Lakota and Cheyenne

Indian Views of the Great Sioux War, 1876–1877

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University of Oklahoma Press : Norman
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Evidence and the Custer Enigma (Kansas City, 1973)
Slim Buttes, 1876: An Episode of the Great Sioux War (Norman, 1982)
Yellowstone Command: Colonel Nelson A. Miles and the Great Sioux War, 1876–1877 (Lincoln, 1991)
Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War, 1876–1877: The Military View (Norman, 1993)
Lakota and Cheyenne: Indian Views of the Great Sioux War, 1876–1877 (Norman, 1994)

This book is published with the generous assistance of the Mellon Humanities Publications Fund.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data


p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN: 0–8061–2681–7 (hardcover)
ISBN: 0–8061–3245–0 (paperback)
1. Dakota Indians—Wars, 1876. 2. Cheyenne Indians—Wars, 1876. 3. Teton Indians—Wars. 1. Greene, Jerome A.
E83.876.L25 1994
973.8'2—dc20 94–12473
CIP

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3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
them off. Here the fight stopped. The Cheyennes and Sioux stayed there a little while and then went away and left soldiers. Many men were wounded and many horses killed and wounded so that many Indians were on foot. After this fight Young Blackbird’s name was changed to White Shield.

Chapter 3
The Battle of the Little Big Horn, June 25–26, 1876

Red Horse, Minneconjou Lakota; She Walks with Her Shawl, Hunkpapa Lakota; Brave Wolf, Northern Cheyenne; American Horse, Northern Cheyenne; Soldier Wolf, Northern Cheyenne; Tall Bull, Northern Cheyenne; One Bull, Minneconjou Lakota; Flying By, Minneconjou Lakota; Little Hawk, Northern Cheyenne; White Bull, Northern Cheyenne; and Young Two Moon, Northern Cheyenne

The tribes that gathered in the Little Big Horn Valley by June 25, 1876, composed the largest known gathering of Indians ever to occur on the northern plains. They represented all the Lakota tribes—Hunkpapas, Oglalas, Minneconjous, Brulés, Blackfeet, Two Kettles, and Sans Arcs, besides members of diverse eastern Sioux groups and the Northern Cheyennes. Inspired by such leaders as Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Gall, Crow King, Lame White Man, and Two Moon, the Indians, whose encampment swelled to as many as eight thousand people, including upwards of twenty-five hundred warriors, anticipated the presence of the soldiers, whose approach their scouts had monitored.

In composition, the assemblage included the so-called Northern Sioux, those people who had spurned all attempts by the U.S. government to bring them within the bounds of the Great Sioux Reservation established in 1868. Besides the security-conscious Cheyennes, perhaps its most numerous components derived from the Sioux agencies themselves—people who had departed the reservation to join their nonagency kin for summer hunting and ritual ceremonial activities.

Having fought Crook’s soldiers at Rosebud Creek, many of the warriors in the Little Big Horn encampment were falsely
confident that the army would not further molest them. Thus, the attack of Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer's Seventh Cavalry at midday on June 25 seems to have caught the tribesmen largely unaware. But they responded well.

The Battle of the Little Big Horn took the form of two major actions. The first, wherein an army battalion under Major Marcus A. Reno charged the south end of the village, ended with the warriors' driving these troops from the valley after they had endured substantial losses. Although Reno gained the bluff tops east of the river and was joined by reinforcements, the Indians succeeded in isolating the soldiers over the next two days. The second action involved the precipitate defeat and death of Custer's immediate command on rugged terrain nearly four miles north of Reno's action.

The overwhelming nature of the warriors' victory over Custer's soldiers in time produced one of the salient image-evoking events in American history. Because of the mystery among whites regarding Custer's course to defeat, Indian accounts were initially sought out for purposes of explanation. This participant testimony was largely dismissed as irreconcilable, owing mostly to failures in translation (often compounded by the sensational coverage of newspaper correspondents) coupled with genuine fears of retribution among the Sioux and Cheyenne people. Eventually, however, Indian accounts of Little Big Horn gained in credibility as more objective interviewers became involved. As a result, Indian accounts of their victory on the Greasy Grass today constitute an authoritative body of data that has enriched knowledge of that event.

The following accounts of Little Big Horn offer the perspectives of five Lakotas (including one woman) and six Northern Cheyennes. Individual in nature, the accounts nonetheless share similarities that enhance the significance of such testimony in explaining the intertribal defeat of the soldiers in 1876.

In 1881 the forty-six-year-old Minneconjou chief, Red Horse, contributed one of the earliest Indian reminiscences of the Battle of the Little Big Horn to Dr. Charles E. McChesney, an acting assistant surgeon, U.S. Army. Red Horse accompanied his recollections with forty-one pictograph drawings, only four of which are presented here. The Minneconjou's account is drawn from Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology (Washington, D.C.; Government Printing Office, 1893), which reproduced ten of the Red Horse drawings. Bracketed material is as it appears in the original publication, except for that preceded by an asterisk, which has been inserted into this generation.

FIVE SPRINGS AGO I, with many Sioux Indians, took down and packed up our tipis and moved from Cheyenne river to the Rosebud river, where we camped a few days; then took down and packed up our lodges and moved to the Little Bighorn river and pitched our lodges with the large camp of Sioux.

The Sioux were camped on the Little Bighorn river as follows: The lodges of the Uncepapas were pitched highest up the river under a bluff. The Santee lodges were pitched next. The Oglala's [*sic] lodges were pitched next. The Brulé lodges were pitched next. The Minneconjou lodges were pitched next. The Sans Arcs' lodges were pitched next. The Blackfeet lodges were pitched next. The Cheyenne lodges were pitched next. A few Arikara [*Arapaho?] Indians were among the Sioux (being without lodges of their own.

I was a Sioux chief in the council lodge. My lodge was pitched in the center of the camp. 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 that the soldiers were charging the camp. To the camp I and the women ran. When I arrived a person told me to hurry to the council lodge. The soldiers charged so quickly we could not talk (council). We came out of the council lodge and talked in all directions. The Sioux mount horses, take guns, and go fight the soldiers. Women and children mount horses and go, meaning to get out of the way.

Among the soldiers was an officer who rode a horse with four white feet. [From Dr. McChesney’s memoranda
they had ever fought. I don’t know whether this was Gen. Custer or not. Many of the Sioux men that I hear talking tell me it was. I saw this officer in the fight many times, but did not see his body. It has been told me that he was killed by a Santee Indian, who took his horse. This officer wore a large-brimmed hat and a deerskin coat. This officer saved the lives of many soldiers by turning his horse and covering the retreat. Sioux say this officer was the bravest man they ever fought. I saw two officers looking alike, both having long yellowish hair.

Before the attack the Sioux were camped on the Rosebud river. Sioux moved down a river running into the Little Bighorn river, crossed the Little Bighorn river, and camped on its west bank.

This day [day of attack] a Sioux man started to go to Red Cloud agency, but when he had gone a short distance from camp he saw a cloud of dust rising and turned back and said he thought a herd of buffalo was coming near the village.

The day was hot. In a short time the soldiers charged the camp. [This was Maj. Reno’s battalion of the Seventh Cavalry.] The soldiers came on the trail made by the Sioux camp in moving, and crossed the Little Bighorn river above where the women and children ran down the Little Bighorn river a short distance into a ravine. The soldiers set fire to the lodges. All the Sioux now charged the soldiers and drove them in confusion across the Little Bighorn river, which was very rapid, and several soldiers were drowned in it. On a hill the soldiers stopped and the Sioux surrounded them. A Sioux man came and said that a different party went around, and the Sioux all heard it and left the soldiers on the hill and went quickly to save the women and children.

From the hill that the soldiers were on to the place where the different soldiers [by this term Red-Horse always means the battalion immediately commanded by
General Custer, his mode of distinction being that they were a different body from that first encountered] were seen was level ground with the exception of a creek. Sioux thought the soldiers on the hill [i.e., Reno’s battalion] would charge them in rear, but when they did not the Sioux thought the soldiers on the hill were out of cartridges. As soon as we had killed all the different soldiers, the Sioux all went back to kill the soldiers on the hill. All the Sioux watched around the hill on which were the soldiers until a Sioux man came and said many walking soldiers were coming near. The coming of the walking soldiers was the saving of the soldiers on the hill. Sioux cannot fight the walking soldiers [infantry], being afraid of them, so the Sioux hurriedly left.

The soldiers charged the Sioux camp about noon. The soldiers were divided, one party charging right into the camp. After driving these soldiers across the river, the Sioux charged the different soldiers [i.e., Custer’s] below, and drove them in confusion; these soldiers became foolish, many 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 for even a few minutes. Those different soldiers discharged their guns but little. I took a gun and two belts off two dead soldiers; out of one belt two cartridges were gone, out of the other five.

The Sioux took the guns and cartridges off the dead soldiers and went to the hill on which the soldiers were, surrounded and fought them with the guns and cartridges of the dead soldiers. Had the soldiers not divided I think they would have killed many Sioux. The different soldiers [i.e., Custer’s battalion] that the Sioux killed made five brave stands. Once the Sioux charged right in the midst of the different soldiers and scattered them all, fighting among the soldiers hand to hand.
Red Horse's Pictograph of the Sioux, Fighting Custer's Battalion. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives.

Red Horse's Pictograph of the Dead Sioux. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives.
One band of soldiers was in rear of the Sioux. When this band of soldiers charged, the Sioux fell back, and the Sioux and the soldiers stood facing each other. Then all the Sioux became brave and charged the soldiers. The Sioux went but a short distance before they separated and surrounded the soldiers. I could see the officers riding in front of the soldiers and hear them shouting. Now the Sioux had many killed. The soldiers killed 136 and wounded 160 Sioux. The Sioux killed all these different soldiers in the ravine.

The soldiers [*under Reno initially] charged the Sioux camp farthest up the river. A short time after, the different soldiers [*Custer's] charged the village below. While the different soldiers and Sioux were fighting together the Sioux chief said, "Sioux men, go watch the soldiers on the hill and prevent their joining the different soldiers." The Sioux men took the clothing off the dead and dressed themselves in it. Among the soldiers were white men who were not [*dressed as?] soldiers. The Sioux dressed in the soldiers' and white men's clothing fought the soldiers on the hill.

The banks of the Little Bighorn river were high and the Sioux killed many of the soldiers while crossing [*during Reno's retreat]. The soldiers on the hill dug up the ground [i.e., made earthworks], and the soldiers and Sioux fought at long range, sometimes the Sioux charging close up. The fight continued at long range until a Sioux man saw the walking soldiers coming. When the walking soldiers came near, the Sioux became afraid and ran away.

The following woman's account of the battle was given by She Walks with Her Shawl, Hunkpapa Lakota, to Walter S. Campbell (Stanley Vestal) in 1931. It is Item 5e, Box III, in the Walter S. Campbell Collection, Division of Manuscripts, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman.
I was born seventy-seven winters ago, near Grand River, [in present] South Dakota. My father, Slohan, was the bravest man among our people. Fifty-five years ago we packed our tents and went with other Indians to Peji-slawakpa (Greasy Grass). We were then living on the Standing Rock Indian reservation [Great Sioux Reservation, Standing Rock Agency]. I belonged to Sitting Bull’s band. They were great fighters. We called ourselves Hunkpapa. This means confederated bands. When I was still a young girl (about seventeen) I accompanied a Sioux war party which made war against the Crow Indians in Montana. My father went to war 70 times. He was wounded nearly a dozen times.

But I am going to tell you of the greatest battle. This was a fight against Pehin-hanska (General Custer). I was several miles from the Hunkpapa camp when I saw a cloud of dust rise beyond a ridge of bluffs in the east. The morning was hot and sultry. Several of us Indian girls were digging wild turnips. I was then 23 years old. We girls looked towards the camp and saw a warrior ride swiftly, shouting that the soldiers were only a few miles away and that the women and children including old men should run for the hills in an opposite direction.

I dropped the pointed ash stick which I had used in digging turnips and rans towards my tipi. I saw my father running towards the horses. When I got to my tent, mother told me that news was brought to her that my brother had been killed by the soldiers. My brother had gone early that morning in search for a horse that strayed from our herd. In a few moments we saw soldiers on horseback on a bluff just across the Greasy Grass (Little Big Horn) river. I knew that there would be a battle because I saw warriors getting their horses and tomahawks.

I heard Hawkman shout, Ho-ka-he! Ho-ka-he! (Charge.) The soldiers began firing into our camp. Then they ceased firing. I saw my father preparing to go to battle. I sang a death song for my brother who had been killed.

My heart was bad. Revenge! Revenge! For my brother’s death. I thought of the death of my young brother, One Hawk. Brown Eagle, my brother’s companion on that morning had escaped and gave the alarm to the camp that the soldiers were coming. I ran to a nearby thicket and got my black horse. I painted my face with crimson and unbraided my black hair. I was mourning. I was a woman, but I was not afraid.

By this time the soldiers (Reno’s men) were forming a battle line in the bottom about a half mile away. In another moment I heard a terrific volley of carbines. The bullets shattered the tipi poles. Women and children were running away from the gunfire. In the tumult I heard old men and women singing death songs for their warriors who were now ready to attack the soldiers. The chanting of death songs made me brave, although I was a woman. I saw a warrior adjusting his quiver and grasping his tomahawk. He started running towards his horse when he suddenly recoiled and dropped dead. He was killed near his tipi.

Warriors were given orders by Hawkman to mount their horses and follow the fringe of a forest and wait until commands were given to charge. The soldiers kept on firing. Some women were also killed. Horses and dogs too! The camp was in great commotion.

Father led my black horse up to me and I mounted. We galloped towards the soldiers. Other warriors joined in with us. When we were nearing the fringe of the woods an order was given by Hawkman to charge. Ho-ka-he! Ho-ka-he! Charge! Charge! The warriors were now near the soldiers. The troopers were all on foot. They shot straight, because I saw our leader killed as he rode with his warriors.

The charge was so stubborn that the soldiers ran to their horses and, mounting them, rode swiftly towards the
unhorsed several of them. The soldiers were very excited. Some of them shot into the air. The Indians chased the soldiers across the river and up over a bluff.

Then the warriors returned to the bottom where the first battle took place. We heard a commotion far down the valley. The warriors rode in a column of fives. They sang a victory song. Someone said that another body of soldiers were attacking the lower end of the village. I heard afterwards that the soldiers were under the command of Long Hair (Custer). With my father and other youthful warriors I rode in that direction.

We crossed the Greasy Grass below a beaver dam (the water is not so deep there) and came upon many horses. One soldier was holding the reins of eight or ten horses. An Indian waved his blanket and scared all the horses. They got away from the men (troopers). On the ridge just north of us I saw blue-clad men running up a ravine, firing as they ran.

The dust created from the stampeding horses and powder smoke made everything dark and black. Flashes from carbines could be seen. The valley was dense with powder smoke. I never heard such whooping and shouting. "There was never a better day to die," shouted Red Horse. In the battle I heard cries from troopers, but could not understand what they were saying. I do not speak English.

Long Hair's troopers were trapped in an enclosure. There were Indians everywhere. The Cheyennes attacked the soldiers from the north and Crow King from the South. The Sioux Indians encircled the troopers. Not one got away! The Sioux used tomahawks. It was not a massacre, but [a] hotly contested battle between two armed forces. Very few soldiers were mutilated, as oft has been said by the whites. Not a single soldier was burned at the stake. Sioux Indians do not torture their victims.

After the battle the Indians took all the equipment
and horses belonging to the soldiers. The brave men who came to punish us that morning were defeated; but in the end, the Indians lost. We saw the body of Long Hair. Of course, we did not know who the soldiers were until an interpreter told us that the men came from Fort Lincoln, then [in] Dakota Territory. On the saddle blankets were the cross saber insignia and the letter seven.

The victorious warriors returned to the camp, as did the women and children who could see the battle from where they took refuge. Over sixty Indians were killed and they were also brought back to the camp for scaffold-burial. The Indians did not stage a victory dance that night. They were mourning for their own dead.


The Northern Cheyenne Brave Wolf recalled the Little Big Horn in an interview with George Bird Grinnell in 1895. The account is in Item 497, “Notes on the Custer Fight,” Grinnell Collection, Braun Research Library, Southwest Museum, Los Angeles.

I was in the Cheyenne camp and when Reno made his charge I went with the rest to meet him. We fought there. I saw the soldiers all go down the timber, they fought there for a little while and then they all ran out of the timber. I could never understand why they left it, if they had stayed there, they would have been all right, but they ran out of the timber and across the river and up the hill. The citizen packers and the pack mules were on the hill before Reno got there,5 then we heard the shooting below, and all rushed down the river. When I got to the Cheyenne camp, the fighting had been going on for some time. The soldiers (Custer’s), were right down close to the stream, but none were on this [west] side. Just as I got there, the soldiers began to retreat up the narrow gulch. They were all drawn up in line of battle, shooting well and fighting hard, but there were so many people around them, that they could not help being killed. They still held their line of battle and

kept fighting and falling from their horses; fighting and falling all the way up, nearly to where the monument now stands. I think all their horses had been killed before they

Brave Wolf, Northern Cheyenne, early 1900s. Photograph by Elizabeth C. Grinnell. Courtesy of the Southwest Museum. Photo no. N.41033 P.10713.