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## Article Title: The Crazy Horse Medal: An Enigma from the Great Sioux War

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Article Summary: Little is known about a Union Pacific Railroad Museum medal engraved "for gallant services rendered to the whites at the death of Crazy Horse." The author summarizes conjectures regarding the sponsorship of the medal, the circumstances in which it was presented, and those who might have received it.

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Photographs / Images: Crazy Horse medal, obverse and reverse views; Little Big Man, Oglala; Amos Bad Heart Bull's drawing of the death of Crazy Horse; 1<sup>st</sup> Lt William P Clark, Second Cavalry, at the time of his graduation from the United States Military Academy, 1869; engraving depicting the meeting of President Rutherford B Hayes and members of the Sioux delegation of September-October 1877 (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 13, 1877)

# THE CRAZY HORSE MEDAL

## AN ENIGMA FROM THE GREAT SIOUX WAR

*By Paul L. Hedren*

On the second floor of the Museum of Nebraska History in Lincoln, in a gallery entitled *The First Nebraskans* and in an exhibit case labeled "Indian Wars Artifacts," is an unassuming, almost obscure silver medal. About the size of an American silver dollar, the hand-engraved, silver planchet proclaims on the obverse:

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Presented to  
MahtiaCowa  
by  
MuzaApapeweChasha  
September 29, 1877

and on the reverse:

A Token of  
regard for gallant services  
rendered to the whites  
at the death of  
Crazy Horse.

The artifact's label credits the collections of the Union Pacific Railroad, from whom the Society borrowed the medal in 1986.

At face value this small silver decoration is an instant reminder of the tragic death of Crazy Horse, bayoneted by Pvt. William Gentles of Company F, Fourteenth Infantry, as the warrior-chieftain lunged from the doorway of the Camp Robinson guardhouse in the early evening hours of September 5, 1877. Closer scrutiny, however, hints at a much



Crazy Horse medal, obverse.



Crazy Horse medal, reverse. This dramatic artifact, on loan from the Union Pacific Railroad Museum in Omaha, is exhibited in the Museum of Nebraska History, Lincoln. (NSHS-10,963-1)

broader story: of the pro- and anti-government factionalism tearing at the Oglala and Brulé Lakota bands in the wake of the Great Sioux War; of the threats of Oglala and Brulé removal from the White River country of Nebraska to agencies along the Missouri River or even in the Indian territory; and of the sullenness of Crazy Horse himself as he struggled in the throes of agency life.

But what of consequence can be said about the medal, beyond the few self-evident facts of names, date, and purpose? R. Eli Paul, senior research historian at the Nebraska State Historical Society, joined me on the quest late in 1989, shortly after I chanced upon the piece during a visit to Lincoln. From Paul's vantage in the state archives, two tantalizing facts quickly surfaced. First was a statement in reference to Little Big Man collected by Eli S. Ricker from Carter P. Johnson, a Third cavalryman from the Fort Laramie garrison, who had been temporarily reassigned to Camp Robinson during the Crazy Horse turmoil. According to Johnson, "Little Big Man went among his Indians and told them that he had been compelled to stab Crazy Horse to save his own life but that Crazy Horse wouldn't die. *He received a silver medal for this action of his.*"<sup>1</sup>

Second, and again involving Little Big Man, Paul found mention in the October 23, 1878, *Omaha Weekly Bee* of Little Big Man appearing in conference at Camp Sheridan "resplendant [*sic*] in medals presented by the President *for services rendered the whites. He helped to capture and kill Crazy Horse.*"<sup>2</sup> That the president in this instance is Rutherford B. Hayes, and that Little Big Man's medals included the "Crazy Horse" piece is presumed since in late September 1877 a delegation of Oglalas and Brulés, including Little Big Man, appeared before Hayes in Washington, conferring principally on the relocation issue.

Little Big Man's actions before and during Crazy Horse's final struggle speak volumes about the factionalism among the residents of the Sioux agencies. This proud warrior, cast from the mold of the



Little Big Man, Oglala. (NSHS-R539:2-4)

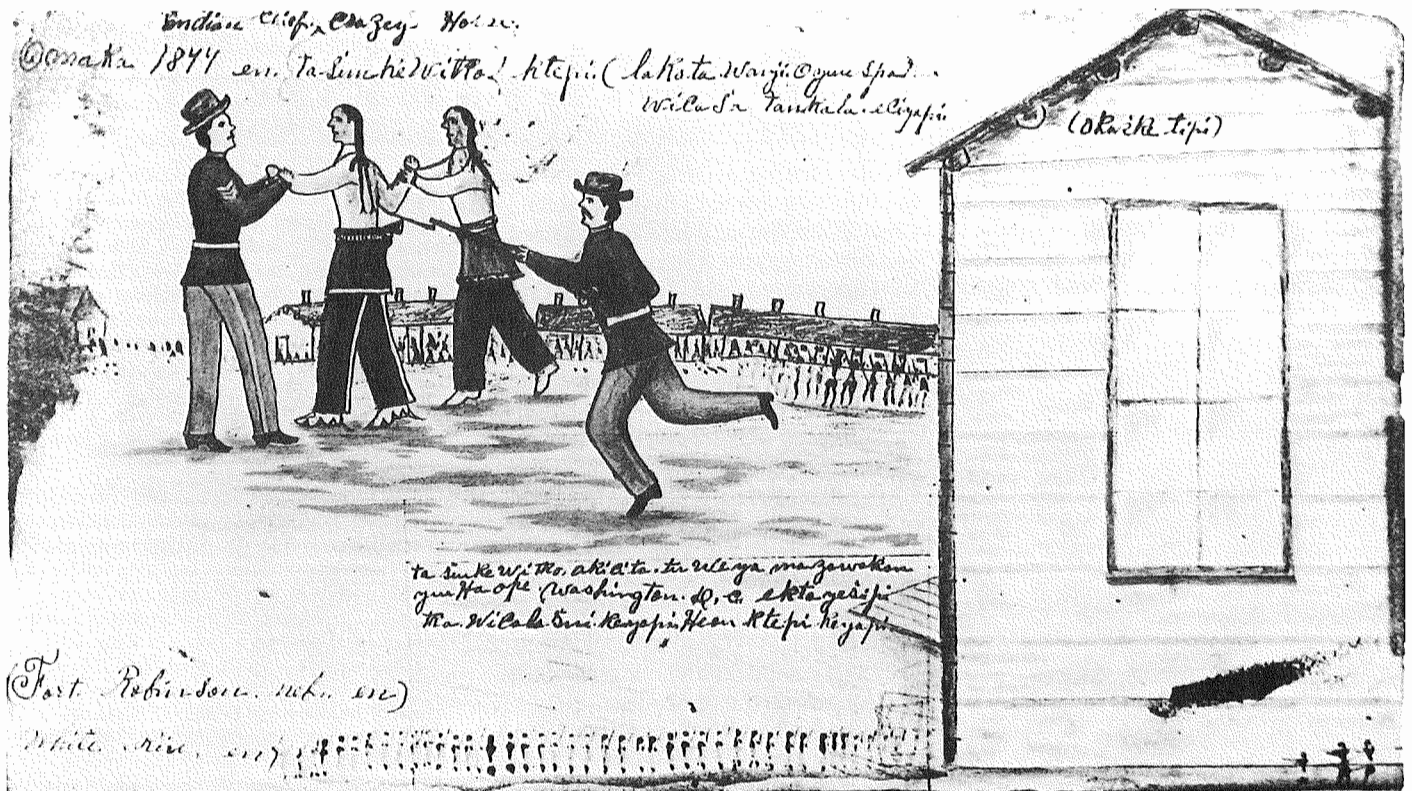
greatest of the traditional Oglalas, was one of Crazy Horse's closest friends and a chief lieutenant through two decades of Indian resistance. Little Big Man stood at Crazy Horse's side on May 6 when these Oglalas surrendered, but he had grown weary of fighting, and that summer their friendship seriously estranged when Little Big Man voiced conciliation and freely cooperated with the whites.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, these uneasy friends again stood side-by-side during the showdown on September 5, Little Big Man easing Crazy Horse through the jeering mass of Indians and whites assembled in front of the Camp Robinson guardhouse just before the stabbing. When Crazy Horse fully comprehended the gravity of his plight and wielded a knife at his captors, Little Big Man was the first to grab his arms to restrain him. Little Big Man's wrist was cut in the melee, but Crazy Horse was fatally wounded by the guard at Post Number One. As he fell to the ground, Little Big Man and several soldiers reached to comfort him, but Crazy Horse called them off, declaring "Let me go, my friends. You have got me hurt enough."<sup>4</sup>

After surrendering at Camp Robinson on May 6, 1877, Crazy Horse's restlessness had betrayed the difficult, seemingly impossible task of acculturation confronting him. Before capitulating he was the literal embodiment of the proud warrior and buffalo culture of the plains. But from May 6 onward, the assimilation of these Sioux people into the American agrarian culture was fully underway. In that disquieted summer of 1877, however, soldiers and agents at Camp Robinson and Red Cloud Agency feared continually that Crazy Horse would not subscribe to the new way, but would either bolt for Sitting Bull's encampment in Canada or simply resume the Great Sioux War.

Repeatedly that summer, Crazy Horse had received overtures to join a delegation of kinsmen headed for Washington in the fall. He vacillated and then declined. Such visits by Indians had become commonplace in the mid-nineteenth century, serving principally to impress the tribesmen with the wonders of industrial, urban

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The death of Crazy Horse, as drawn by Amos Bad Heart Bull, Oglala artist.  
Courtesy of University of Nebraska Press.

America and, as well, to persuade them of the inevitability of change. Confusing matters more for the Sioux in 1877 were the government's intentions of relocating the Nebraska agencies east to the Missouri River. Barely was Crazy Horse dead when a delegation of twenty-five men and four interpreters, headed by Red Cloud and Spotted Tail and guided by 1st Lt. William Philo Clark of the Second Cavalry, traveled eastward from Sidney, Nebraska. Highlighting their stay in Washington were three separate audiences with President Hayes on September 27 and 28 and October 1.<sup>5</sup>

During their visits with the president, the Sioux chiefs made a successful case against removal to the Missouri River, though in late October 1877 the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies were moved a short distance north into Dakota Territory, eventually to become the Pine Ridge and Rosebud agencies. Regrettably,

newspaper accounts are vague on the Sioux delegation's activities on September 29, the date inscribed on the "Crazy Horse" medal. Though hard evidence is lacking, the medal, delegate Little Big Man, and Hayes are circumstantially linked, suggesting at least the possibility of a presentation during that visit and in that company.

Equally problematic is the list of "Crazy Horse" medal recipients. A conclusive translation of the medal's engraving has not been achieved, so the most obvious potential provides no hard evidence.<sup>6</sup> Each member of the 1877 Sioux delegation was a tacit supporter of acculturation, of course, and Crazy Horse's passing marked the death knell of the "old way." By their acquiescence, perhaps each delegate received such a medal as a token of appreciation for supporting change. Gift giving was an essential ingredient of such visits, and a precedent existed for award-

ing medals.<sup>7</sup> Specifics on the Crazy Horse medal are absent, however, and none of the authorities on Indian medals identify such a piece in their respective works.<sup>8</sup>

That vital clause on the medal—"gal-lant services rendered to the whites at the death of Crazy Horse"—can be much more selectively interpreted, of course, narrowing the recipient list considerably. Little Big Man is named, and he was a Washington delegate in 1877. Others might have included Red Cloud, Young Man Afraid of His Horse, Three Bears, Little Wound, American Horse, Touch the Clouds, Yellow Bear, Black Coal, Sharp Nose, and Big Road. All were Washington delegates who played visible roles in Crazy Horse's final subjugation. The short list, too, remains highly conjectural.<sup>9</sup>

The question of the medal's sponsorship is as enigmatic as is the list of possible recipients. Eli Paul has conjectured the Union Pacific Railroad's and



Lieutenant Clark's involvement. The case for the Union Pacific rests in the company's holding of the surviving piece, plus the fact that the complete cessation of hostilities in the Nebraska Sioux country lessened the imperative of relocating the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies to the Missouri River. The railroad had a financial stake in the Nebraska agencies because annuities and supplies bound for



1st Lt. William P. Clark, Second Cavalry, seen here in 1869 at the time of his graduation from the United States Military Academy. Courtesy of Special Collections, United States Military Academy Library, West Point, New York.

those sites traveled via its iron rails to Sidney, whereas the existing Missouri River Sioux agencies were efficiently and economically serviced by contract steamboat lines. From the railroad's perspective, the presentation of silver medals to key Nebraska Sioux residents could have been viewed as an expression of friendship at the conclusion of hostilities and an entreaty for the status quo. Examination of Union Pacific records thus far sheds no light on this possibility.<sup>10</sup>

Like that of the Union Pacific Railroad, William Philo Clark's possible involvement with the "Crazy Horse" medal rests on shadowy evidence. This young Second Cavalry officer had served faithfully as Crook's observer at Camp Robinson and the Nebraska agencies throughout the Great Sioux War, and he had witnessed and often negotiated Sioux and Cheyenne surrenders there in 1877, including Crazy Horse's. Clark also played a pivotal role in the chieftain's apprehension and death, and two weeks later he shepherded the Oglala-Brulé delegation to Washington for its audiences with the president and other government officials. Most compelling in Clark's case was his receipt in New York of \$100 from an anonymous woman, who asked only that it be "expended for the Indians." The Sioux delegation visited New York City on October 4 and 5, and Clark reported that the donation would be used to "buy some frocks and things for destitute squaws on the reservation."<sup>11</sup>

Earlier in their Washington visit, the chiefs had asked for presents and were given overcoats and other clothing, plus \$30 each. Virtually all of the Indians' money was spent in New York buying gifts for family members.<sup>12</sup> Since the Indians did not receive medals in Washington when such pieces were otherwise fairly common gifts, perhaps Clark seized the initiative and had a few pieces engraved in New York using the anonymous donor's money.

Is there other information on the "Crazy Horse" medal in some as yet untapped archive or newspaper file? Probably. Accordingly, this story must remain an investigation in progress. As is, however, this small, carefully engraved silver planchet speaks to the tragedies of the Great Sioux War, of justice and injustice, and of great men driven by conviction and passion in the service of a cause each felt was right.

## Notes

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and Alicia Mauldin, all of whom responded to my inquiries with encouragement and help.

<sup>1</sup> Italics added. Eli S. Ricker Coll., MS 8, box 26, folder 14, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

<sup>2</sup> Italics added. *Omaha Weekly Bee*, Oct. 23, 1878.

<sup>3</sup> Sources on the life of Little Big Man include George E. Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk: A History of the Oglala Sioux Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937), and Stephen E. Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer, the Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1975). Sources on Crazy Horse's surrender include Harry H. Anderson, "Indian Peace-Talkers and the Conclusion of the Sioux War of 1876," *Nebraska History* 44 (1963): 233-55, and Thomas R. Buecker, "A History of Camp Robinson, Nebraska, 1874-1878," Master's thesis, Chadron State College, Chadron, Nebraska, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> The quote is in Mari Sandoz, *Crazy Horse, the Strange Man of the Oglalas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 408. Sources on the death of Crazy Horse are voluminous, including Sandoz and those in note 3. An excellent primer is Carroll Friswold, *The Killing of Chief Crazy Horse* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988). The most recent account is by James N. Gilbert, "The Death of Crazy Horse: A Contemporary Examination of the Homicidal Events of 5 September 1877," *Journal of the West* 32 (January 1993): 5-21. Tom Buecker, curator of the Fort Robinson Museum, has collected virtually every known document related to Crazy Horse's death, and he makes them available to researchers there.

<sup>5</sup> James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 247-53.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Buecker, curator of the Fort Robinson Museum, obtained a Lakota translation from Lula Red Cloud and Harry Burk of Hermosa, S. Dak. Their translation has the medal presented to "Chases Bear" from "Man Hits Metal."

<sup>7</sup> Exhibited in the South Dakota State Historical Society's Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre is an Andrew Johnson presidential medal with an added inscription engraved on the reverse: "Brother I am Pleased With You." On Nov. 14, 1865, Johnson ordered the presentation of this medal to Short Gun, a Blackfeet Sioux, for having rescued two white women from Indian captivity. The story of that rescue and the subsequent presentation of gifts was quite well known in Indian country.

<sup>8</sup> As reported in the *New York Times*, Sept. 18, 1877, and the *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 18, 1877, the delegation included these Sioux: Spotted Tail, Hollow Horn, Bear, Little Hawk, Ring Thunder, Spotted Tail, Jr., White Tail, Swift Bear, Good Horse, Red Bear, Touch the Clouds, Red Cloud, Young Man Afraid of His Horse, Little Wound, Yellow Bear, American Horse, Big Road, Jumping Shield, He Dog, Little Big Man, and Three Bears; and the Arapahos Black Coal, Sharp Nose, and Friday. The broader

## Crazy Horse Medal

context of Indian visits to Washington is examined by Herman J. Viola, *Diplomats in Buckskins: A History of Indian Delegations in Washington City* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981). The medal books consulted include: Francis Paul Prucha, *Indian Peace Medals in American History* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1971); Bauman L. Belden, *Indian Peace Medals Issued in the United States* (New Milford, Conn.: N. Flayderman and Co., 1966); and Kenneth M. Failor and Eleonora Hayden, *Medals of the United States Mint* (Washington: GPO, 1972).

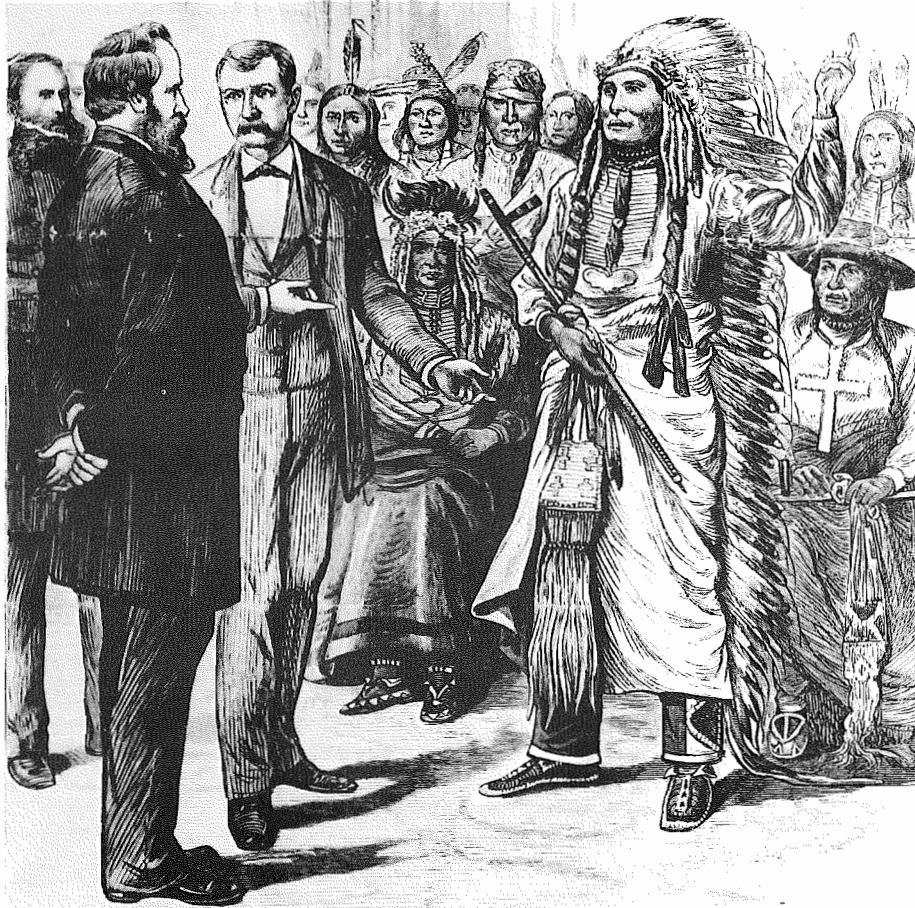
<sup>9</sup> Key Sioux participants in Crazy Horse's apprehension are noted in Friswold, *The Killing of Crazy Horse*, 33, 79, and John G. Bourke, *On the Border with Crook* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), 421.

<sup>10</sup> I discussed agency geography and economics in *Fort Laramie in 1876: Chronicle of a Frontier Post at*

*War* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 5-6. Among evidence regarding the Union Pacific's opposition to the Nebraska agency relocations to the Missouri River, see *Yankton Union and Press and Dakotian*, Oct. 11, 1877. In his letter to the author, Robert C. Pettit, curator of museum collections, Nebraska State Historical Society, reported negative findings in the Union Pacific Railroad Museum's collections. Eli Paul conducted a search of the Union Pacific archives housed at the Nebraska State Historical Society, again with negative results.

<sup>11</sup> *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 1877; *New York Daily Tribune*, Oct. 6, 1877.

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 3, 6, 1877; *New York Daily Tribune*, Oct. 6, 1877.



President Rutherford B. Hayes may have presented "Crazy Horse" medals to members of the Sioux delegation of September-October 1877. An engraving depicting their meeting made the front page of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 13, 1877.