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Article Summary: When Northern Indians tried to destroy a new flag pole inside the Red Cloud Agency stockade in 1874, Sitting Bull and his Oglalas protected it from the attackers until soldiers could reach the site. Sitting Bull's weapon was a famous three-bladed war club.

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Photographs / Images: author's sketch comparing Sitting Bull's 1868 and 1874 war clubs; exhibit from the Museum of the American Indian containing the three-bladed club; picture taken at Fort Laramie in 1868 showing Packs a Drum or Sitting Bull holding the two-bladed club

THE WAR CLUB OF SITTING BULL THE OGLALA

BY HARRY H. ANDERSON

ONE of the more noteworthy items in the Nelson A. Miles Collection of Indian artifacts belonging to the Museum of the American Indian in New York City is a lever action Henry repeating rifle bearing the inscription "Sitting Bull from the President for Bravery and Friendship." The Sitting Bull to whom this rifle was given was a headman of the Oglala Sioux, and as much a friend to the white man as his more widely known namesake, the Hunkpapa Sitting Bull, was an enemy.¹ On November 24, 1874, in the so-called "Flag Pole Affair" at old Red Cloud Agency near Fort Robinson, the Oglala Sitting Bull performed one of the significant acts of "bravery and friendship" for which he was awarded the engraved repeater by

¹ This contrast is emphasized in Mari Sandoz, "There Were Two Sitting Bulls," *Blue Book Magazine* (November, 1949), pp. 58-64. This article may be found also in *Hostiles and Friendlies: Selected Short Writings of Mari Sandoz* (Lincoln, 1959).

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President Ulysses S. Grant. And interestingly enough, this reward, in the form of one unusual weapon, was a recognition of services rendered with another very distinctive instrument of combat—Sitting Bull's famous three bladed war club.

Eye witness accounts of the Flag Pole Affair, one of the several wild riots that took place at Red Cloud Agency in 1873 and 1874, include descriptions of the Sitting Bull war club. This incident had its beginnings in an attempt by the Red Cloud agent, Dr. J. J. Saville, to set up a flag pole inside the agency stockade. A considerable force of Northern Indians, the non-agency hunting bands who had come to winter on free government beef, entered the stockade to destroy the pine trunk that was to fly the national standard. Agent Saville's attempts to prevent the Northern warriors from chopping the pole to pieces proved fruitless, and he sent an appeal for assistance to nearby Fort Robinson.

In his haste, the excited Saville neglected to emphasize to the military authorities either the violent attitude displayed by the Indians or the large number of warriors involved in the demonstration. Only a single troop of cavalry was sent to Saville's aid. Before this detachment could reach the agency it was surrounded by a huge crowd of angry Sioux who shouted insults at the soldiers and did everything possible to provoke them into firing and precipitating an engagement. A fight was narrowly averted by the intervention of the agency Sioux. These Oglalas, permanent residents at Red Cloud Agency, beat back the Northern Indians with war clubs, whips, and gun butts, and opened a path for the soldiers to reach the stockade.²

Among the leaders of the Agency Indians was Sitting Bull, a headman of the Oglala Kiyuksa band. Billy Garnett, Sioux mixed-blood and long time interpreter at Pine

² For a more complete account of this incident and the other difficulties caused by the Northern Indians at Red Cloud Agency from 1871 to 1875, see George E. Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk* (Norman, 1937), 197-229, and Roger T. Grange, "Fort Robinson, Outpost on the Plains," *Nebraska History*, 39 (September, 1959), 193-203.

Ridge Agency, was present at the time, and some years later gave the following description of the incident:

Just then the Minor Sitting Bull appeared on the scene with his three knives on a sweeping handle. He was knocking men and horses right and left with the power of a giant and commanding the Indians to scatter and depart from the agency.³

All accounts of the dispersal of the northern Indians place emphasis on the strength and personal courage displayed by Sitting Bull. Yet considerable credit for his effectiveness must be given to the weapon he used. Two other old residents of Pine Ridge Reservation who were at the Red Cloud Stockade during the Flag Pole Affair confirm Garnett's description of the war club. According to Richard Stirk, Sitting Bull "had a big knife—a long handle about three feet long with 3 blades in it." Ben Tibbitts also referred to the weapon as "a long knife—3 or 4 blades in a long handle."⁴

The summer following the Flag Pole Affair, in June, 1875, Sitting Bull was a member of a large delegation of Oglalas and other Sioux who were summoned to Washington for conferences regarding the proposed relinquishment of the Black Hills by the Indians. While in the capital, in recognition of his support of Agent Saville and as an example to the other Sioux leaders, Sitting Bull was presented with the engraved rifle by the President.⁵

Barely a year and a half later Sitting Bull was killed, and ironically it was this weapon that placed him in the situation which resulted in his death. In the fall of 1876, when a government commission came to Red Cloud Agency with the treaty taking the Powder River and Black Hills country from the Sioux, Sitting Bull rebelled at the pre-

³ Ricker Papers, Tablet No. 2, Nebraska State Historical Society. Interview by Judge E. S. Ricker with Billy Garnett at Cane Creek, South Dakota, January 10, 1907.

⁴ Ricker Papers, Tablet No. 8, Nebraska State Historical Society. Interviews by Judge Ricker with Richard Stirk at his home north of White River in South Dakota, November 10, 1906, and with Ben Tibbitts at his home north of White River and 18 miles above Interior, South Dakota, November 12, 1906.

⁵ New York *Tribune*, June 7, 1875.

tension of the commissioners that this agreement would be beneficial to the Indians. He angrily broke up one meeting with the government representatives by driving the Sioux chiefs out of the council room with the same three bladed knife he had used during the Flag Pole Affair. A short time previous to this, the engraved rifle had been loaned to a friend going to the hostile Sioux camp of Crazy Horse, and now Sitting Bull, disgusted with the situation at the agency, set out for the northern country to get back his rifle.⁶

When Sitting Bull reached the Crazy Horse village, then located on the lower Yellowstone between the mouths of the Tongue and Powder rivers, he found considerable sentiment in the camp for ending the current hostilities with the whites, the so-called Sioux War of 1876. Sitting Bull agreed to lead a delegation into the military cantonment at the mouth of Tongue river to see what terms the Army was prepared to offer. As the peace party approached the post, they were met by a number of their hereditary enemies, the Crows, who were then serving as scouts for the Army. After a preliminary exhibition of friendship, the Crows treacherously fired upon the Sioux, murdering Sitting Bull and four others in the advance party.⁷

⁶ Billy Garnett Interview, *loc. cit.* Sitting Bull's actions at the Black Hills councils were the subject of a report by Colonel R. S. Mackenzie, commanding officer at Fort Robinson, to his superiors, Generals George Crook and P. H. Sheridan. See George W. Manypenny, *Our Indian Wards* (Cincinnati, 1880), 355, 356. Manypenny, who was a member of the treaty commission, denies Sitting Bull performed any acts of a violent nature or that he broke up the council. However, Billy Garnett, an interpreter at the council, gives much the same account of the incident in his interview as does Colonel Mackenzie's report. Garnett also is the source for the statement that Sitting Bull left the agency to get back his rifle. The *New York Sun*, April 21, 1877, contained a letter from Red Cloud Agency which reported that Sitting Bull had been sent to the Crazy Horse camp by General Crook in an attempt to get the hostiles to surrender. "Peace-talkers" were sent out by the Army both before and after Sitting Bull's departure, but in view of the charges by Colonel Mackenzie, it is highly unlikely that Sitting Bull served in such a capacity.

⁷ *Army and Navy Journal*, February 3, 1877.

Colonel Nelson A. Miles was commanding officer at the Tongue river post, and he acquired Sitting Bull's engraved rifle after the killing. The rifle was part of the Miles Collection given to the Museum of the American Indian by the Miles family in 1929.

The other part of the Oglala Sitting Bull's distinctive armament, the three bladed war club, attracted the interest of the present writer several years ago after the examination of a collection of photographs taken at Fort Laramie in 1868. Two of these Fort Laramie views depict a group of white men and Indians, including one warrior identified as "Packs the Drum."⁸ In several contemporary accounts, Packs the Drum (or Drumpacker) is recorded as an alias of Sitting Bull the Oglala.⁹ These two pictures, therefore, provided views of Sitting Bull at a much earlier age than had previously been available.

The photographs, however, are even more significant because they show Sitting Bull holding a war club of particular construction—a handle at the end of which were fixed two knife blades. At first it appeared that this was the celebrated war club used by Sitting Bull at the time of the Flag Pole Affair, but upon careful examination, important inconsistencies were noted. First, the weapon in the photos appeared to be only a little over two feet in length,

⁸ Mrs. Margaret Blaker, Archivist of the Bureau of American Ethnology, kindly supplied copies of the two photos in question. They first appeared in Merrill Mattes, "The Sutler's Store at Fort Laramie," *Annals of Wyoming*, XVIII (July, 1946), 134, 135, and later in Martin F. Schmitt and Dee Brown, *Fighting Indians of the West* (New York, 1948), 36. The originals are in the W. S. Harney Collection of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. The identifications were secured by Mr. Walter Mason Camp from elderly informants, both white and Indian, on the Sioux reservations in 1918.

⁹ The Garnett interview states that Sitting Bull "also had the name Drum Carrier." White Bull, a nephew of the Hunkpapa Sitting Bull, told Stanley Vestal that the Indian called Young Sitting Bull who was killed at the Tongue river post (later Fort Keogh) was also known as Drumpacker. Stanley Vestal, *New Sources of Indian History* (Norman, 1934), 182. Finally, in the testimony taken during the investigation of affairs at Red Cloud Agency under Agent Saville, there are references to the headmen at the agency, including "The One that Carried the Drum" (so called by the trader Jules Ecoffey). *Report of the Red Cloud Investigation Committee* (Washington, 1875), 216.

while Garnett, Stirk, and Tibbitts all had the distinct impression that it was longer, Stirk saying about three feet. More important, these descriptions all mentioned three blades. The club in the photos showed only two. Since the Indian in the photos had been identified as Drumpacker or Sitting Bull and he was holding a war club of this unusual type, it seemed that perhaps the recollections of Judge Ricker's informants were at fault.

A chance inquiry to the Museum of the American Indian where the Sitting Bull rifle is displayed brought the surprising reply that the Miles Collection did in fact contain a war club in the form of knife blades fixed in a wooden handle. A photo which followed vindicated the memories of Garnett, Stirk, and Tibbitts, for the weapon was exactly as they described it, a long sweeping handle into the end of which were fixed at 90° angles three very wicked looking Green River blades.¹⁰ This was the Sitting Bull war club that had been used in the Flag Pole Affair. It had come into the possession of Colonel Miles in December, 1876, but apparently its uniqueness had not been fully appreciated because of the even more unusual nature of the other Sitting Bull weapon, the engraved repeating rifle.

The war club was fashioned from a piece of board varying from $\frac{5}{8}$ " to $\frac{3}{4}$ " in thickness. Its overall length is 40". The width at the handle grip is 1 and $\frac{1}{4}$ ", and 1 and $\frac{3}{4}$ " at the upper end. Three 6" Green River blades are inserted into the heavier end. Attached to the handle are three grizzly bear claws and a rawhide trailer onto which are sewed a number of brass trade bells.

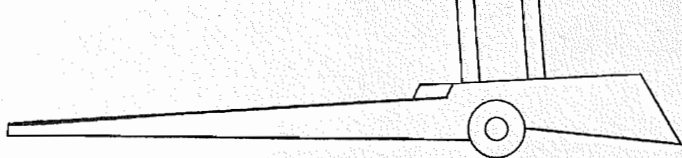
As for the war club in the Fort Laramie photographs, it clearly was an earlier version of the weapon used with devastating affect by Sitting Bull to establish his reputation as a leader among the Oglala warriors. An approximate estimate of the size of this 1868 model can be ob-

¹⁰ Frederick J. Dockstader, Director of the Museum of the American Indian to the present writer, February 13, 1959. I am indebted to Mr. Dockstader for permitting me to examine the war club during a visit to the museum in March, 1960.

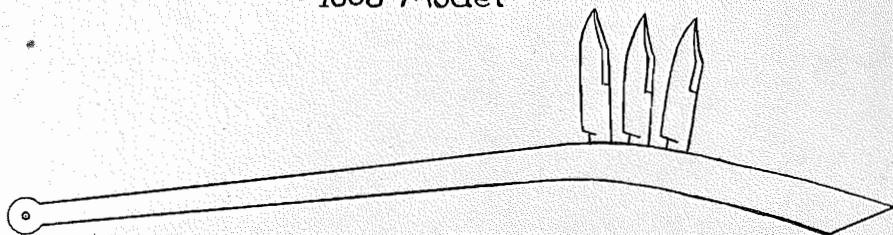
tained from a careful examination of the photographs.¹¹ It takes little imagination to appreciate why this and the improved pattern of 1874 was so effective in the hands of as courageous a warrior as Sitting Bull.

In view of his strong friendship for the white man, it seems more than unfortunate that Sitting Bull's accomplishments have not been properly appreciated, particularly in view of the notoriety afforded the less peaceably inclined of his fellow tribesmen such as Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, and the Hunkpapa Sitting Bull. Yet, small consolation though it may be, more is known about the personal weapons of Sitting Bull the Oglala, his engraved rifle and now his three bladed war club, than of those belonging to any other notable personality among the Indians of the great plains.

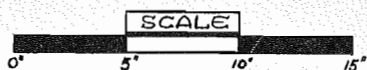
¹¹ The 1868 club was made from a cut-down gun stock. This was the most common type of knife-club weapon used by the American Indians.



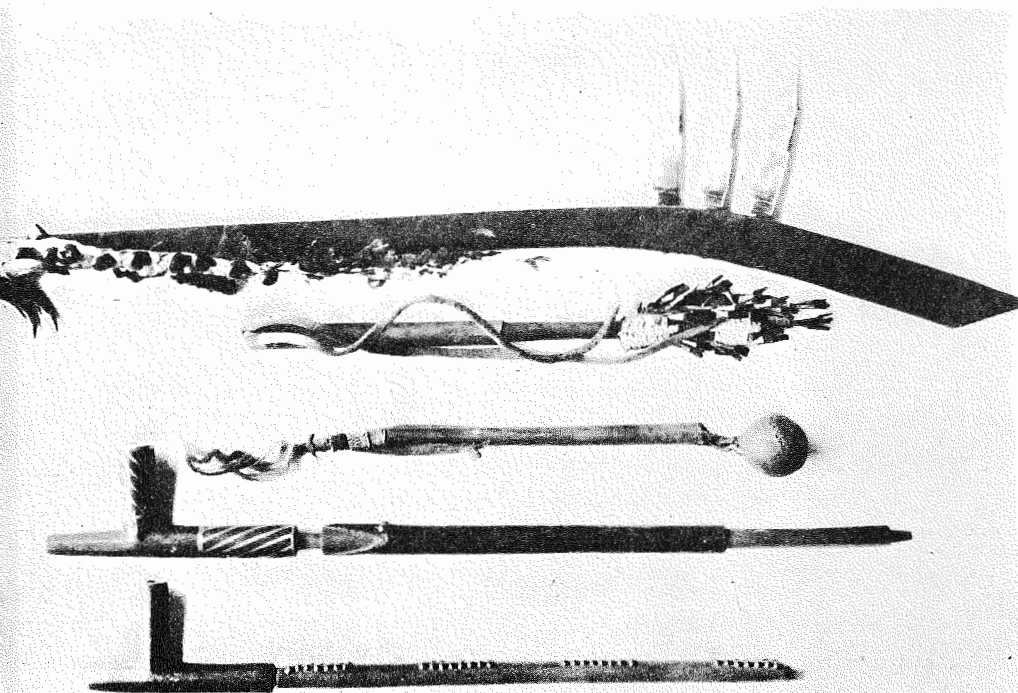
1868 Model

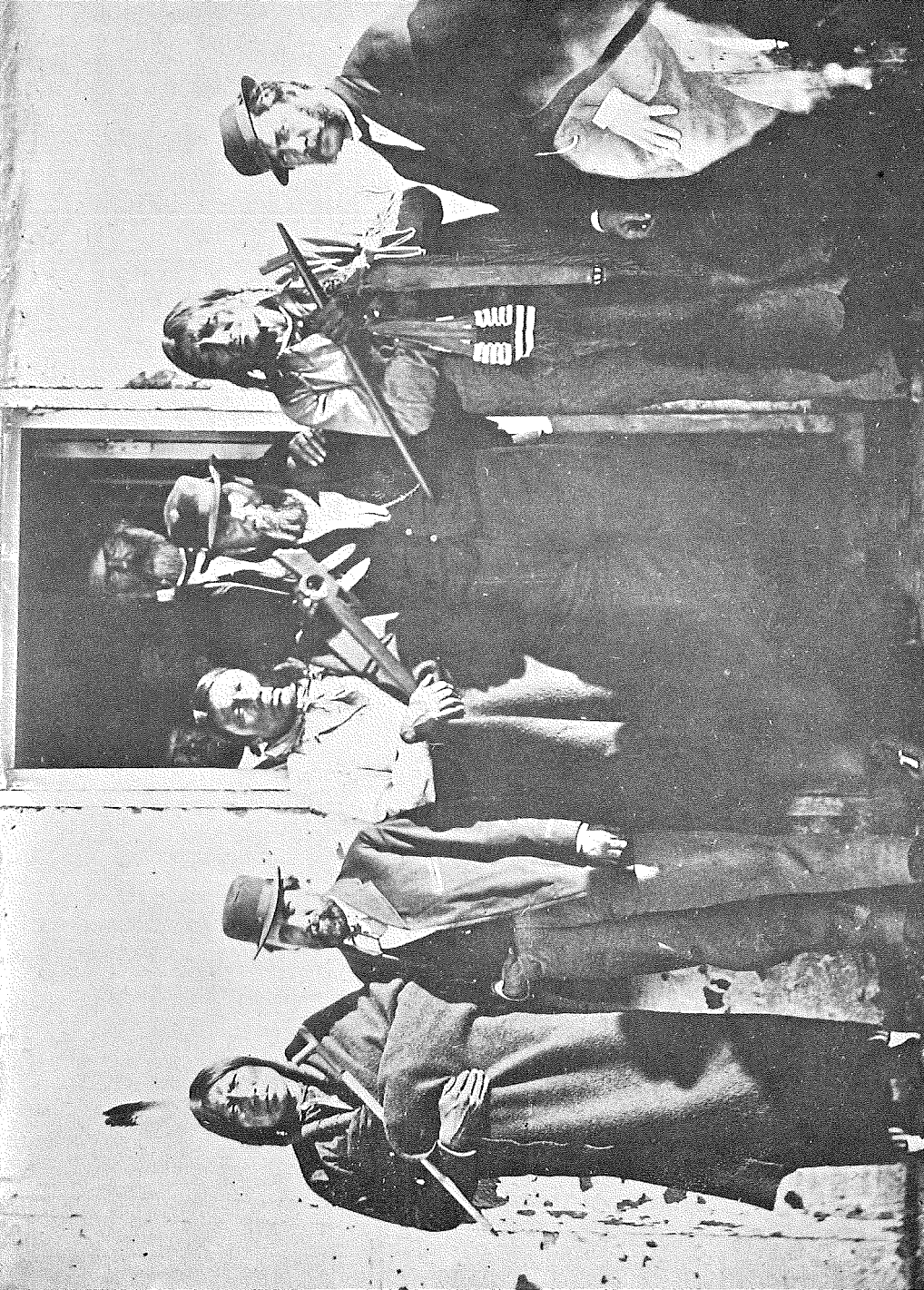


1874 Model



Author's sketch comparing Sitting Bull's War Clubs
Below—Exhibit from Museum of the American Indian,
containing the three bladed Club





Picture at Fort Laramie, 1868. Packs a Drum or Sitting Bull third from left. Note the War Club he holds