



## Red Cloud and the U.S. Flag

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Article Summary: Allen and his interpreter, Big Bat, witnessed the famous incident in which Red Cloud and his men, mistakenly believing that allowing the flag to fly over the Agency would make soldiers of them, opposed the flag-raising.

### Cataloging Information:

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Map: Flag Staff Incident at Red Cloud Agency



Major  
Charles W. Allen

Editor  
Chadron Democrat — 1885-91

During the same period A. E. S. edited the **Chadron Signal** (populist) and was demolished regularly by the logic and invective of his adversary. The only possible revenge was to print verses in the **Signal** with Allen's name as author. As Allen was an ardent, unreasonable democrat this verse seemed peculiarly his own, and is preserved by his friends as a fine example of sound democratic writing.

### Ode to a Mule

O modest mule! On thee I dote.  
Thy mild and melancholy note  
Is sweeter far than fife or drum  
Upon my raptured tympanum;  
Thy naive, unstudied, mulish grace  
Here in my heart hath found thee place—  
Dear border tough.

All hail, Most Royal Mule! Thy mug  
Is pleasant as an uncorked jug  
Unto my eyes. Let other poets praise  
The camp, the court; if my poor lays  
But imitate thy soulful brays,  
It is enough.

Thrice hail, my fellow Democrat!  
To thee I doff my Cleveland hat,—  
Thou slow-to-drive and hard-to-lead  
Type of the true Jacksonian breed.  
Let envious ballet-girls turn back;  
Thy robust limbs and lofty kick  
Proclaim thee master of that art.  
Dear Democratic counterpart,  
This is no bluff!

# Red Cloud and the U. S. Flag

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Story of a Thrilling Incident at the Red Cloud Indian Agency,  
October 27, 1874

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*As Told By An Eye Witness*

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MAJOR CHARLES W. ALLEN OF CHADRON

Among the many frontier friends of the editor of this magazine was and is Major Charles W. Allen of Martin, South Dakota. His life is one of the most picturesque of all the men on the Nebraska frontier. Leaving home while yet a boy, he found his way to the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountain region. He became in turn a mule driver on freighting trains, soldier in a frontier regiment, homesteader, manager of a blacksmith shop, editor of frontier newspapers, postmaster at Pine Ridge Agency, cattle man, poet, and historian.

In recent years Major Allen has written the story of his life. From the manuscript of this story, with his permission, the editor has chosen one of the most dramatic narratives of all the true stories of the Indian frontier. It is the story of the raising of the United States flag at the Red Cloud Indian Agency in October, 1874; the resistance of Red Cloud and other Indians to raising the flag; the conflict between the United States and the Sioux Indians over the event; the conflict between rival groups of the Indians themselves; the near precipitation of a battle which inevitably would have ended in the complete destruction of all the white men at the Red Cloud Agency and at Fort Robinson three miles away. And the final outcome of the controversy, with the flag of the United States flying at the top of a tall pole above both white men and Indians at Red Cloud Agency.—*Editor.*

My wife and I lived on our little homestead, where I cut hay and gardened between freighting trips. I was so engaged when, one balmy autumn morning, I met an old friend known as "Big Bat." This was Baptiste Pourier, post guide and interpreter, who importuned me to accompany him to Fort Robinson and



RED CLOUD

Reproduction of old photo by Trager & Kuhns

the Red Cloud Agency, as he had been ordered to deliver despatches there by ten o'clock the next day. Never having been over that section, I was glad to accede to his wish.

. . . Soon we were again among the trees where the embryo river, in the form of a rippling brook, wound its serpentine course through the falling leaves that were stirred from their branches by the cool October breeze. Within a mile or two of the mouth of this picturesque canyon, where the little valleys begin to broaden and the little stream with its numerous springs gradually deepened into the White River, the road left its banks and rose to the top of a hill at the edge of an extensive valley surrounded by irregular pine ridges. In front of us, on either side of the road, a large Arapahoe village met our gaze. A little farther on, near the mouth of Soldier Creek, lay Fort Robinson; and up this branch still farther to the north was a large Cheyenne village. In plain view to the east was a cluster of buildings, and from the front of one rose a crude miniature tower with portico attachments which, through the haze of morning, were suggestive of some ancient feudal castle. This was the Red Cloud Agency, and round about it, up the rivulets that came out of the hills, camps of family groups of lodges were scattered in every direction. However, Red Cloud's main camp of thousands a little farther east was obscured by a low chain of grass-covered hills.

All this panorama lay before me as we dismounted and I stood holding our horses while Big Bat delivered his despatches to the commander at the post. When he rejoined me I learned that he was given the remainder of the day and the next to rest before returning to Fort Laramie. So we cantered merrily down toward the Agency, and after visiting for awhile I amused myself by looking it over . . . I found that uppermost in the minds of its residents was the controversy between Chief Red Cloud and Dr. Saville, the Indian Agent, over the erection of a flag-staff.

It seems that the Indians, being entirely ignorant of the general significance of this simple patriotic ceremony of raising the flag over all public institutions, felt that it was only an emblem of their natural enemy—not of the soldiers themselves, but of the army in action; and that in some way the placing of the flag over the Agency would make soldiers of them.

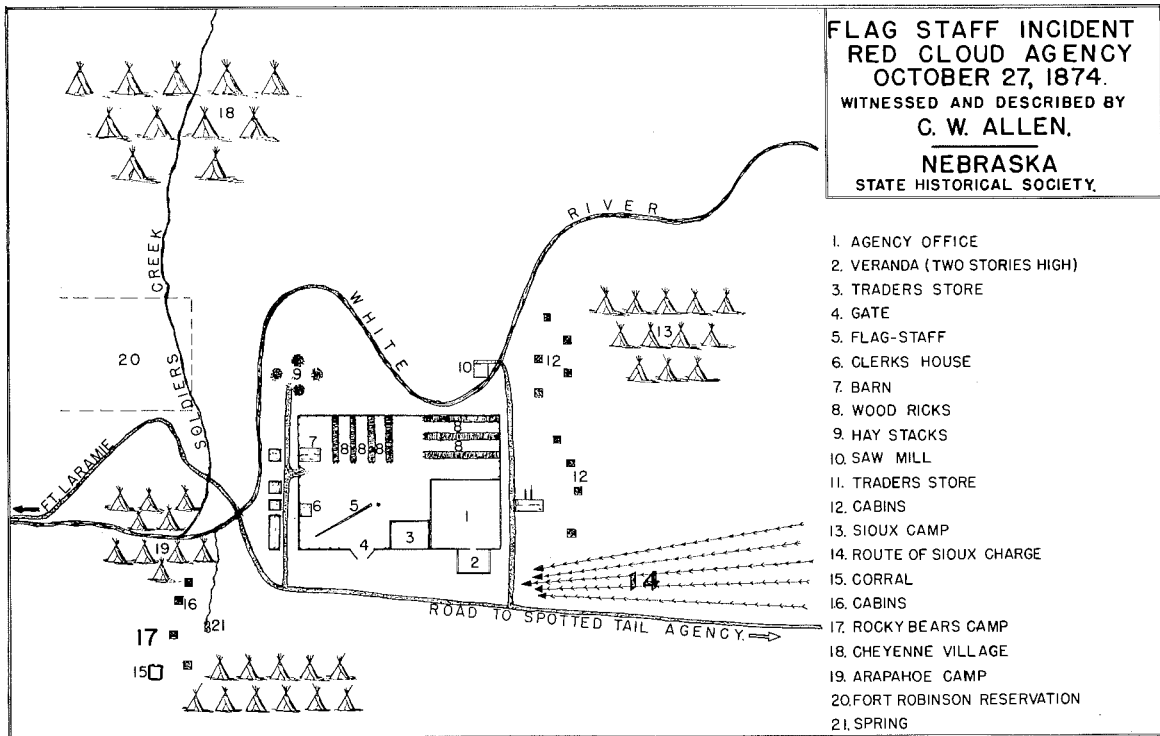
**FLAG STAFF INCIDENT  
RED CLOUD AGENCY  
OCTOBER 27, 1874.**

WITNESSED AND DESCRIBED BY

**C. W. ALLEN,**

**NEBRASKA**

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.



THE RED CLOUD AGENCY AT FORT ROBINSON

Red Cloud and many (but not all) of his head men joined in the opposition to the raising of the flag. It is said that Red Cloud in emphatic tones told the Agent that it should not be done; that the soldiers already had the flag floating over their fort, and they should be satisfied with that.

The Agent, being right and knowing it, told Red Cloud with equal emphasis that the flag would be raised. It was reported that the Chief and Agent had had several quarrels over it, when one day the Agency teams pulled into the yard with a fine tall pole and deposited it in the court under the angry glances of many eyes; but no actual opposition arose, and the men went on about their business.

Whether these controversies were conducted by the Agent in a calm, prudent and conciliatory manner is not now known, but current rumor had it that both he and the Chief were hot-headed. One thing is certain: if the Agent permitted temper to usurp the place of cool reasoning, he and many others soon had ample reason to regret it.

The last Oglala agency to be named for Chief Red Cloud was situated in a picturesque bend of White River a mile or two above the present site of the city of Crawford, Nebraska. It stood on fairly level ground and was built in the form of a square, with its principal face to the south; but it also faced the east and the west, with the inner space at the rear of the buildings forming a sort of court. To the north were located the wood and hay yards, with the barn and large barnyards on the crest of the hill that leads down to the river. All of the long ricks of dry pitch-pine cordwood, the long, tall stacks of hay — in fact, everything save the three entrances of the main building, were surrounded by a tall fence of native pine lumber furnished by the sawmill on the river bank below the hill.

On each side of the main buildings, across the space of an average town square but not at very regular angles, were numerous log residences and the traders' stores.

A word about Fort Robinson, which I had visited previously and observed with some care. It comprised all the buildings considered necessary to the customary military post of the frontier, but larger than were required for the few companies of

cavalry then occupying it. These buildings, like those of the Agency, were of rough lumber sawed from the near-by pines, with here and there one of sawed or peeled logs. Near all the living quarters, mess houses and the bakery were ricks of fine dry pine wood. Hundreds of cords of it were ricked at right angles on the east and north fronts of the main buildings, serving as temporary fence and windbreak. In the yards near the spacious barn were long, tall ricks containing hundreds of tons of hay.

I had noticed these details naturally, without any particular motive, as one is apt to do on entering an interesting place for the first time; but this picture in a different setting and with very different possibilities came vividly to my mind less than twenty-four hours later.

Having spent the afternoon and evening in visiting and looking over the Agency, I returned to the cabins for the night and awakened next morning to a day of strange entertainment.

There seemed nothing unusual about the early morning of October 27, 1874. The same clear sunshine tempered the soft, balmy breezes that characterized the late fall weather in this latitude. Yet everyone seemed to feel that strange events were pending. Rumors? Yes! The air was full of them. It seemed that everyone eagerly sought or more eagerly gave of them. On the western front the denizens of those vast spaces listened to and liked them. To them, rumor was the spice in the lonely monotony of their lives, as radio is to the lonely lives today. They knew, of course, that rumor was always accompanied by the aggravating static of unreliability; but they also knew it to be self-analyzing, and that sooner or later its component parts, its truth — if any — would stand revealed.

As visitors (mostly women) were continually coming and going from the Rocky Bear lodge that stood on a spring creek near the Agency, rumors of the flag dispute grew thicker and darker. We remarked also that riders were beginning to scatter hither and yon, yet with an evident plan. Most of them were in warrior regalia, their steeds painted in varied colors and decked with feathers of gaudy hue on mane and tail. We soon discovered that each hill and prominent knoll was occupied by sev-



eral warriors, sitting their mounts silently in the capacity of sentinels.

Our view from the depression by the spring branch was not extensive to the east and south; but to the north, the short distance to the boxelder trees skirting the river and the high stone hills beyond was unobstructed. It was also clear up the river to the post and the Cheyenne and Arapahoe villages, and the whole pine-encircled amphitheater in which they nestled. To the south and west, as far as the base of the timbered hills, only the outlines of a galaxy of small prairie hills were visible. We could see the lodges farthest south of the agency and the open spaces near them, and about each of these we saw bunches of ponies, all hobbled.

At the time I was not sufficiently versed in the customs of the Indians to realize the significance of this arrangement; and my companions, thinking perhaps that I knew as well as they, said nothing of the fact that these ponies were being held in readiness to be packed or hitched to travoys containing all the camp equipment, should occasion arise.

It was about nine o'clock when first a low, rumbling sound from the east reached our ears. As its source approached it grew louder and clearer and was easily recognized as the thundering of horses' hoofs, and we realized that the threat of opposing the flag-raising was being carried out. We could also distinguish the sounds incident to the hurrying and scurrying of the people at the Agency and adjacent lodges.

Presently Rocky Bear came slowly down the hill road, turned to the bend where his ponies were feeding, dismounted as he took off their hobbles, then drove them past us up to a small corral. When they were safely behind the bars and he had exchanged a few words in low tones with the old woman who had remained to watch the lodge, he rode past us again in stoical silence on his return trip to the Agency.

The speed of the charge had slackened as the riders neared the lodges east of the Agency buildings. The wild, rhythmic sound that for some time had mingled with the clatter of hammering hoofs now swelled into the ancient war song of the Sioux, pierced continually with shuddering yells of defiance.

Thus far we had judged the momentous proceedings by the sounds arising therefrom, but our understanding was afterward fully verified by the many recitals of those within the stockade — that inviting but dangerous trap that appeared to be the only shelter from the terror confronting them. It soon contained not only the agent and all of his employes, but every civilized person in the vicinity except ourselves and one or two others who were caught on the east side of the Agency.

We were on the west side — which was no ill luck, however, for had the riot gotten from under control (which at all times it seemed on the point of doing) there was but one fate awaiting all — death, either swift or lingering, with the additional horror of cremation for those who would have faced their slayers inside the stockade or at the military post.

I learned from John Farnham (who was employed at the agency at that time) and from Big Bat and others, that Louis Richards and Joseph Bissonette, Jr., were then the official interpreters of the agency. They were intelligent mixed-bloods of the Sioux, of middle age and with standing and influence among their people. Others of the same class were equally efficient as interpreters, among them being Louis Shangrau and William Garnett, who, with the two first mentioned, were of the Oglala — Red Cloud's band of Sioux.

There were other interpreters from the Spotted Tail and Missouri River bands who chanced to be present on this occasion: Louis Bordeaux, John Brugier and Louis Robideaux. Bordeaux was official interpreter at the Spotted Tail Agency, and was noted for his fluent command of both the English and the Sioux Indian languages. There were several others whose names I failed to learn, but all were of mixed blood. No white interpreter was used that day. It required men of the tribe who were loyal to both sides to be effective, and only through the untiring efforts of these men was catastrophe averted.

Under the direction of the Agent and the guidance of the experienced men about him in a room just behind the platform of the portico from which they spoke, these interpreters, in relays of two, were kept busy constantly haranguing their excited and misguided brethren in the interest of peace.

All those on the Agency hill could see the approaching mass of men, estimated to have been about fifteen hundred mounted warriors, increasing their speed gradually but methodically until within half a mile from the Agency, where they began their charge . . . They slowed down as they came to the outer edge of the village, through which they scattered and reassembled on the open spaces about the buildings. There they came to a halt while Red Cloud, accompanied by several of his sub-chiefs, opened and passed through the double gates, then marched out to the center of the court where lay the pole that was to have served as flagstaff. Here, with axes that had been hidden under their blankets, they cut the pole into short lengths and then returned, to disappear among their waiting comrades. Immediately John Farnham was despatched to the gate, to take the part of "Horatius at the Bridge."

During all of this time there was a roar of argument: voices raised in conflicting sentiments among the Indians assembled in front, and earnest pleadings for peace from the interpreters on the balcony.

The advocates for and against the execution of a sentence of death and destruction continued hour after hour. Often they came to blows with whips or bows (wild Indians did not use their fists) on the heads and shoulders of their opponents, accompanied by assorted epithets, and the wild shrieks and yells of opposing forces were continuous. Yet the never-ending stream of pacific oratory rolling out over the heads of the avengers was steadily producing the desired effect as the hours passed.

The women of the near-by lodges and camps, practically all of whom were for peace, contributed their share by following the usual Indian custom of preparing feasts for all, friend and stranger alike. Those not busy with the food mingled with the seething throng, collecting them in parties of three to five by coaxing them to "Come and eat," and taking care that a goodly number of the most rabid agitators were included. Always the invitation was accepted, and, stalking sullenly or riding, they went in to the feast. Though they ate rapidly and returned at once to the strife, it was with temper more pliable and demeanor more sane, try as they would to conceal it.

This was true also of the massed cordon of those on foot completely surrounding the stockade. They had enlarged knot-holes and cut other openings through the high board fence with their butcher-knives, giving them a clear view of everything within. They carried tufts of dry grass under their blankets, and were ready at the signal to hurl firebrands onto the ricks of wood and stacks of hay in the yards.

It was nearly eleven o'clock and we were moving about our restricted space in the cabin yards when there came riding coolly and quietly down the road from the Agency a young man who was recognized at once as Michael Dunn, the boss of the beef herd a few miles south. It seems that he was at the Agent's office and was caught with the others. He was acting in the capacity of courier to the post, to which service he had volunteered. We divined the purpose of the trip and admired his unconcerned attitude and even gait — the surest warrant of safety. The Indian outlooks on the hills paid little attention to his movements.

It was not long after he entered the post until we saw a file of cavalymen move out and take the road toward us. As the detail passed we counted some twenty-five or thirty men, with Mike Dunn riding in front beside an officer whom my companions recognized as Lieutenant Crawford.

This passing of soldiers toward the stockade was the most ominous incident we had yet observed. My companions, who understood Indians, felt positive that their appearance would be like a lighted match to the magazine, and that their smaller number was an invitation. For a short time it seemed that their prophecy was to be fulfilled, for when the detail first appeared on the scene we could hear pandemonium break loose in wild yells and the resumption of noisy strife. Then there was a rush for the soldiers which the peace party frustrated, and this led to another and more personal mix-up in which the usual taunting language was heard, together with vigorous whipping over the head with quirts and switches. It was said that one of the warriors laid hold of Lieutenant Crawford's bridle rein, but the Lieutenant reached down and caught him by the shoulder, whirling him from the path as he kept steadily on to the gates that were quickly opened by John Farnham and as quickly closed after the detail had filed through.

It was natural and fitting that when the little city of Crawford sprang up at this historic point, it should be named for the man who heroically executed his orders that day in the face of a situation that presaged certain death. It was for this and other meritorious conduct during the years that followed that this gallant officer received the promotions rapidly accorded him.

The friends of Red Cloud claimed that he had overplayed his hand and lost control of the day, as his only object was to prevent the flag-raising. It was said that he and his advisors had remained inactive in a nearby lodge during the whole disturbance. Be that as it may, another staff was soon secured and the flag went up without opposition.

I have never learned of a reasonable excuse for sending for those soldiers. Under the circumstances they could not have rendered any saving service. They were a dangerous aggravation to the Indians at first, but a different idea soon prevailed among them. They did not even try to follow the soldiers through the gate. Why should they? If the threatened storm had broken, they would have been just so many more mice in the trap. The troop was well equipped with arms — yes; but so were we all. Arms, when outnumbered a hundred to one, might just as well have been toothpicks.

However, so far as the question of safety was concerned, the little detail might as well be there as at their home post, of which we had a complete view. The verdure between us, which for years had been ravaged by fire and by the later onslaught of camps and herds, was not dense, and from the beginning of the disturbance to its end we could see that all the prairie ground lying between the post and the base of the pine-covered hills to the west and north was black with Cheyenne and Arapahoe warriors. Sitting silently on their mounts, they virtually surrounded the post on all sides save the east, which faced the Agency. The significance of this arrangement was plain, as they were waiting for the first puff of smoke to go up over the stockade as a signal for the onslaught, and they would have duplicated at the Post whatever occurred at the Agency. This means that within ten minutes after such a signal, the weakly garrisoned Post would have been a seething inferno, with Death stalking on every side

over its parade grounds and through all of its byways. The tinder of its pine structure and other inflammable material would have furnished a flaming sepulcher for those who remained in the post, and those who fled would have met death at the hands of the cordon of Indians who awaited their appearance.

As the afternoon wore away the portents of peace became more apparent. The watchers on the hills were constantly but quietly retiring from their positions, and the babble of voices was subsiding. About half past two o'clock the troop of cavalry marched back to the post; groups of Indian riders were seen frequently moving toward the east, and the women were returning to their lodges. Then Rocky Bear came riding past, and, seeing a more serene face as he lowered the bars and turned his ponies out to graze, we knew that the nightmare of uncertainty was ended.

From that moment until bedtime we were in constant conversation with those who had witnessed the whole proceeding. It was then we learned that before the boss herder, Michael Dunn, had volunteered to take a despatch to the Post, the Agent had sent a loyal Indian, named Speeder, on the same mission, but his own people had intercepted him and beaten him so badly that he lived only a short time.

The following morning Big Bat and I started on our return trip, leisurely. About midnight we camped in the hills twenty-five miles north of Fort Laramie and rested in our saddle-blankets until the gray dawn, then proceeded to the Post and home.