

Custer at the Little Bighorn: The Great Retrospective

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In June, the northern Great Plains are a vast carpet of green, a stunningly beautiful landscape of high tablelands, broken by hills and ravines and watered by streams flowing quietly between grassy banks. Along one of these streams, the Little Bighorn River in south-central Montana Territory, on an early summer afternoon, June 25, 1876, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer's Seventh Cavalry attacked a village of Sioux and Northern Cheyennes. The Indian encampment was larger than anticipated. Perhaps as many as three thousand warriors charged out to meet the invaders and within a couple of hours overwhelmed Custer and his immediate command, killing everyone. Following their victory, the Indians mutilated the soldiers' bodies, a traditional ritual. The next day, after continued fighting with other units of the Seventh Cavalry under Custer's subordinate officers, the Indians left the area to avoid conflict with a large contingent of troops moving rapidly toward the encampment.

Under such leaders as Crazy Horse, Gall, Two Moon and Sitting Bull, the Plains Indians achieved a dramatic victory over the flamboyant Custer and his cavalymen, and at a significant time—just as the nation was celebrating the centennial of the Declaration of Independence and beginning the 1876 political campaign. The celebration and excitement of these public events were joined with anger and frustration that the Indians had annihilated Custer.

Debates over the battle immediately reached the level of presidential politics—was the Indian policy of the Grant administration at fault? And the debates spread throughout the army—was Custer a hero or an egotist who disobeyed orders and brought on the disaster, and had his subordinates at the Little Bighorn, Maj. Marcus A. Reno and Capt. Frederick W. Benteen, acted cowardly or bravely? The whole affair created intense public interest, at the heart of which lay the mystery: Exactly what did happen to Custer's forces once they rode down toward the Little Bighorn River and disappeared out of sight from Reno's men. What was the course of battle; how did it happen and why?



The Little Bighorn ranks alongside Gettysburg and the Alamo as one of the most well-known battles ever fought on American soil—yet Custer's defeat was only a momentary reversal in the army's effort to subdue the Plains Indians. After the battle, the Indians broke up their village into smaller, scattered groups while the army increased its strength in the region. The struggle for the northern plains soon ended with the army in control and the Indians on the reservation. The Indian victory over Custer had little effect except perhaps to hasten the war's almost inevitable outcome.

While the military and political consequences of the Battle of the Little Bighorn soon played out, public fascination with the battle endured remarkably through the decades. Custer's last stand—a brief, dramatic challenge to Manifest Destiny on the remote northern plains—quickly became a celebrated event, launched into the legendary and mythological realms of the Great American West. There it remains today, alive and well.

In this manner, beyond the historian's traditional concerns for military and political consequences, the Battle of the Little Bighorn created such exceptional public interest that it caused a parallel set of historical consequences—a Great Retrospective, a public response lasting through the years. Each generation has commemorated and celebrated the battle in a sequence of activities which does not fall "outside" of history, but forms a history of its own, a long pageant of color and ceremony, fact and fantasy. Those who "pick up the pieces" in the aftermath of history—who examine

and re-examine an event, and infuse it into the public mind—themselves become a part of history. By perpetuating memory of an event they contribute to and become a part of its extended history.

In retrospect it almost seems that the Battle of the Little Bighorn was fought solely for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations. Over the years, reliving the battle has provided pleasure for millions of people. Dramatic, live-action presentations of the battle soon became a staple of the popular Wild West shows, especially those produced by William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, the great frontier scout turned showman. In the twentieth century, motion pictures have continued this tradition with many versions of the Little Bighorn—depicting the battle in every way from the tragic defeat of gallant, heroic troops (*They Died With Their Boots On*, 1941—World War II era) to an Indian victory over arrogant invaders who deserved a swift, sure death (*Little Big Man*, 1970—Vietnam War era).

Written accounts of the Little Bighorn comprise a vast body of literature—hundreds of works, from dime novels and comic books to serious fiction and historical inquiry. And since the 1890s the Anheuser-Busch Brewing Company's print, "Custer's Last Fight," has decorated barrooms across this country and in many other nations, becoming one of the most popular prints ever produced.

Seeking to get into the very marrow of the "Custer experience" are the buffs. Numbering in the thousands, these aficionados not only partake of most available literature on Custer, but many also dress in costumes of the era (military uniforms or frontier dresses) to participate in encampments and reenactments. They regularly and religiously visit sites associated with Custer. Many have also visited the Dyche Museum at the University of Kansas to view the stuffed, glass-encased horse, Comanche, the venerated remains of the only survivor from the army's side of the battle.

Recently, at a fancy auction in Connecticut, Custer's dog-calling horn brought \$19,800—an indication of the Custer mystique's still powerful and widespread appeal. On the battlefield, imitators of the fallen hero have occasionally wandered about, dressed in Custer-like paraphernalia, perhaps wondering what might have been, wishing to undo, to reverse the outcome of the fatal encounter. And one individual was once caught in the basement of the battlefield museum trying



Custer Hill

on Custer's army issue jock-strap—surely the ultimate Custer experience.

Out of all of the retrospection on the Little Bighorn, one of the most important acts to perpetuate memory of the battle has been the setting aside of the battlefield itself. This began in 1879 when the government proclaimed the site a national cemetery. Regular visits there began soon after with visitors coming from nearby Fort Custer (established in 1877) or traveling by stagecoach from the Northern Pacific Railway depot in Billings. The War Department managed the battlefield until 1940 when this responsibility was transferred to the National Park Service. Now more than 250,000 people visit this site each year.

Those who come to the Little Bighorn encounter an imposing granite obelisk, erected in 1881, at the top of Last Stand Hill, where the furious conclusion of the battle occurred. Inscribed on this monument are the names of the soldiers who died there, many of whom are buried in a mass grave around the base of the obelisk. (Bodies of most of the officers were moved to other cemeteries in 1877; Custer's body was reinterred at West Point, October 10, 1877; the Indians had carried away most of their dead.) Scattered up the hillside to near the obelisk are dozens of small white marble markers erected where the bodies of individual soldiers were originally found. These stones give a rough indication of the disposition of Custer's command during the last stages of the fight.

Other markers and signs in the national monument describe the course of the battle, and an interpretive center contains a museum with exhibits and artifacts. A separate area about four miles up-river preserves the site where troops under Reno and Benteen were besieged during and after the defeat of Custer's forces.

Setting aside the battlefield preserved the sacred ground, allowing the site to fulfill its role as a shrine, rather than to become private grazing lands. From around the world pilgrims and the curious come to this focal point of the Custer and Little Bighorn legend—the place where it happened, the one spot on the planet where this brief historic encounter can be most vividly recalled.

Here also, away from the dime novels, Wild West shows and movies, the more solemn commemorative activities have occurred. Among them: reburial of the soldiers in the mass grave and erection of the granite memorial in 1881; conciliatory meetings of Indians and whites on the battlefield; repeated anniversary observances, most notably the 10th, 50th, and 100th. On the 110th anniversary in 1986, occurred the ceremonial burial of fragmentary remains of 34 soldiers unearthed during the recent archaeological work.

These observances, which will continue in one form or another down through the decades, have great meaning to Indians as well as whites. Speaking to the crowd gathered for the 110th anniversary ceremonies, Enos Poor Bear, former head of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, stated: "To the Sioux Nation and to all Indian people, there is no spot on earth more steeped with Indian tradition and pride than this battlefield at which we are assembled. We of the Indian nations look on this battle as one of our finest hours."

Although the battle is considered one of the greatest Indian victories in the history of the frontier wars, militarily it earned the Indians nothing—but it earned many of them a great and lasting sense of triumph and pride, certainly an indication of the battle's larger symbolic meanings. The Little Bighorn has become more than a shrine for the Indians. It is a symbol of 400 years of

cultural conflict in America. For the Sioux in particular, the Little Bighorn represents a major cultural transition to the reservation experience—from independence to dependence and welfare which exist today.

On the other hand, the Anglo-American society, seemingly invincible in its nineteenth century westward march, reacted to the defeat with shock and disbelief—and has never been able to stop fretting about what happened there and why. Losing the real battle, the whites counterattacked with scientific inquiry, continually seeking to resolve the mystery. Through exhaustive research, historians and archeologists have for decades stalked the minutest detail, even plotting out grid patterns over portions of the bat-

tlefield to map to the last millimeter the location, depth and angle of every precious artifact, every shred of evidence. Between trips to the library and the movies (and perhaps to the mirror), they have now computerized this data—but the complete story remains forever elusive.

Rather than being obsessed with detail, the Indians are more stoic about the Little Bighorn. They may also be curious about the white's fascination with a battle they lost but continue to celebrate.

The Little Bighorn's enduring appeal stems in large part from the fact that it offers something for everyone—adults or children, Indian or non-Indian, patriots, radicals, scholars. As drama

and as theater, the battle provides endless fascination; as historic incident, endless inquiry and speculation.

What is remarkable about the Little Bighorn is that this Great Retrospective, the public celebration and commemoration, has become the weightier, more consequential result of the battle—varied, highly symbolic, longer lasting and with more to come. Each generation has found itself part of this historic pageant. And now we, too, have become participants—actors in the play.

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