



Fort Robinson, Custer, and the Legacy of the Great Sioux War

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Fort Robinson, Custer, and the Legacy of the Great Sioux War

BY PAUL L. HEDREN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF BARNES

I often find myself in a reflective mood these days and so allow me to be a bit autobiographical. Doing so helps explain, I think, not just my deep fascination with this place, and the Great Sioux War, but also how it is I came to be interested in the matter of legacy, which plays straight to our conference theme this year. A friend says that legacy is an “age thing,” and perhaps that’s so. But whether an age thing or not, this consuming interest in this Indian war, and ultimately in this place, has been a near lifelong affair, and I’ll confess that it all began with Custer. I recall very clearly an interest in Custer even in my earliest school days, and remember absorbing those Quentin Reynolds and Margaret Leighton juvenile biographies of the general on cold Minnesota Saturday mornings, books I read again and again, and possess still. Given any opportunity in the 1950s and ‘60s, on summer vacations to the West my family paused at Custer Battlefield and I simply reveled in the place. In high school and college I tried

Fort Robinson State Park, Nebraska, with Crow Butte in the background.







**Fort Laramie National
Historic Site, Wyoming.**

hard to get a summer job there, but that chance never came along. In college I was well along in preparing for a teaching career, wedded to history and geography and bound I supposed for some Minnesota high school.

But instead I lucked into a career with the National Park Service, and my first park job was at Fort Laramie, a place having nothing to do with Custer or the Little Bighorn. There I was introduced to western history in its widest sweep: the fur trade, the Overland migrations, the Pony Express and transcontinental telegraph, gold rushes, and Indian treaties. That place has a powerful war story, too. But there it's the story of the Grattan Massacre in 1854, and Harney at Blue Water a year later, and the Platte Valley war, and Bozeman Trail war, and the ambush and killing of Lt. Levi Robinson near Laramie Peak in 1874, and of course this Indian war of 1876, but with a decidedly different slant from that which had been my youthful interest.

In interpreting the Great Sioux War at Fort Laramie, one necessarily tells the story of the Black Hills gold rush, and Crook's successive campaigns. It was there where I was introduced to the notion of a "southern front" to this Sioux war, and where I got enthralled with the Warbonnet Creek story. I remember vividly the day when my boss, Bill Henry, and I first visited that place in 1972. And I remember well a later day when my wife and I took an old man to the Warbonnet site for his first visit. That old man, Bill Shay, was a veteran Fort Laramie staffer, too, but in his young adulthood some sixty years earlier knew Gen. Charles King, who was there in 1876, and there on that Warbonnet hilltop

we read aloud the story of the fight appearing in King's book *Campaigning with Crook*.

This was an impressionable time in my life, and it was these experiences that set my course in a lifelong study of the Great Sioux War. Along the way I've written about Warbonnet repeatedly. I've examined Fort Laramie's role in the war, authored a guide to the sites of the war, and investigated the army's capacity for waging war. And it was on this course that I grew interested in the consequences, the legacy, of the Great Sioux War.

In my travels across the northern Great Plains, whether intent on locating some Sioux War site that was somehow new to me, or visiting again those I thought I knew well, I'd encounter roadside markers and local museums devoted, it seemed, to anything but the war. I'd read those markers and study the exhibits, which were invariably devoted to railroads, buffalo, cattle, cattle trails, and ranches. Certainly I knew those as aspects of northern plains history, but for the longest while I appreciated such stories in relative isolation, and usually dismissed them as something I really didn't need to invest in too deeply. Now don't get me wrong. I love buffalo, cattle trails, and ranches, but I love Warbonnet Creek more. And yet the longer I was confronted by these varied dimensions of the historical geography of the northern plains the more evident it became that these were not isolated or discrete episodes at all, but truly elements of one large story, episodes connected to one another, and stories that tied straight to the Great Sioux War.

My attempt at exploring the consequences and interrelatedness of it all is served in the book *After Custer: Loss and Transformation in Sioux Country*, published late in 2011 and climaxing some fifteen years of research, as I explored northern plains railroads, the demise of the northern buffalo herd, the story of cattle on these plains, and Indian people, reservations, and sacred places.¹

The book needed parameters, I thought, and I deliberately framed my analysis on the next ten years or so after the fighting ended, and indeed much of the story plays into that extended decade. But not always. I did not intend to carry the story into the twentieth century, although some of what happened took me there, and here we'll look at some additional elements because in many ways there's quite a modern-day legacy, too.

In the book, I explore the story of the generals who came west in 1877. For more than a month that summer the General of the Army, William Tecumseh Sherman, and the commander of the Military

Division of the Missouri, Philip Henry Sheridan, joined George Crook and Alfred Terry in a widely heralded exploration of Sioux Country. Sherman's and Sheridan's interests were slightly different that season, as were their routes and manners of travel, but their paths deliberately crossed on the Bighorn River in Montana. The generals had set out to explore a landscape devoid of Indians and now on the cusp of settlement. Most important perhaps, they came to Sioux Country to measure the needs required of their army to ensure the safety of this settlement about to be unleashed on the northern plains. Sheridan, more than Sherman, also wished to visit Custer Battlefield, and did so. Sheridan and Custer were intimate friends and he sought to understand that great loss and measure the particular needs of that sacred place.

The grand tour was an eye-opener with almost immediate consequences as the generals commenced the transformation of the army's deployment and mission on the northern plains. This army had not been well distributed to wage the Great Sioux War but it would not now falter in guarding the spoils of this war. Two new forts, Keogh and Custer, were then under construction in the Yellowstone Valley and they triggered the commencement of a campaign of military post construction and expansion throughout the northern plains. These new forts, invariably linked to

the nation's ever-expanding railroad grid, rightly doomed many of yesterday's smaller and now obsolete garrisons as they gave way to sizeable modern posts like Custer and Keogh, and Niobrara, McKinney, Assinniboine, Meade, and others. A few of the older forts survived, too, like Robinson and Sully, Yates and Buford, each substantially enlarged and charged with a new mission. The transformation of the northern plains military frontier was dramatic, ensuring on the one hand the tribesmen's bondage to the Great Sioux Reservation, and, as Sherman loved to say, that the "Sioux Indians . . . would never regain this country."

As we know, the roots of the Great Sioux War were many and varied, and included the nation's desire to construct another transcontinental railroad, the Northern Pacific. That line had reached Bismarck in 1873, but then idled owing to the company's financial calamity, intertwined as it was with the great Panic of 1873, but work stymied as well by the Indian barrier confronted as those railroaders peered across the Missouri River into Sioux Country. Northern Pacific surveyors had struggled with the Sioux in the early 1870s when working to determine an alignment in the Yellowstone Valley. After the war, construction of the Northern Pacific did not resume immediately but only in 1878 when the line regained a financial footing enabling it to leap the river and advance westward, slowly at first,



**Warbonnet Battlefield
Monument, Sioux
County, Nebraska.**



Statue of the Marquis de Morès, De Mores Memorial Park, downtown Medora, North Dakota.

but with genuine resolve in 1879. During the peak of construction as the railroad pushed into Montana and up the Yellowstone, troops guarded every aspect of work—the tie cutters working in the Short Pine Hills in the Little Missouri Valley, the bridge crews working far ahead of the graders, the graders, in turn, working far ahead of the tracklayers, and then the iron handlers themselves. The army had performed the same escort and protection services when the nation's first transcontinental railroad was built across Nebraska and Wyoming in the 1860s, and when the Union Pacific's subsidiary, the Kansas Pacific, constructed westward to Denver. Once again, protecting railroad construction was in the nation's interest. This time it proved to be relatively safe duty, but no one was ever particularly certain of that. This had been a contested landscape only yesterday, and thousands of American Sioux Indians were still massed with Sitting Bull just across the Medicine Line.

This, of course, was not just Indian country, but also buffalo country. And like what happened on the central and southern plains when the railroads came, on the northern plains that new railroad accessed another buffalo herd, then as many as two million animals, and within a matter of years the northern herd was wiped out, too. This was an environmental tragedy of an extraordinary sort. Some saw it so even then, and the lament of observers is wrenching. One rancher crossing eastern Montana as the slaughter neared

its end noted that he was “never out of sight of a dead buffalo and never in sight of a live one.” An officer at Fort Keogh, obliged to travel to the Poplar River Indian Agency on the Missouri, observed that the carcasses of dead buffalo reeked with the odor of rotten flesh, and with bare exaggeration said that a good athlete could easily have jumped the whole distance from carcass to carcass without ever touching foot to ground. The demise of the northern buffalo herd was a direct consequence of the Great Sioux War, a slaughter that would not have occurred when it did and how it did had not the Northern Pacific Railroad been built, and the railroad would not have been built when it was and how it was had that landscape remained Sioux Country. The interconnectedness of it all seems so clear.

Onto the de-buffaloed prairie came cattle. Western history enthusiasts, and almost all people our age who are products of the golden age of television westerns, celebrate with enormous pleasure the story of the open range and the great Beef Bonanza. It *is* one of the West's heralded triumphs. In the book I devote a long chapter to the cattle story because what happened in Wyoming *is* somewhat different from what happened in Montana, which in turn *is* somewhat different from the story of cattle in the Little Missouri River country of Dakota, which is where the story played in Dakota because of the existence of the Great Sioux Reservation. This is a story filled with an array of prominent characters, men like the Frewen brothers, Moreton

Chateau de Mores State Historical Site, near Medora, North Dakota.



and Richard, ranching in Wyoming; and the Power brothers, Thomas and John, the Fort Benton steamboat magnates, and Granville Stuart, all ranching in Montana; and the Marquis de Morès and Theodore Roosevelt ranching in Dakota. This is a story of phenomenal success and wealth on the Open Range in a time when, as echoed across the plains, the land and water were as free as the air. But this is a story of tremendous failure, too. De Morès's vision of a packing house functioning on the range, not cattlemen always subservient to railroads and packing houses as distant as Chicago, was realized in Medora, Dakota. This was revolutionary thinking, requiring enormous capital outlays, but ultimately bringing only a huge financial ruin. De Morès was way ahead of his time. Ruinous, too, was the great cattle die-off in the terrible winter of 1886-87, where losses in Sioux Country ranged from 40 and 50 percent on some ranges to as high as 90 and 95 percent on others. The days of the open range virtually disappeared in the wake of that disastrous winter almost as quickly as they had come, but it might not have come at all, or at least when it did and how it did, had the northern plains remained buffalo country. The ties to the Great Sioux War are so evident and always heartrending.

What happened to the Lakota people and their Northern Cheyenne allies in the decades following the war is legacy and drama of another sort. In many ways, the shock and horror experienced in the Indian camps when struck by soldiers, often at daybreak, and just as often in the midst of winter, pales against the social and cultural upheavals marking the early years of the reservation. That was the time of mass relocations, the Cheyennes from Camp Robinson to the Indian Territory in 1877, and of course their fateful return a year later; and the forced relocations of the Oglalas and Brulés from Nebraska's White River country to the Missouri River, and their own return west a year later to what became the Pine Ridge and Rosebud agencies in Dakota. And this is when some of the great chiefs were killed: Crazy Horse in 1877, Spotted Tail in 1881, Sitting Bull in 1890. This is the story of thousands of American Sioux Indians exiled in Canada from 1876 to 1881, and the government's attempts at luring them home, or keeping them there. This is the story of their inevitable return, band by band, with Sitting Bull and his followers coming in last, from Wood Mountain to Fort Buford in July 1881. Not all of the American Sioux returned from Canada, but most did, because this is where their kin lived and are buried. This was home.

But the travails on the Great Sioux Reservation continued as government programs "relentlessly chewed up the old ways." The early reservation era was marked by the labors of strong-willed agents, whose authority worked to undermine that of the chiefs; and the time of futile attempts at crop farming and stock raising; and of day-to-day subsistence not on buffalo anymore but on flour, sugar, and beef delivered on the hoof or in block. This was the time of the introduction of Christian religion, sometimes at the expense of native beliefs and rituals; a time of the compulsory education of the children in local day schools or, for some, in distant boarding schools; and the time, too, of the many attempts at carving up the Great Sioux Reservation, that vast landmass in Dakota. And this was the time of Wounded Knee, the most horrific story of them all. All of this is Great Sioux War legacy, too.

My book *After Custer ends*

about there. It opens with a grand tour of Sioux Country as a geographer might view it. We know the northern plains as more than a mere sea of grass, although I think that's what many Americans envision when they imagine the Great Plains. Yet we know it to be a landscape of tremendous diversity, often exceedingly subtle, a place with inspiring vistas and bounded and bisected by great rivers, with fragile vast treeless openness between water courses, but sometimes pine and cedar-studded high ground between rivers, and dotted throughout with surprising anomalies—the Sweetgrass Hills and Bear Paw Mountains in Montana, the Cypress Hills and Wood Mountain in Saskatchewan, the Little Missouri and White River badlands in the Dakotas, the Black Hills in South Dakota and Wyoming, the Sandhills in Nebraska, and the unique Pine Ridge stretching from eastern Wyoming through Nebraska and into South Dakota. Appreciating the inherent richness and diversity of the northern plains is, I believe, another dimension of the Sioux War story, particularly when we reflect on how the tribesmen lived on this land, hunted it, contested it, and ultimately lost it, and how that landscape has continued to evolve to the point where we are almost losing it, too.

As I opened the book with a look at Sioux Country, I ended it there too, observing the delicate and sometimes fleeting nature of that which we hold so dear. The Sioux people regretted the loss of Sioux Country as they knew it. Cattlemen regretted the loss of the open range in the years following the great die-off. This was the same country, but in different hands. And now you and I face the loss



Northern Cheyenne monument at the Powder River battlefield, northeast of Moorhead, Montana.

of the wide open, unfettered Great Plains as we've known this landscape in our own lifetimes. With ever-expanding systems of roads, railroads, power lines, pipelines, center-pivot irrigation systems, oil and gas wells, cellular towers, coal mines, wind turbines, and towns and cities . . . folks, we on the plains are facing one of the greatest industrializations of a landscape in all of American history. The Sioux Country of old is not quite gone, but friends, it's going, and I suggest we reach out and embrace it while we still can.

Fortunately, there are some dimensions of the Great Sioux War story that are hardly imperiled at all. It is often said that Custer and the Little Bighorn, and by association the Great Sioux War, is one of the most written about sagas in all of American history, maybe second only to Gettysburg, maybe exceeding Gettysburg. I don't profess to be a compulsive Custer collector—meaning that I somehow have to have everything written on the subject, meritorious or not, but I do pay attention to the literature and acquire, as

my dear wife would tell you, way too much, and relish the thoughtful manner in which this story is still being explored: in the spate of new biographies of the great Indian chiefs; in Tom Powers's incredibly rich and insightful book, not just on the specific killing of Crazy Horse, but the manner in which Powers layers the broader context of that story; in James Donovan's recent telling of the Little Bighorn battle, truly a graceful read; in Paul Magid's astute biography of Gen. George Crook, with a second volume covering Crook as Indian fighter now in press, and a third covering Crook as humanitarian being written; and in Jerry Greene's forthcoming history of the Wounded Knee Massacre.² Solid literature exploring the Sioux War story broadly is a matter of legacy, too, feeding our own insatiable intellectual appetites, incorporating new sources, delivering new insights, and introducing this story to new audiences.

I note, as well, that so many of the Sioux War battlefields are reasonably accessible and monumented. I've catalogued these from time to time, and by my reckoning nine of the war's twenty-eight

confrontation sites feature some form of monument, and three more have small signs which themselves may not be very formal but at least affirm that you've come to the right place. Little Bighorn and its widespread monumenting being the exception, elsewhere this memorializing effort is modest. Usually a lone monument or marker suffices, often exhibiting homespun qualities, and usually erected long ago by battle veterans or local history enthusiasts devoted to the cause of remembering such places.

We should be pleased, too, acknowledging that some monuments have been erected by Sioux and Northern Cheyenne tribesmen themselves. I particularly note an Indian marker at the Powder River battlefield, a simple five-foot-tall native stone with the Northern Cheyenne tribal flag, the Morning Star flag, painted on it, that stone located on the evacuation route used by many of the women and children as they fled their village that day in March 1876. Clearly the Cheyenne people are

remembering Powder River, despite its cheerless place in their history. And then there's the Deer Medicine Rocks monolith on Rosebud Creek, Montana, a few miles north of Little Bighorn. That stone, fully the size of a modern house, has etched on its many faces any number of Indian pictographs, including one recording Sitting Bull's dramatic Sun Dance vision in 1876 depicting soldiers falling upside down into an Indian camp—that prophecy realized at Little Bighorn just days later.

We acknowledge, as well, the many protected historic sites throughout Sioux Country that find ways to tell aspects of the Great Sioux War story. It's the *only* story at Little Bighorn, of course. We know that, and there the saga is quite well told. The Great Sioux War is a shared story at places like Forts Buford, Abraham Lincoln, Fetterman, Laramie, and here at Fort Robinson, and even at the Fort Walsh National Historical Park in Saskatchewan, each of these places a protected and staffed state or federal historic site, and each with big



Deer Medicine Rocks National Historic Landmark, near Little Bighorn, Montana.



Mass grave at Wounded Knee Massacre National Historic Landmark, Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota.

broad stories to tell but where each place also finds ways to acknowledge the events of 1876.

Few do it as well as Fort Laramie National Historic Site, the place of contested treaties; and where an original iron bridge still spans the North Platte River, the bridge dating to 1875 and begging a reflection on the Black Hills gold rush story, one of the precipitating events of this Indian war; and in the original cavalry barracks there dating to 1874, with a portion refurbished today with the trappings of Company K, Second Cavalry, as if the year was 1876. That company was one of Crook's favorites and a participant in two of his Sioux War campaigns.

Fort Laramie has a competitor, we know, here at Fort Robinson State Park and the Fort Robinson Museum, with that museum's showcase of exhibits exploring the earliest days of Camp Robinson and nearby Red Cloud Agency; and in the fort's many structures particularly on the old parade ground where so many are original and date to the very founding year of the post, 1874, and several more reconstructed buildings providing a setting for that terrible day in September 1877.

Elsewhere across the Sioux War landscape, one finds quaint surprises, like the little medicine ball-sized sandstone rock in the Bozeman Trail Museum in Big Horn, Wyoming, collected from along Goose Creek long ago and having carved on its face the name and date "Camp Cloud Peak, 1876," Crook's summer camp; and the soldier names carved on Sheridan Butte on the Yellowstone opposite the mouth of the Powder River, and on Deer Medicine Rocks; and the soldier breastwork at the Tongue River battlefield; and the extensive renderings in the new Sheridan, Wyoming, city museum, featuring an entire corner of their building devoted to artwork, artifacts, and a video interpreting Crook's and Crazy Horse's clash at Rosebud Creek. These are important touchstones to a history that still charges the imagination.

We should acknowledge, too, the opportunity to gather with kindred spirits, as occurs in Hardin, Montana, each June at the annual symposium and tour organized by the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association. The focus of that gathering is tightly the story of Little Bighorn and Great Sioux War, with scholarly presentations one day

that are invariably rich and insightful, and then tour opportunities on another day allowing participants to get off-road at places I couldn't direct you to in my *Traveler's Guide*. Similarly, these Fort Robinson History Conferences occurring about every other April since 1995 have offered unique opportunities to delve into events related to this Sioux War, in formal presentations, and in outings to places like the 1875 Black Hills negotiation site, Camp Sheridan, Spotted Tail Agency, Fort Laramie, and this year Wounded Knee.

I'll close with one final thought. The legacy of the Great Sioux War is a profound story with enormous appeal and challenge. Inherently, of course, it's the story of a long and tragic Indian war followed by shattering change as the northern plains was transformed from buffalo and Indian country to the land of cattle, and ultimately so much more. It's a story loaded with colorful characters like Custer, Crook, Crazy Horse, and Sitting Bull, and spotted with scores of touchstones scattered across a vast landscape. It's a story remembered silently at most of its associated places, maybe as

that should be. But perhaps most important of all, the Great Sioux War is uniquely an American story. For us, interpreting its events and consequences honestly, remembering the places and people involved—who were, after all, Americans one and all—respects their actions, honors their sacrifices and blood, and serves to remind us that this is the fabric of America. This is who we are. 🌟

NOTES

¹ Paul L. Hedren, *After Custer: Loss and Transformation in Sioux Country* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).

² Thomas Powers, *The Killing of Crazy Horse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010); James Donovan, *A Terrible Glory: Custer and the Little Bighorn, The Last Great Battle of the American West* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2008); Paul Magid, *George Crook: From the Redwoods to Appomattox* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011); Jerome A. Greene, *American Carnage: Wounded Knee, 1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

Paul L. Hedren is a retired National Park Service superintendent residing in Omaha. He is the author of numerous books, including After Custer: Loss and Transformation in Sioux Country (University of Oklahoma Press), and (as editor) Ho! For the Black Hills: Captain Jack Crawford Reports the Black Hills Gold Rush and Great Sioux War (South Dakota State Historical Society).

