

■ Accounts of the Battle of Little Bighorn

Date: July 4, 1876

Author: W. H. Norton; Chief Red Horse

Genre: articles; testimony

Summary Overview

On June 25, 1876, elements of the Seventh Cavalry led by the famed Civil War hero and Indian fighter George Armstrong Custer attacked a combined force of Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho near the Little Bighorn River in Montana Territory. As a result, and much to the shock of a nation just about to celebrate its centennial, five of twelve companies of the Seventh Cavalry were completely wiped out, while Custer himself, along with two of his brothers, a nephew, and a brother-in-law were killed. For the average American living East of the country, the Battle of Little Bighorn, or what soon became popularly known as Custer's Last Stand, hit like a thunderbolt. The event became a rallying cry, Custer a myth, a symbol of white America's brave resilience against dark savagery. For Native Americans, the Battle of Little Bighorn became one of the last in a series of long and bloody, but ultimately futile struggles against the encroachment of white settlers on their land.

Defining Moment

Since the purchase of the Louisiana Territory at the turn of the nineteenth century, white settlers had been moving onto the Great Plains, first in a trickle and soon in a flood. Encouraged by boosters, government officials, and land speculators, millions of Americans moved West in the hopes of making a new start. As white settlers moved in, they invariably came into direct conflict with Native peoples. These clashes culminated in a series of armed conflicts collectively known as the Sioux Wars. Fighting raged throughout the 1850s and 1860s as the Sioux and their allies tried desperately to defend themselves against an increasingly brutal campaign of displacement. Things did settle for a time in 1868, after the Treaty of Fort Laramie guaranteed to the Lakota a large portion of South Dakota Territory, but the discovery of gold in the sacred Black Hills, followed by an influx of miners eager to strike it rich, brought the tribes once again into open conflict with the United States

government.

Enter George Armstrong Custer. Graduating at the bottom of his class from West Point just as the Civil War broke out, Custer quickly distinguished himself as a brave, flamboyant, but highly capable cavalry commander. Always at the front of his troops, leading charges through some of the bloodiest battles of the war, Custer was never once injured. As a result, the national press regarded him as a sort of sainted warrior. With the close of the Civil War, Custer was assigned to command the Seventh Cavalry and plunged right into the expanding conflict against the Native peoples of the Great Plains.

In 1868, Custer led a series of brutal attacks on the Cheyenne and Arapaho, including the massacre of a village full of unarmed women and children. Custer's brazen actions earned him accolades in the press, which depicted him as an Indian fighter, but this also had the unintended effect of unifying many of the Plains tribes under the leadership of Sitting Bull, a fearless Lakota chief determined to ignore the stipulations of any treaty. In direct response to Sitting Bull, President Ulysses S. Grant issued an ultimatum that any Native peoples who refused to settle on a reservation by 1876 would be considered hostile.

With orders to find Sitting Bull's band and force them onto the reservation, Custer and the Seventh Cavalry headed out west in the spring of 1876. Without waiting for the rest of his regiment, headstrong and eager to make headlines in time for the centennial, Custer launched a blind attack on what he thought was a small Lakota village on the bank of the Little Bighorn River, but this apparent village was in fact several large Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho encampments, home to thousands of armed Native warriors. The resulting battle quickly became a rout and, ultimately, a massacre, as Custer's outnumbered men tried desperately to fall back. Two hundred sixty-eight men, along

with George Armstrong Custer were killed. Within days, newspaper headlines screamed about the loss of Custer and the Seventh Cavalry, painting Custer in the immediate aftermath with a hero's brush. The story became that of a great American warrior's last stand, as he fought off savage Indians, while the version of events told by the Native peoples—a story of survival—was almost completely ignored.

Author Biography

While we know nothing about the writer of the *Hel-*

ena Daily Herald article, W. H. Norton, we do know something about Chief Red Horse. Born in 1822 to a subdivision of the Sioux, he rose to become one of the chiefs under Sitting Bull. An eyewitness to the Battle of Little Bighorn, having taken part in fighting against both Custer and Marcus Reno, Custer's second in command, Red Horse recorded his recollections of the event in 1881. He died in 1907 on a reservation, having, like most of the Sitting Bull's Sioux, eventually surrendered to an aggressive US Army, eager to avenge their fallen hero.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

HELENA DAILY HERALD EXTRA

July 4, 1876

A TERRIBLE FIGHT

Gen. Custer and his Nephew KILLED

The Seventh Cavalry cut to pieces

The Whole Number Killed 315

From our Special Correspondent Mr. W. H. Norton

Stillwater, M. T., July 2nd, 1876.

Muggins Taylor, scout for Gen. Gibbons, got here last night, direct from Little Horn River with telegraphic despatches [dispatches]. General Custer found the Indian camp of about two thousand lodges on the Little Horn, and immediately attacked the camp. Custer took five companies and charged the thickest portion of the camp.

Nothing is Known of the Operation of this detachment, only as they trace it by the dead. Major Reno commanded the other seven companies and attacked the lower portion of the camp. The Indians poured in a murderous fire from all directions. Besides the greater portion fought on horseback. Custer, his two brothers, a nephew and a brother-in-law were All Killed and not one of his detachment escaped. 207 men were buried in one place and the killed are estimated at 300 with only 31 wounded. The Indians surrounded Reno's command and held them one day in the hills

Cut Off from Water until Gibbon's command came in sight, when they broke camp in the night and left.

The Seventh Fought Like Tigers and were overcome

by mere brute force. The Indian loss cannot be estimated, as they bore off and cached most of their killed. The remnant of the Seventh Cavalry and Gibbon's command are returning to the mouth of the I Little Horn, where the steamboat lies. The Indians got all the arms of the killed soldiers. There were seventeen commissioned officers killed.

The Whole Custer Family died at the head of their column. The exact loss is not known as both Adjutants and the Sergeant Major were killed. The Indian camp was from three to four miles long and was twenty miles up the Little Horn from its mouth. The Indians actually pulled men off their horses in some instances. I give this as Taylor told me, as he was over the field after the battle.

The above is confirmed by other letters which say Custer met a fearful disaster.

* * *

[Chief Red Horse (Lakota)]

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 Uncpapas were pitched highest up the river under a bluff. The Santee lodges were pitched next. The Oglala's lodges were pitched next. The Brule 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 Indians were among the Sioux (being without lodges of their own). Two-Kettles, among the other Sioux (without lodges).

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. [This officer was evidently Capt. French, Seventh Cavalry.] The Sioux have for a long time fought many brave men of different people, but the Sioux say this officer was the bravest man 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 Sioux crossed, and attacked the lodges of the Uncpapas, farthest up the river. 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 of Soldiers had all the women and children prisoners. Like a whirlwind the word 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 can not 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 drive 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. These 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.

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 shooting. 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 charged the Sioux camp farthest up the

river. A short time after the different soldiers charged the village below. While the different soldiers and Sioux were fighting together the Sioux chief said, "Sioux men, go watch 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 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. 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.

GLOSSARY

battalion: a large body of troops ready for battle

detachment: a dispatch of a military unit from a larger body for a special duty

infantry: soldiers armed and trained to fight on foot

telegraphic dispatches: a message transmitted by telegraph

tipi: variant of teepee, a Native American tent

Document Analysis

The document is broken up into two parts: the hero narrative, as presented by the press at the time, and the eyewitness testimony, as told by one of the Native peoples on the other side of the conflict. When seen together, they present not just an accounting of the Battle of Little Bighorn, but also the ways in which the history of the American West has been altered and mythologized.

The first part of the document features an article from the *Helena Daily Herald*, published July 4, 1876. Focusing on the tragic death of General Custer and the slaughter of his men, the article relays few, mainly inaccurate details of the battle. According to the article, Custer and Reno attacked an Indian camp, but were immediately overrun by the Indians' "murderous fire."

The article is clear to point out that the Seventh Cavalry fought bravely and tenaciously and were only defeated by "mere brute force." It serves as a good example of the narrative that would develop around the death of Custer, a shocking tragedy made possible only by superior numbers on the enemy's side. Disbelief mixed with a sense that perhaps the Seventh Cavalry might have even had a chance to win the fight. In this light, Custer is the fallen hero and the Native peoples mere savages.

The second part of the document is a transcript of Chief Red Horse's eyewitness testimony of the events surrounding the Battle of Little Bighorn. The collective tribes of the Sioux and their allies were set up along the bank of the river when the Seventh Cavalry suddenly attacked. There was no opportunity for talk or negotiation, but instead, the Native peoples were forced to

immediately jump to their own defense. Here, we see corroboration not just of Custer's tendency to attack without deliberation, but of American military policy toward Native peoples. This was a deliberate act to remove the Sioux from their own land, as forcefully as possible. There was uncertainty from the side of the Sioux which of the officers was Custer, but Red Horse is quick to point out that the American soldiers fought bravely. In this telling there is no last stand. Custer is not the final man standing.

Red Horse goes on to document more of the events of those two days. The fight with Custer's men, followed by the engagement with Reno's battalion. He mentions that some of the soldiers attempted to surrender, that few managed to even fire their guns, then documents the Sioux's final departure from the Little Bighorn. When compared to the newspaper article, Red Horse's account conveys neither the tragedy or heroism of Custer's last stand. The myth comes unraveled. The American Army launched a foolhardy, unprovoked attack on superior numbers. They lost.

Essential Themes

Of the two accounts, the tragic hero narrative became the dominant account of the Battle of Little Bighorn—brave American soldiers standing firm against a tidal wave of brutality. Custer became not just a hero, but a symbol of right, power, and sacrifice: a mythological being, an American god torn down as blood sacrifice to the opening of the frontier. Testimony about that day from Red Horse and other Native peoples was largely ignored and forgotten. This was partly a deliberate

choice to further justify the takeover of Native lands, as was done soon after the Battle of Little Bighorn, when the US government annexed all remaining Sioux land, including the Black Hills. The recasting of events was also partially driven by a lingering sense of disbelief that American soldiers, especially a war hero like Custer, could be so easily defeated by people whom many considered little more than primitives. But on some level, the battle's revised narrative was also driven by an intuitive human desire for a great story with a handsome, brave hero at its center. In the end, the victory of the Sioux at the Battle of Little Bighorn proved to be a disaster for Native Americans, as the US government intensified its anti-Native policies and, for the next century, the Sioux, along with all Native peoples, would be portrayed as the villains in books, films, and even children's backyard games.

—KP Dawes, MA

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