron. While a more balanced approach to Custer and the Little Bighorn campaign is far from complete, the lionization of Custer is decidedly out of scholarly vogue.

### The Print Custer

The first printed news of Custer’s death rolled in on July 6, 1876, like a thunder cloud in the wake of the centennial celebrations. “A Bloody Battle,” the *New York Herald* headline read, “General Custer Killed. The Entire Detachment Under His Command Slaughtered.” The first responses to Custer’s death – the first inklings of the mythic, heroic Custer dying at the hands of bloodthirsty foes – appeared within 24 hours of the first report of the battle. Shortly thereafter, Walt Whitman submitted “A Death-Sonnet for Custer” to the *New York Daily Tribune*, which published the poem on July 10, 1876:

Thou of sunny, flowing hair, in battle,  
 I erewhile saw, with erect head, pressing ever in  
                     front, bearing a bright sword in thy hand,  
 Now ending well the splendid fever of thy deeds.<sup>2</sup>

Whitman's poem is the foundation upon which Custer myths would penetrate all other mediums, profoundly shaping American perceptions for years to come. Custer's hair was actually cut short before the battle, and the soldiers did not carry swords; but the popular perception of Custer would continually prove stronger than reality.

Not long after Whitman's poem, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published his poem, "The Revenge of Rain-in-the-Face." Lakota Chief Rain-in-the-Face was an active participant in the battle and the accidental villain of an overly confident newspaper reporter. He could not live down the legacy of being Custer's "murderer." Through the power of verse, the Chief had to live with the lie until his death in 1905 (Hutton 1992b).

Two authors shaped the immediate image of Custer as a fallen hero abandoned by his superiors as a glory-hunter: Frederick Whittaker and Elizabeth Custer. Within six months of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Whittaker published *A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer, Major-General of Volunteers, Brevet Major-General US Army, and Lieutenant-Colonel Seventh US Cavalry*. This hagiography compared Custer to other individual heroes like Pierre Terrail and Napoleon, claiming to "paint in sober earnest colors the truthful portrait of such a knight of romance as has not honored the world with his presence since the days of Bayard" (Whittaker 1876, 2). Whittaker's self-declared aim was to demystify the public of Custer, but instead he exaggerated Custer's hardships and lifeworks further into mythic proportions. The book's dedication reads, "To the American people, whose liberties [Custer] so gallantly defended, and especially to the American cavalry, past and present, whose greatest pride and brightest ornament he was, I dedicate this memoir." To heighten the drama, Whittaker posed President Ulysses S. Grant, Marcus A. Reno, and Rain-in-the-Face as key villains. Whittaker's continued attacks on Reno's character eventually forced Reno to submit to an investigation of his actions during the Little Bighorn campaign. Facing other accusations as well, the Army dismissed Reno in 1879, only three years after Custer's defeat in Montana. *A Complete Life* continued to be the go-to source for Custer scholars, and historians cited his factual errors with great frequency for the next 50 years (Hutton 1992b). By demonizing tribes and lionizing Custer and his men, Whittaker's book appealed to a wide American audience grappling with policies designed to increase westward expansion. In other words, *A Complete Life* justified future military action in the West and imbued Americans with a moral right. Whittaker's Custer influenced scholarship, military careers, and popular perception for decades after its publication.

The second author to have a profound impact on Custer's myth was his widow, Elizabeth "Libbie" Bacon Custer. She worked tirelessly for the remainder of her life on lectures and speeches for "libraries and garden clubs" that would solidify the positive legacy of her husband (Welch & Stekler 1994). After all, the harder she worked at preserving his demigod status, the more profitable her career would be. It did not pay to be the widow of a reckless soldier (Leckie 1993). Her three books, *Boots and Saddles* (1885), *Tenting on the Plains* (1887), and *Following the Guidon* (1890), all glorified her husband as man and military leader, which created even more public empathy for Custer than did Whittaker's book. *Boots and Saddles* described with "disarming" charm her husband's successes and tribulations without including the controversies that racked his military career (Leckie 1993, 236–237). But Libbie's books did more than promote the heroism of her husband. She succeeded in dictating the public perception of Custer while simultaneously reaffirming Victorian ideals of female domesticity and inspiring manliness within adolescent boys. For herself, however, Libbie "expanded her personal influence and infused her domestic role with public power" (Leckie 1993, 237). As a result, *Boots and Saddles* originally sold a whopping 20,000 copies (Hutton 1992b). The public had spoken: Custer was to be remembered as a hero.

Most notable about Libbie's heavy influence was her ability to shame Custer's biggest critics into silence, a task she accomplished through her widespread public support and the favorable reception of her books. For instance, Colonel Robert P. Hughes, Custer's aide-de-camp and General Terry's brother-in-law, wrote an article condemning Custer's behavior as a soldier. Claiming to have insider knowledge about Terry's true opinion of Custer, Hughes also used his article to correct erroneous statements made in Edward Settle Godfrey's account of Custer and the battle published in the *Century Magazine* in January 1892. Godfrey's account helped set the tone for Custer's reception for years to come, owing in large part to the popularity of the *Century Magazine*. Hughes submitted corrections to the magazine in 1895, but they rejected his article on the basis of length. Hughes refused to edit down his article, and his criticism was thus shunted to the marginal *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* in the January 1896 volume. Because of Libbie's indefatigable efforts to perpetuate the legend she and Whittaker created, the *Century Magazine* was unwilling to devote too much paper to a negative portrayal of Custer. The public simply would not read it.

In another instance of Libbie's influence, "Cyrus T. Brady, whose 1904 work criticized Custer, not only tendered his 'amende' to the widow a decade later, but made Custer a hero in his novel, *Britton of the Plains*" (Leckie 1993, xxi). Brady knew what would sell. The widow's undying resolve to protect her deceased husband's reputation helped forge Custer into America's hero. Instead of contending with Libbie's wrath, writers waited

until after her death in 1933 to release more analytical and critical publications, effectively recreating Custer as a megalomaniac.

### The Visual Custer

Emerging from the same American spirit that embraced the Print Custer, several key pieces of art also developed the Visual Custer, fabricating the now classic image of Custer fighting to the end – and then fighting some more. In reality, while Custer is usually depicted as the last survivor, he likely fell early in the fight (Taft 1992). John Mulvany's *Custer's Last Rally* and Cassilly Adams's *Custer's Last Fight* both depict the hero as fighting to the last bullet or saber thrust. Otto Becker's lithograph of Adams's painting features a Custer who swings his saber like a battle axe, resisting defeat despite the swarms of approaching Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors. The concept of Custer fighting until his last bullets or going down swinging his saber like a battle axe can be traced to Whittaker's *A Complete Life*. Whittaker, claiming to have first-hand accounts from Indian participants, writes:

[It] appears that when only a few of the officers were left alive, the Indians make a hand to hand charge, in which Custer fought like a tiger with his sabre when his last shot was gone, that he killed or wounded three Indians with the sabre, and that as he ran the last man through, *Rain-in-the-Face kept his oath and shot Custer*. (1876, 601)

Custer's glorification and the enhanced "savagery" of Native Americans in visual culture thus continued the trend started in early print accounts of his death. His heroism is verbally and visually magnified by the juxtaposition of his civility and the barbarity of his foe. In *Manliness and Civilization*, Gail Bederman (1995) links whiteness and male power as well as the use of "a central set of ideas that turn-of-the-century Americans frequently used to tie male power to racial dominance – the discourse of 'civilization'" (5). The visual record of the Battle of the Little Bighorn featured Custer prominently, as Mulvany, Adams, and Becker fed directly into this larger discourse on power and identity.

The first of the major paintings to depict the Battle of the Little Bighorn is *Custer's Last Rally* by John Mulvany, an Irishman born in 1844. Mulvany moved to New York at the age of 12 and later fought for the Union in the Civil War. Postwar, he devoted his time to studying art all over the world. He later became a collector of western paraphernalia and settled along the Iowa-Nebraska border (Taft 1992). Mulvany completed *Custer's Last Rally* by March 1881, a painting which featured a larger than life Custer amid the chaos of battle, aiming his pistol at an unseen foe. Save for the three dead

warriors in the lower right corner, the remainder of the Native Americans featured are blurs of action surrounding a small core of US soldiers hunkered down for the fight. Notably, Custer stands in the middle of his men, his hypermasculinity demonstrated through his lack of fear of the danger surrounding him. Though Mulvany predominantly painted the 20 foot by 11 foot canvas in Kansas City, Missouri, he made frequent trips to Fort Leavenworth to consult with the soldiers there about the battle (Taft 1992).

In March 1881, Mulvany revealed *Custer's Last Rally* to approximately 20 members of the press in Kansas City to favorable reviews with only a few suggested changes. In April 1881, Mulvany debuted the painting in Boston, Massachusetts, featuring the suggested amendments: he reduced Custer's physical size in relation to other people and objects in the painting, shortened Custer's hair, and strengthened his face (Taft 1992). In response to the finalized painting, the *New York Tribune* published the following by Whitman, who viewed the painting during its tour in New York on August 15, 1881:

There are no tricks; there is no throwing of shades in masses; it is all at first painfully real, overwhelming, needs good nerves to look at it. Forty or fifty figures, perhaps more, in full finish and detail, life-size, in the mid-ground, with three times that number, or more, through the rest – swarms upon swarms of savage Sioux, in their war-bonnets, frantic, mostly on ponies, driving through the background, through the smoke, like a hurricane of demons.

Calling the scene “dreadful, yet with an attraction and beauty that will remain in my memory,” Whitman reveals what the American public demanded: new, albeit historically inaccurate, visual realities depicting the anguish associated with the loss of Custer and his men. By default, this also meant depicting the participating tribes as “savage,” “frantic,” and “wild.” *Custer's Last Rally* experienced over a decade of popularity, due in part to the chromolithograph reproductions produced by the Chicago Lithograph and Engraving Company. The painting moved to private hands in 1890 (Taft 1992).

The next painting to gain popularity was Cassilly Adams's ill-fated *Custer's Last Fight*. The painting spent most of its time lost in one attic or another, ultimately perishing in a fire. However, its fame lives on through Otto Becker's rather embellished lithograph for Anheuser-Busch. Born in 1843 in Zanesville, Ohio, Adams was also a veteran of the Civil War. He later studied art and engraving at the Cincinnati Art School and opened a studio in St. Louis in the 1870s. Though commissioned by C. J. Budd and William T. Richards of the St. Louis Art Club around 1885, it is unclear when exactly Adams completed *Custer's Last Fight* (Taft 1992). Adams posed Sioux men in full regalia as well as costumed cavalymen to add

legitimacy to his work, and by the late 1880s, the 32 foot by 12 foot painting hung in John G. Furber's St. Louis saloon (Hutton 1992b). Furber's saloon sat at an important confluence of politicians and visitors to St. Louis, increasing the painting's viewership. When Furber died in 1888, creditors (the largest of whom was Anheuser-Busch) claimed the saloon and its possessions, valued at \$35,000 (Taft 1992). Merely the first in a line of ownership transfers that would ultimately lead to the destruction of the painting, Anheuser-Busch gifted *Custer's Last Fight* to the 7th Cavalry at some point between acquisition (1888) and confirmed display (1896) at Fort Riley, Kansas. When the 7th Cavalry moved to Fort Grant and various other forts across the West, the painting disappeared. Rediscovered in 1925 in poor condition in the attic of Fort Bliss, Texas, it went missing again until 1934 when it reappeared at Fort Grant. Transferred once again to Fort Bliss, it hung in poor condition with the 7th Cavalry until destroyed by fire in 1946 (Taft 1992).

Given the painting's tumultuous past, perhaps the only reason scholars are even aware of the it at all is because of Anheuser-Busch's advertising campaign in the 1890s. Anheuser-Busch commissioned artist Otto Becker to make a chromolithograph of Adams's painting and originally sent 150,000 copies to nearly every saloon, restaurant, and hotel in the country. As Custer scholar Robert Taft (1992) states, "It is probably safe to say that in the 50 years elapsing since 1896 it has been viewed by a greater number of the lower-browed members of society – and by fewer art critics – than any other picture in American history." The lithograph reappeared during World War II, and in 1942 an average of 2,000 copies per month were sent to servicemen and others involved in the war effort (Taft 1992). It is no coincidence that the resurgence in popularity coincides with the cinematic release of *They Died With Their Boots On* (1941) starring Errol Flynn as the tragic Custer character. America needed a valiant war hero to whom men in battle could look for inspiration.

There are two key differences between Becker's lithograph and Adams's original painting. Whereas Adams depicts Custer lunging with his saber, Becker depicts him swinging his saber overhead like an axe (Taft 1992). Sabers were not standard issue in 1876, so neither portrayal is accurate. As historian James E. Crisp argues, "Becker's image, even more than the original painting on which it was based, was designed to emphasize the utter annihilation of the forces of civilization by a savage foe" (2005, 161). Instead of merely relying on the ferocity of the tribes as did Adams, Becker added a handful of exotic warriors advancing from Custer's rear to fill in the blank spaces on the canvas. These warriors, in non-Indian head-dresses and replete with shields, were a reflection of Zulu – not Native American – culture. Becker was clearly enthralled with the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 in which, in a rather strikingly similar manner to the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the Zulus wiped out a British force to the last man

in the Battle of Isandhlwana (Crisp 2005). As Crisp points out, at least two of Becker's warriors were copied directly from lithographic scenes of the Anglo-Zulu War published in *The Illustrated London News*. When it came to depictions of "savagery," apparently any indigenous warrior would do.

The differences between the painting (viewed by a select audience) and the lithograph (viewed by the general public) make for good conversation, but ultimately do not matter. Becker's lithograph – not Adams's painting – gained the most notoriety and shaped the public perception of Custer's defeat for decades. Becker's tendency toward the overabundance of "savagery" captured America's imagination, for it is imagination indeed that unceasingly created and recreated Custer's legend. But Becker's recreation of the Battle of the Little Bighorn made its stand at the intersection of American hegemony and Isandhlwana. As colonization of the African continent and peoples hit its peak, American westward expansion continued through violence, treaty, and manipulation. Justification for both endeavors rested on the premise that the "uncivilized" had no right to the land that so obviously belonged to the conquerors. By the late nineteenth century, American middle-class men were fighting the erosion of their capitalistically imbued power and identity over the working class. Race maintained a strong presence in the discourse as well. For example, notorious for its juxtaposition of "civilization" and "savagery," *National Geographic* had its start during this period (Bederman 1995). The racial, economic, social, and political intertwined during this period creating a new definition of "civilization" which legitimized America's expansion of power. *Custer's Last Fight* embodied the rugged fraternity that drove men to the Improved Order of Red Men as "primitive heroics" overtook literature (Bederman 1995, 22–23). For Becker and the American public who rallied around the imagery of Custer's last stand, the overstatement of "savagery" through Adams's original painting and the later inclusion of Zulu warriors made Custer all the more manly, "civilized," and heroic. The reverse is also true: Custer's glorification as a bastion of turn-of-the-century American ideals made the Indian warriors depicted seem all the more morally depraved and "barbaric." America needed this imagery to validate westward expansion and to contextualize the European colonization of Africa.

The last stand mentality invaded other art pieces as well. When Robert Jenkins Onderdonk completed *Fall of the Alamo* in 1903, it was "a virtual mirror image of General Custer in Otto Becker's *Custer's Last Fight*" (Crisp 2005, 160). Instead of swinging a saber over his head, Davy Crockett, out of bullets, swings his rifle instead. Just as Custer likely died early in the battle, Crockett did not even die in battle (if we are to believe the de la Peña diary) – yet both are depicted as fighting to the last like true American heroes. Perhaps artist Eric von Schmidt sums up these hyper-heroic depictions best: "Indeed, who in hell would be *standing* as the bullets and arrows poured in?" (1992, 468).

At the same time the lithograph gained notoriety in saloons, Indians recreated the legacy of the Battle of Little Bighorn as well, albeit with less misleading ambitions. On a cow hide in rural Harrison, Nebraska in 1898, a small number of Red Cloud's band of Lakota gathered at the home of their long-time friend, James H. Cook, and voluntarily painted their recollections of the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Meade 1994).<sup>3</sup> As it turns out, Cook had a long history with Indians and the Little Bighorn. Cook heard about the battle in 1876 while in Wyoming on a hunting trip and was one of the first to arrive on the scene. By this time, Cook had already befriended members of both the Sioux and Cheyenne tribes. On a trip to Fort Laramie after a long cattle drive from Texas in 1875, Cook met Baptiste "Little Bat" Garnier by sheer happenstance. Little Bat, half French and half Sioux, invited Cook to Red Cloud's Agency near present-day Crawford, Nebraska. The friendship between Cook, Red Cloud, and many others of Red Cloud's band grew from this initial meeting (Meade 1994). Red Cloud and his people paid frequent visits to Cook's ranch in Nebraska over the following decades, bringing with them gifts such as Red Cloud's war shirt. In a letter dated May 13, 1908, Red Cloud conveyed his wishes of continued relations between the Cooks and the Lakota:

I will soon go to join my old friends and now on my last visit to you my friend I want to say through my nephew and interpreter Mr. Phillip Romero that in you I think my people will always find a true friend and I want them to listen to your words of counsel. I shake hands with you and put my mark on this letter to you. (Meade 1994, 54)

Red Cloud died in 1909.

Jack Red Cloud, Chief Red Cloud's son, was one of four men consulting for the cow hide pictograph of the battle. Cook's son Harold, who was 12 at the time, later recalled, "The older men who 'sat in' on painting the pictograph were greatly interested and they would often stop, consult, and discuss details, using vivid sign language, before one of them would proceed with the drawing" (Meade 1994, 25). This hide painting is unique, owing especially to the fact that it portrays what these Lakota men *actually* remember about the battle, not what they *wanted* to remember about the battle. Depicting uniformed soldiers, a large Indian encampment, and mounted Indian men, the pictograph neither highlights nor glorifies the Indian victory over the 7th Cavalry; nor does it focus on Custer who, dying so early into the fight, comprised a rather small part of the battle. As author James Welch writes in *Killing Custer*:

In talking with several Indian people, especially Lakotas and Cheyennes, I was surprised to learn that the Battle of the Little Bighorn was not the major event in their tribal memory that one might assume. ... If Custer had emerged triumphant, he probably would have lived to be a bald old man (his

hairline was already receding), writing his memoirs, and the Little Bighorn would have been a paragraph or two in a biographer's temporary best-seller, but in defeat and death, he became, and remains, a name recognized the world over. (Welch & Stekler 1994, 285)

Only in death does Custer seem to come alive. To Indian peoples, Custer's death paled in comparison to Wounded Knee and other stories of loss that clouded the 1876 victory.

One of the most notable characteristics of the pictograph is the depiction of a mounted rider, well distanced from the approaching Sioux (on foot), pointing a pistol to his head. The Sioux, unaccustomed to suicide, identified *this* event as one of great significance, *not* the defeat of Custer – one man among many. Von Schmidt, in describing his own journey painting a scene from the Battle of the Little Bighorn during the 1970s, also portrays the action of a soldier taking his own life. He states, “My painting includes of one these – a first, I believe, in the thousand-plus depictions of the fight” (von Schmidt 1992, 467).

Von Schmidt inadvertently falls victim to the sole-survivor myth. The absence of white survivors of the Battle of the Little Bighorn led many non-Indians to devote their lives to fictional, non-fictional, and ahistorical accounts of the battle (Dippie 1992). Up through the publication of Thomas Berger's book *Little Big Man* (1964), the account of the non-Indians present at the battle is given undue credence, reverence even. There were survivors of the battle. They were Indian. Their stories just have yet to be fully explored. However, von Schmidt does take into account the Indian perspective in his modern-day artwork. He closely examined the pictorial accounts by Red Horse, a Sioux warrior, whose 42 pieces drawn five years after the battle depict tipis en masse. Von Schmidt states, “Considering that the village was over three miles long, there would have been a whole *lot* of tipis, a *thousand*, give or take a few. Red Horse was telling in pictographic terms what Custer himself had refused to believe” (1992, 466). Like Jack Red Cloud and the three other men on the Cook ranch, Red Horse told his version of the battle through pictures, none of which included Custer. Such accounts, both verbal and artistic, never appealed to a wide audience. Fiction, however, did.

It is important to view pictographs drawn by Indians and the lithographic myth spread by Anheuser-Busch in tandem. The exercise is not to debate battle facts, but rather to examine which is more popular – and why. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Indian voices were marginalized as were other forms of indigenous expression. Though often classified as art (i.e., devoid of historical truths), pictography is clearly more than artistic expression. Even if reproduced for bars across America, the hide would still be perceived as fiction regardless of its accuracy. The lithograph, on the other hand, was fiction perceived as truth, because it reinforced conceptions of both masculinity and “civilization.” The power relationship between the hegemonic non-Indian culture and Indian cultures ensured for many decades

that the control of history and art would remain in non-Indian hands despite the only survivors of the battle being Native Americans.

### The Cinematic Custer

Scholars have discussed at length the films in which Custer features as a central character from the perspective of Native Americans, Americans, and historians. The Print and Visual Custer so enraptured the American public that the myths they perpetuated permeated the film industry from its inception. Custer's cinematic persona originated in dime novels and Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows. The House of Beadle and Adams published the first dime novel on June 9, 1860. This novel featured the previously published serial *Malaeska, Indian Wife of the White Hunter* by Ann Sophia Winterbotham Stephens. Despite the fact that Stephens was already an established and successful author, this publication indicates two things about the general public: they liked Indian dramas that did not challenge social values or gender roles, and they liked fiction. Fiction based on truth? Even better.

The reach of dime novels cannot be understated. Like the saloon lithograph, they appealed to a non-academic, working-class audience – in other words, the majority of Americans. As such, they are representative of popular thought. Dime novels provided their readers an escape from industrialization and the ability to imagine and reimagine heroes, both fictive and real. Inspired by the work of James Fennimore Cooper, dime novelists essentially used a “mix-and-match recipe” for success by combining the “savage” imagery of Native Americans with the “romance and danger of the frontier” (Kilpatrick 1999, 9). This simple recipe would later prove fruitful in Hollywood as well.

While Custer's character does feature in dime novels, it is secondary to another legend: William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody. Cody exacted revenge for Custer's death at the Battle of War Bonnet Creek in 1876 when, as a scout for the US Army following the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Cody killed Cheyenne warrior Yellow Hair (often cited as Yellow Hand, a misnomer). His actions rose to immediate fame with Americans still reeling from their defeat. One of the most iconic depictions is Robert Ottokar Lindneux's 6 foot by 13 foot painting *First Scalp for Custer* (1928). The fictionalized “Buffalo Bill” Cody of dime novels, on the other hand, is often portrayed as a hero of the frontier. He was featured in hundreds of stories after 1869. The novelists began to depict him as Custer's scout, who either survives the Battle of the Little Bighorn or arrives too late.

Reenacting the scalping of Yellow Hair time and again, Buffalo Bill's Wild West took America by storm in the 1880s and continued to draw viewership until its 1916 finale. The Wild West's most attractive quality was that it included *real* cowboys and *real* Indians as well as a Medal of Honor

winner – Cody himself. Nevertheless, his show reinforced and reified the simplified and largely erroneous conceptions of what an Indian “is” for American and European audiences of his time and for film audiences around the world since that time (Kilpatrick 1999, 12–13).

Cody did actually hire Sitting Bull in an effort to prove the authenticity of his show. During Sitting Bull’s one season of touring, he spoke to the crowds about life as an Indian and his desire for peace. The translator instead regaled the audience with “a blood curdling account of savagery at the Little Bighorn” (Welch & Stekler 1994, 263). Seeing the profitability in pandering to his Custer-sympathizer audience, Buffalo Bill continually reenacted the Battle of the Little Bighorn after its initial success in 1887 (Elliott 2007). In tandem with the scalping of Yellow Hair, the revenge for Custer’s death and the popularity of the reenactment was viewed across the globe. The Wild West so successfully preserved the mythic hero Libbie Custer fought to create that Buffalo Bill received a note from her, “thanking him for keeping her husband’s memory ‘green’” (Welch & Stekler 1994, 283).

The impact of the Wild West shows did not end with the reenactments, however. A unique historical figure, Cody spans the Print and Visual Custer as well as making the logical leap into motion pictures. Perhaps Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, author of *Celluloid Indians*, says it best: “[Cody’s] imaginative, staged encounters have produced grist for the Hollywood mill for over a hundred years” (1999, 13). Indeed, it produced grist for Cody’s own cinematic mill from as early as 1894 when he first filmed the Wild West Show. But Buffalo Bill’s on-stage persona did not necessarily match the actions of William F. Cody, who by all accounts was quite fond of his Lakota performers (particularly Sitting Bull) and understood the impact of westward expansion (Welch & Stekler 1994). In 1923, Cody filmed *The Last Frontier* based on a novel of the same name. In Cody’s portrayal of the West, he holds true to the massacre at Wounded Knee by depicting Native Americans as victims of a malicious Army. This scene effectively ended his friendship with General Nelson Miles, as Cody’s interpretation was ahead of its time. Similar representations in cinema would not occur until after the Cold War witch hunts of the 1950s. To add insult to injury, as Hutton writes, “Ben Black Elk, whose father was in the film, claimed that the Interior Department banned it and later destroyed it” (1992a, 491–492).

Representing a distinct moment in time, a film captures more on its reels than just pictures; it captures contemporary American political and social environments while in essence becoming an artifact of American culture. Comfortable seeing themselves on film, non-Indians were less comfortable seeing real Native American history on film. As Kilpatrick states, “Unfortunately, Native peoples would remain largely unseen, displaced now by the Hollywood Indian, a cinematic creation springing directly from the ubiquitous images of the old bloodthirsty savage and his alter ego, the noble savage” (1999, 15). For example, Joseph Medicine Crow, a

descendant of Custer's scout White Man Runs Him, answered a call for Indian extras on the set of *They Died With Their Boots On* (1941). When the studio learned of his ancestry, they recruited him to consult on the script. Asked by a producer how he felt about Custer, Medicine Crow told him, "[My] grandfather always said Custer was very foolish" (Elliott 2007, 232). After all, said Medicine Crow, Custer did not listen to the Crow scouts. The producer fired him.

Calling cinema a "powerful" social agent and key to the "production of national symbols," Kilpatrick identifies the reflective aspect of film that makes something like Custer's death the perfect blank canvas through which Americans can both glorify and critique war, the treatment of indigenous peoples, or themselves (1999, 18 and 5). For example, *They Died With Their Boots On* fed the patriotism of World War II and the escapism from the reality of global conflict. It served the American public well in this capacity, as they watched World War II unfold, uncertain of victory but hopeful that good would defeat evil. Custer's defeat, followed in the subsequent decades by the military defeat of Native Americans in the West, meant that the projection of evil onto Native Americans still implied overall victory for the United States despite Custer's death. Being so well known, this pseudo-history would speak widely to an American audience by providing them with the hope in which they so desperately needed to believe.

Thirty years later, *Little Big Man* (1970) reversed this sentiment and provided Americans with an outlet for their protest of the Vietnam War. Penn's adaptation of Berger's popular novel of the same name depicts the hero of an absurd mythology. Historian Brian Dippie calls it "the ultimate ugly Custer" (Dippie 1976). Using a white character named Jack Crabb to tell a Native American version of events, the film juxtaposes a prideful rendition of "Garry Owen" as Custer's men massacre the Cheyenne at Washita. The scene serves as a metaphor for American atrocities in Vietnam (Kilpatrick 1999).

Other film iterations of Custer need to be unpacked as contemporary evidence of the American social and political atmosphere. Until recently, for example, Native Americans have not held a position from which to respond to these film adaptations of themselves. Their cinematic fate has rested in the hands of non-Indians. Not only do films need to be analyzed from these more inclusive perspectives, but films also need to be made with these perspectives in mind.

### The Pixelated Custer

In 1978, the US Supreme Court heard the *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe* case (435 US 191). In a six-to-three vote, Justice William Rehnquist wrote for the majority: "The Suquamish Indians are governed by a tribal government which, in 1973, adopted a Law and Order Code. The Code, which

covers a variety of offenses from theft to rape, purports to extend the Tribe's criminal jurisdiction over both Indians and non-Indians." He continued, "We granted certiorari, 431 U.S. 964 to decide whether Indian tribal courts have criminal jurisdiction over non-Indians. We decide they do not." In fact, nine out of ten perpetrators of violence against Indian women on reservations are non-Indian, leaving them in not only a politically fragile and vulnerable position but also a physically vulnerable one (Greenfield & Smith 1999). The *Oliphant* decision epitomizes the hostile environment American culture often provided Native peoples at the start of the 1980s. Emerging in the wake of this decision, the Pixelated Custer features a new iteration of the Custer myth through the videogame *Custer's Revenge*: Custer-as-rapist. Pandering to a receptive audience, the game reveals the rather malicious underbelly of American society in the 1980s.

By the turn of the 21st century, American culture replaced the escapism of dime novels and cinema with videogames. John Wills, author of the article "Pixel Cowboys and Silicon Gold Mines: Videogames of the American West" (2008), argues that the digital West differs from previous mediums in one important way: "Unlike dime novels and Hollywood Westerns, where immersion derived mostly from imagination and observation, the digital West demanded physical interaction from its players" (282). The first of such games, *Gun Fight* (1975), was followed closely by *Boot Hill* (1977), both of which drew from the Western genre and added an interactive component to imagining gunslingers. It is no surprise that in the relatively new medium of the videogame, Custer once again plays a starring role.

In their Swedish Erotica series, the gaming company Mystique produced *Custer's Revenge* in 1982 for the Atari gaming console. Marketed for adults-only, *Custer's Revenge* featured a nude Custer (save his cowboy hat, bandana, and cowboy boots) sporting a large erection. Custer's character must dodge arrows to advance toward an equally nude Indian maiden (save her headband and solitary feather) named "Revenge," tied to a cactus. If he makes it past the arrows, the spoils of victory exclusively include raping the maiden. If he is struck by an arrow, the video game plays the opening bars of "Taps." The game rewards sexual conquest, as the points increase due to the frequency and speed with which Custer's character rapes the woman. The video game description asks: "Will Custer have his sweet revenge? Or will he get it in the end?" It continues:

You are General Custer. Your dander's up, your pistol's wavin'. You've set your sights on a ravishing maiden named Revenge; but she's not about to take it lying down, by George! Help is on the way. If you're to get to Revenge you'll have to rise to the challenge, dodge a tribe of flying arrows and protect your flanks against some downright mean and prickly cactus. But if you can stand pat and last past the stings and arrows – you can stand last. Remember! Revenge is sweet. Every time ol' Custer scores he comes up smilin' and right back for more. The higher the score, the more challenging the game action gets. (*Custer's Revenge*, 1982)

Following the dime novel and cinema as vehicles of escapism, the portrayal of Custer as a rapist in *Custer's Revenge* is disturbing, to say the least.

Clearly not the result of higher intellectual pursuits, *Custer's Revenge* incited an outcry from Native American and women's groups across the country. According to the *New York Times* on October 15, 1982, the National Organization for Women, Women Against Pornography, and American Indian Community House (AICH) organized a protest on October 14 outside New York's Hilton Hotel where the game was set for promotion by American Multiple Industries (AMI). After selling 75,000 copies, AMI succumbed to the pressure and sold the game to Game Source (jas 1983a). Tellingly, Mystique rounded out their final figures at 80,000 units sold, a number "roughly double that of other Mystique adult-targeted titles" (Wills 2008, 289). Game Source, as it turns out, was a company created for the sole purpose of announcing AMI's discontinuation of the game. However, Game Source turned around and sold the rights of sale and distribution to Playaround, a company whose then president, Joel Martin, was closely associated with AMI (jas 1983a). As of July 2014, t-shirts sporting the cover art of the original game are still available for purchase at tshirtbandit.com for 19 dollars a pop. If rape as escape reveals the rather malicious underbelly of American society in the late twentieth century, the t-shirts still for sale reveal the underbelly of American society in the new millennium that still devalues women and Native Americans in favor of conquest.

Two things are apparent from the videogame itself and the reactions to it. First, Custer's "Revenge" has nothing to do with reclaiming history or emerging victorious from Little Bighorn, but everything to do with staking a claim on Native American sexuality and emerging victorious in the sexual conquest of the race. Naming the woman in the video game "Revenge" bestows Custer's character with a sense of entitlement for which he does not have to apologize. Furthermore, one cannot simply ignore the sexual innuendo and imagery incited by the description. "Not about to take it lying down, by George," Revenge exhibits deviancy from a missionary style sexual position, thus making her all the more desirable. The description also calls out George Armstrong Custer by name. Cheap attempts at innuendo are obvious as Custer *rises* to the challenge and *scores* with a sexual prowess that leaves him immediately ready for more. The continued conquest of Native peoples through the sexuality of women reflects the "*If we get the girls, we get the race*" sentiment so prevalent in the discourse of "civilization" (Devens 2010). Revenge – the woman and the retaliation – is Custer's to take.

Secondly, as Wills points out, *Custer's Revenge* tested the extent to which the American public would allow the rewriting of frontier history:

While slaughtering Native Americans served as a legitimate reprisal trope in dime novels, Hollywood Westerns, and computer games, the rape of Indian

women went beyond the boundaries of frontier envisioning. *Custer's Revenge* indicated that frontier violence had its own strict parameters of public acceptability. (Wills 2008, 289)

While the company ultimately succeeded in remarketing its product under the name *Westward Ho*, the outcry from the public also succeeded in thwarting company revenue, albeit temporarily. Wills concludes, "Custer, as a war hero and icon of national sacrifice, could not be seen with his boots on but his pants down" (Wills 2008, 290).

As of 1982, Native rights organizations had been arguing on behalf of Native women for decades. What made the American public listen this time? Native American advocacy groups prevailed in part due to the fact that the Pixelated Custer had gone too far. The *New York Times* reported that AMI had received countless phone calls requesting they remove their product, including one from Colonel George Armstrong III. Native advocacy groups could protect their pixelated women by protecting the image of Custer. Furthermore, they could protect their non-fiction women by citing the history of victimization of Native Americans in the West. AICH spokesman Rudy Martin stated, "They've been raping our women and killing our men as entertainment on television for years. It's got to stop" (jas 1983b). In an interesting turn, Custer's sullied heroic image was restored by Native Americans calling attention to their continued victimization. Historically at odds in popular culture, *Custer's Revenge* ironically brought opposing sides together for the first time.

## Conclusion

Today, Custer-buffs, scholars, and the curious gather around Crow Reservation every June to watch the reenactment of the Battle of the Little Bighorn during Crow Native Days. There are two rival reenactments. The oldest is held in Hardin, a border town approximately 12 miles northeast of Crow Agency. Here, the Hardin Chamber of Commerce reenacts the battle as well as provides a general history of the area. Thanks to a script written by the once-fired Joseph Medicine Crow, Montana tribes are featured prominently in the era before the exploration by Lewis and Clark. The second reenactment grew from a response to the first and has become a central part of Crow Native Days, which includes an art show, powwow, the Ultimate Warrior competition, and rodeo as well as other festivities. Along Medicine Tail Coulee in Garryowen on the Real Bird property, one can learn the history of the Crows and the tensions – between tribes and between the federal government and their armies – that threatened to rip apart the Northern Plains in 1876. Closer to the drama of Buffalo Bill's Wild West than Raoul Walsh's *They Died With Their Boots On*, the reenactments have two major

differences. First, they are attended by non-Indians and Indians alike, each enjoying the festivities despite already knowing how the story ends. Second, they are far more historically accurate than the reenactments of old and both include and respect the stories of the only survivors at Last Stand Hill, the Indians themselves.

Scholars can trace the evolution of an icon, as people popularly construct and reconstruct their heroes and the medium used. Moving chronologically through the Print and Visual Custer into the Cinematic Custer, Americans project their needs for a glorified hero onto their memory of the General. Used to justify expansion, the heroic Custer myth reinforced masculinity and female domesticity, provided an escape from the pressures of industrialization, and supported the war effort during World War II. Civil rights and the Vietnam War in the latter half of the twentieth century represented a shift in the varying needs for a hero, and the American public used Custer instead to project their own dissatisfaction with their political leaders and society. The Pixelated Custer demonstrates both the depraved and righteous sides of American society. Even as the videogame promoted the rape of Indian women, coincidentally following one of the worst Supreme Court decisions for the safety of Native women, it brought together Native and non-Native groups; the former demanding the withdrawal of *Custer's Revenge* on the grounds that Native peoples have been victimized enough, and the latter on the grounds that their American icon should not be represented in such a distasteful manner.

As the American public better understands Native cultures and their unique legal status as sovereigns in the United States, Custer's image will continue to morph. In the meantime, Crow Native Days is a smashing success, and both the Hardin Chamber of Commerce and the Real Birds in Garryowen will continue to use people's curiosity about Custer to dose them with equal amounts of American pride and tribal history. Henry Pretty On Top's opening remarks at the 2013 Crow Native Days powwow perhaps best summarize the hopeful result of such a pairing: "Thank you for coming to our powwow this year. We hope you take nice things to say back to the places you come from."

#### NOTES

- 1 Special thanks go to my colleague and friend, Jacob K. Friefeld, for his guidance and multiple reads of this chapter.
- 2 Whitman's poem was later republished in *Leaves of Grass* (1881–1882) as "From Far Dakotas Cañon," which included slight editorial changes in language.
- 3 The hide is held in the Cook Collection of the Agate Fossil Beds National Monument in Harrison, Nebraska, the site of the Cook ranch. While best known for its invaluable fossil record, Agate also houses an extensive collection of gifts from Red Cloud's band to James H. Cook in the years following 1886.

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## Chapter Twenty-Two

### REENACTING THE BATTLE

*Jeremy M. Johnston*

“Was there such a person as Buffalo Bill?” Captain Charles King asked his readers in a 1932 article for *Winners of the West*. “You might doubt it, if you believed all that you read nowadays,” continued King. The Army veteran mused: “Thousands of persons now living have seen the magnificent figure of William Frederick Cody directing the presentations of his Wild West show. But there are those who maintain that Cody was never anything but a showman, that he was only the hero of a series of dime novels and of exploits on the stage and in the arena” (King 2005, 364).

King’s article portrayed Buffalo Bill killing the Cheyenne leader Yellow Hair (misnamed Yellow Hand due to a mistranslation) at the Battle of Warbonnet Creek on July 17, 1876, an event witnessed by King as a First Lieutenant of the 5th Cavalry. Eyewitnesses described the historical event as surreal, witnessing a stage actor, in a stunning theatrical costume, killing a Cheyenne warrior, scalping him, and proclaiming the trophy to be “The First Scalp for Custer.” That day, Cody wore clothing described by King as “a Mexican costume of black velvet, slashed with scarlet and trimmed with silver buttons and lace – one of his theatrical garbs, in which he had done much execution before the footlights in the States, and which now became of intensified value” (King 1964, 38–39).

Due to the dramatic nature of Buffalo Bill killing Yellow Hand, news spread throughout military forces stationed on the Great Plains, countering the dismay about the killing of Custer and over 250 men of the 7th Cavalry. Correspondent John T. Finerty recalled hearing the dramatic description of Cody’s exploit from another scout, “Buffalo Chips” White.

Finerty noted: "He related the whole of Buffalo Bill's exploit with great glee, and made us think that the days of Achilles and Hector had been renewed in Merriitts' Fight on War Bonnet Creek" (Finerty 1994, 150–151).

In his article "Correct in Every Detail," historian Paul Hutton noted the transformation of the Battle of the Little Bighorn into a form of entertainment following Buffalo Bill's killing of Yellow Hand. "After Warbonnet Creek," wrote Hutton, "it became increasingly difficult to tell if art were imitating life or vice versa" (Hutton 1992, 490). This event greatly blurred the line between Buffalo Bill's theatrics and his fighting skills as a frontier scout, and his blend of history and histrionics displayed at Warbonnet shaped popular depictions of "Custer's Last Stand" for years to come.

In his study of popular depictions of "Custer's Last Stand," historian Brian Dippie noted, "there is no comprehensive study of the 'Custer's Last Stand' reenactments" (Dippie 1976, 179). However, there was considerable coverage of Buffalo Bill Cody's depiction of the events related to the military campaign of 1876 on stage and through his traveling exhibition Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Prominent William F. Cody biographers such as Don Russell and Louis Warren, along with Wild West show historians including Sarah Blackstone, Paul Reddin, and Jay Kasson, examined Cody's personal connections to "Custer's Last Stand." Surprisingly, Cody and Custer had very little personal or professional contact with one another. They met briefly during the Royal Buffalo Hunt for the Grand Duke Alexis in 1872. Cody never scouted for Custer, nor did he fight alongside Custer in any conflict. Buffalo Bill's well-known connection to Custer resulted from his dramatic performances that recreated both the Battle of Warbonnet and the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Charles King noted the absurdity of Cody's flamboyant theatrical depictions after Warbonnet, saying that it expanded into "a medieval romance involving a challenge and duel between lines" (King 2005, 369). Most historians agree Buffalo Bill greatly popularized the Last Stand image through dramatic reenactments staged in Buffalo Bill's Wild West. In her study of Cody's stage career *Buffalo Bill on Stage*, Sandra Sagala (2008) examined in detail Cody's staged plays depicting the "First Scalp for Custer," characterizing himself as Custer's avenger. Historians James (Jay) Monaghan (1938) and Paul Hedren (2005) also detailed the history of Cody's stage performances and his use of Yellow Hair's scalp to promote the show.

*The Red Right Hand; or, Buffalo Bill's First Scalp for Custer*, based on Cody's fight with Yellow Hair, was written by dime novelist Prentiss Ingraham and appeared on stage in 1877. Instead of Warbonnet Creek, Ingraham set the play in a haunted valley located in the Black Hills. Thomas R. Bruce played the role of "Yellow Hand," accompanied by actors playing a mix of characters from trappers to Lang-Wa-Hoo, "a Chinaman," in addition to an unusual mix of actors portraying outlaws, Indian princesses, and frontier maidens. The play also included two key participants from the

Great Sioux War of 1876, Captain Jack Crawford and William F. Cody, again blurring the line between actors and authentic “Indian Fighters.” The final act of the play ended a chaotic storyline with Cody recreating “The First Scalp for Custer” on stage and avenging Custer’s death. Distinguishing fact from fiction throughout the play would be difficult due to its unusual mix of theatrics and realism.

Although the Battle of Warbonnet Creek could not have had anything less to do with a haunted valley, nor did the actual event involve the mix stereotypical characters such as Indian princesses or a “Chinaman,” Cody’s stage production established the tradition of casting the events of the Great Sioux War of 1876 within a larger narrative. This process allowed the Last Stand to serve as a catalyst for a grander story of westward expansion, be it the successes or horrors of settling the American frontier. In this case, “Custer’s Last Stand” set the scene for Cody’s duel with “Yellow Hand,” thus marking a dramatic conclusion to Buffalo Bill’s scouting career by becoming an avenger.

### Wild West Shows

With so much focus on Buffalo Bill Cody’s role in shaping the basic elements of Last Stand reenactments, both on stage and in the arena, other stage productions depicting the Battle of the Little Bighorn are obscure in secondary literature. Roger Hall’s (2001) study of theatrical productions depicting the American West from 1870 to the early 1900s mentions a few of these non-Buffalo Bill stage productions. On August 14, 1876, *Sitting Bull; or, Custer’s Last Charge*, written by Harry Seymour, premiered. Three weeks later, another production entitled *Custer and His Avengers* appeared on stage. W. J. Flemming portrayed Custer for *Custer and His Avengers* beginning in 1879, a role he performed until the 1890s.

These performances failed to achieve the level of notoriety enjoyed by Cody and are largely forgotten in current studies of the Custer Myth. According to Roger Hall, a reason for their limited appeal was simple: “The whites lost” (2001, 86). In contrast, Buffalo Bill’s stage production of the killing of Yellow Hair offered a “happy ending” to the Custer massacre by avenging Custer’s death and turning back bands of Cheyenne warriors hoping to join Sitting Bull at the peak of his success. Further research of these stage productions would offer some interesting comparisons to Cody’s well-documented performances.

During 1883, Cody collaborated with Doc Carver to create the precursor to Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, an outdoor event where frontier characters and American Indians reenacted the Euro-American settlement of the frontier in all its violent glory. The following year, Cody separated from Carver and opened Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, allowing him to reenact his own

accomplishments and other western events within a large, outdoor arena. During the 1885 season, Buffalo Bill's Wild West reenacted Cody's military accomplishment at Warbonnet Creek, and he once again killed "Yellow Hand" before hundreds of spectators on a daily basis.

The current characterization of Buffalo Bill's Wild West as a circus with a frontier theme would be an unfamiliar concept to Cody as well as to most members of his audience. Cody viewed Buffalo Bill's Wild West as an educational endeavor, not a show or an amusement, and he consistently ensured some element of authenticity shaped all performances. Additionally, the presence of American Indians in the heart of the reenactments lent an air of authenticity. Within the 1885 program, correspondent Brick Pomeroy noted, "There is more of real life, of genuine interest, of positive education in this startling exhibition, than I have ever before seen, and it is so true to nature and life ... I wish there were more progressive educators like Wm. Cody in this world."<sup>1</sup>

Further cementing his connections to the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the late Custer, Cody hired Sitting Bull to tour with Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Cody booked Sitting Bull for \$50 per week, a bonus of \$125, and exclusive rights to sell autographs and portraits. Historian Robert Utley noted, "Sitting Bull's role was not taxing." Rather than a sensationalized "slayer of Custer," Cody presented him to the public "simply as Sitting Bull, the famous Hunkpapa chief" (Utley 1993, 264–265). The 1885 program for Buffalo Bill's Wild West characterized Sitting Bull as the "Napoleon of the West" and credited him for leading over 5,000 warriors at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

However, while the program praised Sitting Bull's military and political accomplishments, it also noted that the Lakota leader possessed "a strong desire to meet the noted frontiersman [Buffalo Bill] who had contributed so largely to his defeat in 1876." The program made it clear that Cody's efforts successfully ended the Great Sioux War and further elevated Cody's reputation as the avenger of "Custer's Last Stand" (Utley 1993). After the killing of Sitting Bull on December 15, 1890, Cody reacquired the horse he had previously presented to the slain leader. Buck Taylor, a former cowboy turned actor, portrayed Custer and rode this horse during the 1894 reenactment of "Custer's Last Stand," adding yet another element of authenticity to the performance (Bridger 2002).

Cody staged his first large-scale reenactment of "Custer's Last Stand" in 1886 as part of a saga entitled *The Narrative of the West*. Cody turned to Elizabeth Custer for her thoughts and ideas on properly staging a reenactment depicting her husband's death. In a letter dated August 13, 1886, Cody described his plans to Custer's widow:

It is my design to illustrate to the public this winter a series of episodes in military life on the frontier that will be a revelation to the unthinking people

who know nothing of the valor and heroism of the men who have made civilization possible on this continent. To that end I have decided to make a supreme effort in reproducing in historic accuracy and with great fidelity to detail that memorable field where the nation lost an honored son when the black shadow of widowhood was cast across your life and hopes. I shall spare no expense to do credit to our exhibition and deepen the lustre (sic) of your glorious husband's reputation as a soldier and a man. May I hope that you will give your sanction to the plan and by your presence endorse my effort to perpetuate his memory. If it should become known that you were to be present on the first occasion of the illustration of the battle of the Little Bighorn it would attract the attention of all the good women in America who would share your pride and my triumph. (Frost 1979, 261)

To assist him in staging the Last Stand as a grand pageant, Cody turned to Steele MacKaye, a prominent playwright, director, actor, and manager well known for his ability to produce spectacular theatrical plays. Percy MacKaye noted his father's work on "the sweeping realistic yet imaginative effects of *The Drama of Civilization*, [was] the first dramatic pageant ever given in America (wherein he transformed for a season the Wild West of Cody into a constructive drama of spectacle and action)" (MacKaye 1912, 166–167). MacKaye also noted his father confronted "the problem of realism for the sake of symbolism, the illusion of nature for the purpose of poetry," which he "attacked technically" (MacKaye 1912, 166).

It is questionable whether Elizabeth Custer attended a performance of the reenactment and witnessed "The Last Stand" from her seat. An article in the *New York Times* dated July 15, 1886, noted that she did attend Buffalo Bill's Wild West, just a few weeks before Cody wrote her about his plans to stage a reenactment of "Custer's Last Stand." She also described the excitement of Buffalo Bill's Wild West in her 1887 book *Tenting on the Plains*, yet the storyline depicts her servant Eliza attending the show in her place. She did not describe her attendance or offer her personal views of Cody's Last Stand reenactment, nor did she indicate she even viewed Cody's reenactment of her husband's demise. An 1887 article appearing in *The Critic* noted, "In giving her consent Mrs. Custer stipulated that she would have time to get out of town before the performances began, as it would be very painful to remain here while they were a subject of newspaper comment and general conversation" (*The Critic*, 8).

Even if she did not see Buffalo Bill's reenactment, years later Elizabeth Custer thanked Cody: "You have done so much to make him an idol among the children and young people" (EBC to WFC, 1910).<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Frost, Shirley Leckie, and Howard Kazanjian and Chris Enss, biographers of Elizabeth Custer, note her ongoing collaboration with Cody in staging the Last Stand reenactments, encouraging one another to further their individual promotions of Custer's heroic status. These biographers also

conclude that she attended one of the reenactments; however, further research is necessary to determine if she actually did.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West later offered a stand-alone reenactment of "Custer's Last Stand" beginning in 1893, when the Wild West appeared in an arena bordering the grounds of the famed World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. An 1893 program listed the act as "THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN, Showing with Historical Accuracy the scene CUSTER'S LAST CHARGE."<sup>3</sup> In a news clipping pasted in the 1893 Cody Scrapbook, Cody proclaimed, "It is a practical lesson in history and one, I think, that will not readily be forgotten."<sup>4</sup>

Buffalo Bill's Wild West reenacted "Custer's Last Stand" in 1894 and again performed the reenactment in 1898. During the 1898 season, Cody also demonstrated his support for American intervention in the Cuban Revolution by inviting a number of Cuban rebels to appear in the exposition. The following year, Cody's battle reenacting skills focused on the Battle of San Juan Hill and again mixed history with histrionics by including actual Rough Rider veterans portraying themselves. The Battle of San Juan Hill continued to dominate the reenactments performed by Buffalo Bill's Wild West, except for a brief hiatus when a reenactment of the Battle of Tientsin from the Boxer Rebellion replaced it for a year. Buffalo Bill Cody performed "Custer's Last Stand" for European audiences during his 1902–1906 tour of Europe, allowing citizens from England, Scotland, France, Germany, and Italy to view the iconic fall of Custer (Blackstone 1987).

Due to Cody's longstanding popularity and his well-known collaboration with Custer's widow, the biographical accounts of his life and performance overshadowed scholarly research on other public spectacles depicting the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Historian Don Russell identifies 116 Wild West shows performing through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Additionally, he highlighted many other shows with Last Stand reenactments. The focus exclusively on Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Cody's paradigmatic reenactment of "Custer's Last Stand" obscures other contemporary outdoor productions.

Buffalo Bill was not the first showman to reenact the Battle of the Little Bighorn in an outdoor arena. Tom Hardwick organized the "Great Rocky Mountain Show" in 1884, starring John Johnston (nicknamed Liver Eating Johnson and later Jeremiah Johnson), Calamity Jane, and Curley, one of Custer's Crow scouts. Part of the entertainment included "Custer's Last Stand" as one of the main acts in which Curley reenacted his escape from the battlefield. Over 20 Crow Indians traveled with the show along with adopted member Thomas Leforge, who later recalled, "We got paid – in promises. I still have these promises" (Leforge 1974, 325–326). The presence of a Last Stand living participant, the Crow scout Curley, also lent an authentic air to the show. According to Leforge, the audience loved the

reenactment. However, the Great Rocky Mountain Show ended after a few performances due to bad management. The success of the reenactment may have inspired Cody to stage his own reenactment of “Custer’s Last Stand” in 1893 (Dippie 1996).

In his study of Wild West shows, Russell (1961) notes at least three other companies that offered reenactments of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, probably modeled after Buffalo Bill’s reenactment. Pawnee Bill, Buffalo Bill’s competitor and future partner, depicted “Custer’s Last Stand” as an act for Pawnee Bill’s Historic Wild West. Additionally, Adam Forepaugh of “4-Paw’s” Wild West billed his “New and Greatest All-Feature Show” as “Custer’s Last Rally or the Battle of the Little Bighorn.” A poster advertising “4-Paws” performance depicts Custer and the 7th Cavalry attacking an Indian village – almost an identical image to well-known artistic renditions detailing the Battle of the Washita. The Gabriel Brothers, according to Russell, copied “4-Paws” production of the Last Stand and performed it in their own tours.

These other companies would be worthy of examination and comparison to Cody’s Last Stand. One wonders if these presentations attracted large crowds as Cody’s did, and if so, why do they remain relatively obscure in modern studies of Custer’s imagery. Did Buffalo Bill’s popularity overshadow these productions? Alternatively, did poor management plague these presentations? Clearly, they failed to gain the notoriety of Cody’s reenactment of the Last Stand.

### Ceremonies of the Dead

An important yet overlooked reenactment of the Battle of the Little Bighorn occurred in 1877 on the Red Cloud Agency. This performance did not draw large crowds, nor did its participants intend to entertain audiences. The Lakota staged a sham battle depicting their win at Little Bighorn before their annual Sun Dance, with non-agency Indians performing the role of the “hostiles” and the agency Indians acting as soldiers of the 7th Cavalry. According to Crazy Horse biographer Kingsley Bray, official reports indicated the tensions between the non-agency and agency Indians caused this “battle” to become a little too realistic. Upon the intervention of concerned witnesses, the action ceased before any serious injuries occurred (Bray 2006, 310–312). This Sun Dance of 1877 marked the beginning of American Indians staging reenactments of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, albeit not for entertaining audiences but for religious purposes.

These early American Indian reenactments received very little study, with the exception of cultural anthropologists examining traditional religious

ceremonies like the Sun Dance (Lowie 1963). While the agencies often banned “heathen” rituals, American Indians would perform them before white audiences through Wild West Shows, lending an air of authenticity to reenactments.

Similar to their white performers, American Indians view the opportunity of performing in reenactments as an opportunity to connect with their own heritage. As Michael Elliott noted of the modern reenactments, “It does not matter if you are Crow, or Northern Cheyenne, or Arikara – as long as you are Indian, you can pick up a blank-filled gun and fire off some rounds at the US Cavalry” (2007, 268). Historians L. G. Moses, Vine Deloria, Jr., and Linda McNenly have extensively examined the role of American Indian performers in productions staged by white producers, but these early American Indian produced reenactments of the Battle of the Little Bighorn are either briefly mentioned or ignored. Today, American Indians host their own reenactments for public entertainment such as the Real Bird family reenactment of the Battle of the Little Bighorn held on the Crow Reservation. This transition of American Indian reenactments from religious ceremony to popular entertainment would be an interesting study for future scholars.

Cultural historians have examined the Last Stand imagery to ascertain how it expressed strong nationalistic messages to American audiences, greatly shaping the historical memory of the Indian Wars. American audiences of the latter half of the nineteenth century were quite accustomed to viewing such tragic depictions of battle deaths, a phenomenon stemming from the brutality of the American Civil War. Previously, a “Good Death” occurred in the home, with the dying individual surrounded by loved ones, at peace with their maker, and accepting of their own mortality. If possible, before the passing of the individual, he or she uttered their last words to comfort the family. The Civil War abolished the possibility of a “Good Death” for thousands. Death occurred suddenly on a remote battlefield, without family, and in many cases, the departed disappeared without a trace or was interred in an unmarked grave.

In her book *This Republic of Suffering*, historian Drew Gilpin Faust (2008) documents how veterans and civilians after the Civil War memorialized the loss of life. The loss of 600,000 soldiers created a culture wherein citizens from both sides of the conflict memorialized heroic combat deaths through literature, cemeteries, and ceremonies such as Memorial Day. The loss of a soldier became not just a personal loss for one family but also a national loss necessitating the need for the entire nation to honor these deaths. Clearly, Last Stand reenactments reflected this cultural norm.

Cody’s reenactment of “Custer’s Last Stand” served the same purpose in honoring those who lost their lives fighting the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho at the Little Bighorn. By depicting the men of the 7th Cavalry riding to certain death, Cody allowed the audience to witness the heroic sacrifice of Custer and his men in the name of western expansion. Some

contemporary newspaper accounts and Cody biographers note that at times Cody changed the act by allowing Custer to win; or in some cases, Cody himself portrayed a victorious Custer. Today, these actions of Cody's smack of certain insensitivity to the honored dead. However, no newspaper accounts report Cody's depictions showing cowards running away from the battle, nor men "saving the last bullet for themselves." All rushed into the action, and all died a heroic death in combat.

In his book *The Fatal Environment*, Richard Slotkin demonstrates how the popular view of the Last Stand resonated on many levels within late nineteenth-century American society and culture. Slotkin does not mention Buffalo Bill's reenactments in this book, neither onstage or in the arena, and their contributions to the Last Stand imagery. Instead, Slotkin focuses on newspaper coverage of "Custer's Last Stand" to determine how the American public responded to the event and the messages they drew from the Last Stand imagery. Slotkin concluded:

Although the media's varying treatments reflected sharp partisan divisions, they also confirmed the major points of an underlying consensus: an agreement on the appropriateness of the language of racialism to the definition of class difference, on the Indian war as an adequate model of progressive historical change, and on the importance of the Last Stand as a real-world event whose character confirmed the validity of the language and the historiographical model. (Slotkin 1985, 476)

Slotkin also noted how the popular perceptions of the Last Stand led to the creation of a new western hero, "The Frontiersman" (Slotkin 1985, 500).

In his subsequent work on frontier mythology, *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin examined the popularity of Buffalo Bill's Wild West and how it reflected societal and cultural issues in the 1890s and into the twentieth century. It is at this period that the frontier ceased to be a region and became a metaphor for imaginative spaces, advancing political causes such as imperialism. Additionally, "the Wild West also invented and tested the images, staging, and themes and provided much to this personnel for the motion-picture Westerns, which succeeded to its cultural mantle" (Slotkin 1992, 87). In his 1981 essay for a catalogue for a Buffalo Bill exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, Slotkin wrote, "the Wild West show was the vehicle through which the symbolism of the frontier mythology was communicated to new generations of Americans – and Europeans – living in a 'post-frontier' metropolitan society" (Slotkin 1981, 43).

In *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin theorized: "Like Hawkeye, Cody is of plebian and agrarian origins, and therefore knows the value of democracy and hard work" (1992, 75). Slotkin argued Cody did his best to become Custer, even dressing like him and taking on Custer's role in the Wild West's Last Stand reenactments, an argument he began in *The Fatal*

*Environment* by comparing Cody and Custer's roles in the 1872 Grand Duke Alexis hunt. Yet one must wonder how Buffalo Bill at the center of the stage appears as a simple Hawkeye to the heroic Custer. Custer died at his Last Stand, yet Cody became a hero because of his fight at Warbonnet. Additionally, one could make the argument that Custer attempted to take on Cody's persona well before the Last Stand. In his biography of Custer, Jay Monaghan noted Custer played the role of Buffalo Bill in a play entitled *Buffalo Bill and His Bride*, performed during one of the long winters at Fort Abraham Lincoln (1959, 358). Both Richard White (1994) and Louis Warren (2005) agree in their studies of Buffalo Bill's Last Stand reenactments that one could equally argue Custer grew his beard to emulate Cody, who was already a dime-novel hero.

Louis Warren also took issue with Slotkin's willingness to give so much power to Buffalo Bill's Wild West in defining a national message for westward and imperial expansion. Warren notes that the Battle of the Little Bighorn reenactment did not run continuously through the various touring seasons of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, even though the burning of the settler's cabin concluded nearly all Wild West performances. Regardless of the scenes performed during a touring season, all Buffalo Bill Wild West programs contained an illustration of Cody holding the "First Scalp for Custer." This illustration reemphasized that the scout turned actor, who led the staged charge to save the settlers from Indians or rescued the Deadwood Stage from raiding hostiles, was indeed Custer's avenger (Warren 2003).

Slotkin examined the phenomena of Last Stand reenactments from the producer's perspective and acknowledged the weakness of such an approach. He admitted that this approach "has the disadvantage of underemphasizing the complex and various ways in which different audiences receive the production of the cultural industries" (Slotkin 1992, 10). This approach, also used by Warren and Dippie in their studies of Cody's Last Stand reenactments, does not address how regional audiences accepted, or even rejected, these performances. Even Elliott's chapter examining modern reenactments focused on the perspective of the producers. Undoubtedly, the audience response impacted the productions.

Yet the producer perspective also needs to take into account that these depictions were often changed, or not performed before certain audiences, in order to reflect regional demands. Cody's stage career reflected how depictions of the events related to the Little Bighorn evolved in response to ever-changing public perceptions and concerns regarding the interpretation of historical events. Shortly after scalping Yellow Hair, Cody sent his victim's scalp to his wife Louisa, who fainted when opening up the package to discover the gruesome object (Cody 1919, 268–269; W. F. Cody to Louisa Cody, CodyArchive.org). Despite his wife's revulsion, Cody wanted to use this gruesome war trophy as a marketing tool to draw audiences and

to reinforce the authentic nature of his performances. Paul Hedren's 2005 article on the "First Scalp for Custer" details how Cody altered his use of Yellow Hair's scalp as a promotional item based on audience reactions. Cody appeared in many later stage productions that did not recreate the killing of "Yellow Hand," possibly because of the fallout regarding public display of the scalp.

Clearly, many scholars of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Last Stand reenactments have focused on its strong nationalistic message, yet few examined how the regional audiences received these depictions. The Buffalo Bill Wild West scrapbook of 1898 reflects that Cody's Last Stand act was either not performed in certain regions or these reporters found greater value in other performances and simply overlooked the reenactment. With current newspaper databases and the detailed tour schedule of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, historians have an opportunity to see how various regions responded to these images.

Even in the urban areas like New York City, a region Slotkin identifies as a primary contributor to the powerful Last Stand images, some of Cody's reenactments generated revulsion. A review of one such reenactment appeared in the January 6, 1887 issue of *Forest and Stream*, edited by George Bird Grinnell, cofounder of the Boone and Crockett Club with Theodore Roosevelt. This review slammed Buffalo Bill's depiction of "Custer's Last Stand," especially with Cody wearing an auburn wig and assuming the role of Custer during the performance. "Under these circumstances," stated the review, "the Wild West performance is an outrage on decency." The review concluded that,

in this case, at least, there must be those who, like ourselves, have followed Custer as a leader in campaigns on the plains and among the mountains, who will join with us in protesting against such unseemly burlesquing of the Little Bighorn Ambush on that fateful summer's day.

Perhaps this review reflects the highbrow view of Last Stand reenactments, but not all critics received Cody's reenactment warmly.

It is very likely Buffalo Bill's Wild West depicted differing acts during the same annual tour to entertain its diverse regional audiences. The 1898 scrapbook contains a number of articles that indicate either Cody altered specific acts to reflect popular demands or newspaper reporters ignored certain acts and focused on what they found unique. For example, when Buffalo Bill's Wild West toured the South, the scrapbook collection of articles fails to mention any reenactment of "Custer's Last Stand." Instead, the papers heavily report on the presence of Cuban Revolutionaries traveling with the show. Yet when juxtaposed to the news coverage in the Midwest, "Custer's Last Stand" appears frequently. The coverage of the Wild West's

1898 appearance in Monroe, Michigan, is especially poignant. Reporters detailed that Nevin Custer, George's brother, attended Buffalo Bill's Wild West to view the Last Stand reenactment. After the performance, Nevin was introduced to Red Horn Bull, who was billed as the last Indian wounded by a shot from the dying Custer's pistol. According to the news reports, Nevin broke down and hurriedly left after noticing the horrific scars on Red Horn Bull's jaw.

The news coverage of the 1898 Wild West tour raises some interesting questions: Did Buffalo Bill not perform the Last Stand reenactment in the South where former Confederates would despise the glorification of a Union General? Alternatively, did Southern newspaper reporters ignore covering the Last Stand performance due to their keen interest in the Cuban Revolutionaries, reflecting the South's long interest in the island of Cuba? Did Michigan reporters focus intently on the Last Stand because the Custer family resided in their community? Did Cody realize he could attract a larger audience by depicting the glorious fall of the heroic general responsible for leading Michigan volunteers to victory during the Civil War?

Just because Buffalo Bill's Wild West performed acts with a strong nationalistic message, it is uncertain whether or not these performances were generally accepted from region to region. Future historians may be able to use Cody's depiction of "Custer's Last Stand" to test how regions reacted differently to these strong nationalistic images. With many newspapers now available and searchable online, it is easier for historians to determine the frequency of Cody's reenactment of the Last Stand. Additionally, researchers can glean more information regarding audiences' reactions in order to better gauge the reception of historical memory from a regional perspective.

### **More Great Performances**

As Cody promulgated the image of "Custer's Last Stand" to audiences in cities located throughout the United States and Europe, other reenactments occurred in the relatively isolated location of the Little Bighorn valley. These performances served a different set of purposes, contrary to those established by Cody. They also served more of a ceremonial purpose by honoring the dead or reconciling the cultural conflict produced by the Indian wars. Additionally, these simulated troop movements on the battlefield site apparently offered some visual insight about "what really happened" to Custer and his men on June 25, 1876. As these reenactments attracted greater crowds, local communities viewed staged reenactments as an opportunity to lure visitors to their towns and thereby stimulate local economies with tourist dollars. Soon, reenactments that were more elaborate began to develop near the Battle of the Little Bighorn site to replace

the touring reenactments offered by Wild West shows. They assumed an air of authenticity through the twentieth century, because they occurred on or near the contested ground (Greene 2008; Rickey 1967).

In his book *After Custer*, Paul Hedren (2011) detailed the considerable role played by the military in transforming the Battle of the Little Bighorn site into a special place to honor the memory of Custer and his fallen troops. Scholars interested in the battlefield have examined many of these early military-sponsored reenactments. The small-scale reenactments at the battlefield site occurred mainly during anniversary services hosted by the Army, which initially managed the site as a national cemetery.

Western photographer D. M. Barry attended the memorial services marking the tenth anniversary of the battle. Barry used the occasion to stage some photographs of Gall delivering his stories of defeating Custer as well as recreating battle scenes using troops to form skirmish lines along the individual white grave markers indicating where troops fell. These photographs are reproduced in James Brust, Brian Pohanka, and Sandy Barnard's *Where Custer Fell: Photographs of the Little Bighorn Battlefield Then and Now* (2005). In addition to Barry, Chief Gall attended and recalled his experiences fighting the 7th Cavalry on the site in 1876.

Five years later, the Crow hosted a reenactment in which Crow warriors acted as both troopers and opposing Lakota and Cheyenne. The Crow traditional Sun Dance used sham battles during the ceremony to reenact military accomplishments – long before Buffalo Bill portrayed himself and acted out his military accomplishments on stage. The purpose of the early Sun Dance was to give warriors visions to avenge the killing of a family member by the enemy. The traditional Crow Sun Dance stopped around 1875 after a ceremony ended poorly and did not produce its intended results. The 1891 reenactment, the first of its kind near the battlefield, marked the shift from a traditional Crow religious practice to performing a public event intended to entertain an audience.

Planning occurred for an onsite reenactment during the twenty-fifth anniversary, but it did not come to fruition. However, in 1902 the community of Sheridan, Wyoming, located nearly 70 miles south of the battle site, hosted a full-scale reenactment. Town boosters and officials from the Burlington Railroad believed such an event would promote the town of Sheridan and the railroad line. The goal was to lure tourists into the region.

Sheridan dentist Will Frackelton organized the event by recruiting Crow Indians and the local unit of the Wyoming National Guard as participants. Tensions quickly emerged between the Guardsmen and the Crow, causing Frackelton great concern and worry. The head of the Crow actors demanded they be able to take the Guard unit's flag at the climax of the battle, but the commander refused. Frackelton found it necessary to check all weapons to ensure they were loaded with blank cartridges. He later recalled, "The situation gave me the creeps" (Frackelton 1941, 196–198). In the course of

the reenactment, the Guardsmen lost their flag when the Crow reenactor Blue Bead took it at the height of the performance. Probably in an act of defiance, someone shot Blue Bead in the buttocks with a shotgun. To appease the Crow, Frackelton paid Blue Bead \$10 and a quarter of beef; the exchange pleased him so much he apparently offered the other cheek to receive additional compensation (Dippie 1982).

The Sheridan reenactment occurred only once. The failure to restage the act likely resulted from the great tension between participants. Another reason stemmed from Buffalo Bill's established precept that performances must include an element of authenticity. Sheridan was near the sites for the Fetterman Fight and Wagon Box Fight, not the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Despite the presence of great histrionics, Sheridan could not lay any claim to historical legitimacy, and, as a result, the reenactments shifted back to the actual site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Today, the community of Sheridan celebrates Buffalo Bill Days, capitalizing on Cody's historic connections to the famed Sheridan Inn. Reenactments at other locations appeared as well, including Hot Springs, South Dakota, which hosted a short-lived reenactment in 1964 using 212 actors and 100 horses (Dippie 1976, 95).

A reenactment on the Little Bighorn battlefield in 1909 reflected the transition from Wild West shows to a new form of entertainment, the movies. This reenactment provided raw film footage for William Selig's *On the Little Bighorn, Or "Custer's Last Stand."* Throughout the twentieth century, film would convey the image of the Last Stand to a wider audience.

To honor the forty-fifth anniversary in 1921, the American Legion of Hardin, Montana, sponsored a sham battle that featured Crow Indians in the role of Custer's enemy. The event took on a circus-like atmosphere with the addition of a carnival, parades, and an air show. The anniversary also demonstrated how the battlefield site was rapidly becoming a prime tourist attraction by drawing in 15,000 visitors, some of whom arrived in nearly 4,000 automobiles.

As the fiftieth anniversary date neared, local communities stepped up their efforts to draw in more tourist dollars. In the summer of 1926 a tent city emerged near Crow Agency, housing veterans from both sides of the conflict, members of the modern 7th Cavalry, film crews, and visitors. Film star William S. Hart also attended the anniversary events. His presence, along with a film crew and planes flying banners promoting the movie *Flaming Frontier* demonstrated the tremendous rise in popularity of Hollywood westerns and movie stars. The anniversary activities drew around 50,000 spectators.

Three reenactments occurred during the 1926 anniversary. The 7th Cavalry charged through the Little Bighorn valley for the film crews, and later they reenacted Reno's charge on the Indian encampment. A more

ceremonial reenactment occurred as two separate lines of riders – one line representing the 7th Cavalry veterans and Crow warriors with another line representing the Lakota and Cheyenne veterans – rode to the monument atop Last Stand Hill. There the opposing riders met, shook each other's hands, and rode down the hill together. This kind of reconciliation also occurred at the reburial of the "unknown soldier" at Garryowen, where a symbolic "Burying of the Hatchet" occurred. This particular commemoration firmly focused national attention on the battlefield.

With the success of the 1926 events, local communities attempted something similar for the sixtieth anniversary. However, the events only drew 15,000 visitors. Charles Windolph, the sole surviving 7th Cavalry veteran of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, attended the event, signifying the passing of battle participants. A reenactment between a few hundred Sioux, Crow, and Cheyenne and a single troop of the 4th Cavalry from Fort Meade also occurred on the grounds of the battlefield. A 1931 reenactment was the last to occur on the historic battlefield, marking the end of reenactments supported by the Army. Don Rickey, Jr., stated that when the National Park Service assumed authority over the battlefield site, "the era of spectacular sham battles and other elaborate commemorations had passed" (Rickey 1967, 84). The 1951 commemoration marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of the battle was a more solemn affair without loud reenactments. Soon, the National Park Service established a visitor center to expand the interpretive efforts at the battle site. At least at Custer Battlefield National Monument, exhibits and informative lectures replaced sham battles as the primary interpretation of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

The public image of George Armstrong Custer also changed. After the death of Elizabeth Custer in 1933, the image of Custer as the soldier-hero began to wane without her continued efforts to promote her husband's past glories. The death of General Godfrey also silenced one of Custer's biggest proponents. Frederic F. Van de Water released *Glory-Hunter: The Life of General Custer* in 1934, which depicted a less than glamorous view of Custer. Hollywood films also continued to shape Custer's image. Errol Flynn portrayed a heroic Custer in the 1941 film *They Died With Their Boots On*, yet other films portrayed Custer in a negative light, including *Bugles in the Afternoon* in 1953, based on the Ernest Haycox novel, and *Tonka*, the 1957 Disney film about the horse Comanche.

Despite the tarnishing of Custer's image, communities near the Battle of the Little Bighorn Battlefield continued to benefit from increased annual visitation to the site where Custer fell. Custer scholar Brian Dippie noted, "Like the moon, General Custer's reputation has two sides, one bathed in light and the other cast in deep shadow" (Dippie 1976, 4). This propagation of "Custerana" also contributed to current battle reenactments in other locations in the region. It mattered little if Custer was a hero or a villain;

seeing actors recreate the Battle of the Little Bighorn continued to entertain audiences.

Joe Medicine Crow, a Crow historian and graduate of the University of California, wrote a script for another reenactment to celebrate the Montana Territorial Centennial in 1964. This reenactment rejuvenated the interest in hosting sham battles near the battlefield, and it marked a transition by portraying the Battle of the Little Bighorn from an American Indian perspective. Medicine Crow is the grandson of White Man Runs Him, one of Custer's Crow scouts, again granting him an authentic quality that appeals to modern audiences. He also is a decorated World War II veteran. After spending some time in Hollywood working on westerns until a director fired him because of his counter-opinion about Custer, he wrote a script detailing the history of the misguided Indian policies that culminated with "Custer's Last Stand."

Dorothy M. Johnson, historian and author of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, witnessed the Medicine Crow reenactment on June 25, 1966, the ninetieth anniversary of the battle. Although the official title of the program was "Custer's Last Stand," Johnson recalled most people referred to the spectacle simply as "the reenactment." Johnson characterized the event as educational, similar to Pomeroy's comments about Buffalo Bill's Wild West. "The Re-enactment is educational as well as exciting," she wrote, because it "puts the Battle of the Little Bighorn into context, not as an isolated prairie fight, but as an inevitable result of a series of treaties broken by the United States Government" (Johnson 1967).

As popular entertainment and publications in the 1960s and 1970s transformed Custer from a heroic soldier into an unapologetic "Indian Killer," popular media depicted Buffalo Bill and Wild West exhibitions as circus-like parodies of cultural genocide. Arthur Kopit's play *Indians* debuted at the Aldwych Theatre in London on July 4, 1968, with Stacy Keach playing the role of Buffalo Bill delivering a line describing General Custer as "one o' the great dumbass men in history." In 1976, Robert Altman produced *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson*, a film loosely based on Kopit's stage play. Famed western movie actor Paul Newman starred as a less-than-heroic Buffalo Bill, who makes a living reinventing historical memory through his Wild West show. Altman leaves his audience with a clear impression that Buffalo Bill and his Wild West were nothing more than a whitewashing of a shameful past.

With the tarnishing of Custer's image as well as a rise in American Indian activism, reenactments of "Custer's Last Stand" ended for over a decade. The Medicine Crow reenactment did not appear during the centennial year of the Battle of the Little Bighorn due to concerns regarding possible American Indian Movement (AIM) protests and acts of vandalism. The Hardin Chamber of Commerce eventually revived Medicine Crow's reenactment in 1990, and it continues to entertain and educate audiences today.

The revival of the reenactment also spawned another event near the site of the battle, a competing event hosted by the Real Bird family beginning in 1992. Brothers Richard, Kennard, and Henry Real Bird viewed hosting a family-sponsored reenactment on their land as an opportunity to create jobs for members of the Crow Reservation. The Real Bird reenactment examines the same events depicted in the Hardin reenactment, although it provides an alternate ending to Custer's demise by ending his life not on Last Stand Hill but at the mouth of Medicine Tail Coulee. The Real Bird reenactment opens with the telling of the "real story" to the grandfather of the Real Birds, Owen Painted Horse, who heard the story from his Cheyenne brother Pat Spotted Wolf. Despite the challenges from Custer historians, Michael Elliott notes, "the Real Birds have reconfigured the symbolic geography of the battle so their land is at the center" (Elliott 2007, 257). The Real Bird performance also suggests Custer's Crow scouts warned the Cheyenne and Lakota, setting the stage for Custer's defeat. Despite its jabs at the Hardin reenactment and the traditional narrative of "Custer's Last Stand," the Real Bird reenactment ends on a patriotic note.

### Conclusion

Today's reenactments follow the same tradition of Buffalo Bill, placing the Battle of the Little Bighorn within a larger narrative about the settlement of the American West as well as the failed Indian policies of the United States. Today's reenactments begin with American Indians encountering the Lewis and Clark Expedition, followed by the Oregon Trail migrations, the Fort Laramie Treaty negotiations, and the post-Civil War battles for the Powder River Country – all culminating in "Custer's Last Stand." Despite the hard benches and the presence of a modern sound system and an ambulance, visitors can experience the hot, dry temperatures. They can breathe the dust mixed with sage and gunpowder. They can hear the galloping, whooping, and gunshots.

Reenacting the events of 1876 poses dangers for actors, again blurring reality with fantasy. The current reenactment hosted by the Chamber of Commerce of Hardin, Montana, provides a manual detailing various safety requirements ([www.custerlaststand.org](http://www.custerlaststand.org)). Additionally, despite its inauthentic placement, an ambulance stands by at all reenactments just in case any emergency should arise. The element of danger provides yet another aspect of authenticity blended with histrionics, a combination continuing to thrill audiences.

Even on a stage long ago, William F. Cody and his fellow actors faced danger from firearms, and in one particular case, suffered from gunshot wounds – again contributing an air of authenticity. Fellow scout, poet, and

newspaper reporter Jack Crawford joined Cody's stage production of *The Right Red Hand*. During one performance Crawford, filling in as "Yellow Hand," accidentally shot himself in the groin while attempting to dismount his trained donkey and fight the duel with Buffalo Bill. Although the pistol was loaded with blanks, the expulsion from the blank cartridge caused a serious wound to Crawford that apparently left blood on the stage.

Modern reenactments continue to draw thousands of spectators to Montana. In an age of digital media and high-tech entertainment, these outdoor spectacles continue to provide viewers an opportunity to connect with the past. Reenactments still hold the ability to titillate the senses that Hollywood films, television programs, and the Internet cannot reach. One can experience smells, sounds, heat, dust, rattlesnakes, dehydration that may give a sense of what the belligerents in the Great Sioux War encountered during the summer of 1876.

Some element of authenticity is the key to success for these reenactments. However, America's definition of what is authentic has greatly changed. For example, in 2012 the author noted the actor portraying Crazy Horse during the Real Bird reenactment was not only Crow but also had a red Mohawk and painted his basketball jersey number on his back. Current reenactments have their share of comic and surreal interludes.

The mysteries about what happened on June 25, 1876, contribute to the success of these reenactments. They allow for a malleable script, as writers try to address shifting public opinions on Custer. Technological advances in entertainment and the ever-changing image of Custer will continue to impact reenactments of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Yet Buffalo Bill Cody's template for providing audiences with a dramatic and authentic experience remains constant today. Buffalo Bill's paradigmatic reenactment style will continue to shape historical memory of "Custer's Last Stand" well into the future – concealing the nuances and complexities of the Battle of the Little Bighorn under a veneer of staged drama.

#### NOTES

- 1 1885 Buffalo Bill Wild West Program (MS6.6.A.1.4.1), McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming (see [CodyArchive.org](http://CodyArchive.org)).
- 2 Elizabeth Custer to William F. Cody, May 9, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming (MS6 series, box 13, folder 19). The letter has no year date, but another letter from Cody thanking her for the material is dated August 5, 1910.
- 3 1893 Buffalo Bill Wild West Program (MS6.1918), McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.
- 4 1893 Cody Scrapbook, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.

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## Chapter Twenty-Three

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### THE LEGACY OF ARCHAEOLOGY

*Douglas D. Scott*

It can be argued that the Little Bighorn battlefield became an archaeological site the moment the fighting ended, or perhaps when the burial parties left the field, leaving nature to take its course on the debris of war left behind. However, it seems unlikely that anyone in the summer of 1876 or the remainder of the nineteenth century even remotely considered that possibility. That they were a part of an event that had historical import was not lost on the participants, and some even used the distribution of the dead and clusters of fired cartridge cases to make deductions about what may have happened. Though the importance of physical evidence was not lost on these individuals, preservation of the debris of war and the context in which those artifacts were associated likely never entered their minds. It would take time and the evolution of the field of anthropological archaeology over the next 100 years before the necessary theoretical and methodological means were at hand to tease information from the context of the debris to build an increased understanding of the multitude of individual actions that is the Battle of the Little Bighorn. That understanding also allowed for new interpretations of how the battle ebbed and flowed. The legacy of the Battle of the Little Bighorn relative to archaeology is that the investigations became a signal event in the development of the now international field of battlefield or conflict archaeology.

The Little Bighorn archaeological investigations and the broad public interest in the work became a signal event in the history of American

archaeology. The project results were quickly published and widely disseminated, and in a short time they had worldwide influence. The Little Bighorn archaeological work became the focal point for the rise of a new field of archaeological investigation, battlefield archaeology, now more appropriately referred to as conflict archaeology. Now a well-established discipline, battlefields around the world are being archaeologically investigated with new insights to the past revealed almost daily. The field and analytical methods as well as the theoretical underpinnings of battlefield archaeology were pioneered at the Little Bighorn. This chapter documents the role of early battlefield researchers and the contributions of modern professional anthropological-based archaeology.

### **Early Physical Evidence Documentation Efforts, 1940–1970**

While there was no lack of interest in the Little Bighorn story during the Army's administration of the battlefield, it was not until the National Park Service (NPS) assumed control of the site that any attempt at a coordinated research agenda was even considered (Greene 2008, 75–80). The US Army's main charge at the battlefield was the national cemetery (Greene 2008, 47–75; Rickey 1967). The Custer field was created as a national cemetery in 1879. As frontier military forts were abandoned, remains from those cemeteries were relocated to national cemeteries, among them Custer National Cemetery. The first permanent superintendent arrived in 1893. Up to 1940, when the NPS began its administration of the site, civilian employees took charge of reburials, new burials of veterans of later wars, and maintained the cemetery. They also reluctantly, because it was not their primary responsibility, hired a guide to give tours for the increasing numbers of visitors wanting to see the iconic battlefield. They also helped to sponsor several anniversary events, specifically the fortieth, forty-fifth, and fiftieth. The latter drew over 10,000 visitors.

With the growing public interest in the Little Bighorn story as well as political pressure and funding, the Army added the Reno-Bentzen defense site to the national cemetery and designed and built in stages a road from Last Stand Hill to Reno-Bentzen in the mid-1930s. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s there were proposals to build new support facilities to include a museum. As early as 1896 a few battle relics were on display in the superintendent's lodge and office, but interpretation was not formalized. Support for the museum was widespread, but support for funding through congressional appropriation was not. With the growth of the historic preservation movement in the 1930s, change came to the site with its transfer to the NPS.

The first NPS superintendent, Edward S. Luce, was appointed in 1940. He had a long and serious interest in the story, was himself an ex-cavalryman, a published author, and an acknowledged authority on the battle (Luce

1939). Luce was acquainted with many of the battle participants and researchers of the day, and he had walked much of the battlefield with other researchers long before his appointment to the NPS. Along with his active interest in the subject, he almost literally served as a rallying point and sometimes lightning rod for research. Luce, along with a number of active Little Bighorn researchers, including Elwood Nye, Ralph G. Cartwright, and local rancher Joseph Blummer, began an intense, if sporadic, study of the ground beyond the Custer field in an attempt to find the route Custer's command followed in approaching the battlefield. Luce's shortcoming in his research was that he tended to focus almost exclusively on the 7th Cavalry, their route, positions, and so on to the exclusion of Lakota and Cheyenne combat positions or movements. Regardless, Luce and other researchers of the era were interested in the physical evidence as a means to refine the battle story and place events more precisely on the landscape. They used the finds as a means to support their theories of movements and enhance their understanding of history. Although this "handmaiden to history" approach is now passé in anthropological archaeology, it was very much the standard at the time Luce began his data collection efforts.

As early as the 1920s Blummer discovered cartridge cases on a ridge top about one mile southeast of the battlefield (Blummer 1959; Greene 2008, 194–195). Luce learned of Blummer's finds, and he and his researcher friends realized that physical evidence could aid them in sorting out Custer's route and other issues related to the battle. Luce, along with Custer researchers R. G. Cartwright, Joseph Blummer, and Elwood Nye, had a strong interest in locating the precise locations where Custer and his men fought and died, the routes of travel to the battlefield, and many other elements of the story. They searched for and found various kinds of physical evidence, since they literally walked the battlefield ground and the areas surrounding it.

R. G. Cartwright compiled notes on his finds on the Little Bighorn, Custer's route to the battlefield, the Reno-Benteen defense, and the valley fight in 1941 (Cartwright n.d.). Cartwright included a description of his finds keyed to a map with letters indicating where he found or observed items. He noted finding human remains near the Custer field as well as in the Reno valley fight area, and he recalled finding in 1938 well over 100 cartridge cases grouped in threes along a ridge south of the Custer field. With additional cartridge case finds and other battle-related items made by Luce and his fellow researchers in 1943, the locale took on the name of Nye-Cartwright Ridge (Luce 1943a). Luce was perceptive enough to engage experts like Colonel Calvin Goddard of the US Army Ordnance Department to identify Custer era cartridge cases and bullets that he and his colleagues recovered from their battlefield searches (Luce 1943b). The artifact finds compelled Luce to write his supervisor at Yellowstone National Park asking for the aid of an archaeologist in conducting a study of the

battlefield (Luce 1943c, d). Luce's appeal for archaeological aid went unheeded until 1958.

Luce's interest in the physical evidence was not limited to finding relics of the battlefield, but he also wanted to record them. He was the first person to attempt to consolidate the relic finds of various researchers on to a map. He prepared an enlarged map of the battlefield based on the 1891 USGS topographic map, first published in 1908. From the boundary of the park he created a grid across the area encompassing Deep Coulee, Medicine Tail Coulee, and Weir Point. The grid squares, approximately 375 feet on a side, were numbered west to east 1 through 28 and lettered north to south A through X. Luce then roughly plotted the finds made up to that point, denoting them as a series of x's.

Luce distributed the map as part of a mimeographed item he entitled "Bulletin No. 1, Enlarged Map of Custer Battlefield National Cemetery Area and Surrounding Country." The bulletin was sent to fellow researchers, and aside from the map contained some text attributing the finds by grid to individuals. The bulletin further identifies several numbers on the maps. The numbers generally correlate with the find location and appear to provide some explanation or interpretation of the "X marks the spot" approach. Luce also noted that the find locations were marked by wooden stakes that were driven into the ground. Some of these find areas appear to have been formally surveyed on November 24, 1943, by Surveyor Philip Hohlbrandt (Luce 1943e). Using the northeast corner of the park fence, Hohlbrandt plotted four separate locations of cartridge case finds and the location of a cavalry spur. His notes mention that he plotted the sites of 135 cartridge cases and the spur. These surveyed locales are likely some of the same locations mentioned in Luce's Bulletin No. 1. Some of those stakes survived until the 1990s, although they disappeared due to the ravages of time and the range fires (Donahue 2008).

Luce's stated plan was to update the map as new finds were made and to distribute those updates to interested researchers. No subsequent bulletins have come to light, however. The Luce map, as Michael Donahue aptly notes, was the first effort to document physical evidence findings by mapping the find locations (Donahue 2008). The map has limited research value today, since the find descriptions cannot be linked to specific artifacts in personal or park collections. Thus, modern identification methods and current analytical techniques cannot be applied to test Luce's assumptions regarding their origin. Nevertheless, the map and descriptions are an important, if rudimentary, legacy in the attempt to document artifact distributions that aid in interpreting the Little Bighorn battle events.

World War II and NPS funding reductions during that era certainly contributed to the lack of response for professional archaeological assistance, but there were other larger issues that likely played a part in the decision as well. American archaeology was almost entirely the purview of academics

at that time, and their interest focused on the prehistoric past. The field of historical archaeology was in its beginnings in the late 1930s and early 1940s, largely spearheaded by NPS archaeologists J. C. "Pinky" Harrington and John Cotter. However, their efforts were centered in Colonial American sites like Jamestown and Washington's Fort Necessity. The post-war era witnessed a change in not only NPS management attitude but also the methods and concepts of the archaeological profession, setting the stage for cooperation between historians and archaeologists on an unprecedented scale (Orser 2004).

Luce was also innovative in his thinking about the use of metal detectors to find artifacts associated with the Little Bighorn battle. He first mentioned the idea of metal detector use, which he referred to as "a radio metal finding machine" in 1943, but World War II continued to disrupt his plans. Luce did not lose interest in finding further physical evidence, and encouraged by the continuing development of the mine detector during World War II, he experimented with one in order to find relics of the battle in 1947 (Rickey 1967). The effort failed, he believed, because the machine was capable of only finding iron objects. It is possible the system tested by Luce was of such limited capability, but it is also conceivable that given the complexities of tuning the World War II era machines, it was improperly tuned or not sensitive enough to find small items like cartridge cases or bullets. It would be another decade before metal detectors were found to be a useful discovery tool at the Little Bighorn.

Don G. Rickey, one of the doyens of Indian Wars history, became the park historian in July 1955 (Greene 2008, 92). Probably spurred by Superintendent Luce, although propelled by his own long-seated interest in the physical evidence of history, Rickey soon began a formal collaboration with Jesse W. Vaughn, an attorney and a vocational historian and archaeologist from Windsor, Colorado. Vaughn was aware of the advances in metal detector technology and had been using one on his research at other Indian War sites with some success. Rickey and Vaughn began a systematic attempt at metal detecting on the battlefield in 1956 (Vaughn 1966, 145–166). They worked various areas using the machines between 1956 and 1959. Their first effort was a metal detector survey of the Reno-Benteen defense site in 1956. They found and marked with wooden stakes a variety of artifacts, although most were Army carbine cartridge cases found in linear arrangements along the presumed perimeter. They also located nails and what they believed were pieces of human bone.

Rickey and Vaughn continued their collaborative effort that year by extending their metal detector search to the ridge tops south and east of the Reno-Benteen defense site. There they discovered a variety of cartridge cases indicating combat positions used by the warriors during the battle, totaling eight separate warrior fighting areas, and they collected nearly 600 cartridge cases from these positions (Rickey 1956). In reporting the finds,

Rickey called for a park boundary expansion to include these previously unknown Lakota and Cheyenne fighting positions. He also noted that the find locations were mapped, and a copy of the map was attached. Unfortunately, such a map has not been relocated, and carbon file copies of the report do not include the map. However, there is a hand-annotated copy of the 1954 aerial photograph of the Reno-Benteen area in the park files that does appear to generally denote the find areas mentioned by Rickey. It also generally locates two new warrior positions discovered in 1969 by Park Historian B. William Henry, Jr. Although the item is not attributed, it appears that the locations were plotted by Henry.

Rickey and Vaughn continued their metal detector efforts in 1957, 1958, and 1959, confirming the work of Luce on Nye-Cartwright ridge and locating a previously unknown fighting area near the mouth of Medicine Tail Coulee. Rickey and Vaughn made what they thought was an exciting find during their 1957 metal detector work (Greene 1986, 21–25). One of the cartridge cases recovered contained paper inside the case. Hoping this might be a note related to one of the burial spots of Custer's men, they had the cartridge case sent to an NPS museum preservation specialist (Rickey 1967). A response was quickly received identifying the paper as a cardboard roll. Although not realized by the museum personnel, the paper was a cardboard tube used by the Frankford Arsenal as liner to reduce the diameter and powder capacity of the cartridge case for cavalry carbine rounds, which used 55 grains of black powder instead of the 70 grains for infantry rounds. The two types of rounds used the same size cartridge case.

J. W. Vaughn continued his metal detector use in his research efforts after Rickey left the park in 1960. Four years later he walked over and metal detected the presumed area of Major Marcus Reno's first skirmish lines in the Little Bighorn River valley (1966, 145–166). Jerome A. Greene later scoured the park files and interviewed Rickey. He carefully recorded his recollections of his finds as part of his effort to document relic-collecting efforts on and around the battlefield (Greene 1986).

Rickey did not just find artifacts and have them mapped. His identification of the artifact locations compelled researchers to significantly revise the interpretation of the Reno-Benteen defense site. He used the archaeological information not only to revise interpretive text but also to place wayside exhibits more accurately on the defense perimeter, to determine the route of the new interpretive walking trail, to incorporate three newly restored rifle pits, and to locate and mark the site of Dr. Henry R. Porter's field hospital. He also employed the information to create a Reno-Benteen defense site brochure and experimental self-guiding trail guide; although subsequently revised several times, it is still used on site today. Rickey's contribution to the early and effective use of archaeological data has been somewhat underappreciated. Rickey's artifact collections appear to be present in the park collections, but they were unfortunately later lumped for cataloging

purposes. Their proveniences were lost or not recorded during the cataloging process, thus further obscuring the real value of his and Vaughn's documentation efforts.

The first professional archaeological investigation that took place in the park was in response to a cultural resource management issue, the construction of a visitor footpath at the Reno-Benteen defense site—essentially today's walking tour route. Initially the work was to be funded by NPS, but priorities shifted and the funds were reallocated to another park in the region. At the last minute the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association came to the rescue and donated funds to secure the work, beginning a long tradition of support of archaeological research and investigation in the park (Rickey 1996, 58–59).

Archaeologist Robert Bray, then associated with the National Park Service's Midwest Regional Office in Omaha, Nebraska, mapped many of Rickey's finds at the Reno-Benteen defense site, and with Rickey and locally hired day laborers excavated several features that were determined to be soldiers' rifle pits. Bray also excavated several test trenches through the presumed hospital area. Rickey's earlier human bone finds led Bray to recover three incomplete soldier burials. These were not formally examined at the time but simply reinterred in the National Cemetery in August 1958 (Bray 1958). They were exhumed in 1986 in preparation for reburial of additional soldier remains that had been discovered since that time (Connor 1986).

Bray was one of the few archaeologists of his era to advocate the use of metal detectors in studying historic sites. He was exposed to the value of metal detecting in archaeology in 1958 during his work with Rickey and Vaughn at the Little Bighorn battlefield (Bray 1958; Connor and Scott 1998). His experience with Rickey confirmed the near ideal detecting conditions present at the Little Bighorn, including good soil conditions, shallowly buried artifacts, and little modern trash. The work led Bray to employ metal detectors at many other historic sites during his years with the University of Missouri, especially at Wilsons Creek National Battlefield (Bray 1967). Unfortunately, his recovery rate was generally very poor. Developed in World War II as a device for finding buried land mines and booby traps, metal detectors by the 1960s were not much more than sophisticated electronic tools meant to be used to find large buried iron or utility and sewer lines. Their application to relic collecting was still developing, and manufacturers were only beginning to recognize the need to refine their sensitivity to find smaller and more discrete targets. Bray's advocacy of the use of metal detectors makes him a leader in the area of their archaeological use, for he was ahead of his time given the limitations of the technology.

Bray's map of the Rickey and Vaughn finds within the Reno-Benteen defense perimeter exists in several files as blueprint copies. The map was made using a plane table and alidade, a common archaeological mapping technique of the era, with the excavation trench locations denoting the rifle pits, human

remains burial sites, and a number of other features. Bray also mapped the earlier cartridge case find locations that they had marked with wooden stakes (a few of those stakes were relocated and mapped during the 1985 archaeological project, but these were subsequently lost to the 1991 range fire).

Bray's notes were left with the park, where they reside today. His notes and plan drawings of the rifle pit excavations as well as of some of his trenching efforts contain information that was not included in his report. The plan view of the two rifle pit excavations and his notes indicate there were at least six cartridge cases in the fill of the pit and along the western berm or parapet of the western rifle pit, or Trench A, as he designated it. Also found in the fill were horse bones (locations not specifically recorded), metal fragments probably from tin cans, and at least seven glass bottle fragments. The glass was not saved, so it is not now possible to determine the container type or even if these were 1876 era bottle fragments. Bray believed they were fragments of liquor or wine bottles. The eastern rifle pit, Trench B, contained a similar artifact assemblage and with similar numbers represented. Bray recovered at least six cartridges and cases (three unfired, two fired .45-caliber, and one fired .50-caliber), four pieces of clear glass, nine fragments of blue glass, five fragments of amber glass, a part of a tin can, a canteen cork, and fragments of a piece of blue cloth. In each excavation artifactual material was found near the surface to a depth of 20 inches, which he considered the bottom of the original pit. Such depths are consistent with what the Army called hasty entrenchments or rifle pits during the nineteenth century (Mahan 1861).

Bray's barricade area trenching effort located the upper torso and skull of a human skeleton, with uniform buttons still in place running the length of the torso. A number of horse bones were found in the trenching efforts as was an isolated human humerus. Another excavation site, termed rifle pit No. 1 (Rickey map point 8), located northeast of the current parking lot, yielded little evidence, and the trenching effort could not clearly refine the size or edges of the pit, if indeed it was one. Rifle pit No. 2 (Rickey map point 9) was tested with similar results, although two fired Army cartridge cases were found in the fill about 12 inches below the surrounding ground surface.

Bray continued his excavations by trenching in the presumed hospital area. The work there was extensive, yielding a tin can, a pistol cartridge case, a "hostile bullet" otherwise unidentified, an animal vertebrae, and some unidentified bone fragments. The final Bray excavation area was Rickey's map point 25, or the so-called L-shaped entrenchment. Bray recovered at least 13 army blouse and iron trouser buttons in the excavation as well as small cut nails, evidence of a fire at the northeast end of the rifle pit, a cartridge, and the disarticulated remains of a partial human skeleton.

Bray was unsure if the L-shape was a real feature or the result of his artifact discoveries. He was sure that a packing crate or similar box had been

burned at the site, and the location served as a resting place for one of the soldiers killed during the Reno-Benteen defense.

No NPS personnel undertook, or documented inventory efforts after Rickey was transferred until 1969. In June of that year and again in 1970, Park Historian B. William Henry conducted several metal detecting surveys of warrior positions on private lands around the Reno-Benteen defense site. He metal detected Rickey and Vaughn's previously located warrior positions and discovered two new positions on the battlefield. Henry recovered 496 cartridge cases in many different calibers and four bullets (Henry 1969–1970).

Following Henry's surveys, historian Jerome Greene was the first professional researcher since Rickey and Bray's work to take a serious interest in plotting and analyzing the distribution pattern of many of these relic finds. Greene interviewed many collectors and local ranchers, and he combed the park files and archives for notes, letters, and memoranda related to finds by many of the early Little Bighorn researchers. He first published these results in 1973, with subsequent editions in 1978, 1979, and 1986. His work used relic finds coupled with documentary evidence and Indian testimony to reevaluate the traditional view of the battle. Greene's analysis of the relic finds was particularly insightful, and he developed probable routes for Reno's advance in the valley as well as his subsequent retreat to the bluffs. Likewise, Greene built on Luce's work, and using information from collectors and other sources, refined the Custer column movements to Medicine Tail Coulee and along Nye-Cartwright Ridge on their dash to the main engagement (Greene 1986).

Greene was also the first person to offer a critique of some of the early Little Bighorn researchers, who had more or less ignored Indian testimony regarding the battle. Greene noted these early researchers often lacked a sense of the terrain on which the fights took place, and they did not understand how to use Indian testimony by employing cross-cultural approaches to analysis. Greene's argument for appropriate analysis and use of oral history went largely unheeded until Richard Fox's anthropological approach to Lakota and Cheyenne testimony rigorously tested against the archaeological data, which brought the value of Indian accounts to the center of Little Bighorn research (Fox 1988; 1993). Greene's work was an important foundation in the development of the research designs for the archaeological investigations that began in 1983.

### **Professional Archaeology at the Little Bighorn**

Bray's 1958 work was the first professional archaeological investigation within the park, and it was not until 1977 that another professional archaeological survey was undertaken at Little Bighorn. Connie Bennett (1977)

from the Midwest Archeological Center (MWAC) in Lincoln, Nebraska, conducted a visual survey of a waterline alignment at that time but found nothing. No further archaeological investigations were done at the site until a range fire in August 1983 burned the vegetation of Custer battlefield. Richard Fox, Jr. was contacted by park Superintendent James Court to conduct a field reconnaissance to determine if relics and features related to the battle were visible. Fox did find artifacts and several new features, and he recommended that a full-scale inventory project be implemented (Fox 1983). Without James Court's strong support for Fox and his findings, it is unlikely further action would have been taken by regional park personnel.

Such a project was commenced in 1984 under the co-direction of Douglas Scott from MWAC and Fox, then a PhD graduate student at the University of Calgary, Canada. The project and much of the subsequent work in the field was funded by the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association. The 1984 project included a metal detecting inventory of the Custer battlefield and selected testing at several marble markers under the direction of Melissa Connor. The marker testing yielded several human remains assemblages that all proved to be soldier related. Following on the footsteps of the 1984 investigations, the project was expanded in 1985 to inventory the Reno-Bentzen defense site and conduct a stratified random sample excavation at 15% of the markers to determine which ones were incorrectly placed. The result of that work and a reassessment of the 1984 work was later published. Subsequent to the 1984 and 1985 projects a variety of other research and cultural resource management investigations have taken place in and around the park (Scott & Fox 1987; Scott et al. 1989; Scott 2013).

Artifacts found on the field of battle and removed without context are just relics, curiosities that arouse romantic imagination. However, when the recovery of those artifacts is accomplished in a systematic manner and the provenience and context properly recorded, the data become a valuable new source of information on the battle. Recovered battlefield artifacts as the physical evidence of the event are useful for several purposes. At one level they are the tangible evidence of the event and can be used in the museum setting to interpret the event. The data contained in the artifact and in its context in the ground also provide a new and independent evidence source for detailed analysis of specific battle elements, such as combatants' attire, armament, deployment, and movements.

One of the advances resulting from the Little Bighorn investigations was the development of a disciplined, systematic approach for surveying battlefields with metal detectors and meticulously recording the spatial data of recovered artifacts. The effort spent mapping the precise locations of individual bullets and cartridge cases was ground-breaking in its application to a battlefield site, because it allowed for a more detailed analysis of the

battlefield and the actions occurring therein. This methodology was first used in Scott and Fox's work and has since been adopted by the conflict archaeology community for completing systematic studies of conflict sites.

Another advance was the application of modern firearms identification techniques to the firearms components, cartridge cases, and bullets, which allowed for individual firearms to be identified by class and individual characteristics among the bullets and cartridge cases. This provided a means for tracking the movement of these firearms around the battlefield and by association the combatants, thus providing the opportunity to observe and analyze a series of individual combatant behaviors within a narrow temporal context (60–90 minutes). By completing this analysis, it became clear that Custer and his men not only were outnumbered but also were outgunned and outfought by their Lakota and Cheyenne foes (Scott 2013).

A significant outcome of the Little Bighorn investigations was the development of a post-Civil War battlefield archaeological pattern or model that allowed a more in-depth understanding of combat behavior (Fox & Scott 1991; Scott et al. 1989). The attention spent on modeling the behavior of soldiers proved that a battlefield and its artifacts could offer much more than data for critiquing the historical record. The work demonstrated that the data can be used to get at the heart of relevant anthropological questions regarding behavior of the individual in intense, life-or-death situations (Fox 1993). Subsequent studies have expanded the model in both time and space, and these seminal studies are the basis for most contemporary studies of conflict sites today, even being expanded and modified to create models of marine battlefields and shipwrecks and their debris fields for underwater sites (Cohn et al. 2007; Conlin & Russell 2006).

The archaeology of the Battle of the Little Bighorn has yielded thousands of artifacts, reams of notes and other records, two master's theses, one PhD dissertation, five books, three monographs, 25 published articles or book chapters, and 37 short NPS internal reports. Examples of the diversity are: Richard Fox's 1993 study of Native American oral history and the archaeological data *Archaeology, History, and Custer's Last Battle* from the University of Oklahoma Press; Sandy Barnard's popular 1986 account of the archaeological investigations from AST Press, *Digging Into Custer's Last Stand*; Douglas Scott, P. Willey, and Melissa Connor's 1998 University of Oklahoma Press book *They Died With Custer: Soldier's Bones from the Battle of the Little Bighorn*; Shannon Vihlene's 2008 University of Montana Master's Thesis, "Custer's Last Drag: An Examination of Tobacco Use Among the Seventh Cavalry During the Nineteenth Century"; and the most recent overview of all the archaeological work, Douglas Scott's 2013 title, *Uncovering History: Archaeological Investigations at the Little Bighorn*. One other result of the archaeological work was the development and publication of an archaeological model of battlefield behavior based on the Little Bighorn investigations that became an internationally recognized

standard of methodology and theory of the emerging field of battlefield and conflict archaeology (Fox & Scott 1991).

In nearly 30 years of continuing archaeological investigations, many items were recovered and interpreted that demonstrate the extent to which the historical record is correct on many points. They also indicate that Indian oral history and oral tradition explain some details better than the Army accounts. The archaeological detective work has also uncovered artifacts and their patterns of distribution that neither oral tradition nor documentary records mention. The Little Bighorn archaeological record is not better than the others; rather it should be viewed as another set of information to be compared, contrasted, and correlated with the others. Archaeological data is the physical evidence of the battle, and as such is the very visible reminder of those past events that have come to play such a role in our lives. The artifacts and the information they convey are a very real part of the interpretation of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

The artifacts recovered during the archaeological investigations do not just sit on shelves in a vault. A variety of researchers study some aspect of the data set nearly every year. Some artifacts, including some very poignant ones, are on display in the museum, aiding in bringing the battle story to life for the visitor. They and the information they convey are a very real part of the interpretation of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

### **The Advent of Conflict Archaeology**

The archaeological evidence from the Battle of the Little Bighorn contributed to understanding the particulars of the fight and added to the historical significance of its aftermath. At one level, the results of the archaeological studies at the Little Bighorn have shown that individual movements, unit movements, and unit composition can be revealed in the most chaotic of human endeavors, a pitched battle. Warrior deployment can be discerned and the flow of the battle followed. Details lost to history can be discovered and interpreted in respect to the cultural conditioning and training received by the opposing forces. The remaining archaeological deposits, which are substantial, are likely to yield additional significant information about the battle and the individual participants, which will further refine understanding of the events in the summer of 1876. Beyond the particular results of a detection is the significance of the archaeological study of the battlefield within the context of anthropological theory.

The Little Bighorn archaeological investigations generated a model of battlefield behavior that was based on empirical evidence and has subsequently been tested in other situations (Scott & McFeaters 2011). That model was predicated upon an axiom basic to archaeological investigation: human behavior is patterned. Behavioral patterns are expressed through

individual behaviors constrained by the norms, values, sanctions, and statuses governing the group within which the individual operates. War tactics, which represent patterned behavior, include establishment of positions and the deployment and movement of combatants. The residues of tactics in warfare – artifacts, features, and their contextual relationships – have been shown to be patterned and reveal details of battlefield behavior.

Conflict archaeology has become a dynamic area of investigation in historic archaeology (Scott & McFeaters 2011). There is a strong interest in the archaeology of violence and conflict in the prehistoric past as well. The special focus of the classical and historic archaeology fields has been on battlefields and other specific points of conflict. At battlefields, conflict archaeologists have developed techniques and methods to recover and to record evidence of conflict. They also offer interpretations of how combat occurs. Recently, conflict archaeologists have expanded the definition beyond battlefields. Archaeological consideration of the organization and management of war is beginning to be investigated at sites other than battlefields that played important roles in military events, including military support facilities, camps, bases, arsenals, hubs, and even prisoner of war, internment, and concentration camps.

Military sites, specifically battlefields or sites of conflict, offer a unique perspective on the behavioral aspects of a culture or cultures in conflict (van Creveld 1989). Archaeological work has established evidence patterns by which historical battlefields are studied with an anthropological perspective. This perspective holds that sites of conflict exhibit a cultural behavior by combatant parties that can be retrieved and recorded employing archaeological methods and theory (Scott & McFeaters 2011). Military behavior, whether in a post, camp, or combat zone, is best described as an element of society, a subcultural unit that mirrors the greater society's cultural ideals, constraints, and orientation.

Conflict and battlefield archaeology has emerged over the last three decades as a legitimate specialty in the fields of archaeology, anthropology, and history. Its earliest manifestations revealed a method to find relics or gun emplacements. It has developed into its present form, where the archaeological record is viewed as an independent data set that can be compared to historical documents, participant accounts, maps, and other sources to build a more complete and accurate picture of an event or develop new views of strategy and tactics.

Anthropologists and sociologists use as their basic premise in studying people the tenet that human behavior is patterned. The basic concept is that human behavior is constrained by norms, values, morals, and sanctions of society, all combining to govern a group. Individual behavior may deviate from the expected to a certain degree, but in order to maintain membership in a group, society, or culture, an individual must generally conform to the group standards.

Archaeologists extend this premise to the physical remains of a society. Group and individual beliefs and behavior are reflected in the material culture of that society, which can be studied by archaeological means. One aspect of conflict and battlefield studies is the level of detail about individual weapon use and weapon movement, particularly with firearms components, that can be teased from the archaeological data. This level of precise knowledge encourages a microhistorical approach to studying the past. It gives the researcher not only the big picture of strategy and tactics carried out on a field of battle but also allows a look at the role of the individual, which is almost unique in archaeological investigations. Conflict archaeologists study, analyze, and interpret the context in which artifacts of war or conflict are found. Most of all, their remarkable insights foster an increased understanding of the warrior's in warfare, the warrior lifestyle through time and across space, and perhaps the allure of war itself.

### Conclusion

One important point about the Little Bighorn battlefield that is noted over and over again is not just how rich the archaeological or physical evidence record is, but that it is an independent line of evidence distinct from the documentary or literary record and from oral tradition. The value of archaeological research and the recovery and documentation of physical evidence lies not only in the artifacts but also in the context in which they are found. Archaeology can enhance the oral testimonial and documentary record, yet that is not its real power. That power lies in the pure fact that archaeological evidence, properly recorded and documented, is a truly independent data source.

Historical documents and oral testimony are accounts derived from human memory and can contain intentional or unintentional bias. The archaeological record has its own bias, although it is one of preservation instead of intent. The archaeological record of a conflict is not dependent on human memory to record it; rather it is the debris and evidence left behind by violent events. It is there, and it is recoverable using the best possible data collection methods available. The archaeological record cannot speak for itself, but it is interpretable. This independent line of evidence can be found, recovered, recorded, and interpreted, which can be seen in the role archaeology has played in reassessing a variety of conflict sites (Espenshade, Jolley, & Legg 2002; Geier & Winter 1994; Haecker & Mauck 1997). Its real power lies in the fact that it can be used to correlate, corroborate, or contrast documentary sources or oral testimony to determine the best fit or the accuracy of various information sources, as has been done with the Scottish-English Battle of Culloden (Pollard 2009).

It may be trite, but a crime scene analogy does explain the value of archaeology best. The historical sources and oral tradition are akin to

witness, victim, and alleged perpetrator statements in a criminal investigation. The archaeological record is analogous to the physical and trace evidence gathered by forensic scientists. Compared and contrasted, the physical evidence shows who is a reliable witness and sometimes leads to new lines of inquiry in an investigation. The archaeological evidence of conflict and warfare makes it possible to test the reliability of various sources, to find new information about the past, and, as a partner to history, build a more complete and accurate story of past events. The modern field of conflict archaeology is the legacy of the Battle of the Little Bighorn archaeological research.

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## Chapter Twenty-Four

### A NATIONAL MONUMENT

*Douglas Seefeldt and Jason A. Heppler*

In early August 1994, 350 academic and public scholars, authors, students, and individuals convened in Billings, Montana, for the Little Bighorn Legacy Symposium. Exploring the evolution of complex historical, social, and cultural themes, the nearly two dozen scholarly presentations and expert-led discussions included historians, writers, anthropologists, filmmakers, and members of the Native American communities directly involved in the battle: the Sioux, Cheyenne, Crow, and Arikara nations. The stated purpose of the symposium was “to encourage open dialogue and objective exchange of ideas about future preservation and interpretation of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.”

While most of the sessions proceeded with thoughtful presentations and engaged discussions in a respectful tone, historian Edward Linenthal’s banquet keynote address, “Whose Shrine Is It? Symbolism at Little Bighorn,” elicited a lone, determined demonstration of disagreement from a Custerphile that ironically mirrored the disruptions by groups of American Indian Movement (AIM) activists during the battle anniversary commemorations at the site in previous years. This gentleman stood up and impassionedly proclaimed to the astounded speaker, something to the effect of “you can change the name of the site all you want, but it will always be the goddamned Custer Battlefield!” Indeed, fighting words have been common in conversations about the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

Those who worked at the National Park Service (NPS) administered site and those who studied the broader context of the Plains Indian Wars knew quite well that the Custer Battlefield National Monument was experiencing

an identity crisis. The conventional interpretation of the site as a place of ultimate, heroic sacrifice for one's country had been established by the US Army in the battle's immediate aftermath with the burial of the dead and the creation of the first temporary memorials. It was solemnly perpetuated by the War Department at the Custer Battlefield National Cemetery from 1879 until the World War II era, when the NPS took over management in 1940 and the entire site complex (the national cemetery, the Custer battlefield, and the Reno-Bentzen battlefield) was redesignated as the Custer Battlefield National Monument in 1946. Custer buffs, what Linenthal has called the "patriotic guardians of the Custer myth," carried that torch from Frederick Whittaker's hagiography published the year of Custer's death into the present day through well-organized Custer society events, publications, and commemorations. Since the mid-1970s, changing popular attitudes that equated Custer with what Linenthal terms "white racism and genocidal expansionism" combined with new western historical scholarship and increasing recognition of Native American historical perspectives to challenge the dominant interpretations (Linenthal 1991, 130–31, 141; Rankin 1996, xx–xxi).

The broader implications of the 1994 Little Bighorn Symposium confrontation reveal the competing interpretations among Native peoples, Custer enthusiasts, and the NPS. Over time, individuals and groups remember the past in different ways and compete with one another to shape the dominant public memory of an event or a place. Often these disparate interpretations become entangled with conversations about identity and society. The Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument has long been the focus of passionate debates and roundly criticized for its one-sided storytelling, encapsulated in its former name, the Custer Battlefield National Monument. The constructed past at Little Bighorn has changed frequently since June 27, 1876, the day after the decisive battle. This essay examines the tangled process of making memory, landscape, and identity at the site of the Little Bighorn battlefield.

### **Histories, Places, and Memories**

Historian David Thelen warns, "since people's memories provide security, authority, legitimacy, and finally identity in the present, struggles over the possession and interpretation of memories are deep, frequent, and bitter" (Thelen 1989, 1126–1127). Indeed, the Little Bighorn's constructed past contains multidimensional interpretations that grapple with the literal and symbolic meanings of the event and its place in American society. As geographer David Lowenthal describes the process, "the tangible past is altered mainly to make history conform with memory. Memory not only conserves the past but adjusts recall to current needs" (Lowenthal 1975, 27). Adding to this process has been the NPS's

longstanding charge to provide well-researched site interpretations in general and its efforts take a neutral approach in presenting Little Bighorn's story in particular (Meringolo 2012; Linenthal 1994). Shifting interpretations, resulting from constantly changing cultural attitudes, also contribute to present concerns about the role the site should play in identity and heritage construction (Buchholtz 2011). As public historian David Glassberg noted, "public historical representations such as an exhibit, war memorial, or commemorative ceremony are often deliberately ambiguous so as to avoid controversy" (Glassberg 1996, 11–14). But as everyone would agree, except perhaps for his faithful wife and legacy steward Elizabeth Custer, controversy followed George Armstrong Custer from West Point to his demise on the Little Bighorn.

Controversies about the Little Bighorn battlefield abound. Linenthal identifies it as an American sacred place, "part of a constellation of martial centers where Americans celebrate the formative acts that gave shape to the nation" (Linenthal 1983, 268). Lowenthal notes that commemorative activity at these sites affects "the very nature of the past, altering its meaning and significance for every generation in every place." Interpretations of pasts and places are frequently mutable, leading to "what previous groups identify and sanctify as their pasts become historical evidence about themselves" (Lowenthal 1979, 103, 124.) The blood-stained ground contributes to its own interpretation so much so that geographer Kenneth Foote contends that what is "set in motion is a complex iterative process in which place spurs debate, debate leads to interpretation, and interpretation reshapes place over and over again" (Foote 2003, 5–6). Sites of memory reflect the tensions and realities of contemporary societies, politics, and cultures of all those who construct meaning there (Foote & Azaryahu 2007). Historical memory, therefore, is as much about the struggle over control of the past in the present as it is about remembering particular historical events (Linenthal & Engelhardt 1996).

### **Early Battlefield Memorials**

Examining the development of American memory reveals how certain cultural and social values directly contributed to the legacy of Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Custer became a martyr for American progress and westward expansion, and the battlefield at the Little Bighorn River became a symbolic locus of that process. General William T. Sherman, in a letter to the widowed Elizabeth Custer, wrote that the "the Regular Army of the United States should claim what is true and susceptible of demonstration, that it has been for an hundred years ever the picket line at the front of the great wave of civilization" (Linenthal 1991, 131). Custer's earliest biographer, Frederick Whittaker, portrayed Custer refusing help

from an Indian scout, thus securing the image of Custer choosing heroic death for the sake of the nation. Custer, Whittaker claimed, "weighed in that brief moment of reflection all the consequences to America of the lessons of life and the lesson of heroic death, and he chose death" (Linenthal 1991, 132). Through Custer's early biographers as well as showmen like William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Americans remembered Custer's defeat as a symbol of heroic self-sacrifice. In a nutshell, Custer "died for timeless ideals while facing overwhelming odds in bringing civilization to the frontier" (Shackel 2003, 174).

Casting the memory of a heroic Custer began as soon as news of his death was first published in newspapers (Utley 1962, 32–43). In an editorial titled "A National Monument to the Brave Custers," the *New York Herald* on July 9, 1876, recommended "that a national monument be erected to commemorate the heroism of General Custer and his kinsmen who fell with him," pledging to support such an effort with a \$1,000 donation while calling for the formation of a national Custer Monument Association. It would be founded in Monroe, Michigan, on July 18 with Lieutenant General Phil Sheridan as its president (Linenthal 1991, 132). The Monroe *Commercial* also expressed hope that funds could be raised and a monument would be erected to the fallen warrior in the town where his parents still lived. But Custer's expressed wishes to be buried at West Point implied that a monument should also be erected there, effectively quashing any local support in Monroe and leading to the committee turning over to the national endeavor the \$1,000 they had raised. Subsequent *New York Herald* columns suggested that local monument associations be formed in "every town and village." Writers praised Custer's "highest qualities of manhood and soldiership" as well as the "valor and self-denial" of the soldiers who rode with him. They did not want "a trophy of the Indian war" but "a monument to bravery, devotion, and duty" (Millbrook 1974, 22–25).

The *New York Herald* was not alone in its efforts to have Custer and his men memorialized at Little Bighorn. Interest in a battlefield memorial came from Army officers and private citizens, who pressured Congress to establish a National Cemetery there. Sensationalized news reports that the bodies of Custer's command had been hastily buried without care and had been subsequently strewn about by foraging animals also led to cries for something more permanent and reverent to be done at the site (Greene 2008, 19–20; Rickey 1968, 211). The initial attempt to afford the remains of the dead a decent burial occurred on June 28, 1876, when the surviving members of the 7th Cavalry located, counted, and hastily covered the bodies of the 261 fallen soldiers (Gray 1975, 31; Hardorff 1984). In the heat of that moment, with more than 50 injured soldiers to remove to safety and a large battlefield strewn with rapidly decomposing remains, the beleaguered survivors faced the impossible task of properly laying

their dead comrades to rest without appropriate grave-making tools (Scott, Willey, & Connor 1998, 96–97).

Since the Army's departure from the battleground, there have been three attempts to rebury the remains of the dead at the Little Bighorn. In May of 1877, the War Department first authorized the recovery of the officers who perished in the fight. Officials wanted to have their remains shipped for reburial at other locations at their families' discretion while reinterring the soldiers on the battlefield. A detachment of the 7th Cavalry built rough pine coffins at the construction site of the Post Number 2, soon to be christened Fort Custer, and accompanied Colonel Michael V. Sheridan to the site of the battle (Hardorff 1984, 54–58; Scott et al. 1998, 97–101). They removed the remains of 11 men, nine officers and two civilians, shipping them back to Bismarck from where the Northern Pacific railroad delivered them to their final destination. Five, including Custer's brother Captain Thomas W. Custer, were reinterred at the National Cemetery at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, with military tributes, five others were buried in more private ceremonies by family in the United States and Canada, while George Armstrong Custer was buried at West Point, New York, in a ceremony attended by thousands (Hardorff 1984, 58–59). Just days after Colonel Sheridan's party left the battlefield, John H. Fouch became the first photographer to make an image of the "The Place Where Custer Fell," capturing the scattered horse bones, cavalry gear, and stakes that had been left to mark the places where the soldiers fell (Brust 1991; Brust 1994; Brust, Pohanka, & Barnard 2005; Greene 2008, 24).

Stories about the soldiers' remains at the Little Bighorn spawned indignation. News items appeared in the *Herald* that questioned the care that the Army had given to their reburial. In an article titled "Custer's Comrades," published on December 20, 1877, the editor announced: "There should be reared an obelisk appropriate to the fame of those who ought ever to sleep under the sod which they consecrated with the libation of their blood." The Montana Territorial Legislature filed a resolution that called for "the name of said Little Bighorn shall be changed to Custer's River." Efforts to rename the river, however, never succeeded (Rickey 1968, 210).

By April of 1878, the idea to set the battlefield apart as a national cemetery had support from General Sheridan, Custer's friend and mentor, and Sheridan's superior General Sherman. As a recent study of the soldiers' remains explains, the memorialization of fallen soldiers laid to rest in a national cemetery

reflects a mix of cultural philosophies. Viewed in the context of the history of warfare, the hasty burial of the dead at the Little Bighorn was not uncommon. The concept of military dead being treated with respect and being reverently buried grew out of the American Civil War experience. (Scott et al. 1998, 104–105)

That October, the Army's quartermaster general, Brigadier General Montgomery C. Meigs, whose son, First Lieutenant John Rodgers Meigs, was killed at Swift Run Gap in Virginia, recommended to the Secretary of War that a proper monument be erected at the Little Bighorn, "a granite monument of sufficient size, to receive in legible characters the names of all the officers and men who fell in that fight." Meigs also suggested that all of the remains of the soldiers be reinterred in a common grave underneath a structure that would be "massive and heavy enough to remain for ages where placed – a landmark of the conflict between civilization and barbarism" (Greene 2008, 31).

Later that month, General Sherman ordered improvements to the appearance of the battlefield. General Alfred Terry instructed Lieutenant Colonel George Buell, commander of the new Fort Custer, to collect all of the exposed bones and reinter them under a pyramid of stones. In April of 1879, Fort Custer's new commander, Lieutenant Colonel Albert Brackett, directed Captain C. K. Sanderson to lead a command to inspect the condition of the graves and to erect a monument, the first to be constructed at the site. Sanderson could not locate sufficient stone to carry out the task, so he ordered cordwood to be used instead. Sanderson's men stacked the wood 11 feet high and filled the center with horse bones. Parts of the four or five bodies that were found exposed on the battlefield were collected and placed in a common grave dug below the memorial, giving a "perfectly clean appearance, each grave being re-mounded and all animal bones removed." Photographs of the cordwood mound and the battlefield made by Stanley J. Morrow accompanied Sanderson's official report (Gray 1975, 37; Greene 2008, 26–30).

In January of 1879, the Secretary of War ordered the establishment of a national cemetery of the fourth class. On August 1, General Orders No. 78 officially conferred national cemetery status (US War Department 1880). The final configuration would not be determined until President Grover Cleveland issued an executive order on December 7, 1886, proclaiming the national cemetery at Custer's battlefield to be a part of a military reservation in connection with Fort Custer (US Department of the Interior 1890). The Headquarters of the Army issued General Orders No. 90 to implement the presidential proclamation for what was officially named the Custer Battle Field National Cemetery (Greene 2008, 30, 35–36, 241–246). Oversight of the cemetery was left to the commanding officer of Fort Custer until 1893, when a superintendent began living at the cemetery in a lodge constructed the next year. This caretaker would occasionally offer guide services to the few interested visitors to the battlefield, but there was no official interpretation program during the War Department's stewardship of the site (Rickey 1967, 56–59; Rickey 1968, 211).

In February of 1879, the federal government contract for the creation of Meigs's monument was awarded to Alexander McDonald of the Auburn

Marble and Granite Works located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The 11 and a half foot high, six foot wide truncated stone obelisk weighed an estimated 38,500 pounds. The three granite pieces arrived at the US Arsenal in New York in August 1879 before being finally hauled to Fort Custer by teams of bulls during the summer of 1880. Later that summer, an eight foot square concrete foundation for the monument was poured six feet deep and was ready to support the three granite blocks when they arrived on site in early 1881. The War Department sent a detail from Fort Custer commanded by Lieutenant Charles F. Roe to raze the temporary cordwood memorial and to oversee the construction of the monument that still stands at the site today. Carved into the obelisk's faces are the names of the 261 dead, including officers, enlisted soldiers, Indian scouts, and attached civilians. After the monument was set in place on July 29, 1881, the third effort to rebury the remains occurred. The graves were reopened, and the remains were reinterred in a common grave at the base of the monument. Stakes were then driven into the field to mark the former gravesites, so visitors "could see where the men actually fell" (Linenthal 1991, 132–133; Elliott 2007, 37).

In 1890, a detail commanded by Captain Own Jay Sweet used the stakes to set the 246 small marble markers that are now dispersed near the cemetery and two others on the Reno-Benteen defense site (Scott et al. 1998, 103–104). Unfortunately, many of the 1881 stakes were missing nine years later, when Sweet was forced to use his best judgment based on bone fragments, luxuriant stands of grass, and depressions in the terrain. These marble markers are a unique feature, "making the Little Bighorn the only battlefield in the world to identify and place a monument at the site of each soldier's death or original burial" (Scott et al. 1998, 328). In 1926, the Secretary of the Interior was authorized by Congress to acquire the 160-acre Reno-Benteen defense site. Two years later, a second act was passed that included language requiring that the "monument be maintained by the Quartermaster Corps, United States Army, in conjunction with the Custer Battle Field Monument." The nine and a half foot high monument, created by Livingston Marble and Granite Works in Livingston, Montana, was erected in July 1929. At the same time, Montana congressman Scott Leavitt successfully inserted an authorization to purchase the land for Reno Hill into the Interior Department's appropriation bill, allowing the Reno-Benteen Battlefield to become an important part of the Custer Battlefield National Cemetery reservation (Greene 2008, 67–68).

Commemoration of the Battle of the Little Bighorn frequently occurred on an ad hoc basis, as no major ceremonies occurred throughout most of the nineteenth century. But ceremonial events became more common toward the end of the century, as railroads promoted the battlefield as a tourist destination (Linenthal 1991, 133–134, 151; Buchholtz 2005, 21).

Most celebrations were minor affairs. This was the case with the tenth anniversary in 1886, when the 7th Cavalry survivors met at the battlefield with Curley, a Crow scout who served with Custer, and with Gall, a Hunkpapa Lakota leader. News reporters, who were more interested in Gall's explanation of Custer's military defeat, noted coverage of the meeting with passing interest. Gall toured the battlefield and shared his memories (Elliott 2007, 37). On June 25, volleys were fired in tribute to the fallen, and perhaps as many as a thousand visitors toured the Custer and Reno fields (Greene 2008, 34). Smaller remembrance ceremonies took place each Memorial Day and Independence Day. At the twentieth anniversary in 1896, survivors from Reno's command and a number of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Crow visited the site that had become the locus of the official memory of "Custer's Last Stand."

Commemorations continued into the early twentieth century, but the 1916 anniversary of the battle – the fortieth anniversary – was special. Spectators witnessed the meeting between US Army veterans and a contingent of Northern Cheyennes under the banner "Peace and Reconciliation." It is estimated that between 6,000 and 8,000 tourists made their way to the remote location (Elliott 2007, 37). The highlight of the fortieth anniversary commemoration was the appearance of Lieutenant Edward Godfrey, who had served with Custer at the Washita and at the Little Bighorn. Godfrey's appearance included reading a speech by Libbie Custer, who could not bring herself to visit the site of her husband's death in person (McChristian 1996, 55, 59–60). Other speeches delivered at the site continued to praise Custer's role in the battle and the righteousness of his cause. Colonel Frank Hall's patriotic speech approvingly cited the advance of American settlement and the opportunity to lead Native Americans to the "ways of pleasantness" (Linenthal 1991, 134–135).

Between the fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries of the battle, veneration of Custer continued to grow. In 1920, the Custer Memorial Highway Association designated a trail from Omaha, Nebraska, to Glacier National Park. In 1923, Elizabeth Custer promoted the idea of building a museum to exhibit materials related to her husband and the Indian Wars at the Little Bighorn. She succeeded in enlisting retired Major General Nelson A. Miles to write to Congress, encouraging a \$40,000 appropriation for the creation of "a commodious memorial building" at the site. That same year, Senator Thomas J. Walsh of Montana introduced a bill seeking \$15,000 to fund the construction of a comfort station structure for visitors coming to bury relatives at the national cemetery. His bill did not make it through Congress, and the next year Mrs. Custer expressed her interest in a more ambitious project when she wrote to a Montana newspaperman: "I have in mind some sort of memorial hall on the Battle Field of the Little Bighorn to commemorate the frontiersmen as well as our soldiers." In 1925, Mrs. Custer lost an ally when General

Miles died suddenly from a heart attack. Her efforts to establish a museum at the battlefield would not be revived until after her death in 1933 (Robinson 1952, 23–26; Rickey 1968, 212–213).

The 1926 semi-centennial would result in the largest celebration of the early twentieth century. The recreational attractions at the Black Hills and Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks, coupled with growing American affluence and better automobiles and roads, gave the site an opportunity to become a key tourist attraction (McChristian 1996, 56). The Billings Commercial Club started planning an event for June and sought to raise funds to construct “a permanent memorial to General Custer and the valiant men who were sacrificed with him.” The Montana Department of Agriculture, Labor, and Industry created publicity brochures titled “Carrying On for 50 Years with the Courage of Custer.” Anniversary activities planned by the National Custer Memorial Association, founded the year before with General Godfrey as a key member, included celebrating Custer and the 7th Cavalry (McChristian 1996, 56–57). Another brochure produced by the Association declared that the Indian Wars were the fault of the “hostile Sioux, who could not recognize the benevolent attitude of the American government” (Linenthal 1991, 135). Festivities attended by 70,000 spectators including motion picture star William S. Hart and 20,000 Native Americans began on June 24 (McChristian 1996, 61).

The highlight of the 1926 anniversary took place on June 25 with the “burial of the hatchet,” a gesture toward peaceful relations between Indians and whites. Columns of cavalry representing Custer’s 7th Cavalry, led by Godfrey, proceeded toward Custer Ridge from the south, while another column led by the Lakota leader White Bull proceeded to the ridge from the north. The columns met at the 1881 granite monument, where Godfrey and White Bull shook hands and presented each other gifts. A rifle tribute and the playing of “Taps” followed the exchange. The columns rode off together in pairs, symbolizing the friendship and reconciliation achieved between Americans and Native peoples (Linenthal 1991, 136). Two days later, Godfrey participated in the reburial of an unknown soldier, presumed to be one of Reno’s troopers, who had been unearched just before the anniversary at the location of the Garryowen rail depot and store. As part of the ceremony, Godfrey and Lakota representatives buried an actual hatchet that was interred with the remains. At the conclusion of the observance, a party of dignitaries, veterans, and survivors from the Indian Wars placed a marker at the Reno-Benteen defense position (Rickey 1967, 82; McChristian 1996, 59, 64; Elliott 2007, 37–38).

Because the twentieth-century anniversaries took on the character of celebrations, the site retained its symbolism of strength and sacrifice. The extolling of progress was present in the activities of the sixtieth anniversary event, when 10,000 visitors attended parades and heard Montana Governor Elmer Holt praise Custer and the 7th Cavalry (Rickey 1967, 83). However,

the conversations were changing criticism was just beginning to mount. After Libbie Custer's death in 1933, historians began rethinking the common interpretation of Custer. This Custer reassessment began with works such as Frederick Van de Water's 1934 book *Glory-Hunter*, which argued that Custer was selfish and reckless rather than selfless and brave (Pearson 1999). After the failed attempts by Libbie Custer to create a museum in the 1920s, her last will gave her husband's artifacts upon her death to "the public museum or memorial which may be erected on the battlefield of the Little Bighorn in Montana." A movement to establish such a museum was spearheaded by Major Edward S. Luce and Montana Senator Burton K. Wheeler. By the spring of 1938, Wheeler introduced a bill in Congress requesting funding, but it failed to pass. The next year, it was reintroduced, approved, and signed into law by President Franklin Roosevelt on August 10. However, no money was authorized for construction. The onset of World War II placed an indefinite hold on the funds (Robinson 1952, 26–27).

### Transferring Ownership

The NPS assumed control of the Custer Battlefield National Cemetery on July 1, 1940, when executive order 8428 signed by President Roosevelt a month earlier transferred the national cemetery reservation from the War Department to the Department of the Interior. Major Edward S. Luce, who had served with the 7th Cavalry from 1907 to 1910, became the first NPS superintendent of the Custer National Battlefield Cemetery. In March of 1946, the name was officially changed to the Custer Battlefield National Monument. The new national monument subsumed the national cemetery, the Custer Battlefield, and the Reno-Benteen Battlefield monument site (Rickey 1968, 215–216). Custer still dominated the interpretation of its significance, but the NPS's role as stewards impacted the interpretation of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Superintendents of the park cautiously introduced new interpretive approaches that they felt would balance the story (Buchholtz 2011, 430).

Superintendent Luce and his wife Evelyn created a museum prospectus in June of 1947, and the couple wrote the first NPS historical handbook in 1949 on the Custer Battlefield National Monument (Luce & Luce 1949). Later that year, the NPS Physical Improvement Program budgeted \$96,000 for the museum at the Custer battlefield in the 1950 fiscal year. The Department of the Interior Appropriation Act of 1950 included the funds necessary for construction to begin that August. The legislation approving the funding insisted that the museum would serve as a "memorial to Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer and the officers and soldiers under his command at the Battle of the Little Bighorn River" (Robinson 1952, 27–28; Linenthal 1991, 152).

The NPS introduced fresh interpretive material in the mid-1950s, including \$31,200 worth of exhibits installed in the new museum that was formally dedicated and open to the public on the seventy-sixth anniversary of the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Robinson 1952, 11–23). The exhibit materials, planned in 1950 by Curator Harry B. Robinson and approved by the Director of the NPS, continued to overlook Native Americans, as NPS historian Roy Appleman noted in a visit to the site in 1956. The museum, he wrote, told an “extremely unbalanced story of the events” and concluded that “far too much space [was] given in the museum to the personal history of ... Custer” (Linenthal 1991, 152–153). The NPS did turn away some proposed memorial ideas, such as a suggestion in 1953 by the 7th US Cavalry Association that a bronze equestrian statue of Custer be constructed at the site. Superintendent Luce scoffed at the idea: “To put a huge equestrian statue of General Custer ... would be to pour salt into already unhealed Indian wounds” (Greene 2008, 85). In 1960, the NPS renovated the museum exhibits to fix some factual errors, to balance historical accounts, and to revise the flow patterns of visitors through the gallery area (King 1996, 170). But according to Linenthal, “under Luce’s superintendency the Little Bighorn became an NPS shrine to Custer and the 7th Cavalry” (Linenthal 1991, 151).

Coinciding with the new stewardship and interpretive redefinition came an increase in visitors. Improved roads and trails, new construction and landscaping, and the creation of new interpretive markers drew greater numbers to the site. Approximately 60,450 visitors came to the site in 1940, and after dipping dramatically during World War II, that number increased to 109,261 visitors touring the battlefield in 1952. In 1956, when Superintendent Luce retired, 115,808 people came. By 1966, visitation had jumped to 218,062, and it reached 330,550 in 1977 (Greene 2008, 88, 257–258).

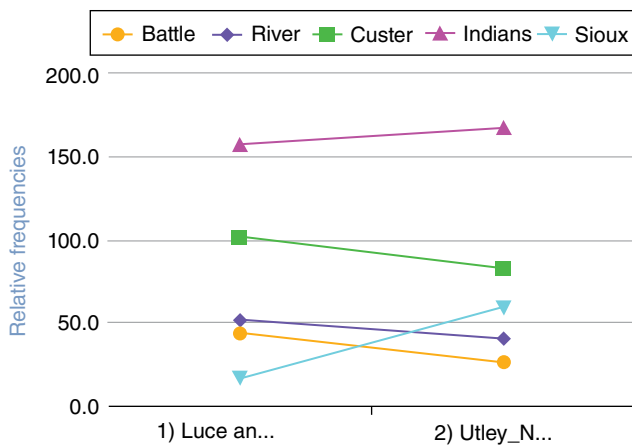
### Controversy

Catalysts for change in the popular memory of Little Bighorn came in the form of new scholarly works, including William A. Graham’s *The Custer Myth* (1953), Edgar Stewart’s *Custer’s Luck* (1955), Robert M. Utley’s *Custer and the Great Controversy* (1962), and Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970). NPS promotional and instructional material emphasized the patriotic story of westward expansion against hostile Indians but gradually sought to achieve greater balance (Utley 1992, 72). In 1971, superintendent William L. Harris began discussions with his superiors about the possibility of changing the name of the national monument from the Custer Battlefield to the Little Bighorn National Monument, and the monument’s 1975 Statement for Management

declared that “consideration should be given to a name change” (Linenthal 1991, 146–147, 154). During the 1960s, the NPS commissioned historian Utley to revise the handbook on the Custer Battlefield. Utley described the Luce handbook as “a period piece” in its content and design (Utley 2004, 114). With financial support from a nonprofit Custer Battlefield association, Utley and the NPS chief of publications put together a new handbook that is often noted for the controversial artwork of Leonard Baskin that depicted a dead, nude Custer.

Comparing the texts of the 1949 handbook written by Edward and Evelyn Luce and the 1969 handbook written by Utley reveals the changing attitudes about the site. Rather than just reading the two documents in relation to one another, a “distant reading” of the texts allows the identification of patterns or trends in language and, more importantly, provides avenues for critical textual analysis.<sup>1</sup> What emerges through this analysis of the handbooks are shifting attitudes. Luce provides an account of Custer and Little Bighorn embedded in ideas about duty and self-sacrifice (Luce & Luce 1949). Utley, on the other hand, ostensibly tries to give a more balanced version of events (Utley 1969). He reaches for balance, noting at one point that both Sioux and Americans “justly charged” violations of the Fort Laramie Treaty. Most significant in the shift is the way the handbooks treat ideas about Native people.

Looking at the frequency of words relative to all the words in the corpus, the textual analysis suggests a few interesting trends (Figure 9). First, “Indians” remain a frequently used word and its usage increased between 1949 and 1969. There is an uptick in “Sioux” as well, suggesting that Native Americans were becoming more central to the story.



**Figure 9** Relative frequency word trends for the most frequent words in the entire corpus, when compared to the rest of the corpus. Visualization generated by Voyant Tools.

Concurrently, as “Sioux” and “Indian” rise in frequency, “Custer” and “battle” both drop. That American Indians are among the highest frequency words is no surprise. But in Utley’s account, those involved at Little Bighorn are not lumped together as an ambiguous “Indian” but rather given more specificity.

Nevertheless, the textual analysis also suggests that the narratives created by Luce and Utley contain no significant changes in interpretation. Among the distinctive words for each of the documents – those words that have the highest frequency and are unique – there is no evidence of a narrative shift. An exploration of potential themes – “battle,” “warfare,” “hostile,” “treaty” – reveals the ways the two authors wrote about Custer and Little Bighorn. Despite the uptick in references to the Sioux, the story largely remained the same (Figure 10).

**Distinctive words** (compared to the rest of the corpus)

1. [Luce and Luce\\_NPS Historical...](#); [indians](#) (73), [battlefield](#) (35), [seventh](#) (21), [national](#) (25), [general](#) (39). [More...](#)
2. [Utley\\_NPS Historical...](#); [sioux](#) (47), [reno](#) (39), [little](#) (34), [trail](#) (18), [village](#) (16). [More...](#)

**Figure 10** Distinctive words are computed based on their raw frequency and unique appearance in each of the texts. Visualization generated by Voyant Tools.

Pressure for revising the official interpretation of Little Bighorn came from elsewhere. Many voices began assaulting the consensus in the mid-1960s, contesting the official version of Little Bighorn and the veneration of Custer embedded in the site. By the 1970s, Custer had become a symbol of rottenness in American culture. In particular, Native Americans used Custer to symbolize racism and genocidal expansionism. Indeed, a popular bumper sticker of the period proclaimed, “Custer had it Coming” (Linenthal 1991, 141). As historian Brian Dippie notes, as a “symbolic rallying point for modern Indian dissent, Custer is not just useful, but essential” for activists (Dippie 1976, 135.) They capitalized on this symbolism popularized by such works as “Custer,” a 1963 folk song critical of the erstwhile hero by the singer-songwriter Peter LaFarge and recorded by Johnny Cash a year later. Another source was Thomas Berger’s novel *Little Big Man*, published in 1964, as well as Arthur Penn’s subsequent 1970 film adaptation. In addition, Vine Deloria, Jr.’s book *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) and Floyd Westerman’s song on his 1969 album of the same name provoked dissent. A high profile feature written by Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., titled “The Custer Myth,” which appeared in the July 2, 1971, “Our Indian Heritage” issue of *Life* magazine, proclaimed that “the tragedy of Little Bighorn was that it sealed white minds against the American Indian.” Josephy, who had served as a consultant to Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall and President Richard Nixon, criticized the lack of Native American historical

interpreters at the NPS site and lamented “the battlefield is a sore from America’s past that has not healed” (Josephy 1971, 49, 55).

As part of their assault on Custer, Indian activists sought to press the NPS for the establishment of an Indian memorial at Little Bighorn (Buchholtz 2012). Plans were presented but met resistance from the NPS leadership. Eldon Reyer, serving as superintendent of the site in the early 1970s, refused to allow the AIM to place a cast-iron plaque on the site in 1972 as part of the AIM Trail of Broken Treaties national protest. Utley, who became the chief historian of the NPS, rebuffed another attempt in 1973 (Linenthal 1991, 159). Yet in the face of such resistance from the NPS, the advocates for Red Power increased their efforts as the centennial approached. The NPS had always sought to avoid a confrontation with activists at the site. Their desire to avoid controversy was heightened following several large protests such as the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1972, the riot in Custer, South Dakota, in 1973, and the 71-day occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973. President Nixon’s staff warned the NPS that the “consequences of an unsophisticated treatment of that occasion could be portentous.” Raymond Freeman, the associate director of the NPS, stressed that the centennial “must not emphasize the Indian-whiteman conflict that existed in 1876 and still exists today” (Linenthal 1991, 142). Hoping to avoid any confrontation with AIM, the NPS moved the commemorative activities to June 24 while the FBI monitored the area – especially the activities of Native American protestors.

The centennial commemoration in 1976 saw a comparatively small crowd of around 800 visitors at the Custer Battlefield National Monument. Superintendent Richard Hart claimed in a speech that the park honored all those who died at Little Bighorn, while NPS historian Utley delivered a keynote address that called for the battle to be viewed in historical terms (Utley 2004). “My plea,” he told the crowd, “is that we temper our judgments with understanding, understanding of the forces that caused essentially decent people to do what they did” (Greene 2008, 152). During the ceremony, members of AIM and other Native Americans unexpectedly arrived at the site accompanied by chants and drumbeats. Hart allowed activist Russell Means to address the crowd from the speaker’s platform. Means spoke briefly, describing challenges facing contemporary Indian communities.

A few days before the centennial, the Lakota Treaty Council announced a “spiritual gathering [that] will pay homage to our forefathers who fell a hundred years ago” at the Little Bighorn. Ceremonies were held at a ranch owned by Austin Two Moons, a descendant of a Cheyenne warrior who fought in the battle. On the last day, Indians conducted a sunrise ceremony at the monument as an alternative to the patriotic commemoration. By celebrating Custer, Means claimed, Americans celebrated genocide: “I can’t imagine a Lt. Calley National Monument in Vietnam,” he said of

the soldier found guilty of murdering unarmed civilians in the 1968 My Lai Massacre (Linenthal 1991, 144).

Both commemorative events at the Little Bighorn ended without violence, but the presence of Indian activists was significant. Defenders of Custer's memory rose to the challenge, with the Little Bighorn Associates, founded in 1966, being the most vocal. They accused the NPS of pandering to special interests. They fumed that reenactors were not allowed onto the battlefield, even though Means was granted time at the speaker's platform. Furthermore, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer III, Custer's grandnephew who had served in Vietnam, was not officially recognized at the event (Greene 2008, 153; Elliott 2007, 41; Linenthal 1991, 145).

### **Name Change and Memorial**

Grassfires that raged up Deep Ravine and across the battlefield in August of 1983 removed most of the tall grasses. This led superintendent James Court of the NPS to ask archaeologist Richard Fox to conduct a reconnaissance survey using historical battlefield archaeology techniques. Based on this preliminary survey and a set of research questions compiled by Fox and Custer battlefield historian Neil Mangum, the Custer Battlefield Museum and Historical Association agreed to fund a full archaeological study in the summers of 1984 and 1985 (Scott & Fox 1987; Scott et al. 1989; Fox 1993; Scott et al. 1998). The archaeological investigations were not without controversy, as proponents and opponents squared off in private and in public. Whereas some debated whether or not it was appropriate to disturb the sacred ground, others questioned the value of the research conclusions (Utley 1986; Michno 1996). During this period, the NPS renovated the museum displays to reflect the new archaeological findings and historical interpretations (King 1996, 170). Cooperation was demonstrated at the battlefield, where Native Americans and whites jointly reburied 411 bones of 7th Cavalry troopers, that had been uncovered during the recent archaeological investigations. In 1987, serious discussion about changing the site name began again for the first time in a decade (Linenthal 1991, 163).

Calls for an Indian memorial at Little Bighorn remained mostly stagnant until 1988, when Indian activists attending the 112th anniversary commemoration removed sod, poured concrete, and installed a three-foot square steel plaque at the base of the Last Stand Hill mass grave monument. Led by Means, these AIM members were clearly well versed in political theatrics. Addressing the shocked crowd and NPS staff, Means lambasted American society for both its poor treatment of the indigenous peoples of North America and the veneration paid to the defeated Custer

(McDermott 1996, 102–103; Buchholtz 2012). The homemade plaque’s text reflected Means’s sentiment:

In honor of our Indian Patriots who fought and defeated the U.S. Calvary  
[sic] In order to save our women and children from mass-murder. In doing  
so, preserving rights to our Homelands, Treaties and, sovereignty. 6/25/1988  
G. Magpie Cheyenne.

Means contended that the site’s granite obelisk, erected in 1881 by the War Department, is as incongruous as Germany erecting in Israel a Hitler national monument listing the names of Nazi officers. He uttered a warning: “You remove our monument, and we’ll remove yours” (Linenthal 1991, 159–160; Elliott 2007, 41).

The timing of the Custer memorial vandalism was a calculated political maneuver, for the AIM plaque was placed not only on the anniversary of the Battle of the Little Bighorn but also on American Indian World Peace Day. Means and his allies drew attention to the myriad problems that the Custer Battlefield National Monument represented in the late twentieth century. Defenders of Custer again reacted swiftly. William Wells of the Little Bighorn Associates complained in a letter to the NPS about the “group of thugs comprised mostly of professional Indians” led by a “megalomaniacal convicted felon” (Linenthal 1991, 130–131, 159–160). Historian Wayne Michael Sarf, writing in the conservative magazine *American Spectator*, characterized the AIM activists as “burn-outs led by the shameless Means – smug jackals content with ‘counting coup’ on bones a century dead,” condemning those who rode their horses on the gravesite for acting “like old-time warriors gaining credit by touching a fallen enemy, [as] they ‘counted coup’ on the monument with sticks” (Sarf 1988, 34). Custer enthusiasts also targeted the NPS with their ire, accusing the battlefield stewards of timidity in the face of activist bullying and lambasting their decision to not stop the defilement of a national shrine. Others drew upon historical analogies comparing AIM’s plaque as being equivalent to the Sons of Union Veterans placing a marker at General Lee’s statue at Gettysburg (Linenthal 1991, 160–161).

Evidently, Means’s symbolic strike at the Custer symbol succeeded in forcing the NPS to address the Indian memorial issue. In 1988, NPS director William Penn Mott, Jr., wrote to the Rocky Mountain regional director about the need to “exert strong, positive leadership” in establishing an Indian memorial committee and ordered the committee to “communicate your intentions without delay not only to the groups involved in the June 25 event but to the Tribal Chairmen of all the directly affected Indian Nations” (Linenthal 1991, 161). The steel plaque was removed from the gravesite in September and placed in the museum as a gesture that the NPS was serious about developing an Indian memorial. To further cement their

intentions, the NPS produced a brochure detailing the potential themes of an Indian memorial. Means and Utley were both named to the Indian memorial committee, which was tasked with overseeing a national competition for the memorial's design.

Debate over who would define the memory of Little Bighorn flared up again two years later. In 1990, US Representatives Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a Northern Cheyenne and a Democrat from Colorado, and Ron Marlenee, a Republican from Montana, introduced a bill to Congress calling for an Indian memorial at Little Bighorn. The bill never made it out of committee, but the next year they reintroduced the bill with an important modification: to change the official name of Custer Battlefield National Monument to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. The Indian memorial had wide support even among Custerphiles, but suggesting a new name for the site that would scrub Custer from the battlefield rubbed many the wrong way. Supporters argued the change made sense, because no other NPS location was named after an individual. Critics denounced it as "political correctness." Michigan Democratic Representative John Dingell argued the name change "demeans the American soldiers who died in Little Bighorn" by implying that Custer's actions were wrong and need correction. "I say no wrong was committed there, I say no impropriety was committed by the American soldiers who died there." Lowell Smith, president of the Little Bighorn Associates, told the *New York Times* that the bill was "a bill of appeasement," and Brice C. Custer, a descendant, regarded the bill as part of the "National Guilt movement" (Elliott 2007, 43). Letters to the editor of *Montana* magazine scorned "feel good" politics, and one writer asked: "In an effort to honor the American Indian, must we dishonor the American soldier?" (Custer 1991, 93).

The NPS, however, offered their support to the name change. Speaking before the Montana History Conference in Helena, Montana, on October 25, 1991, Utley told the audience that the "time has come" to embrace a more neutral and more accepted usage in naming the battlefield. Citing historian Linenthal's 1991 book *Sacred Ground*, Utley said he had "a new perspective" on the Little Bighorn site. "What I have seen as misuse," he said, "as a perversion of history, is in truth part of history, just as was the battle fought here" (Utley 1992, 74). Chief historian at the national monument, Douglas McChristian, also publicly supported the name change, suggesting that Custer had been memorialized in 1879 when the Custer Battlefield National Cemetery was named in his honor, and that "the redesignation is not a matter of 'political correctness.' But rather one of historical correctness" (McChristian 1992, 76). The bill passed Congress and was signed into law by President George H. W. Bush, yet Custerphiles continued their criticism of the NPS. The appointment of Barbara Booher (Cherokee and Northern Ute) and Gerard Baker

(Mandan-Hidatsa) as superintendents in the 1990s provided additional fire for Custerphiles (Elliott 2007, 44).

Efforts to establish an Indian memorial at Little Bighorn would continue for another contentious decade. In 1994, a design competition was announced that resulted in 554 submissions addressing the memorial theme of "Peace Through Unity." After more than two years of deliberations, the winning design submitted by the husband and wife team of John R. Collins and Alison J. Towers, landscape architects, was selected by a seven-member jury. It was ultimately approved by the Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt. In 1999, a ground-breaking ceremony was held at the site. Fundraising languished until 2002, when the NPS managed to convince Congress to appropriate the \$2.3 million necessary to construct the monument (Rankin 1997, 58–59). Built lower on the ridge 70 yards north of the 1881 monument to the 7th Cavalry, the circular memorial invites visitors to walk into the area and view the dark stone that honors all of the Native Americans present at the Battle of the Greasy Grass/Little Bighorn. Along one side of the memorial is a bronze wire sculpture of three mounted riders while the opposite view, called "spirit gate," frames Last Stand Hill (Doss 2010, 332–338; Rowe 2011, 163–173). The Indian Memorial was officially dedicated on June 25, 2003, on the 127th anniversary of the battle, with attendees including tribal chairs and Montana government officials (Western National Parks Association 2003). Means made an appearance as well, speaking to the crowd for 15 minutes (Elliott 2007, 21; Rowe 2011, 172–173). After further conversations with the 17 affiliated tribal groups about appropriate text and images that would be consistent with their traditions, customs, and values, the names of the warriors and other markings were engraved into the granite in 2013.

On Memorial Day 1999, the NPS began the practice of erecting red granite markers on the exact locations where Indian warriors are thought to have been killed in the battle. The first two such markers commemorate the Northern Cheyenne warrior Noisy Walking and the Southern Cheyenne warrior Lane White Man. The more than 20 red granite markers that have been dedicated to date are credited to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument chief historian John Doerner and superintendent Neil Mangum (Doerner 2000; Elliott 2007, 274; Reece 2008).

## Conclusion

The conflicting interpretations offered by Native Americans, Custer enthusiasts, and the NPS reflect a struggle for the ownership of Little Bighorn's symbolism. Memorial efforts in the nineteenth century attempted to find honor and purpose in Custer's death, which would demonstrate the righteousness of American expansion and the eradication of Native culture.

The NPS's tenure as steward of Little Bighorn led many to seek neutrality in the presentation of the Battle of the Little Bighorn as well as its multicultural history. This search reveals the NPS's self-ascribed role in shaping cultural attitudes, as it strives to fulfill its interpretive mission to a growing constituency of American tourists and foreign visitors. The greater integration of Native perspectives and the reassessment of Custer's centrality to the site brought about by Indian activists likewise operated within contemporary cultural dynamics. The national monument began to emphasize the place of Native life in American society.

As Richard King observed in 1996, "the content and form of the histories currently produced at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument emerge at the intersection of a number of sociohistorical processes. Most notably, commemoration, nationalism, tourism, and the resurgence of indigenous resistance have shaped the national monument and its retelling of the conflict." In so doing, the never-ending contest over the Custer story has resulted in the site being transformed into a cultural battleground. He concludes that Americans "must move beyond critiques of imperialist nostalgia and historical relativism to theorize about the intricate interplay of colonial practices and mnemonic practice at work in the contemporary United States" (King 1996, 169, 171, 178).

Going forward, historians must try to see past the simple yet seductive "clash of cultures" trope. As historian Timothy Braatz points out, a "forthright presentation of U.S. expansionism in the nineteenth century would remind monument visitors that the country's territorial growth and wealth depended on the dispossession of Native Peoples" (Braatz 2004, 115; Elliott 2007, 275–276). If the past is to have a future at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, then the memorials must strive to deepen our understanding of the complex interconnections of sacred landscapes, public memories, and diverse narratives.

#### NOTE

- 1 Literary scholar Franco Moretti, who argues that we can understand corpus of text not only by individually reading each text but also by aggregating texts together and using computational methods to identify trends and patterns, coined "distant reading" as a method. Close reading, Moretti argues, cannot possibly uncover the full scope of textual corpora. See Franco Moretti, "What is Distant Reading?" *New York Times*, June 24, 2011. Between the two documents, there are a total of 16,771 words and 3,146 unique words. We were, unfortunately, unable to analyze the 1988 NPS Handbook. The visualizations produced here were built with Voyant Tools, a text analysis platform created by Stéfán Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell. The full data and dashboard can be accessed at <http://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=1404057664889.134&stopList=stop.en.taporware.txt>, accessed April 30, 2015.

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## Chapter Twenty-Five

### THE BATTLE OF HISTORY

*Michael Welsh*

A mere two weeks after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Walt Whitman, the most famous poet of his day, penned an elegy for the 216 soldiers of the 7th Cavalry and their commander, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer. While America celebrated a century of independence, Whitman imagined “the cavalry companies fighting to the last – in sternest, coolest, heroism.” So touched was the author that in his mind’s eye he “erewhile saw, with erect head, pressing ever in front, bearing a bright sword in thy hand,” a leader “in struggle, charge, and saber-smite.” Little did it matter that Custer and his five companies carried no sabers. Whitman’s poetic license led him to believe that “in defeat most desperate, most glorious, after thy many battles, ... thou yield-est up thyself” (Whitman 1876).

As with the conflict between the US Army and thousands of Native warriors that summer day in Montana Territory, so have competing narratives fought for the attention of the reader, the viewer of movies and television, the art patron, the tourist, the visitor to the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, and the scholar alike. An Internet search in the summer of 2014 generated over 525,000 citations on the subject. Michael O’Keefe, a native of Great Britain, organized a magisterial bibliography in 2012 of nearly 8,500 entries on Custer, the battle, and the legacy of the Little Bighorn. He acknowledged that his two-volume work was the ninth such publication to appear since Milton Rothstein’s 1929 list of 75 sources. Most intriguing was O’Keefe’s claim that 55% of the most prominent works on Custer had appeared since the centennial of the battle (1976), and that he had identified 21 categories of subject matter in his 898 pages of text (O’Keefe 2012).

*A Companion to Custer and the Little Bighorn Campaign*, First Edition.

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Michael Elliott, a professor of literature at Emory University, wrote in his 2007 study, *Custerology*, that more than 250 oral interviews had been conducted with Native participants of the Little Bighorn battle (Elliott 2007).

Whether one is an academician or a buff, three different “Custers” have emerged from narratives since 1876; the hero, the villain, or a complex and conflicted symbol of America’s past. The famed history professor Frederick Jackson Turner, author of the path-breaking “Frontier Thesis” of 1893, spoke to this divided imagery when he wrote: “Each age studies its history anew and with interests determined by the spirit of the time.” Warning that such attention to current events “exposes the historian to a bias,” Turner did encourage everyone to take another look at old stories with the promise: “At the same time it affords [the scholar] new instruments and new insights for dealing with [the] subject” (Nash 1991).

### Professional vs. Amateur Historians

For students of Custer, no matter their outlook, the narrative is embedded in the larger arc of American scholarship from the late nineteenth century forward. Peter Novick identified multiple stages of American historical writing, all of which included themes and personalities that aligned well with the portrayals of Custer. Prior to formation in the 1880s of the American Historical Association (AHA), with its standards and rigorous academic training, historians were mostly wealthy amateurs. They wrote to honor what they saw as best about their young nation. The first wave of “true” academicians, said Novick, “opted for an austere style which would clearly distinguish professional historical work from the florid effusions of the amateur historians whom the professionals sought to displace” (Novick 1988).

This cadre of scholars took issue with the champions of American growth and expansion, if only in tone and style. They agreed that American history spoke of “freedom realized and stabilized through the achievement of national identity.” In matters important to the American West, wrote Gerald D. Nash, historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries accepted Turner’s belief that “the frontiering experience,” which Custer and the US Army helped to accelerate, “constituted the dominant influence of the shaping of American civilization.” For the generation that included Turner, said Nash, “one world was disappearing, and another was rapidly taking its place.” Americans assumed that they once had “lived in a society that was open – with a series of new frontiers.” Turner’s jeremiad that the census of 1890 signaled “the decline of the agrarian character of the nation,” according to Nash, led many to conclude that “the clearly defined values of their Western society contrasted markedly with the increasingly ambivalent values of industrial America” (Nash 1991).

## World War I and Disillusionment

World War I further diminished the romance of the American West. Novick explained that “interwar culture was overflowing with ‘relativistic,’ ‘pragmatic,’ and iconoclastic ideas, which historians took up in developing their critiques of the received epistemology” of professionals. Nash noted that “the emergence of the United States as a world power had a deep impact on historians of the West who now sought out the international dimensions of their subjects, which they had overlooked before.” The “lost generation” of the 1920s Jazz Age “witnessed a waning of much of the optimism that had characterized earlier years.” Charles Beard wrote in the 1930s of economic determinism shaping the nation, while Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., saw immigration as the cultural theme most worthy of academic attention. “In deemphasizing the role of the frontier,” said Nash, scholars “sought to alter the perception that it had played a critical role in the shaping of the United States” (Novick 1988; Nash 1991).

Frederic F. Van de Water’s *Glory-Hunter: A Life of General Custer* (1934) is often cited as the first major challenge to the heroic image of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. In a book review for the *New York Times*, R. L. Duffus highlighted Van de Water’s critique of the decades-long crusade of Elizabeth Bacon Custer to preserve her husband’s reputation. “Yet here we have,” wrote Duffus, “a brilliant example of the truth that a man’s memory cannot really be preserved unless the memory of his failings and failures is retained.” In Duffus’s estimation, “the Custer so portrayed is a thousand times more fascinating, has far more claim to sympathy, than the plaster saint of poor Mrs. Custer’s loving narratives.” Like later students of literature and folklore, Van de Water saw “something of Richard the Lion-hearted in him, something of Achilles, and, unhappily, a little of Falstaff” – a reference to the Shakespearean character who became the scapegoat for England’s loss in the climactic Battle of Patay (Duffus 1934).

The 1930s marked the apogee of American disillusionment after World War I, when the study of domestic issues and international peace mattered more to scholars than fighting and dying in battle. Given the national mood of isolationism as Europe and the Far East moved toward war, Van de Water’s criticism of the naivety of Americans made sense. Yet Duffus recognized one quality of Custer that endured from his days as a dashing cavalry officer in the Civil War, which his Indian scouts on the Great Plains recalled when asked how they could serve with someone who had fought their people. “At least,” concluded Duffus, Van de Water’s Custer “did not sit comfortably in a chateau and send other men to do the dying” (Duffus 1934).

The 1930s not only witnessed the sharper criticism of Custer after the death of his widow. It also saw the passing of military officers

who had any connection to his era, and who could speak to the core issues of Custer's command and leadership. General Hugh L. Scott (1853–1934) would become the last officer to claim authoritatively to understand the events of the Little Bighorn battle. Upon his death, family members published selections from his private papers, including his recollections of service in the 7th Cavalry. Scott had held many prestigious posts in his long career in uniform, most notably as superintendent of the United States Military Academy (1906–1910) and the Army Chief of Staff as America prepared to enter World War I (1914–1917). Yet he began his career as a young lieutenant assigned to the remnants of the Custer command, which was then led by none other than Major Marcus Reno (Scott 1935).

Scott had written his autobiography, *Some Memories of a Soldier* (1928), several years before his death, but not all the details of his life in the Army had appeared in print. Perhaps because of the sensitive nature of his comments about Custer, certain documents did not surface until 1935, when the *New York Times* published them under the title, "Custer's Last Fight." In the spring of 1877, said Scott in the new account, "I went up to the battlefield ... to secure the bodies of Custer and of the other officers that could be recognized" (Scott 1935). The young lieutenant worked alongside Cheyenne warriors who had fought at the Little Bighorn. They described to him the scene and the locations of the dead. "I soon got on very excellent terms with the Cheyennes," wrote Scott, "who talked to me as fully about their part in the battle and all of its circumstances as an Englishman would talk about Waterloo." Scott, who became a student of Indian languages after his work with the Cheyennes, recorded in his notes: "It is therefore to the Indians alone, and to the marks on the ground, that we must look for information concerning Custer's last movements" (Scott 1935).

After recording his thoughts on the landscape that he encountered nine months after the death of Custer, Scott went beyond most chroniclers of his day to deduce the meaning of the Little Bighorn for its Native combatants. Speaking as harshly as any revisionist of the late twentieth century, the aging soldier concluded: "It is now my opinion that the act of the Secretary of the Interior ordering all those Indians to report to their agencies before Jan. 31, 1876, and threatening otherwise was a crime against humanity." Equally intriguing was Scott's claim: "I have heard many Indians ... volunteer the statement ... that if Custer had come close and asked for a council instead of attacking he could have led them all into the agency without a fight." Scott's final comments about the strategies of the Army in the Centennial Campaign could only be made by someone who had taught military tactics: "How it was expected of [General Alfred Terry's] foot soldiers to catch Indians was always a puzzle to me" (Scott 1935).

## The Age of Consensus

Critical judgments of Custer gave way in the 1940s to a shift in the public mood and the academic rendering of the nation's past. Peter Novick wrote that "the coming of World War II saw American culture turn towards affirmation and the search for certainty." For Novick, "consensus" became the key word in postwar attempts "to produce a new interpretive framework for American history, focusing attention on what had united American officials rather than what had divided them." The next two decades witnessed what Novick called "the inward turn of the historical profession," when scholars celebrated the "end of seriously divisive conflicts" and touted the "end of ideology." The Consensus school of historians, wrote Novick, wished to "establish a new, somewhat chastened, objectivist synthesis, trivializing the relativist critique by partially incorporating it" (Novick 1988).

As scholars returned to the universalism of American history, consumers of popular culture had not lost faith in the power of Custer's heroism or the rightness of Manifest Destiny. Academia might explore topics such as "the West as frontier, region, and urban civilization," commented Nash. But for "millions of Americans who endured suffering because of economic want," the mythical West served as an "escape" from what Frederick Elkin called "the turmoil of Cold War tensions." Technological advances in the era only heightened the sense of unity and cohesion that the Consensus school recognized, said Nash. By 1950, Americans "were reading at least eighteen million westerns yearly" and listened to popular radio programs like *The Lone Ranger*. Scores celebrated the "singing cowboys" such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. "Tens of millions went to see the myth reflected in Western films," observed Nash, while others "soon joined an even larger television audience" (Nash 1991).

Oddly enough, this recognition in the 1950s of American exceptionalism produced only a few books of significance on Custer. Among them were Edgar I. Stewart's *Custer's Luck* (1955) and Jay Monaghan's *Custer: The Life of George Armstrong Custer* (1959). Neither held academic appointments as historians, and each wrote from a personal fascination with the subject. Stewart was inspired by his days as a "historical aide" at the Custer battlefield, while Monaghan served as the chief archivist for the State of Illinois Archives. Retired Colonel William A. Graham produced *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana* (1953) with minutiae about the famous battle. A handful of authors began to explore topics about Custer that presaged the critical perspective of the 1960s "New Left."

As the chief medical officer for the Veterans Administration and a retired Major General in the US Army, Paul R. Hawley spent much of his time with wounded soldiers. He took a particular interest in the Custer story as it echoed post-World War II concerns about the effects of fighting in combat upon individuals (what a later generation would identify as "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," or PTSD). In a 1947 article in the journal

*Surgery, Gynecology and Obstetrics*, Hawley asked the provocative question: "Did Cholera Defeat Custer?" Tracing the journey of the virus as it came north from New Orleans, borne by ships from France, cholera claimed 40–50 lives per day at the peak of its 1848 outbreak. Seven years later, the disease had spread as far west as the construction site of Fort Riley, Kansas. During the summer of 1867, said Hawley, "the news of a cholera outbreak ... reached Custer in the field, and he became alarmed over the safety of Mrs. Custer who was living at Fort Riley" (Hawley 1947).

From this incident came the 1867 court-martial of Custer, his year-long suspension from duty without pay, and his restoration to command by General Philip Sheridan as part of the latter's "winter campaign" on the southern Plains against the Cheyennes and Arapahoes. "The effect of [Custer's] humiliation," said the VA director, "is apparent during the remaining years of his life." Then came the attack on an Indian village on the Washita River in November of 1868, where Custer's hasty retreat left Major Joel Elliott and his unit of 19 soldiers surrounded by Indians bent upon revenge. "So long as Custer commanded thereafter," concluded Hawley, "the 7th Cavalry was not a happy outfit" (Hawley 1947).

Not sure of his own findings about Custer's actions, Hawley sought the advice of Dr. Karl Menninger, director of the psychiatric clinic in Topeka, Kansas, that bore his family's name. Like Hawley, Menninger worked with returning veterans on their mental health issues. In a one-page summary of the salient features of Hawley's manuscript, Menninger noted that "these data describe a personality type only too familiar to psychiatrists." The famed military psychiatrist told Hawley: "But when a man wears 'stars' on his shoulders, he can 'get away with' things for which he would be court-martialed or hospitalized were he a private." Menninger then asked the question that would surface time and again in later years: "Why does the name of Custer still stand in the mind of the average American as that of a great hero?" (Menninger 1947).

Though wary of radical interpretations, the American public learned about the shortcomings of the commander in his private life. In her old age, Elizabeth Custer had given her personal papers to Marguerite Merington for the writing of a book on her relationship with her husband. Published in 1950 as *The Custer Story: The Life and Intimate Letters of General George A. Custer and His Wife, Elizabeth*, the narrative routinely echoed the praise that Libbie Custer had showered on dear "Autie" in life and in death. Not to be outdone by her patron, Merington's prose evoked memories of the gallant general as "Bayard, Roland and Galahad, all in one." Yet Merington also posed a counterargument about the letters, revealing that "he was indifferent to others' suffering" and that the widow appeared "smug in her own conception of virtue, cruel, arrogant, vain, intolerant" (Birney 1950).

In addition to curiosity about women's voices, the years after World War II witnessed more scholarship on African Americans. The *Journal of*

*Negro History* published an article in 1948 by Roland McConnell titled, "Isaiah Dorman and the Custer Expedition." Appearing in the same year that President Harry Truman desegregated America's armed forces, McConnell's essay reminded readers that "little if anything is known about the participation of a Negro in the expedition." McConnell thus endeavored to situate Isaiah Dorman in the pantheon of heroes that Custer and the 7th Cavalry occupied in the public mind (McConnell 1948).

Dorman first appeared in the Army's records in 1865, where McConnell learned that he had accepted employment as "a courier who was to make trips between Fort Wadsworth and Fort Rice, Dakota Territory at \$100.00 a month." Five years later, Dorman resurfaced in the records as "employed by Captain Henry Inman, in the field, as guide with the escort for engineers of the Northern Pacific Railroad Survey." The courier spent the next five years as an interpreter, leading McConnell to state: "Dorman must have acquired considerable experience in dealing with the Indians and had gained much knowledge concerning their language and customs." Dorman's last days saw him attached in 1876 to Major Marcus Reno's unit of the 7th Cavalry. "Although he did not die in the massacre at the Little Bighorn," concluded McConnell, "[Dorman] was present as a member of Custer's regiment and died in the battle which developed in the general area." Therefore, McConnell claimed, "he in no way deserves less credit than those who died immediately near Custer" (McConnell 1948).

McConnell's quest to valorize the life of Isaiah Dorman did not succeed, as few students of the black experience in America found his exploits compelling. Alone among scholars of the Little Bighorn, Robert J. Ege in 1966 revisited the legacy of Dorman. "This is the story," proclaimed Ege, "of a man – not a fighting man – but one who was courageous, sober, of proven dependability, and possessed of the unique ability to converse with the Sioux Indians in their native tongue." Dorman would meet his fate on the Reno battlefield, wrote Ege, where a legend arose that Sitting Bull had given him a drink of water and instructed the Lakota women not to disturb his body. Yet when American soldiers arrived the next day, they found Dorman to be "horribly mutilated." Said Ege: "This desecration was probably the parting gesture of enraged, savage [women], or the Cheyennes, who did not know him" (Ege 1966).

### The Sixties, Revisionism, and "Custer Died for Your Sins"

Where Robert Ege tried to recast the narrative of Isaiah Dorman for the rising black consciousness of the 1960s, the decade also saw the publication of what the journalist and historian Alvin Josephy called "probably the best account of the battle ever written," the 1966 volume by Mari Sandoz, *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*. Sandoz had gained fame after three decades of

studying and writing about the people whom she had encountered while growing up in far western Nebraska. Josephy told readers of the *New York Times* that her account of the conflict “takes no sides,” because of her interweaving of military records from the National Archives with stories told to her as a child by Lakota and Cheyenne participants of the battle. “Her Custer,” remarked Josephy, “is deaf and brooding, riding in a trance, committed to an appointment” (Josephy 1966).

The voice that broke through in the 1960s to shame those who admired the heroes of the Little Bighorn was Vine Deloria, Jr. Enrolled as a member of the Standing Rock Sioux (Lakota) tribe, Deloria had been a Marine, a student of theology, and a recruiter for the Episcopal Church of young Indians for eastern colleges and universities. From 1964 to 1967, he served as executive director of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI). While attending a White House ceremony for the swearing-in of a new Commissioner of Indian Affairs, he handed out printed business cards that read, “Custer died for your sins!” (Josephy 1966). He soon shocked the nation with the publication of his momentous book, *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969).

Studies of Custer would never be the same. Writing in 1988 to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of his book, Deloria explained the sharpness of his words. “Indians raised the question of the American past,” said Deloria, “and since this bloody past was then being revived in the search and destroy missions in Vietnam and in incidents such as that [in 1970] at Kent State [University], it was apparent that few people in the government heeded the lessons of history.” Ironically, the provocative title “was originally meant as a dig at the National Council of Churches,” Deloria recalled. Reflecting his own degree in theology as well as the teachings of his minister father, Deloria stated that “under the covenants of the Old Testament, breaking a covenant” like the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie with the Lakota “called for a blood sacrifice for atonement.” For Deloria, “Custer was the blood sacrifice for the United States breaking the Sioux treaty.” The battle itself mattered little to Deloria’s larger narrative, except for the fact that “the most popular and enduring subject of Indian humor is, of course, General Custer.” Deloria surveyed the impact of his writings and concluded: “I hope that this book can continue to make its contribution to the task of keeping American Indians before the American public and on the American domestic agenda” (Deloria 1988).

Deloria’s assessment of his contribution to the dialogue about Custer contained much of the rhetoric that Novick found at the heart of the New Left’s scholarship. “During the decade of the Sixties,” wrote Novick, “the ideological consensus which provided the foundation for this posture collapsed, and it was not to be reconstructed in subsequent decades.” Novick saw instead a political culture that “lurched sharply left, then right.” A shared vision of America “was replaced first by polarization, then by

fragmentation" (Novick 1988). Nash echoed these sentiments: "Some of the smug optimism of the 1950s turned into a pervasive pessimism, and at times even into nihilism." Said Nash of the work of Deloria and his generation: "Instead of the nation's distinct pride, the frontier had become its shame, its albatross" (Nash 1991).

The phrase "Custer died for your sins" animated the study of the Little Bighorn for the next three decades. Writing in the *Journal of American Folklore*, Bruce A. Rosenberg remarked in 1975 that "historians generally shun the battle because it was a small one and did not amount to more than a speck in the destiny of nations." He added that "literary scholars and critics have also busied themselves with more important matters." Yet despite the indifference of academics, he lamented, "the public continues to remember Custer" (Rosenberg 1975).

Rosenberg spoke of the many myths swirling around Custer and his fateful encounter with the Lakota and Cheyenne. "One legend," wrote Rosenberg, "was Monahsetah's plea to spare Custer from mutilation after his death." Another was "the eaten heart," a reference to the strident poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow claiming that the Lakota leader Rain-in-the-Face had removed Custer's heart from his chest after his death. Yet another oddity was "the singing of *Nearer My God to Thee* by the wives of the 7th Cavalry officers at the moment of the battle," waiting for their husbands to return to Fort Abraham Lincoln. From his research into historical figures like Custer, Rosenberg surmised that "in the lives of the heroes of old, people saw more than just a mortal life." Custer as "the ardently admired hero comes to embody some transcendental quality which is actually the basis for his adoration" (Rosenberg 1975).

Rosenberg's analogies about Custer and the tradition of heroic warriors led him to believe that "the prominence of Custer and his last battle in the popular imagination is so striking that one is tempted to analyze the accounts of it as [Claude] Levi-Strauss has done with myths." Custer called to mind the eighth-century French leader Roland at the Battle of Roncevaux (778), who "insisted that he would not call for help lest he humiliate his family, and that it was better to die than to live in shame." Rosenberg detected a similar quality in the writings of Whittaker, the author in 1876 of a hagiographic life of Custer. This dime novelist, said Rosenberg, "made of his hero's last battle a Thermopylae of the plains, glorifying him beyond even his own extravagant intentions." Comparisons of Custer to these icons summoned images of "sleeping warriors," whom Rosenberg supposed were "merely slumbering in another world, awaiting the proper moment to return to [their] people." Arriving at the end of his examination of Custer, Rosenberg surmised: "It has been sagely said that every people gets the folk hero it deserves" (Rosenberg 1975).

Perhaps aware that the future belonged to the critics of Custer, Michael Sievers wrote in the summer of 1976 a "Centennial Historiography" of the

Battle of the Little Bighorn. In reviewing the many dimensions of popular culture and academic works, Sievers realized that most scholars “begin with the premise that armed confrontation was inevitable.” Many authors also viewed the Black Hills Gold Rush as “the prime and perhaps only cause of the war,” while still others focused on treaty violations, the building of the Northern Pacific Railroad, or corruption within the Office of Indian Affairs. Yet Sievers’s reading of the literature of a century of Custer studies led him to note: “The single most important question is why the Custer detachment was annihilated.” Sievers cited Menninger’s claims that Custer fit the “category of psychopathology typically characterized by excessive vanity, complete disregard for the feelings or safety of others, a lack of loyalty.” Yet hardly any scholars “want to say that the Indians won because the generals lost.” Instead, wrote Sievers, “writers are not responsible for perpetuating a controversy to which there are no answers, but they are also guilty of distortion” (Sievers 1976).

Sievers’s verdict of “distortion” echoed the complaints of the protesters in 1976 at the Little Bighorn centennial. “By the sheer numbers of publications and heated debate,” said Sievers, scholars “have given to the Little Bighorn far more significance than it deserves.” In an ironic twist, “there has been so much controversy that there is no longer any.” Sievers offered the intriguing prediction that “writers will surely continue to debate the issues, but their words will probably become increasingly hollow and insignificant from a historical standpoint.” He prophesied that “others will see in the Little Bighorn clear evidence of [the] white man’s theft of Indian land and destruction of native society in the name of progress and will conclude that Custer as a white agent got what was coming to him.” Sievers then cautioned his peers with this warning: “A more accurate and viable treatment will occur only when writers divest themselves of the assumption that the reasons for Custer’s annihilation are supremely important and direct their efforts towards an analysis of the long-term impact of the Little Bighorn” (Sievers 1976).

### **New Scholars, New Methods, Old Questions**

Sievers did not know that the decades of the 1980s and 1990s would witness even more curiosity about the story of the Little Bighorn. The battlefield itself would undergo a name change in 1992, which evoked as much passion as any historical text. Archaeologists took advantage of a major grass fire in 1983 that exposed artifacts buried for a century by ground cover, leading to theories of the fighting that challenged the best estimates of scholars and popularizers alike. Multidisciplinary studies of public memory emerged, as well as women’s historians reading into Elizabeth Custer’s works their own interpretations of sexuality, marriage, identity, and the roles of Victorian women as spouses of Army officers.

Among the more distinctive, if little known, historical efforts of the late twentieth century was *Custer and the Little Bighorn: A Psychobiographical Inquiry* (1981) by Charles K. Hofling. A psychiatrist by training, Hofling had served during the Korean War as chief of the Neuropsychiatric Outpatient Clinic of the 3380th US Air Force Hospital. He became interested in Custer while treating a noncommissioned officer, whose Cheyenne grandfather had fought at the Little Bighorn. "When I was on duty in the evening," Hofling recalled some 30 years later, "and after we had gotten to know each other, he would sometimes tell me stories of the Plains Indians and especially of the battle which occurred at the Little Bighorn River." What surprised Hofling was that "Custer and the 7th Cavalry were, for the most part, mere foils for the feats of the Cheyenne heroes and their Sioux allies." His patient "indicated very clearly the special, almost unique place which this encounter occupied in [tribal] history." In what Hofling characterized as "the long history of Indian disappointments, occasional successes, but repeated defeats at the hands of the whites," the Little Bighorn battle represented "a dramatic victory" for his patient (Hofling 1981).

Hofling maintained an interest in Custer for most of his career, searching for "counter-motives, presumably unconscious, in an attempt to account for the ups and downs in Custer's career." He preferred the more scientific method of psychoanalysts like Franz Alexander, who studied "the cyclic pattern" of unconscious factors interacting with "ambitious strivings." In conducting his own investigation of Custer's actions in 1876, Hofling created a psychological profile of his life from childhood until his death. Both Custer's youth and his military service received very thorough attention, with commentary at several points about the connection between his private behavior and his public actions. "It is fair to say," Hofling added in his assessment, "that no thorough understanding of George Armstrong Custer is possible without a close consideration of his marriage to Elizabeth" (Hofling 1981).

Hofling's desire to know all that he could about the behavior of Custer led to an examination of Mari Sandoz's statement that "the Fort Sill medical records showed Custer and his brother Tom to have received treatment for syphilis in 1868 and 1869," which was the time period around the notorious Battle of the Washita. Hofling qualified this reference by saying that "Sandoz's claim has been demonstrated to be incorrect, at least for the years stated." Yet Hofling found that "it appears that some of the officers must have believed that Custer had had sexual contact with an Indian girl in camp." Perhaps it was the young Cheyenne woman Monahsetah (also called Me-o-tsi by her relatives), whom Custer took from the Cheyenne camp after the battle. Hofling concluded: "These are merely hints that there may have been a different type of woman for Custer, one which was regarded eventually as a sexual object" (Hofling 1981).

Perhaps the most acclaimed biography of Custer ever written appeared in 1988, when Robert M. Utley completed his *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier*. "Over a span of years now approaching fifty," wrote Utley, "I never succeeded in penetrating the enigma of George Armstrong Custer, in either his mortal or his immortal incarnation." In his youth a summer seasonal ranger at the Custer battlefield, Utley reminded his readers of the relationship of his subject to the times in which writers lived. "Almost overnight," said Utley of the publication of Deloria's polemic against Custer, the general "became the symbol for all the iniquities perpetrated by whites on Indians – and some that were not." The awkward encounters at the Custer centennial ceremonies still haunted the author's mind. "The speeches [at the 1976 commemoration] proceeded in front of a nervous audience," recalled Utley a dozen years later, "ringed by Indian activists in red berets with folded arms and menacing visages." Utley thus believed that "for each generation of Americans since 1876, the mythic Custer tapped deep and revealing intellectual and emotional currents. He was what they wanted him to be" (Utley 1988).

Utley proceeded to explain to his readers how he had rationalized the positive and negative images of Custer. In so doing he paraphrased the conclusion of Michael Sievers a decade earlier: "The army lost because the Indians won." Utley, who also had served as the chief historian for the National Park Service, declared that "to ascribe defeat entirely to military failings is to devalue Indian strength and leadership." For those who still admired the defeated commander of the 7th Cavalry, Utley examined what Custer did right at the Little Bighorn. "Despite the consequences," said Utley, "the decision to attack on June 25 was sound." The author believed that Custer's troops "were tired ... but no more so than normal on campaign." As for the general's "failings," said Utley, "combat leadership was not one." He contended that "a charge by the eight companies of Custer and Reno into the upper end of the village would almost certainly have stampeded the Indians" (Utley 1988).

Utley then criticized Custer's superior officers for failing to protect his command. "Ponderous columns could not catch Indians if they did not want to be caught," observed Utley, and "after Custer's death, none of the remaining commanders knew how to fight Indians, at least Plains Indians." Nor did Generals Terry, Gibbon, and Crook know how to "gather and use intelligence in a thoughtful way." Under such circumstances, said Utley, "George Armstrong Custer does not deserve the indictment that history has imposed on him for his actions at the Little Bighorn." Instead, wrote Utley, "Custer died the victim less of bad judgment than of bad luck" (Utley 1988).

What made Utley's biography of the commander of the 7th Cavalry distinctive was his transition at the end of *Cavalier in Buckskin* to a frank assessment of the reality and the myth. "What lifted Custer above the [military] competition," claimed Utley, "was publicity." In an analysis that

bordered on an indictment of Custer that would have done any revisionist proud, Utley wrote that "Indian fighters who failed to get inside the Indian mind and fathom how their foe thought and why he behaved as he did could not truly excel at their calling." Instead, wrote Utley, "what was wanted ... was not so much Indian fighters as 'Indian thinkers.'" Despite Utley's youthful admiration for Errol Flynn's valiant portrayal of Custer in *They Died With Their Boots On*, he had to conclude: "Custer never thought like an Indian." As proof, Utley contended that "on the frontier, combat did not happen often enough to make up for [Custer's] deficiencies of temperament and commitment." The commander of the 7th Cavalry "was not the country's greatest Indian fighter, or hunter, or plainsman." Utley then closed his book on the historical figure that shaped his entire professional life: "The real Custer, however, is not the significant Custer" (Utley 1988).

Questioning the Custer legacy, rather than merely praising or condemning it, became the scholarly style of the 1990s. Less enamored of the movement toward multicultural and multidisciplinary perspectives were the people whom Brian Dippie identified in a 1991 article as the "Custer Buffs." Dippie, author of *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (1976), wrote that "most Custer buffs are military historians, far more comfortable working with white sources than with Indian testimony." As a student of the artwork of Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell, Dippie assumed that for *aficionados* of the Custer story, "the Indians cannot be the reason for Custer's defeat, a premise reflecting the biases of 1876." He then examined the less enthusiastic response of his fellow historians to the Little Bighorn narrative. "Buffs do not write for academics," said the University of Victoria professor, "they write for one another and are published by specialist presses or themselves." Custer admirers believed, said Dippie, that "partisanship is not something to be avoided; it is to be worn as a badge of honor and so proudly proclaimed." For Dippie, raised in western Canada and aware of the iconography of frontier heroes, "this obsession with minutiae, the despair of academic historians, is the definition of buffdom" (Dippie 1991).

The irony of scholarship in the 1990s, then, was its retreat from popular culture's embrace of the villainous Custer in search of a more nuanced image. Historian Paul Andrew Hutton edited a collection of essays and primary sources entitled *The Custer Reader* (1992), which included documents from figures often quoted by scholars but rarely made accessible to the general public. Academics shared space in Hutton's anthology with one of Custer's last publications; his 1874 essay, "Battling the Sioux on the Yellowstone." Edward S. Godfrey, a young lieutenant in Custer's 7th Cavalry, lived to write a lengthy treatise in 1908 entitled, "Custer's Last Battle," that served as the most thorough statement of affairs before and during the Little Bighorn fight. Kate Bighead, a young Cheyenne woman in 1876, recounted to Dr. Thomas Marquis nearly 50 years later her reminiscences of the conflict,

in particular the chaos of death and the disfigurement of soldiers' bodies. Most intriguing to students of Custer, especially those who explored his private behavior, was her reference to her cousin, "a young woman named Me-o-tzi," who "went often with [Custer] in finding trails of Indians." Kate Bighead claimed that her relative "said that Long Hair [the Cheyenne name for Custer] was her husband, that he had promised to come back to her, and that she would wait for him." Me-o-tzi "waited seven years" for his return, but "then he was killed." Her grief, said Marquis, would endure for the rest of her life (Hutton 1992).

Scholars of Custer by this time had accepted the premise that he had not been faithful to his wife, which was an interpretive shift that drove the narrative of Shirley A. Leckie's *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth* (1993). Four decades after Marguerite Merington had utilized Elizabeth's personal correspondence to fashion her "intimate history" of the Custers, Leckie wrote what many consider the definitive biography of the famous widow. Unlike Merington, Leckie placed Elizabeth Custer in the context of what she called "an age of unprecedented corruption," even as Libbie herself endured "severe depression." The heartaches caused her to recognize that her fellow citizens "needed desperately to extract heroic lessons from that tragedy" at the Little Bighorn. Even more provocative was Leckie's claim that Elizabeth's goal, "stated over and over, had been to transform [Custer] into a boy's hero." In so doing, said Leckie, "she had sought to inspire youth to become what she claimed he had been" (Leckie 1993).

Elizabeth Custer's survival by 67 years of her husband's death, and her gifts as a writer and promoter of his legacy, provided Leckie with much evidence of the "puzzle" that had stymied contemporaries and scholars alike. Elizabeth, said Leckie, "began her marriage determined to convert her husband and create a Christian home." Leckie poignantly described her desire to raise "Christian children who would mature to become 'cornerstones in the great church of God.'" Yet when he died in battle, George and Elizabeth were heavily in debt, obligating her to spend "years extricating herself from a financial morass." What allowed Elizabeth to do so and to live comfortably in mid-town Manhattan was the "invoking of her power as a model widow, her nation's equivalent to the British model widow, Queen Victoria" (Leckie 1993).

Once Elizabeth Custer recognized the public craving for idealized tales of her husband and of their life together, she became another of what Leckie described as the "inveterate mythmakers" of the Victorian era. "The person she wanted most to convince," claimed Leckie, "was herself." The incarnation of the "Boy General" represented for Elizabeth's readers "the fulfillment of her own inner emotional and ideological needs." Yet Leckie sensed something tragic in the loss of her husband. "Almost sixty years after Elizabeth's death, much of her work has eroded" (Leckie 1993).

In a critique as melancholy as it was insightful, Leckie reminded her readers: "If one values the ability of individuals to live honestly and confront the truth, then one finds little to celebrate in the Widow Custer's achievements." Elizabeth, wrote Leckie, "a woman without parents, siblings, or children, had done her best to transform her dead husband into the ideal spouse and family man of the ideal family she never had." Leckie could only conclude of her biographical subject: "Her life was full of loneliness." As for those who admired her husband, Leckie wrote: "So, too, has the figure of George Armstrong Custer darkened, now that Elizabeth no longer stands guard to repair and polish his image." For all who sought the meaning of Elizabeth's life, said Leckie, "the dreamer has gone, and her dream is no longer our only reality" (Leckie 1993).

The National Park Service also recognized in the 1990s the need to change its thinking about Custer. The newly renamed Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument hosted a symposium in the fall of 1994, with its goal "a scholarly interdisciplinary approach to a broad spectrum of topics related to the Little Bighorn." Charles E. Rankin, the editor of *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, organized the proceedings that became the volume *Legacy: New Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (1996). "As a consequence of new scholarship, new investigative techniques, new evidence, and especially because of a growing Native American insistence on inclusion in the Little Bighorn story," said Rankin, "the conventional interpretation has become hopelessly outmoded." The NPS invited "scholars and writers from a broad range of disciplines," among these "Native American authors, historians, and narrators." The NPS solicited "approaches ranging from the anthropological to the myth historical and art historical." Rankin and his colleagues came away from their deliberations with a conclusion about the park that spoke to the larger paradigm shift in American society. "The Little Bighorn," wrote Rankin, "says as much about flawed federal policies and national attitudes towards settlement, Indian prowess, national mythology and a standing military as it does about individual personalities and unique circumstances" (Rankin 1996).

This sense of what the historian Richard White called a "middle ground" between the polarities in American Indian history of "discovery" versus "conquest" did not hold at the Little Bighorn. In 1996, Gerard Baker, superintendent of the Little Bighorn park unit and a member of the Hidatsa tribe of North Dakota, sought designs for what the *New York Times* called "a monument to be built on Last Stand Hill to commemorate the deaths of the 50 or so Indians in the battle." Baker also agreed to allow descendants of the Cheyenne and Lakota warriors to stage what he called an "Attack at Dawn" ceremony, wherein the Indians would swarm the hill once more and "count coup" on the Custer obelisk (Brooke 1997).

Into this latest moment of crisis over Custer's memory came a group of scholars from the Organization of American Historians (OAH), who

accepted the NPS's invitation in 1997 to tour the Little Bighorn site and the Civil War battlefield of Antietam. Janny Scott of the *New York Times* accompanied the OAH team to Montana, noting that the NPS "has had trouble keeping up with recent changes in the study of history." The academics agreed that "the Park Service had successfully transformed the site from what they called a shrine to Gen. George A. Custer to a more neutral enterprise." Unfortunately, wrote Scott, "some of its Indian interpreters were now erring in the opposite direction." Paul Hutton, one of the OAH team members, characterized "one young ranger's talk as 'replete with gross oversimplification and a total misstatement of fact.'" The renowned Custer scholar told Scott: "He [the ranger] was supposed to be doing Indian and soldier weaponry and tactics." Instead the interpreter "devoted two-thirds of his talk to a discussion of repression of Indian peoples and how the current reform in the welfare act was a continuation of this warfare." Hutton could not contain his anger at the incident, employing a metaphor about weaponry: "I went ballistic" (Scott 1997).

### The New Millennium

Hutton's lament about the legacy of revisionism at the Little Bighorn monument came just before another moment of change in America's historical consciousness: the attacks on the United States that occurred on September 11, 2001, which were launched by Islamic militants connected to the radical Al-Qaeda movement. Literary scholar Michael Elliott noted that "since 9/11 the historical landscape has become charged with a version of patriotism that emphasizes national unity and cohesion to a greater degree than in any of the years since the dawn of the Vietnam era." Elliott conceded that "my post-Vietnam education had eschewed military topics and instead focused on social movements, favoring 'culture' over war, diversity over violence" (Elliott 2007).

Like many academics, Elliott expressed displeasure when the United States retaliated against the Al-Qaeda operatives with strikes in Afghanistan and Iraq. "Americans have once again recognized," wrote Elliott, "that their nation constitutes an imperial power and have again become divided over the correctness, the costs, and the ultimate purpose of American military power exercised overseas." With his 2007 book *Custerology*, Elliott contended that his research on the Little Bighorn battle "has taught me the necessity of being more cognizant of the histories of military violence." Elliott also realized that "we cannot avoid further military action by ignoring the presence of militarism in our historical landscape" (Elliott 2007).

Elliott found that the story of the Little Bighorn "is well-suited to our age of small-scale conflicts." He cited as evidence his attendance at the 2003 dedication ceremonies at the battlefield for the Indian Memorial.

“One did not have to look hard,” wrote Elliott, “for everywhere one went, devotion to the contemporary United States – and particularly to the military defense of the nation – was on display.” Russell Means, an Indian activist who had done much to alter the nation’s perspective on the battle and Custer’s demise, caught Elliott and most other attendees by surprise with his plea for “peace and unity” at the ceremonies. “Means’ castigation of ethnic separatism,” said Elliott, “was hardly what one might expect from someone so long involved in efforts to win tribal self-determination.” Elliott could not escape the irony of the moment when he wrote: “There was a time when this kind of demonstration of U.S. patriotic sentiment would itself have been a cause for celebration among non-Indians” (Elliott 2006).

Historian Tim Lehman, a professor at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, explored in 2010 the imagery of Custer and the Indian Wars beyond the moment of 9/11. He paid close attention to such international phenomena as the reenactment of the Last Stand in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Lehman found that the former Army scout employed between 75 and 100 Lakota, most notably the famed Sitting Bull. In an amusing twist on the legacy of conquest, Lehman wrote of the recollection of Black Elk, a young Lakota who had fought at the Little Bighorn, performed with Buffalo Bill, and then gained fame when the ethnographer John G. Neihardt published his interviews in *Black Elk Speaks* (1931). “According to Black Elk,” wrote Lehman, England’s Queen Victoria “did not care much about seeing the white man in the show. She only shook hands with the Indians.” Lehman further noted that authors such as Deloria brought attention to Custer “as a symbol of overbearing arrogance in pursuit of misguided national interest.” In making the connection between Custer and his own time, Lehman wrote: “From the jungles of Southeast Asia to the deserts of Baghdad, American soldiers have referred to treacherous and hostile lands as ‘Indian country,’ and have sometimes considered Third World peoples as inferior beings” (Lehman 2010).

Absorbed by one of the worst military defeats in American history, writers attempt to tell the story of the Little Bighorn without taking sides. Nathaniel Philbrick, a New England author better known for his work in maritime history, wrote *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (2010). His narrative covered much of the same territory as fellow author James Donovan’s *A Terrible Glory: Custer and the Little Bighorn* (2008). Nevertheless, Philbrick did offer a telling comment: “At times during my research, it seemed as if I had entered a hall of mirrors” (2010, xxii). Thomas Powers, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and an expert in the history of American intelligence-gathering activities, likewise gave a new look to the Custer legend in *The Killing of Crazy Horse* (2010). His book brought to mind for a *New York Times* reviewer Powers’s earlier work on the origins of the Central Intelligence Agency. Said Evan Thomas of the

*Times*: “The CIA was, at least in the early years of the Cold War, a tribe as mysterious and exotic as the Great Plains Sioux of the 1870s” (Thomas 2010).

The plethora of documentation and scholarly works on the Little Bighorn inspired Debora Buchholtz’s *The Battle of the Greasy Grass/Little Bighorn: Custer’s Last Stand in Memory, History, and Popular Culture* (2012). As part of the Routledge series on “Critical Moments in American History,” Buchholtz’s work attempted to “give students a window into the historians’ craft.” A new generation could “set out on their own journey, to debate the ideas presented, interpret primary sources, and to reach their own conclusions.” The author advised her audience: “By incorporating and contextualizing the competing voices and discordant memories suggested by the distinct ways of labeling the battle already noted, the book aims to convey the contingency of history.” Buchholtz included many of the themes examined by her predecessors, including scholarly treatments, popular iconography, reenactments, and the NPS’s quest to satisfy competing visions of Custer as heroic and villainous. Faithful to her mandate to encourage student dialogue rather than to draw her own conclusions, Buchholtz reminded her readers that “all battle accounts are best approached as constructed or manufactured” (Buchholtz 2012).

## Conclusion

Of the many lessons that emerge from analysis of some 14 decades of the Little Bighorn story, it is clear that the facts sometimes mean less than what the viewer, reader, or park visitor wish the story to be. While the quest to know Custer may never end, it is instructive to read the 2001 opinion piece by Allen Barra in the *New York Times*, entitled “Ideas and Trends: Shape-Shifting at Little Bighorn.” When Barra first visited the site as a child of eight, “John F. Kennedy was president and Gen. George Armstrong Custer was still a hero.” What struck Barra upon his return as an adult were the changes in interpretation and in the landscape itself. “Thirty-eight years later,” said Barra, “there is no chance of getting lost near Little Bighorn.” Barra recalled the traumatic events of 1876, when “in Philadelphia the news hit particularly hard,” as “Custer had planned to attend the [Centennial] party after mopping up out west.” Now Barra would read that “many share the view of the Indian historian Vine Deloria, Jr., who has called Custer the Eichmann of the Plains” (Barra 2001).

Yet charges such as this failed to dim the luster of the Little Bighorn. From the days after Custer’s death, when Whitman could write of the saintliness of the slain officer, through subsequent generations of scholars and popularizers, the ghost of 1876 seems never to rest. Authors as different as Elizabeth Custer, Robert Utley, and Vine Deloria, Jr., gained fame and fortune in their quests to valorize or demonize the same man, responding at each turn to the

sentiments of their time. Historians still turn to the battlefield in search of a hero, a villain, or a complex and conflicted symbol of America's past. One wonders what Custer would make of all this. Perhaps the savvy traveler, Barra, said it better than all the others: "Judging from all the traffic jams and garish billboards, it's hard to shake the feeling that no matter who inherits the land, Custer may have the last laugh after all" (Barra 2001).

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# Index

- Adams, Alexander, 60–61  
Adams, Cassily, 408–11  
Adams, David Wallace, 117  
Adams, Donald K., 174  
Adams, Kevin, 148, 155, 161, 164  
Adams, Mary, 182–3  
Alexander, Franz, 495  
Allison Commission, 124  
Altman, Robert, 438  
Ambrose, Stephen, 63, 350  
American Indian Movement (AIM),  
462, 475–7  
Anderson, Harry, 246  
Anderson, Ian, 351  
Andrist, Ralph, K., 345  
Anheuser-Busch Brewing Company, 1,  
409–10, 413  
Antietam, Battle of, 215, 303  
Apache, 43, 45, 84, 87, 93, 94–6,  
195, 231, 390  
Appomattox surrender, 225  
Arapaho, 1, 19, 22, 35, 38,  
44–7, 49–52, 54, 231–2,  
236, 319, 370–371, 375,  
405, 408  
Arikara, 16, 19, 45, 47, 68, 92, 94,  
96–107, 254, 303–4, 306, 319,  
383, 430, 462  
Armstrong, William, 123  
assimilation, 24, 36, 56, 67, 113–26,  
197, 351  
Assiniboine, 47  
Astor, John Jacob, 273  
Athearn, Robert, 131  
Autry, Gene, 489  
Aztec, 93  
Babbitt, Bruce, 479  
Bacon, Daniel, 265–7  
Baker, Eugene, 294  
Baker, Gerard, 324, 478–9, 499  
Baldwin, Frank, 153  
Ball, Eve, 96  
Bannock, 76, 87  
Barnard, Sandy, 326–32, 336, 435, 455  
Barnes, Jeff, 134  
Barnett, Louise, 97, 161  
Barra, Allen, 502–3  
Barry, D. M., 435  
Barth, Alan, 387, 401

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- Battle Ridge, 3, 322, 324–34  
Bear Hunter, 289  
Beard, Charles, 487  
Beck, Paul, N., 95  
Becker, Otto, 408–11  
Bederman, Gail, 408  
Belknap, Carrie Tomlinson, 125  
Belknap, William, 124–5, 297  
Bell, Alexander Graham, 1  
Bennett, Connie, 453–4  
Bent, George, 42, 48  
Benteen, Frederick, 3, 54, 182, 238,  
246–51, 254–7, 270, 299–300,  
302–16, 319–21, 325–6, 328,  
333, 341, 380  
Berger, Thomas, 413, 416, 474  
Biddle, Ellen, M., 173  
Bierstadt, Albert, 273  
Bigelow, John, 159  
Big Foot, 257–8, 327  
Big Head, Kate (Antelope Woman),  
376, 378, 497–8  
Billington, Monroe Lee, 159  
Bingham, Wallace, 155  
Birtle, Andrew, J., 163  
Black Buffalo Woman, 62–4, 66  
Black Elk, 25, 28, 44, 81, 84, 319,  
350, 381, 501  
Black Hills, 1, 4, 6, 13, 16, 24, 25,  
27, 29, 37–8, 46–52, 124, 136,  
138, 242, 295–301, 346, 353  
Black Hills Expedition, 229–30,  
241–3, 253, 295  
Black Kettle, 190, 197, 237–8,  
250–251, 288, 292  
Black Shawl, 66  
Blackstone, Sarah, 424  
Blair, Austin, 216–17  
Bloody Knife, 96–8, 101–3, 307  
Blue Bead, 436  
Blummer, Joseph, 447  
Boag, Peter, 179–81  
Bobo, Edwin, 325, 331  
Booher, Barbara, 478–9  
Bourke, John, 75–6, 120, 153  
Boyd, Frances, 160, 173, 174, 178  
Boye, Alan, 346–7  
Boyer, Mitch, 97, 99, 101, 103,  
105, 335  
Bozeman Trail, 25, 49, 130–131,  
137, 142, 289  
Braatz, Timothy, 480  
Brackett, Albert, 467  
Brady, Cyrus, 103, 305–6, 407  
brag skins, 373–4, 377–8, 380  
Brands, H. W., 122  
Brandy Station, Battle of, 216, 266  
Brave Bear, 343  
Bray, Kingsley, 26, 66–7, 326, 328,  
332, 334–5, 350  
Bray, Robert, 451–3  
Brisbin, James, 298  
Britten, Thomas, A., 95–6  
Brown, Alexander, 369, 375  
Brown, Dee, 35, 83, 96, 173–4, 345,  
353, 472  
Brown, Eliza, 182–3, 266, 427  
Brown, Joseph Epes, 14  
Bruce, Thomas, R., 424  
Brust, James, 326–32, 336, 435  
Buchholtz, Debora, 502  
Budd, C. J., 409  
Buecker, Thomas, 134, 158  
Buel, C. C., 271  
Buell, George, 467  
buffalo, 4, 13–15, 47, 49, 65, 71,  
83, 231  
Buffalo Bill's Wild West (see Cody,  
William)  
Buffalo Calf Road Woman, 170, 183  
buffalo soldiers, 88–9, 121, 157–60,  
230, 290, 294  
Buford, John, 189–90, 196  
Bulkley, John, L., 273  
Bull Bear, 17  
Bull Run, Battle of, 214  
Bunting III, Josiah, 122  
burials, 270, 273, 325, 437, 445–6,  
450–452, 463–70  
Burnette, Robert, 353  
Burnham, Philip, 93  
Bush, George, H. W., 478  
Butler, Anne, M., 156–7  
Butler, James, 331

- Cahill, Cathleen, 115  
 Calhoun, Charles, W., 125  
 Calhoun, James, 269, 324, 327–9, 332  
 Calhoun, John, 114  
 Calhoun Hill, 321–4, 326–34  
 Calloway, Colin, G., 104  
 Campbell, Ben Nighthorse, 478  
 Campbell, Walter (see Vestal, Stanley)  
 camp followers, 143, 172, 174–5, 178  
 Camp Supply, 162, 250, 292–3  
 Camp, Walter, 6, 323–5, 327, 330  
 Canada, 4, 30, 60, 65, 257, 347–8, 350–351  
 Carlisle Indian School, 117  
 Carr, Eugene, A., 238, 291–2  
 Carrington, Frances, 173, 174  
 Carrington, Henry, 25, 161, 173  
 Carrington, Margaret, 172–4  
 Cartwright, Ralph, 447  
 Carver, Doc, 425  
 Cash, Johnny, 5, 474  
 Catlin, George, 15  
 Cedar Creek, Battle of, 223  
 Centennial Campaign, 2, 4, 145, 190, 198, 229, 253–6, 295–301, 388–400, 488  
 centennial commemoration, 1, 387, 391, 502  
 Chalfant, William, 235  
 Chandler, Melbourne, 246  
 Chandler, Zachariah, 124  
 Cheyenne  
     alliances, 2, 19–23, 45–52, 286, 405  
     culture, 34–52  
     Little Bighorn, 3–4, 300, 305–13, 319–37, 445–50, 455, 462–80, 485–503  
     memories, 369–83, 453  
     representations and portrayals, 408–16, 423–5, 430, 435–9  
     surrender, 341–54  
     warfare, 1, 54–62, 71–2, 77–86, 92–104, 117, 145, 231–9, 248–9, 288–98, 388–400  
     Washita, 229–30, 236–9, 249–52, 291–4, 299  
     Chief Joseph, 55, 197, 256, 348  
     Chivington, John, M., 288  
     cholera, 47, 235, 490  
     Christian, Garna, 159  
     Cisco, Johnny, 266, 277  
     Civil Rights movement, 81, 420  
     Civil War, 88, 149, 189–92, 196–8, 202, 211–27, 302–3, 345, 401, 430  
     Clark, Michael, J., 159  
     Cloud, Barbara, 390  
     Clymer Commission, 125, 297  
     Cody, William, 4, 70, 351, 414–15, 419, 423–40, 465, 501  
     Coffman, Edward, 118, 131, 133, 154, 164  
     Cold War, 79, 259, 489–91, 502  
     Collins, John, R., 479  
     Comanche, 43, 45, 78, 194, 202, 294  
     Comanche (horse), 437  
     Connell, Evan, S., 74, 97, 321, 397  
     Connor, Melissa, A., 101, 454–5  
     Connor, Patrick, E. 289  
     Conquering Bear, 24, 48, 287  
     Cook, James, H., 412–13  
     Cooke, Phillip, 189, 191  
     Cooke, William, 250, 309, 320  
     Cooper, James Fennimore, 414  
     Cooper, Wycliffe, 233  
     Corbin, H. C., 150  
     Cortés, Hernán, 93  
     Cotter, John, 449  
     counting coup, 18, 41, 77–8, 286, 373  
     Court, James, 454, 476  
     Cozzens, Peter, 120  
     Crawford, Jack, 425, 440  
     Crawford, Samuel, 293  
     Crazy Horse  
         death, 4, 349–50, 347–51, 501  
         life, 2, 19, 25, 26, 28, 54, 55, 62–7, 70, 289–90, 294, 297–8, 389  
         Little Bighorn, 322, 326, 332–4  
     Crisp, James, 410–411  
     Crittenden, John, 327

- Crook, George, 2, 4, 27, 29, 57, 76, 87, 94, 96, 120, 153–4, 183, 192, 195–6, 256, 295–9, 341, 346, 389–91, 399, 496
- Croon, Brian, 104, 106
- Crow, 4, 7, 16, 19–20, 27, 43–6, 92, 94, 96–107, 254, 304, 306, 319, 405, 428–30, 435–40, 462, 469
- Crow's Nest, 2
- Curley, 96–7, 99–106, 325, 428
- Custer Battlefield (see Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument)
- Custer, Boston, 269, 335
- Custer, Brice, 478
- Custer, Elizabeth Bacon, 7, 80, 160, 173, 174, 176–82, 234, 248–9, 264–81, 313, 319, 396, 406–7, 415, 426–8, 437, 464, 469–71, 487, 490, 494–5, 498–9, 502
- Custer, George Armstrong  
     burial, 270, 273, 445, 466  
     courtship and marriage, 264–8  
     death, 3, 173, 268–72, 316, 318–37, 343, 376, 387–97, 404  
     memoir, 6, 231, 243  
     military career, 2–3, 27–9, 49–50, 54, 57, 80, 92, 96–7, 153, 182, 188, 194–202, 211–27, 229–43, 246–55, 233–5, 246–56, 285–316  
     myth, 5, 272–81, 404–20, 423–40, 462–80, 485–503  
     political activities, 97, 102, 106, 125, 217–18, 268, 297  
     West Point, 212–14, 266
- Custer National Cemetery, 7, 30, 323, 327, 446, 451, 463, 465–71, 478
- Custer, Nevin, 434
- Custer's Last Stand (See Battle of the Little Bighorn)
- Custer's Revenge* (video game), 417–20
- Custer, Thomas, 179–80, 268–9, 466, 495
- Darling, Roger, 101, 336–7
- Dawes Act, 116
- Deep Ravine, 3, 323–4, 325–31, 333–6, 476
- Deland, C. E., 103
- Delaware, 232
- Deloria, Ella, 14, 21
- Deloria, Vine, Jr., 350, 405, 430, 474, 492–3, 496, 501–2
- DeMallie, Raymond, J., 14, 17, 21, 23, 84, 352
- Denig, Edwin, 15
- De Rudio, Charles, 308
- De Smet, Pierre-Jean, 400
- DiMarco, Louis, 119
- Dingell, John, 478
- Dinges, Bruce, 149, 161
- Dippie, Brian, 7, 114–15, 388, 392, 416, 424, 432, 437, 474, 497
- disease, 47, 49
- Dobak, William, 156, 158
- Doerner, John, 479
- dog soldiers, 39–43, 49, 231, 238
- domesticity, 133, 143–4, 146, 161–2, 171–2, 174–6, 264–80, 407, 420
- Donahue, Michael, 323–5, 328, 335, 337, 448
- Donovan, James, 94, 102, 254, 285, 296, 304, 315, 321, 334–5, 394, 501
- Donovan, Terrence, 315
- Dorman, Isaiah, 491
- Downey, Fairfax, 93–4, 98
- Duffus, R. L., 487
- Dull Knife, 4, 50, 72, 343, 346–7
- Dunlay, Thomas, W., 93, 98, 106
- Eastman, Charles, 34
- Eastman, Elaine, 351
- Eastman, Mary, 172
- Edgerly, Winfield, 311, 319
- Ege, Robert, J., 248, 491
- Eisenhower, Dwight, 122
- Ellingworth, William, 242–3
- Elliot, Joel, 237–8, 248–51, 292, 310, 315, 490
- Elliott, Michael, 430, 432, 439, 486, 500–501
- Ellis, Richard, N., 96, 120
- Enss, Chris, 427–8

- Evans, Andrew, 291, 294  
 Evans, John, 125, 288  
 Everett, Melfine Fox, 105  
 Ewers, John, C., 21, 74, 80, 96  
 Ewert, Theodore, 155  
  
 factory system, 114  
*Far West* steamer, 97, 299  
 Faust, Drew Gilpin, 430  
 Fetterman Massacre, 25, 49, 66, 161, 173, 289–90, 295–6, 298, 436  
 Fifield, Fanny, 266  
 Finckle, August, 325, 331, 332  
 Finerty, John, 133, 423–4  
 Finley, Jeremiah, 325, 331, 332  
 firearms, 3, 79–80, 198–203, 224, 334, 455, 457–8  
 Fisk Wagon Train Fight, 68  
 Fixico, Donald, 113  
 Flemming, W. J., 425  
 Fletcher, Marvin, 158  
 Flipper, Henry, O., 158  
 Flying Hawk, 333  
 Flynn, Errol, 410, 437, 497  
 Foner, Jack, D., 157  
 Foote, Kenneth, 464  
 Foote, Lorien, 161  
 Ford, John, 74  
 Forsyth, John, 257–8  
 Fort Abercrombie, 137  
 Fort Bennett, 136, 145, 376  
 Fort Benton, 136, 139  
 Fort Berthold, 68, 98, 136  
 Fort Bliss, 259, 410  
 Fort Bridger, 140  
 Fort Buford, 4, 58, 134, 136, 144–5  
 Fort C. F. Smith, 25, 137, 289–90  
 Fort Concho, 150  
 Fort Custer, 134, 138, 145, 466–8  
 Fort D. A. Russell, 137, 139  
 Fort Dodge, 249–50, 292  
 Fort Douglas, 159  
 Fort Ellis, 2, 140, 141, 145  
 Fort Fetterman, 2, 130–134, 137–40, 143, 145, 296  
 Fort Grant, 410  
 Fort Hale, 136, 145  
 Fort Hall, 135, 140  
 Fort Harker, 248  
 Fort Hays, 232–3  
 Fort Kearny, 48, 135–7, 388  
 Fort Keogh, 138, 145  
 Fort Laramie, 18–20, 23, 24–5, 47–8, 134–6, 138–40, 143–5, 290, 412  
 Fort Laramie Treaty (1851), 18–20, 46–7, 51, 287  
 Fort Laramie Treaty (1868), 1, 24–6, 29, 49, 63, 68–9, 115, 137–8, 295, 439  
 Fort Larned, 232, 235, 248  
 Fort Leavenworth, 135, 136, 235, 287, 409, 466  
 Fort Lincoln, 2, 4, 136–7, 139, 145, 170, 177–82, 240–241, 257, 267–9, 275, 295–7  
 Fort Lyon, 291  
 Fort McKinney, 138  
 Fort McPherson, 137, 145  
 Fort Meade, 134, 138–9, 145, 253, 257, 437  
 Fort Monroe, 215  
 Fort Phil Kearny, 25, 66, 137, 142, 172, 173, 289–90, 296  
 Fort Pierre, 135  
 Fort Randall, 134–6, 140, 145  
 Fort Ransom, 137  
 Fort Reno, 25, 137, 289  
 Fort Rice, 136, 140, 145, 491  
 Fort Richardson, 388  
 Fort Ridgely, 136  
 Fort Riley, 136, 229, 230, 247–8, 267, 277, 279, 290–291, 410, 490  
 Fort Robinson, 4, 50, 63, 65, 70, 134, 138–41, 159, 343, 346  
 forts, 49, 130–146, 202–3, 287–93  
 Fort Sanders, 137  
 Fort Sedgwick, 233–4  
 Fort Seward, 137, 141, 145  
 Fort Shaw, 145  
 Fort Sill, 76, 125, 294, 495  
 Fort Sissertown, 145  
 Fort Steele, 137  
 Fort Stevenson, 136

- Fort Sully, 25, 49, 134, 136,  
140–142, 145  
Fort Thompson, 136  
Fort Totten, 137, 145  
Fort Union, 136, 144, 388  
Fort Wadsworth, 137, 491  
Fort Wallace, 233–4, 248  
Fort Wise Treaty, 49  
Fort Yates, 69, 136, 145  
Fouch, John, H., 466  
Fowler, Arlen, 158  
Fox, Richard, 101, 320, 328–31,  
334–6, 453–6, 476  
Frackelton, Will, 435–6  
Frazer, Robert, 133–4, 152  
Freeman, Raymond, 475  
French, Thomas, 307  
Friendship Treaty, 46–7, 52  
Friends of the Indian, 24, 116  
Frost, Lawrence, 427–8  
Fry, James, 271  
Furber, John, G., 410  
fur trade, 15, 17–18, 135
- Galaxy* magazine, 6, 231, 270  
Gall, 2, 19, 26, 28, 54, 55, 67–71,  
332–3, 350–351, 469  
Garnier, Baptiste, 412  
“Garry Owen” (song), 250, 258, 416  
Gates, John, 148, 163  
Gatling guns, 3, 202–3, 253, 296  
Genetin-Pilawa, Joseph, 116–17  
genocide, 48–9  
Geronimo, 96  
Gettysburg, Battle of, 190, 218–19,  
303, 387  
Ghost Dance, 5, 15, 59, 70, 81, 190,  
257–8, 343–4, 351–4  
Gibbon, Guy, 21  
Gibbon, John, 2, 94, 97, 98, 194, 199,  
256, 293, 295–300, 394–5, 496  
Gibson, Katherine, 173, 174, 179  
Glassberg, David, 464  
Global War on Terror, 260, 500–501  
Goddard, Calvin, 447  
Godfrey, Edward, 251, 255, 258, 271,  
311, 319, 407, 437, 469–70, 497
- Goes Ahead, 99, 105  
Goetzmann, William, 151  
gold, 1, 24, 47, 48, 50, 125, 134,  
138, 239, 242, 253, 287, 289,  
295, 494  
Graham, William, 80, 99, 319, 370,  
472, 489  
Gramsci, Antonio, 404–5  
Grandstaff, Mark, 119  
Grant, Orville, 125, 297, 392  
Grant, Ulysses, 1, 24, 113, 121–5,  
220–225, 248, 252–3, 267,  
269–70, 294–7, 303, 313–14,  
391–2, 396–8, 406  
Grattan, John, 24, 48, 135, 287  
Gray, John, 94, 98, 103–4, 124–5,  
320, 321, 331, 335, 336  
Greasy Grass, Battle of the (see Battle  
of the Little Bighorn)  
Great Cheyenne War, 50  
Great Sioux Reservation, 25, 49, 115,  
124, 136–8, 290, 351–2, 376  
Great Sioux War, 34, 57, 61, 64, 87,  
104, 116, 194, 342–50, 425  
Greene, Jerome, 35, 85, 120–121,  
136, 237, 249, 258, 285,  
318–19, 322–3, 331, 334, 348,  
353–4, 450, 453  
Gregg, David, 218  
Grenier, John, 87  
Grinnell, George, 34, 56, 71, 77–8,  
95, 343–4, 348, 433  
Gros Ventre, 46, 47  
Gulf War, 259–60
- Hagan, William, 116  
Hairy Moccasin, 99, 105  
Hale, Owen, 256–7  
Hall, Frank, 469  
Hall, Roger, 425  
Hamilton, James Starr, 155  
Hamilton, Louis, 249, 251  
Hammer, Kenneth, 100, 325, 330  
Hancock, Winfield Scott, 126,  
215, 229–30, 232–5, 248–9,  
290–291  
Harcey, Dennis, 104, 106

- Hardorff, Richard, 28, 86, 251, 325,  
     330, 334–5, 370–371  
 Hardwick, Tom, 428  
 Hare, Luther, 280, 308  
 Harney, William, 287–8, 290  
 Harrington, J. C., 449  
 Harris, William, 472–3  
 Hart, Richard, 475  
 Hart, William, 436, 470  
 Hassrick, Royal, B., 21, 81  
 Hatch, Thom, 97–8, 226, 326, 330,  
     334, 337  
 Hawley, Paul, 489–90  
 Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 171  
 Haycox, Ernest, 437  
 Hayden, Ferdinand, 140  
 Hazen, William, 239  
 He Dog, 332, 389  
 Hedren, Paul, L., 348, 424, 433, 435  
 Henry, B. William, 450, 453  
 Hiawatha, 55  
 Hidatsa, 499  
 High Backed Wolf, 45, 47  
 High Bull, 369, 375–6  
 Hinman, Eleanor, 25  
 Hirst, Adrian, E., 105  
 Hoagland, Alison, 132, 135–6  
 Hoebel, E. Adamson, 34, 71, 80  
 Hofling, Charles, K., 495  
 Hohlbrandt, Philip, 448  
 Hoig, Stan, 35, 85–6, 249  
 Holt, Elmert, 470  
 homesteading, 231  
 Hooker, Forestine Cooper, 184  
 Hooker, Joseph, 189, 216  
 horses, 19, 78–80, 193–6, 202–3, 291  
 Howard, John, 400  
 Howard, O. O., 160, 256, 348  
 Hoxie, Frederick, 116  
 Hoxie, Richard, 274  
 Hughes, Robert, 272–3, 407  
 Hump, 19  
 Huntington, Samuel, 117–18, 148  
 Hutton, Paul, 153–4, 163, 247, 251,  
     315, 415, 424, 497–8, 500  
 Hyde, George, 17, 18, 78, 81,  
     344, 353  
 Ia Drang, Battle of, 259  
 Indian agencies (see specific names  
     of reservations)  
 Indian Claims Commission (ICC),  
     50–51  
 Indian Memorial, 7, 475–80, 500  
 Indian Wars (see specific battles  
     and conflicts)  
 Ingraham, Prentiss, 424–5  
 Inman, Henry, 491  
 Innis, Ben, 98, 106  
 Interior Department, 51, 114–17,  
     123–6, 242, 257, 415, 468, 471  
 Iron Teeth Woman, 42  
 Isandhlwana, Battle of, 410–411  
  
 Jackson, Donald, 253  
 Jackson, Helen Hunt, 116  
 Jacobsen, Jacques, 93–4, 98  
 Jamieson, Perry, 191, 193  
 Jefferson, Thomas, 36  
 Jennings, Francis, 93  
 Jensen, Richard, 25, 30  
 Jim Crow laws, 159–60  
 Johnson, Andrew, 217, 248  
 Johnson, Dorothy, 438  
 Johnson, Willis Fletcher, 26, 58, 60  
 Jones, Okah, L., 93  
 Josephy, Alvin, M. Jr., 54–6, 474–5,  
     491–2  
  
 Kanipe, Daniel, 309, 320, 323–5, 327  
 Karsten, Peter, 148–9  
 Kasson, Jay, 424  
 Kaw, 235–6  
 Kazanjian, Howard, 427–8  
 Keach, Stacy, 438  
 Kearny, Phillip, 214–15  
 Kellogg, Mark, 328, 390, 393–4  
 Kellog, Susan, 171  
 Kemble, C. Robert, 148  
 Kennedy, John, 502  
 Kenner, Charles, 158–9  
 Keogh, Miles, 248, 254–5, 320–327,  
     330–334  
 Kicking Bear, 257  
 Kidder, Lyman, 233–4

- Killdeer Mountains, Battle of, 68  
 Kilpatrick, Jacquelyn, 415–16  
 Kilpatrick, Judson, 219–21  
 Kinevan, Marcos, 159  
 King, Charles, 148, 271, 423–4  
 King, Richard, 480  
 Kiowa, 16, 19, 43, 45, 231–2, 292, 294  
 Knight, Oliver, 160  
 Kopit, Arthur, 438  
 Korean War, 122, 259, 495  
 Koster, John, 353  
 Ku Klux Klan, 252, 303  
 Kuhlman, Charles, 319, 331  
  
 La Farge, Peter, 5, 474  
 Lakota  
     alliances, 2, 45–52  
     culture, 13–30, 54–72  
     defense of the Black Hills, 2, 242–3, 286–99  
     Little Bighorn, 3–4, 299–300, 305–13, 319–37, 355, 388–400, 445–50, 455, 462–80, 485–503  
     memories, 369–83, 453  
     representations and portrayals, 405, 412–15, 426–30, 435–9  
     surrender, 341–54  
     warfare, 1, 74–89, 92–104, 120, 145, 231–2  
 Lame Deer, 347, 399  
 Lame White Man, 331–2, 479  
 Langellier, John, P., 247  
 LaPointe, Ernie, 383  
 Larned, Charles, 252  
 Larson, Robert, 18, 26, 68–71, 332, 350–351  
 Last Stand Hill, 3, 6, 201, 318, 323–31, 334–7, 387, 437, 439, 446, 476, 479, 499  
 laundresses, 162–3, 170, 174–5, 177–81  
 Laurence, Mary Leefe, 183–4  
 Leavitt, Scott, 468  
 Leckie, Shirley, 160–161, 175–6, 264–5, 273, 427–8, 498–9  
 Leckie, William, H., 121, 158, 248  
  
 Lee, Henry, 189  
 Lee, Robert, 139  
 Lee, Robert E., 218–19, 222–5  
 Lehman, Tim, 102–3, 326, 333, 335, 501  
 Leiker, James, 159–60  
 Leonard, Elizabeth, 121  
 Lewis and Clark Expedition, 15–16, 36–7, 353, 439  
 Liberty, Margot, 35, 56, 319, 323, 337  
 Liddic, Bruce, 321, 326–7, 333–4  
 Lincoln, Abraham, 214–17  
 Lincoln, Robert, 275–6  
 Lindneux, Robert, 414  
 Linenthal, Edward, 237, 462–4, 472, 478  
 Little Arkansas, Treaty of, 231  
 Little Bighorn, Battle of the  
     archaeological study of, 330, 445–59  
     causes of, 2–3, 27–9, 46–50, 125, 237–8, 253–4, 285–301  
     Custer's actions, 99–107, 195–6, 198–201, 254–5, 268–72, 313, 318–37  
     effects of, 3–5, 65–71, 86, 256, 341–55  
     historiography of, 485–503  
     name of, 2, 55–7, 324, 341–2, 353–5, 394  
     news coverage of, 387–401  
     Reno's actions, 255, 302–16  
     testimony from, 369–83, 404–20, 423–40, 462–80  
 Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, 7, 30, 336, 462–80, 485, 499  
*Little Big Man*, 5, 188, 405, 416, 474  
 Little Wolf, 48, 346–7  
 Llewellyn, Karl, 34  
 Longfellow, Henry, 406  
 Looking Glass, 256, 348  
 Louisiana Purchase, 36  
 Lounsberry, Clement, 393–4  
 Low Dog, 3, 328  
 Lowenthal, David, 463–4

- Lubetkin, M. John, 239  
 Luce, Edward, 446–50, 453, 471–4  
  
 MacArthur, Douglas, 259  
 MacDonald, J. Wilson, 273–4, 280  
 MacKaye, Percy, 427  
 MacKaye, Steele, 427  
 Mackenzie, Ranald, 4, 120, 294, 346  
 Maddux, Vernon, 346  
 Magpie, 477  
 Male Crow, 66  
 Mandan, 16, 45, 47  
 Mangum, Neil, 476, 479  
 Manifest Destiny, 55, 58, 75, 119, 134–5, 489  
 Manypenny Commission, 4  
 Manzione, Joseph, 351  
 March, Grant, 299  
 Mardock, Robert, 115  
 Marias Massacre, 294  
 Marlenee, Ron, 478  
 Marquis, Thomas, 35–6, 100–101, 343–4, 348, 376, 382, 497–8  
 Marshall III, Joseph, 26, 34, 56–7, 64–6, 72, 87, 333, 349, 350, 383  
 Marshall, S. L. A., 94, 98  
 Martinez, J. Michael, 252  
 Martin, John, 401  
 Martin, John (Giovanni Martini), 309, 320  
 McChristian, Douglas, 158, 159, 164, 247, 478  
 McClellan, George, 214–17  
 McConnell, H. H., 155–6  
 McConnell, Roland, 491  
 McDermott, John, 134  
 McDonald, Alexander, 467–8  
 McDougall, Thomas, 254, 302, 309–11  
 McDowell, Irvin, 214  
 McFeely, William, 122  
 McGillicuddy, Valentine, 26  
 McGinnis, Anthony, 85–6, 94–5  
 McIntosh, Donald, 307  
 McLaughlin, James, 26, 58–60, 67, 69  
 McKenney, Thomas, 114  
 McNenly, Linda, 430  
 Meade, George, 216, 219–21  
 Means, Jeffrey, 353  
 Means, Russell, 475–9, 501  
 Medicine, Beatrice, 183  
 Medicine Crow, Joe, 105, 415–16, 419, 438–9  
 Medicine Lodge Treaty, 49, 235, 249  
 Medicine Tail Coulee, 104, 255, 318, 321–3, 326–34, 439, 448, 450, 453  
 Medicine Woman, 292  
 Meigs, Montgomery, 467  
 Menninger, Karl, 490, 494  
 Meriam Report, 59  
 Merington, Marguerite, 248–9, 490, 498  
 Merrill, Lewis, 252, 256–7  
 Merritt, Wesley, 120, 275–6  
 Mexico, 95, 226  
 Michigan wolverines, 216–22  
 Michno, Gregory, 35, 86, 322–3, 328, 330–332, 335, 354, 371, 382  
 Miles, Nelson A., 4, 29, 96, 120, 202, 256–9, 271, 346–8, 353, 415, 469–70  
 Miller, Darlis, A., 152, 175, 183  
 Miller, David Humphreys, 81, 100, 398  
 Mills, Charles, 247, 315  
 miners, 24, 241–2, 253, 295, 396  
 Mintz, Steven, 171  
 Monaghan, Jay, 424, 432, 489  
 Mo-Na-Se-Tah (Me-o-tzi), 181–2, 238, 277–8, 495, 498  
 Monnett, John, 72  
 Mooney, James, 34, 352–3  
 Moore, Hal, 259  
 Moore, John, 35, 71  
 Moore, Shirley Ann Wilson, 182–3  
 Morrow, Stanley, 467  
 Moses, L. G., 430  
 Mott, William Penn, 477  
 Mountain Chief, 294  
 Moylan, Myles, 307–8  
 Muddy Creek, Battle of, 347

- Mulford, Frank, 155, 178  
 Mulvany, John, 408–9  
 Myers, Edward, 250–251, 292  
 Myers, Rex, 400  
 My Lai Massacre, 476  
 Myres, Sandra, L., 160–161, 175–6  
  
 Nash, Gerald, 486–7, 489, 493  
 Nash, Mrs., 170, 179–81  
 National Park Service (NPS), 7, 324,  
     331–2, 437, 446–55, 462–4,  
     471–80, 496, 499, 502  
 Neihardt, John, G., 14, 84,  
     380–382, 501  
 Neihaus, George, 156  
 Nelson, Harold, 401  
 Newman, Paul, 438  
 Nez Perce, 88, 94, 105, 197, 199,  
     202, 256–7, 347–8  
 Nixon, Richard, 55, 474–5  
 Noisy Walking, 479  
 Noonan, John, 180  
 North, Frank, 95  
 North, Luther, 95  
 Novick, Peter, 486–7, 489, 492–3  
 Nye, Elwood, 447  
 Nye, Wilbur, 75–6  
  
 Obama, Barack, 51  
*Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian  
   Tribe* case, 416–17  
 Olson, James, 18  
 Onderdonk, Robert, 411  
 One Bull, 61, 68, 81  
 O’Keefe, Michael, 337, 485  
 O’Neill, Thomas, 308  
 Oregon Trail, 17, 20, 23, 47,  
     130, 135, 287, 439  
 Osage, 96, 236  
 Ostler, Jeffrey, 17, 20, 353  
 Owl Child, 294  
  
 Page, Abel, 265  
 Page, Eleanor (Bacon), 265  
*Paha Sapa* (see Black Hills)  
 Painted Horse, Owen, 439  
 Paiute, 87  
 Panic of 1873, 125, 239–40  
  
 Parker, Ely, 123  
 Parkman, Francis, 17, 18, 76  
 Paul, R. Eli, 18  
 Pawnee, 16, 19, 43, 95  
 Pawnee Bill’s Historic Wild West, 429  
 peace pipe ceremony, 43–6, 49–50,  
     375–6  
 Penn, Arthur, 405, 416, 474  
 Pennington, Jack, 102  
 Perret, Geoffrey, 122  
 Petter, Rodolphe, 34–5  
 Philbrick, Nathaniel, 102, 309, 310,  
     315, 327–8, 333, 501  
 Phillips, Thomas, 158  
 Pickett, George, 218  
 Piley, Allison, J., 293  
 Pine Ridge Reservation, 257–8,  
     380, 372  
 Pitts, Rhoda (Bacon), 265  
 Pleasonton, Alfred, 215–16, 221  
 Pohanka, Brian, 326–32, 336, 435  
 Pomeroy, Brick, 426, 438  
 Pope, John, 126  
 Porter, Henry, 307, 311, 450  
 Potter, Edward, 280  
 Potter, James, 156  
 Powder River, Battle of the, 297–8,  
     348, 439  
 Powell, Peter, 35, 71, 84, 327–9  
 Powers, Thomas, 26, 322, 350,  
     501–2  
 Pretty On Top, Henry, 420  
 Price, Catherine, 21  
 Priest, Loring, B., 115  
 prostitutes, 130, 156–7, 159, 162,  
     174–5, 180–182  
 Prucha, Francis Paul, 115–16,  
     151–2, 354  
 Pueblo, 93  
  
 Rafuse, Ethan, S., 121  
 railroads, 1, 26, 137–40, 193,  
     239–40, 252, 278–9, 294–5,  
     388, 435, 468, 494  
 Rain-in-the-Face, 240, 396–8,  
     406, 408  
 Rankin, Charles, 499  
 Rattling Blanket Woman, 66

- Real Bird family, 419–20, 439  
 Ream, Vinnie, 267, 272–4, 280  
 Reconstruction duty, 117–19, 190,  
     225–6, 239, 252, 267, 303  
 Red Cloud, 17, 18, 25, 26, 58, 61,  
     63, 66, 69, 84, 120, 138, 174,  
     289–90, 297, 397, 399, 412, 429  
 Red Cloud, Jack, 412–13  
 Reddin, Paul, 424  
 Red Horn Bull, 434  
 Red Horse, 372, 376–80, 413  
 Red Power, 96, 106–7, 405, 475  
 Red Star, 97  
 Reed, Harry, 269  
 Rehnquist, William, 416–17  
 Remington, Frederic, 264, 497  
 Reno, Marcus,  
     Little Bighorn, 3, 60, 69, 97, 100,  
     106, 198–9, 299–300, 302–13,  
     319–22, 325, 328, 330, 332–3,  
     341, 369, 377, 380  
     military career, 54, 246, 254–6  
     reputation, 6, 270–272, 275,  
     313–16, 394–6, 406, 450,  
     488, 491  
 Reno Hill, 3, 201, 255, 308–13, 396,  
     446, 450–454, 468, 491  
 Reyer, Eldon, 475  
 Reynolds, Charley, 242  
 Reynolds, Joseph, 50, 297–8  
 Richards, William, 409  
 Rickey, Don, 81–2, 131, 133, 154–5,  
     323, 328, 437, 449–53  
 Riley, Glenda, 182  
 Robinson, Charles, 94, 98, 120, 349  
 Robinson, Doane, 78  
 Robinson, Harry, 472  
 Rockwell, Stephen, 122  
 Roe, Charles, 468  
 Roe, Frances, 160, 162, 173, 174  
 Rogers, Roy, 489  
 Roosevelt, Franklin, 471  
 Roosevelt, Theodore, 264, 273, 433  
 Rosebud, Battle of the, 2, 27, 57, 94,  
     183, 196, 200, 298, 341,  
     389–90, 393  
 Rosebud Sioux Reservation, 64, 72  
 Rosenberg, Bruce, 100–101, 493  
 Rosser, Tom, 223  
 Rothstein, Milton, 485  
 Russell, Charles, 497  
 Russell, Don, 151, 424, 428–9  
 sabers, 189, 191–2, 203, 216, 218,  
     220–221, 223–5, 408–11, 485  
 Sajna, Mike, 63–4  
 Sand Creek Massacre, 49–50,  
     231–2, 288  
 Sanderson, C. K., 467  
 Sandoz, Mari, 26, 62–4, 72, 100,  
     346, 349–51, 491–2, 495  
 San Juan Hill, Battle of, 428  
 Sarf, Wayne Michael, 285, 477  
 Schlesinger, Arthur, 487  
 Schoenberger, Dan, 103 (AU: Found  
     as Schoenberger, Dale T.)  
 Schofield, John, 126, 273  
 Schubert, Frank, 121, 158, 159  
 Scott, Douglass, 101, 328–9, 330,  
     336–7, 454–7  
 Scott, Hugh, 488  
 Scott, Janny, 499  
 Scott, Winfield, 214  
 scouts, 2, 27–8, 81, 92–107, 149,  
     195–6, 236, 254, 296–7, 299,  
     303–4, 306, 309, 319, 343, 348,  
     383, 399, 438, 464–5, 487  
 Secoy, Frank Raymond, 79–80  
 Sefton James, 118–19  
 Selig, William, 436  
 Seminole, 95  
 7th Cavalry (organization), 2, 28, 92,  
     201, 229–43, 246–60, 303  
 Seymour, Harry, 425  
 Shellum, Brian, 158  
 Sheridan, Michael, 466  
 Sheridan, Philip, 2, 4, 96, 121, 124,  
     138–9, 153, 193–4, 196–7, 212,  
     221–4, 236–8, 241–2, 248–53,  
     286–7, 291–300, 313, 388, 390,  
     465–6, 490  
 Sherman, William T., 121, 125, 172,  
     198, 249–50, 275, 290–294,  
     300, 313, 341, 388, 395, 464,  
     466–7  
 Short Bull, 257

- Shoshone, 27, 43, 87, 94, 289  
 Sibbald, John, 174–5  
 Sievers, Michael, 493–4, 496  
 Sim, David, 122–3  
 Simpson, Brooks, 122  
 Sioux (see Lakota)  
 Sitting Bull  
   life, 2, 19, 23, 25, 26, 54–8, 290, 294, 298  
   Little Bighorn, 2, 28–9, 67–9, 238–40, 394  
   legend, 4, 58–62, 70–71, 78, 341–4, 347–52, 375, 399–400, 425–6, 438, 491, 501  
 skirmish line, 3, 193, 196, 304–6, 308–12, 322, 324, 331–4, 450  
 Sklenar, Larry, 101–2, 255  
 Slim Buttes, Battle of, 4, 347, 399  
 Slotkin, Richard, 431–3  
 Smith, Algernon, 325  
 Smith, Andrew, 230, 248–9, 252  
 Smith, Edward, 124, 295  
 Smith, Jean Edward, 122  
 Smith, John, 4  
 Smith, Lowell, 478  
 Smith, Shannon, 161  
 Smith, Sherry, 95, 120, 149, 152, 154–5, 163, 171, 176, 183  
 Smith, Thomas, 152–3, 155, 184  
 Sniffen, Frank, 307  
 Soja, Edward, 132  
 Soule, Silas, 288  
 Spanish-American War, 150, 164, 258, 428  
 Spotted Eagle, 68  
 Spotted Elk, 352  
 Spotted Tail, 19, 26, 58, 61, 138, 397, 399  
 Spotted Wolf, Pat, 439  
 Stallard, Patricia, 160, 175  
 Standing Bear, 380–382  
 Standing Bear, Luther, 21, 34  
 Standing Rock Reservation, 58–9, 67, 69, 240, 351–2, 374–5, 492  
 Stands in Timber, John, 35, 56, 319, 323, 328, 337  
 Stanley, David, 239–41, 252  
 Stanton, Edwin, 223  
 Stanton, Thaddeus, 296  
 Starkey, Armstrong, 76  
 Stephens, Ann, 414  
 Stewart, Edgar, 97, 319, 472, 489  
 Stone Forehead, 49, 375  
 Stuart, J. E. B., 189, 218–19, 221  
 Sturgis, Samuel, 248, 252, 256–7  
 Sully, Alfred, 249–50  
 Summer, Edwin, 288  
 Summerhayes, Martha, 160, 173, 174  
 Sun Dance, 28, 45, 298, 429–30, 435  
 Sweet, Own, 468  
 Tabeau, Pierre-Antoine, 15  
 Taft, Alonso, 125  
 Taft, Robert, 410  
 Tall Bull, 238  
 Tate, Michael, 95, 114, 131, 152, 260, 388, 391  
 Tatum, Lawrie, 123–4  
 Taunton, Francis, 330  
 Taylor, Quintard, 182–3  
 Terry, Alfred, 2, 4, 94, 98, 194, 198, 253–6, 270, 272, 290, 295–300, 341, 394–5, 399, 407, 467, 496  
 Thelen, David, 463  
*They Died With Their Boots On*, 410, 416, 419, 437, 497  
 Thomas, Evan, 501–2  
 Thompson, William, 250  
 Tom's Brook, Battle of, 223  
 Tongue River Reservation, 50  
 Towers, Alison, 479  
 Trevilian Station, Battle of, 211  
 Truman, Harry, 491  
 Truteau, Jean Baptiste, 15, 18  
 Turner, Frederick Jackson, 76–7, 80, 152, 174, 343–4, 354–5, 486  
 Twain, Mark, 1  
 Twiss, Thomas, 287  
 Two Moons, 50, 72, 335, 389  
 Two Moons, Austin, 475

- Udall, Stewart, 474  
 UH-1 helicopters, 259  
 United Nations, 51  
 Upton, Emory, 126, 191–2  
 Urwin, Gregory, 226  
 Utley, Robert, 26, 35, 61, 82, 97,  
     100, 118, 124, 131, 133, 153,  
     164, 191, 192–3, 229, 246–8,  
     253, 258, 285, 293, 319, 321,  
     331, 334, 351–4, 387–90,  
     394, 398–400, 426, 472–8,  
     496–7, 502  
  
 van de Logt, Mark, 95, 106  
 Van de Water, Frederick, 97, 280,  
     437, 471, 487  
 Varnum, Charles, 306–7  
 Vaughn, Jesse, 449–53  
 Vestal, Stanley, 5–6, 26, 59–60, 78–9,  
     94, 103, 344, 348, 351–2,  
     374–5, 382  
 Vic (horse), 327  
 Vielé, Teresa, 172  
 Vietnam War, 82, 152, 197, 259, 345,  
     416, 420, 475–6, 492, 500  
 Vihlne, Shannon, 455  
 Villa, Pancho, 258  
 Viola, Herman, 6, 35, 105–6, 114,  
     376–7  
 vision quest, 22, 28, 298  
 Vogdes, Ada A., 174  
 von Schmidt, Eric, 411, 413  
  
 Waggoner, Josephine, 30  
 Wagon Box Fight, 290, 436  
*Wakan Tanka*, 14  
 Walker, James, 14, 20  
 Wallace, George, 258  
 Walsh, James, 351  
 Walsh, Thomas, 469  
 Warbonnet Creek, Battle of, 414,  
     423–6, 432  
 War Department, 17, 114, 117–21,  
     123–6, 131, 137, 145, 198, 214,  
     241–2, 247, 253, 257, 275, 296,  
     466–8, 471, 477  
  
 Warren, Louis, 424, 432  
 Washita, Battle of the, 5, 49, 181–2,  
     190, 197, 229–30, 233, 236–9,  
     249–52, 253, 255, 291–4, 299,  
     310, 315, 326, 376, 416, 429,  
     469, 490  
 Watson, Elmo, 390  
 Waugh, Joan, 122  
 Webb, Walter Prescott, 78  
 Weigley, Russell, 83–4, 118  
 Weir Point, 3, 311  
 Weir, Thomas, 251, 255, 311  
 Welch, James, 101, 412–13  
 Wells, William, 477  
 West, Elliott, 85, 88, 183–4, 197, 256  
 Westerman, Floyd, 474  
 West Point, 29, 58, 199–201, 212–  
     14, 236, 270, 273–5, 280, 303,  
     400, 448, 465–6  
 West, Robert, 235  
 Wheeler, Burton, 471  
 White Bird, 348  
 White, Bruce, 156  
 White Bull, 25, 28, 59–61, 78–9, 81,  
     343, 398, 470  
 White, Hayden, 6  
 White Man Runs Him, 99, 103,  
     104–5, 416, 438  
 White, Richard, 17, 84–5, 96,  
     432, 499  
 Whiteside, Samuel, 258  
 White, William Bruce, 121  
 Whitman, Walt, 405–6, 409, 485, 502  
 Whittaker, Frederick, 96, 100, 107,  
     270–271, 304–6, 310, 313–14,  
     406–8, 463–5  
 Willert, James, 75, 320, 330, 333  
 Wills, John, 417–19  
 Wilson, James, 220–222, 303  
 Windolph, Charles, 2, 303, 310, 313,  
     319, 437  
 Wishart, David, 77  
 Wissler, Clark, 20, 22  
 Wister, Owen, 264  
 Wolf Mountains, Battle of, 4, 347  
 Wolf Tooth, 323, 327–31, 337

- Wood, Cynthia, 161  
Wooden Leg, 38–40, 46, 319, 329  
Wood, W. H., 376, 380  
Wooster, Robert, 119, 131, 133, 153, 163–4  
World War I, 259, 487–8  
World War II, 259, 410, 416, 420, 448, 451, 463, 471–2, 489–90  
Worm, 64, 66  
Wounded Knee, 5, 15, 52, 190, 257–8, 341–2, 344–5, 350–354, 413, 415, 475  
Wynkoop, Edward, 237  
Yates, George, 254, 269, 320–323  
Yellow Bird, 258  
Yellow Hair, 414–15, 423–5, 432–3  
Yellow Nose, 328  
Yellowstone Expedition, 27, 138, 140, 229–30, 239–41, 252–3, 295  
Yellow Tavern, Battle of, 221  
Yenne, Bill, 355  
Young, Charles, 158  
Zitkala-Ša, 34  
Zulu, 410–411

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