

cluster battlefield

1876-1976

A CONFLICT OF CULTURES

Custer Battlefield National Monument in southeastern Montana memorializes one of the last armed efforts of the Northern Plains Indians to preserve their ancestral way of life. Here in the valley of the Little Bighorn River on June 25 and 26, 1876, more than 260 soldiers and attached personnel of the U.S. Army met defeat and death at the hands of several thousand Sioux and Cheyenne warriors. Among the dead were Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and every member of his immediate command. Although the Indians won this battle, they lost the war against the white man's efforts to end their independent, nomadic ways.

The conflict between cultures had begun with the arrival of the first settlers from Europe and continued relentlessly for three centuries—sometimes around the campfire, sometimes at treaty grounds, but more often on the battlefield. Custer Battlefield, with its scattered white marble markers, is a reminder of that long struggle for possession of the American continent.

CAUSES OF THE INDIAN WARS

The end of the Civil War saw a vigorous resumption of the westward movement by settlers. An almost certain result was encroachment on the Indian domain. Settlers showed little regard for the sanctity of Indian hunting grounds or the terms of former treaties. The Indians resisted stoutly. Then in 1868, at Fort Laramie, Wyo., representatives of the Sioux, Cheyenne, and other tribes of the Great Plains, signed a treaty with the U.S. Government by which a large area in western Dakota and part of eastern Wyoming was designated a permanent Indian reservation. The Government promised to protect the Indians "against the commission of all depredations by people of the United States."

In 1874, gold was discovered in the Black Hills, the heart of the new Indian reservation. News of the strike spread quickly, and soon thousands of eager gold seekers swarmed into the region in violation of the Fort Laramie treaty. The Army tried to keep them out, but to no avail. The peace agreement of 1868 was completely dishonored when the Sioux and Cheyenne in growing defiance began to leave the reservation. In December 1875, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs ordered them to return before January 31, 1876, or thereafter be regarded as hostiles to be "treated accordingly by the military force." When the Indians did not comply, the Army was called in to enforce the order.

THE CAMPAIGN OF 1876

The Army's campaign against the Sioux and Cheyenne called for three separate expeditions—Gen. George Crook's force from Fort Fetterman in Wyoming, Col. John Gibbon's command from Fort Ellis in Montana, and Gen. Alfred H. Terry's troops from Fort Abraham Lincoln in Dakota Territory. These columns were to converge on the main body of the Indians concentrated in southeastern Montana under the leadership of Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and other war chiefs.

Crook clashed with the Indians in March and again in June. Afterwards the Indians moved west toward the Little Bighorn. In mid-June Terry and Gibbon met at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Rosebud Rivers. Hoping

trenched and held their defenses throughout that day and most of the next, returning the Indian fire and successfully discouraging attempts to storm their position. The siege ended when all the Indians broke their great encampment and withdrew upon the approach of columns under Terry and Gibbon.

In the meantime, Custer had ridden into history and legend. Vivid accounts of the battle by Indians who participated in it tell how his command was surrounded and destroyed in fierce fighting. But Custer's intentions and precise movements after separating from Reno's battalion have never been determined.

In the battle, the 7th Cavalry lost the five companies (C, E, F, I, and L) that were under Custer, about 225 men. Of the other six companies of the regiment, under Reno and Benteen, 47 were killed and 52 wounded.

The Indian losses were no more than 100 men killed. They removed most of their dead from the battlefield when the large village broke up. The tribes and families scattered, some going south, some north. Most of them returned to the reservations and surrendered in the next few years.

A QUESTION OF MISTAKEN NUMBERS

The information on which the Army based its campaign against the Indians who had left the reservation was that they totaled about 800. That number may have been correct in the winter of 1875-76, but with the arrival of spring more and more Indians slipped away to the western hunting grounds. The effect of the inaccurate estimate and early Indian victories on the Rosebud River are recounted in the *Custer Battlefield* National Park Service handbook by Robert M. Utley:

"Rarely, unless absolutely certain of victory, did the Plains Indian stand and fight; usually he faded into the hills and easily eluded his slow-moving pursuers. Thus military planning focused mainly on how to catch the quarry rather than on how to defeat him once caught. . . . In all the unceded territory, according to the Indian Bureau, the warrior force did not exceed 800, and the possibility that these might unite in one place was not seriously considered.

"As a matter of fact, a great many more Indians were absent from their agencies than the Bureau had reported, and they continued to flock to Sitting Bull's standard throughout the spring. By June the scattered bands had begun to come together in a single village that formed one of the largest in the history of the Great Plains.



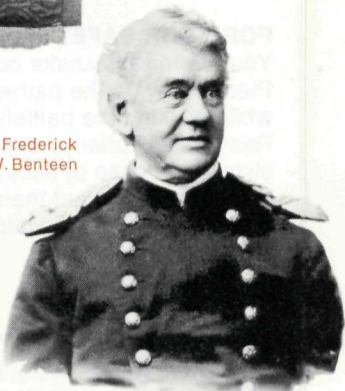
The blue and gold regimental flag which Custer's men carried on the campaign of 1876 is now displayed in the park museum.



Maj. Marcus A. Reno



Capt. Frederick W. Benteen



Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, leaving less than half his command to two subordinate officers, Captain Benteen and Major Reno, rode with five companies of the 7th Cavalry into one of the most unforgettable disasters in American military history.

to find the Indians in the Little Bighorn Valley, Terry ordered Custer and the 7th Cavalry up the Rosebud to approach the Little Bighorn from the south. Terry himself would accompany Gibbon's force back up the Yellowstone and Bighorn to approach from the north.

BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN

The 7th Cavalry, numbering about 700 men, located the Indian camp on June 25. Custer, probably underestimating the fighting power of the Indian forces, believed it safe to divide his regiment into three battalions. By attacking immediately, he might have hoped to prevent the Indians from slipping away. One battalion of three companies under Capt. Frederick W. Benteen was sent to scout the bluffs to the south. At the same time, a battalion of three companies under Maj. Marcus A. Reno and one of five companies under Custer marched along opposite banks of a small creek to attack the Indian village in the valley of the Little Bighorn.

When near the Little Bighorn, Custer turned north toward the lower end of the Indian camp. Reno, with orders from Custer to cross the river and attack, advanced down the Little Bighorn Valley and struck the upper end of the camp. Outflanked by the defending warriors, he retreated in disorder to the river and took up defensive positions on the bluffs beyond. Here he was soon joined by Benteen, who had hurried forward under written orders from Custer to "Come on; Big village, be quick, bring packs."

Gunfire from the north caused men to scout in that direction seeking the whereabouts of Custer and his command. An advance company under Capt. Thomas B. Weir marched downstream to a high hill, from which the Custer battlefield was visible. By this time, however, the firing had stopped. When the rest of the command arrived on the hill it was attacked by a large force of Indians, and Reno ordered a withdrawal to the original position on the bluffs overlooking the Little Bighorn. Here these seven companies en-

All the Teton Sioux were represented—Hunkpapas under Sitting Bull, Gall, Crow King, and Black Moon; Oglalas under Crazy Horse, Low Dog, and Big Road; The Miniconjou followers of Hump; Sans Arc, Blackfoot, and Brule Sioux. There were also Northern Cheyennes under Two Moon, Lame White Man, and Dirty Moccasins, and a handful of warriors from tribes of Eastern Sioux. They clustered around six separate tribal circles, and altogether they numbered perhaps 10,000 to 12,000 people, mustering a fighting force of between 2,500 and 4,000 men. Many had firearms—some the Winchester repeating rifle obtained, quite legally, from traders and Indian agents for hunting.

"Secure in their unaccustomed numbers, the Sioux and Cheyennes, moving up Rosebud Creek in mid-June, wasted little thought on the news brought by some young men that they had seen soldiers farther south, beyond the head of the Rosebud. Turning west, the great procession crossed the Wolf Mountains and came to rest on a tributary of the Little Bighorn later named Reno Creek. Here further reports confirmed the presence of many soldiers descending the Rosebud, and more than a thousand warriors rode over the mountains to contest the advance.

"On the morning of June 17, General Crook collided with this array, and after a severe action lasting most of the day he turned about and marched back to Goose Creek (near present Sheridan, Wyo.) to call for reinforcements. The Indians returned to their tepees in triumph and at once moved down to Reno Creek, crossed the Little Bighorn, and laid out a new camp. It lined the west bank of the river for 3 miles and sprawled in places all the way across the mile-wide valley."



Custer, hatless and standing casually third from the left, poses with other officers and ladies of the 7th Cavalry at Fort Lincoln shortly before the expedition moved out against the Indians. The woman nearest Custer on the first step is Mrs. Custer.

By deed and spoken word, Sitting Bull's resistance to the Federal Government was an inspiration to those of his people who had rejected reservation life from the beginning and to those who accepted it to their regret. Here the great warrior and chief of the Sioux wears a white buckskin shirt, a single feather in his hair, and a crucifix of brass and wood given to him by Father De Smet, a Jesuit.



The Battle of the Rosebud was the victorious prelude to the greater Indian success on the Little Bighorn. General Crook had learned of the Sioux' strength and will to fight, but word of the battle never reached Custer and the 7th Cavalry. He still estimated the Indian strength at 800 warriors.

SITTING BULL SURRENDERS

After the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the Indian village broke up and the various bands went their separate ways pursued by the Army. As Utley says in *Custer Battlefield*:

"By autumn many of the Indian fugitives had tired of the pursuit and, with the winter coming on, slipped back to the agencies to surrender. . . . With the approach of spring, hundreds drifted into the agencies and gave up. . . ."

Vowing never to accept reservation restraints, Sitting Bull and some 400 Hunkpapa Sioux crossed into Canada. But food was scarce and U.S. soldiers patrolled the international boundary, preventing the Indians from hunting buffalo in Montana. Little by little the refugees weakened. . . . Finally in July 1881, Sitting Bull and 43 families appeared at the fort [Fort Buford, North Dakota] and gave up."

Sitting Bull's surrender marked the end of a war that had all but ended 4 years earlier at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Regaled for the fight, mounted Indian warriors assemble before Crazy Horse (left) and Sitting Bull. The artist, Oglala Dakota Amos Bad Heart Bull, based his drawings of the Battle of the Little Bighorn on the recollections of his older relatives.

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CUSTER BATTLEFIELD 1876-1976

One hundred years have gone by, but the Custer battle continues to illustrate a part of what Americans have come to know as their western heritage. Heroism and tragedy, brashness and humiliation, victory and defeat—these are things people still come here to ponder.

Very soon after the fight, the battlefield became a popular tourist attraction. Many easterners touring the northwest on the newly built Northern Pacific Railway took time to journey up the Little Bighorn to view the historic spot. Troops from Fort Custer, which was established at the mouth of the Little Bighorn in 1877, served as the first custodians. In 1893, the War Department placed a superintendent in charge to protect the area from vandals and souvenir hunters. All of the early superintendents were retired soldiers; several of them had served in the northwestern Indian campaigns. What information they passed on to visitors was purely at their discretion and depended on their competency.

Many anniversaries of the battle have been celebrated since the first one in 1877. In 1886, on the 10th anniversary, several Army and Indian veterans of the fight returned to the battlefield for an elaborate observance. Prominent among them were Captain Benteen, Lieutenant Godfrey, trumpeter Penwell, and Chief Gall of the Hunkpapa Sioux.

Thousands of spectators were on hand in 1926 at the 50th anniversary commemoration to see processions, parades, and sports events and to hear speeches and the memorial services on Custer Ridge.

After the cemetery was transferred to the National Park Service in 1940, development policies were formulated not only to safeguard and preserve the area, but to provide interpretation for the visiting public.

Space for a growing museum collection was made ready in the visitor center, dedicated in 1952. Field work continues to uncover these relics and to pinpoint the locations of specific battle action. In June 1958, the remains of three groups of soldiers were uncovered at the Reno-Benteen area.



In waves of tall prairie grass, white marble tablets mark the scene of furious fighting during Custer's last stand. Bodies found at these locations were buried on the spot, then moved several years later to a common grave on the battlefield.

Two Moon, a chief of the Northern Cheyenne, tells of the battle: "... the shooting was quick, quick. Pop-pop-pop very fast. Some of the soldiers were down on their knees, some standing. ... The smoke was like a great cloud, and everywhere the Sioux went the dust rose like smoke. We circled all round him—swirling like water round a stone. We shoot, we ride fast, we shoot again. Soldiers drop, and horses fall on them."

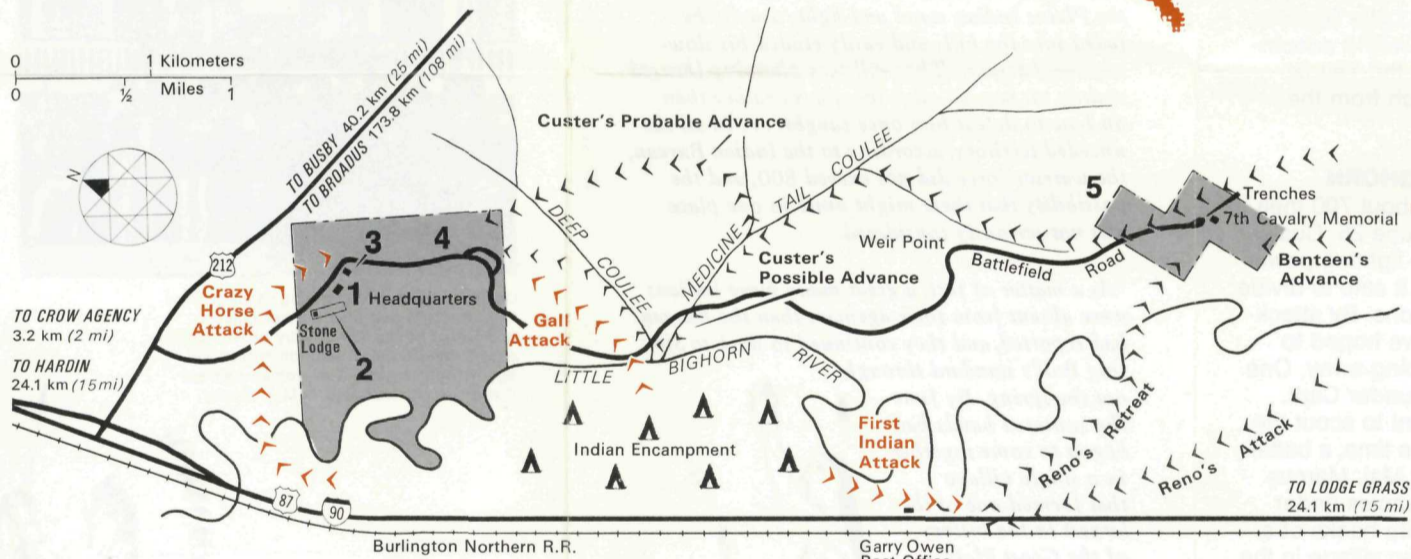


1 VISITOR CENTER

Stop first at the visitor center. Park rangers are on duty to help you plan and understand your tour of the battlefield. The center also has museum exhibits and literature. There are no camping or picnicking facilities at the monument. Federal law prohibits the removal or disturbance of any marker, artifact, relic, or historic feature.

2 NATIONAL CEMETERY

Within walking distance of the visitor center is Custer Battlefield National Cemetery, a relatively small burial ground contained within the boundaries of the larger battlefield. Soldiers killed in several notable Indian engagements on the Northern Plains are buried here with servicemen of World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Originally the battlefield was maintained as a National Cemetery under the jurisdiction of the Army. The brown stone lodge, built in 1894, served as quarters for the superintendents for many years. The superintendent was



known to the Indians as the "ghost herder," whose main purpose was to keep the spirits of the dead from ranging outside the cemetery fence. The raising of the American flag at dawn brought back all the ghosts to their proper resting place.

The bodies of most of Custer's men are not buried in the cemetery; they are in a common grave on Custer Hill. Of those killed in the battle, only a few unidentified remains and the body of Lt. John C. Crittenden are in the cemetery.

Over a period of about 25 years, as the old western forts were closed down or abandoned, the bodies of men killed on the frontier in other Indian fighting were brought here for reburial. The dead of the 1866 Fetterman fight, the worst Army defeat inflicted by the Plains Indians until Custer's, were buried originally at Fort Phil Kearny, Wyo., then moved here in 1888. Bodies of those killed in the 1867 Hayfield Fight and buried at Fort C. F. Smith, Mont., were reinterred here in 1892. Other reburials came from Forts Totten, Rice, Buford, Pembina, Sisseton, Assiniboine, and Custer.

3 CUSTER HILL

The first graves of Custer and his men were dug in great haste over the entire battlefield in the places where the soldiers had fallen. Then, in 1881, as many graves as could be found were reopened and the bodies reinterred in a common grave around the base of this memorial shaft bearing the names of all the dead. The bodies of 11 officers and two civilians already had been exhumed for reburial elsewhere at the request of relatives. Custer's remains were buried at West Point Military Academy, N.Y., on October 10, 1877.

From Custer Hill you can see most of the battlefield and the valley in which the Indian village was located. On the west side of the hill just below the monument, a cluster of 52 markers shows as nearly as possible where the remnant of Custer's battalion gathered for the "last stand." Custer, his brothers Tom and Boston, and his nephew "Autie" Reed were all found in this group. The markers indicating where C and E Companies were overwhelmed can be seen west of the monument on a knoll between the hill and the river.

FOR YOUR SAFETY

You are in rattlesnake country. Please stay on the pathways while walking the battlefield. Rangers will offer prompt assistance in case of accidents, but you can prevent them from happening by being watchful and cautious.

U.S. troopers appear hopelessly immobile without their horses as they crouch to defend themselves against overwhelming numbers of Indians who seem to dart by effortlessly in this drawing of the Custer fight by Amos Bad Heart Bull.

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4 BATTLE RIDGE

Interpretive signs along the crest of the ridge identify groups of markers where the men of Companies, F, I, and L fell in the battle. At the end of the ridge, a spur road loops around Calhoun Hill, a flank of the L Company position.

5 RENO-BENTEEN BATTLEFIELD

After beating off Major Reno's attack on the afternoon of the 25th, the Indians forced him to this point where the 7th Cavalry Memorial now stands. Until the Indians left the next day, Reno and Captain Benteen were held to defensive action. Interpretive markers indicate Indian and Cavalry advancements.

Please don't leave with questions; a second stop at the visitor center may well make your visit complete.

ADMINISTRATION

Custer Battlefield National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Crow Agency, MT 59022, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

LOCATION OF PARK

Custer Battlefield National Monument lies within the Crow Indian Reservation in southeastern Montana. U.S. 87 (I-90) passes 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) to the west; U.S. 212 connects the monument with the Black Hills and Yellowstone National Park. The Crow Agency is 3.2 kilometers (2 miles) north, and Hardin, Mont., is 29 kilometers (18 miles) north. The nearest cities are Billings, Mont., 105 kilometers (65 miles) northwest, and Sheridan, Wyo., 113 kilometers (70 miles) south.

National Park Service
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the INTERIOR

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