ELECTRONIC RESERVE COLLECTION

The Electronic Reserve Collection is a service for UNCW students, faculty and staff. Access to the collection is by professor's name or course number only.

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code), governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research". If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order, if, in its judgement, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

Greene, Jerome A.
10 245 4 The Great Sioux War and Indian Testimony (Introduction)
11 500 Pages xiii-xxvi IN Lakota and Cheyenne: Indian Views of the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877, edited by Jerome A. Greene. Norman:
University of Oklahoma Press, 1994

Filename: greenelakintro Date added to database: 11-01-01 Term:(YR)

Need by: ____________
Processing Complete: ___

Instructor: david la vere No. of Students:
Course No. and Name: hst440 indian wars
Introduction

The Great Sioux War and Indian Testimony
By Jerome A. Greene

The Great Sioux War comprised a series of sequential battles and skirmishes that arrayed elements of the U.S. Army against diverse tribes of Teton, or western, Sioux and Northern Cheyenne Indians during a period of fifteen months from March 1876 through May 1877. The conflict embraced fifteen encounters of varying magnitude that ranged across an extensive landscape encompassing parts of present-day Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, and South Dakota. The war evolved from the inexorable movement of whites onto lands claimed by the Sioux and Cheyennes (as well as other tribes) on the northern Great Plains. Its conclusion saw the intertribal coalition sundered, its people scattered among reservations in Dakota Territory, Nebraska, and the Indian Territory (present Oklahoma) or refuged in Canada.

The two tribes involved in the Great Sioux War, the Teton Sioux, or Lakotas, and the Northern Cheyennes, while linguistically unrelated, nonetheless possessed cultural similarities that had influenced their parallel courses by the mid-1870s. The Algonkian-speaking Cheyennes, once inhabitants of the country adjoining the western Great Lakes, had been drawn by the buffalo herds to occupy the prairie country east of the Missouri River late in the seventeenth century. Augmented by the arrival of horses among them, their westward migration continued, and within a few decades the Cheyennes hunted beyond the Black Hills as far north as the Yellowstone River and as
far south as the Platte. By the early nineteenth century, the tribe had divided into northern and southern segments that nevertheless maintained band and familial interrelationships. In their seasonal movements, Cheyenne warriors vied with other Indian tribes for supremacy of the land and its game resources. The Cheyennes became noted fighters as a result of their battles with neighboring tribes, especially the Crows, Kiowas, Comanches, and bitterly hated Pawnees. Conversely, they formed durable alliances with other groups, notably the linguistically related Arapahoes and the culturally like Teton tribes, and particularly the Oglalas.

The Teton, formerly prairie tribesmen, had reached the plains country traversing over much the same ground as the Cheyennes, and during the same approximate period. The seven tribes of the Siouan-speaking Teton—Oglalas, (Those Who Scatter Their Own Grain), Hunkpapas, (Campers at the Entrance of the Camp Circle), Sichangus (Burned Thighs People, commonly known as Brulés), Mínoconjou (Planters By the Water), Sihasapas (Blackfeet, or Wearers of Black Moccasins), Oohenunpa (Two Kettles, or Two Boilings People), and Itazipchos (Those Without Bows, commonly called Sans Arcs)—occupied the Yellowstone region early in the nineteenth century, laying a strong claim by virtue of superior numbers. Although the Sioux and Cheyennes occasionally fought one another, their conflicts were minimal compared to those between the Sioux and the Crows, who vigorously contested Sioux encroachment. The Lakotas and Cheyennes shared common objectives, including security; intermarriages and increasing cultural affinity fostered intertribal cohesiveness that in no way compromised either tribe’s autonomy.

Because of their relatively large population, the Teton Sioux attracted the attention of whites during the period of national expansion that preceded the Civil War. Treaties arranged with the Plains tribes in 1851 eventually pro-
moted conflict between the Sioux and the U.S. government. Bloodshed intermittently occurred until the late 1860s, most of it involving Sioux attacks on gold-seekers and troops who invaded their country. In 1868, the government and some of the Lakota bands concluded the Fort Laramie treaty, which created the Great Sioux Reservation in what is now western South Dakota. Some of the Lakotas, however, particularly the followers of Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and other chiefs, refused to sign the treaty and avoided the reservation altogether. Furthermore, many of the Indians who had agreed to reside on the reservation now opted to join their kinsmen in the north on a seasonal basis.

Two events finally culminated in the Great Sioux War. First, a surveying expedition for the Northern Pacific Railroad penetrated into the Yellowstone River lands inhabited by the northern Sioux in the summer of 1873. Second, in 1874 the confirmation of gold in the Black Hills provoked a rush of miners onto the Great Sioux Reservation. Both events symbolized the expansive designs of white Americans, so far as Indian rights were concerned, while signaling to their government the need to forestall conflict with the Sioux over the coveted lands.

The Indians reacted defensively, attacking parties of miners in the vicinity of the Black Hills while striking camps of tribes friendly to the United States. Late in 1875, the government ordered all Lakotas then beyond the boundary of the Great Sioux Reservation, including the nontreaty followers of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, to place themselves within its confines. If they did not come to the agencies, troops would be sent to force them in. Freezing conditions prevented many tribesmen from learning of the directive; doubtless many would not have complied anyway. In sum, none of the targeted bands in the Yellowstone country responded, and the War Department initiated a winter campaign against them.
The war that followed was unwanted by the Indians, who desired to be left alone to continue their traditional way of life. First to come under attack by U.S. troops was a village of Northern Cheyennes that stood along the Powder River in southeastern Montana Territory and mistakenly was thought by the army to contain Sioux. On March 17, 1876, an army column struck these people at dawn, driving them from their homes, seizing their ponies, and destroying their supplies. But the warriors countered, retrieved their animals, and suffered but minimal casualties in the fighting. Far from succeeding, the army attack at Powder River only solidified the Cheyennes' alliance with the Tethons and steeled their resolve. As such, from both Indian and military perspectives, the Powder River battle was a critical beginning.

Emboldened by the onset of fighting, the Sioux and Cheyennes anticipated army movements over the next several months and, confident in their success, initiated combat against the troops. On June 9, 1876, warriors briefly attacked Brigadier General George Crook's bivouac along the upper Tongue River, firing on the soldiers from bluffs above the stream. Eight days later, more than one thousand warriors struck Crook's command on Rosebud Creek, besting the army in a day-long encounter that raged across several square miles of terrain. Significantly, the Indians drove Crook south, away from other military columns operating in the region.

By June 25, a village containing perhaps 8,000 people—Lakotas representing all the seven tribes, plus Northern Cheyennes accompanied by some of their southern kinsmen and a few Arapahoes and eastern Sioux—had located in the Little Big Horn Valley, one stream west of Rosebud Creek. The Indians, now increasingly drawn together for security, had assembled in a favored spot known to the Sioux as Greasy Grass to hunt and to pursue traditional religious activities. When troops under Lieu-
Area of the Great Sioux War, 1876–1877, showing principal zone of activity and locations of major battles and skirmishes.
tenant Colonel George A. Custer struck the village at midday, as many as 2,500 warriors countered, destroying that officer's immediate command of approximately 225 men and forcing the other battalions to seek refuge on the bluffs overlooking the river until the tribesmen withdrew. The Little Big Horn victory was complete and resounding; it raised the confidence of the Lakota-Cheyenne union and demoralized the army. Today, Little Big Horn—the major Indian triumph in the Great Sioux War—remains the best known of all engagements of the conflict. Because of the mystery surrounding the demise of Custer's immediate command, the Little Big Horn has assumed legendary stature. Indian eyewitness reports thus are critical to understanding what occurred during Custer's phase of the battle.

A long period of military retribution followed the Indian victory at Little Big Horn. None of the subsequent engagements assumed that battle's scale, but their cumulative impact, coupled with the near starvation of the Indians, effectively destroyed the tribesmen's unity and drove most to yield to the government. With few exceptions, army-Indian encounters after Little Big Horn consisted of widely scattered actions in which troops defeated piecemeal the once powerful Indian alliance.

Early in July a combined party of Sioux and Cheyennes clashed with a scouting party from Crook's command and almost succeeded in preventing their escape. Later that month, a band of Cheyennes who had left Red Cloud Agency to join the warring factions in the north ran headlong into an army column patrolling northeast of Fort Laramie. After an encounter with the troops in which one of their number was killed, the Indians retreated to the agency, pursued all the way by the soldiers. The first major setback to the Indians in the Great Sioux War, however, came in September, when a village of Lakotas and Cheyennes was assaulted by a battalion of Crook's command.
Most of the people fled in the misty dawn. A few found shelter in a ravine but were forced to surrender. The Battle of Slim Buttes, occurring within the confines of the Sioux reservation, forecast the destruction and despair that visited the tribesmen over the remaining eight months.

Indians who returned north to hunt buffalo in the autumn of 1876 found that a permanent military presence had been established with construction of an army cantonment at the mouth of Tongue River on the Yellowstone. They reacted angrily, striking an army supply train en route to the new post. After the post's commander, Colonel Nelson A. Miles, failed to negotiate Sitting Bull's surrender in a face-to-face meeting, he ordered his troops to attack the Indians at Cedar Creek, north of the Yellowstone. Although Sitting Bull fled with his immediate followers, several hundred Indians ultimately yielded to Miles. But of these, only a small body actually went to the agencies; most continued hunting to sustain themselves and their families and to prolong their freedom.

Throughout the winter of 1876–77 the troops kept pressure on the tribesmen. In November and December, Sitting Bull's people sought relief from tribes situated near the Fort Peck Indian Agency along the Missouri River. But the soldiers soon arrived. During the latter month, part of Miles's command skirmished with the Indians along the Missouri, and on December 18 the troops attacked Sitting Bull's camp of 122 lodges along Ash Creek. The occupants of the village were driven into the freezing elements without their property; thereafter, Sitting Bull's influence faded among the Lakotas. Eventually, he led his band into Canada, where he remained until 1881.

While the Lakotas north of the Yellowstone contended with the army, the Northern Cheyennes under Dull Knife suffered a crippling defeat in Wyoming that largely ended their involvement in the war. On November 25, 1876, more than two hundred lodges of Cheyennes—
some fifteen hundred Indians—nestled in a canyon of the Big Horn Mountains, were attacked by a command under Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie. In one of the largest battles of the war, Mackenzie's troopers stormed the encampment at dawn, chasing families into the cold and capturing horses and property. The warriors fought back futilely; in the end, at least forty of them died. The Cheyenne families trekked north seeking help from Crazy Horse's Oglalas in the Tongue River region of southern Montana Territory. Many women and children did not survive the journey. Others, facing the reality of their weakened condition, turned themselves in at the Nebraska agencies during the next few months.

For the Indians, the winter of 1876–77 only grew worse. Their condition desperate, they continued to challenge the soldiers. On January 8, Crazy Horse's Sioux, augmented by Northern Cheyennes, confronted Miles in the upper Tongue River valley. Desiring to protect their nearby village, the Indians assaulted the troops early in the morning and kept up the fight until a blizzard obscured the belligerents from each other. The warriors withdrew up the Tongue, while the soldiers returned to their cantonment. Although both sides sustained minimal losses, the Battle of Wolf Mountains alerted the tribesmen to the hopelessness of holding out longer. Factionalism appeared to further erode their unity, and, much like the vanquished Cheyennes from Dull Knife's camp, the Oglalas and other Lakota tribesmen began to surrender in large numbers.

In a last bid for freedom, a band of Minneconjou Lakotas under Lame Deer determined to remain afield. After most of the Indians had either turned themselves in to Miles or had started for the agencies, Lame Deer and his people—some sixty-odd lodges with approximately 430 occupants—turned towards the upper Rosebud and in early May 1877 camped along Muddy Creek, a tributary of that stream. Most of the people were asleep at daybreak on
May 7 when Miles's soldiers charged the tepees, killed Lame Deer and thirteen other Minneconjous, and chased the rest into the surrounding hills. Over the summer, the survivors, pursued by troops, traveled to the Nebraska agencies. On May 6, the day before Miles destroyed Lame Deer's village, Crazy Horse led almost 900 Sioux men, women, and children into Camp Robinson, Nebraska. Four months later, on September 5, the Oglala leader was mortally wounded in a scuffle at the post guardhouse. Together with Sitting Bull's passage into Canada, Crazy Horse's death symbolized the conclusion of the largest Indian war in American history.

This book presents the recollections of Lakota and Cheyenne veterans of the various engagements of the Great Sioux War. It complements a previous volume by affording an Indian viewpoint and thereby facilitating a greater understanding of events and on-site intercultural dynamics regarding Sioux War battlefields. Most of these accounts have not been previously published. They offer both immediate testimony, that given within weeks or months of an event, and reminiscent testimony, that given years or decades later, often to scholarly minded interrogators.

Indian testimony, ostensibly a valuable adjunct in determining the history of Indian-white relations, must at the outset be considered with care. Obviously there existed a language problem, in that an informant's remarks, almost always translated from Lakota or Cheyenne (or even gesture or sign language) into English, created a filtering process that, especially in the early days, was prone to error. Equally troublesome, statements rendered in the first person, processed through an interpreter, were usually transcribed into the third person by the receiver. Some questioners rearranged the substance of accounts before their transcription, further jeopardizing their accuracy. There are other faults, too. Because of the war honors
tradition of Plains tribal cultures, battle accounts were very individualistic, reflecting the personal character of Plains warfare, and thus seldom promoted perspectives of group behavior in combat. Further, the Indian record described events as the people remembered them; errors of perception were always possible, and to this extent such sources must be accepted with certain faith, for there is often no means of verification.

Because of these inherent problems, Indian testimony has been dismissed, or at best reluctantly accepted, by most historians. Today it is apparent, however, that its pluses outweigh its minuses. Indian testimony, carefully weighed, exhibits advantages that make it a valid tool for assessing the past. Veracity was important in tribal society, and so was memory. Remembering such minute data was instilled as part of Indian storytelling ritual, wherein the storyteller was culturally obliged to relate an event accurately, consequently ensuring its perpetuation by future generations. Because of its individualistic character, the Indian record is often most useful in recalling personal incidents that occurred during encounters with whites rather than in describing broader aspects. For example, the many native statements about the Little Big Horn often corroborate each other in details of the struggle while differing materially on more contextual facets.

If this sense of accuracy, born of cultural affinity, is the constant that validates Indian testimony, it must overcome biases that have traditionally neutralized its value, notably among non-Indians. Perhaps the biggest hurdle, as previously noted, is the translation factor; if errors of interpretation occurred, so, quite likely, did errors of fact and feeling. Moreover, sometimes words and phrases interpreted might not convey the literal meaning intended by the informant. This was noticeably the case for spatial and temporal matters; time and distance measurements and geographical descriptions often emerged from the ac-
counts as confusing benchmarks. Consequently, Indian assertions might not be altogether precise and must be evaluated with some latitude if they are to benefit overall knowledge of these battles.

Both types of Indian statements can be valuable. Reminiscent testimony, by its distance from an event, was more often bias-free for both giver and receiver than testimony delivered soon afterwards. This observation is especially true of accounts of the Little Big Horn, wherein surrendering Sioux and Cheyennes, hurriedly pressed for information of that battle, became intimidated by virtue of their recent involvement there. Fearing retribution, they either subordinated their personal roles or told what they believed their questioners wanted to hear. On the other hand, immediate accounts, if indeed forthright, can be rich sources for details over reminiscent accounts sometimes executed decades later.

As mentioned, most immediate accounts dealt with the Custer fight; few Sioux or Cheyennes were interviewed about other battles and skirmishes of 1876-77. Conversely, many reminiscent statements brought forth years later described these seemingly less provocative engagements, as well as the Custer fight, because both amateur and professional students of Indian history took more interest and had ample opportunity to gain the Indian perspective about them. So far as the Little Big Horn goes, both immediate and reminiscent Indian recollections are inordinately significant in depicting what happened on Custer’s battlefield. Comparisons of reports about that encounter disclose surprising analogies in their contents about Custer’s route to destruction. Regarding other Sioux War engagements, Indian recollections, taken together with military accounts, contribute to a more comprehensive knowledge about them.

Despite the obvious pitfalls that accompany the employment of Indian testimony (non-Indian testimony also
has its problems), it nevertheless merits attention. The selections in this book represent a fairly comprehensive record of the engagements of the Great Sioux War as described by Teton Sioux and Northern Cheyenne eyewitnesses. Brevity in the Indian recollections, as well as the availability of a variety of largely unused sources, has dictated that, for each engagement, several accounts be presented. Internal nuances, as well as the knowledge of who conducted an interview and under what circumstances, often suggested which accounts were more objective than others, and this proved to be a selecting factor. The presentations are true eyewitness accounts, not hearsay, that provide clear renditions of the battle actions. (In the case of the Cedar Creek encounter, the immediate accounts used are limited in detail regarding the fighting; also, no Indian account of the fight at Ash Creek, Montana, on December 18, 1876, wherein Sitting Bull’s village was destroyed, has been located.) Because of their accuracy and availability, there are more reminiscent accounts than immediate ones in this volume.

In preparing these statements for publication, faithfulness to the original material was the utmost guiding principle. A few of the accounts have been published elsewhere and are identified as such; most, however, have not previously appeared in print and have been drawn verbatim from reports and manuscripts of the recipients of the accounts. In either case, editorial changes have been kept to a minimum. As required or appropriate, punctuation has occasionally been added to improve readability. Also, some words, names, and terms abbreviated in the transcriptions have been completed to further promote clarity. In no way has the substance of the accounts been altered, except to indicate in brackets or footnotes wherever appropriate obvious errors of fact. And wherever interview content lapsed into the irrelevant, it is omitted and its omission indicated by use of ellipses.
For Further Reading


INTRODUCTION