

LEGACY

**New Perspectives
on the Battle of
the Little Bighorn**

**Edited by
Charles E. Rankin**

From The Library of
Thomas C. Rust

MONTANA
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY
PRESS

Helena

Oral and Written Indian Perspectives on the Indian Wars

Margot Liberty

Historians and other scholars of the Indian wars are concerned with both oral and written accounts from Indian and white participants, on both sides of the conflict. All such reminiscences and interviews need careful evaluation and analysis. In dealing with these sources, the investigator needs to be aware of inherent problems and how best to understand and use information from them in research. What follows is a consideration of the value of such sources and what to look for in deciding their ultimate worth.

In general, soldier accounts were initially written, and most Indian accounts were initially obtained through interviews, then written down by the interviewer or someone else. Conventional wisdom holds that Indian accounts may be less reliable than soldier accounts because of their oral nature and because they have been transcribed by someone other than the original source. With the use of tape recorders, moreover, they are subject to misunderstandings in interpretation and translation, especially as translation may not occur until much later, thus losing authenticity with the passage of time. Indeed, such interviews must often be translated or augmented by the use of sign language, as in the work of Thomas Marquis and Frank Linderman, also known as "Sign Talker."¹ Although this distinction is not absolute—see the

written account of the Sioux physician Charles Eastman concerning events at his hospital after Wounded Knee or the tape recording of old soldier accounts by Don Rickey, Jr.—it more or less holds.²

In addition, soldier accounts, especially those by highly educated officers, are credited with stressing the overall picture or grand scheme of events more than Indian accounts, which tend to focus on personal experience. Absolute accuracy was required of a warrior who recounted his deeds in battle, however, and verification was necessary if honors were to be won. Traditional Plains cultures had little concern for the wider view until outside pressures brought the need for different perspectives in later years. In all of this the nature of oral and written language plays a determining role. If Indian accounts are indeed to be counted less reliable but more detailed than soldier accounts, some reminders concerning oral and written language from the perspective of an anthropologist may help explain why that seems to be the case.³

Oral history is often linked conceptually to the invention of the tape recorder, although it actually originated with human speech itself and was relied upon for the vast majority of human experience prior to writing. It is limited by the extent of a single human memory, and it usually depends on face-to-face contact and personal transmission. Every language of the thousands known, whether written or not, is fully developed according to its own structures and principles and is able to incorporate changes through time as required. Each language is characterized by its own unique grammar as well as a particular selection of sounds from those possible to the human speech apparatus. Organizational principles vary widely but no language is "primitive," because each is a complete sophisticated system. Languages adapt quickly to express new ideas and information, but they are learned as total entities before six years of age; after that learning new languages becomes much more difficult.

At the time of Columbus, more than two hundred Indian languages, belonging to nine or ten stocks or major classifications, were spoken in native North America north of Mexico. None of these was written. In the Great Plains region in historic times—that is, following European contact—there were about thirty distinct languages belonging to six major linguistic stocks or

divisions. Thus, the old question asked of frontier educational personnel, "Do you speak the Indian language?" indicated serious misunderstanding. An early teacher for the Bureau of Indian Affairs at Pine Ridge, who spent a good deal of time trying to learn Lakota, was astonished at its uselessness when he was transferred to the Southwest.⁴ The linguistic diversity on the historic plains came about through the displacement of many native groups into the region from all directions after the arrival of horses and the adoption of buffalo hunting. The plains thus became a melting pot, or a linguistic Tower of Babel, in which unspoken sign language developed as a *lingua franca*—a form of communication Frank Linderman and Thomas Marquis, among others, made much use of.

Spoken language depends on the human speech apparatus, which is lacking in other species (including the great apes and sea mammals, whose thought processes may approach the sophistication of our own). Writing also depends upon the human upright bipedal posture that permits free use of the upper limbs and development of tool-using capacity by means of the oppositional thumb. Written language transcends space and time, as does speech, but because it can be passed from one human community and one human generation to the next, it is not dependent upon face-to-face contact (or by now, telephone or other mechanical transmission). Spoken language transcends space and time by the use of grammatical devices such as past and future tenses, and cognitive mapping, which distinguishes and names geographical localities, seasons, periods of time, and so on, but it cannot compare with the capacities of written language in this regard. Writing permits preservation and transmission of infinitely more material than spoken language, even with mnemonic devices such as winter counts or birchbark record rolls. As a device for cultural record keeping, writing is unique. It is amazing that it has existed for so short a time (five thousand to seven thousand years) in contrast to the whole of human experience (one million years at least). Before writing, everything we learned was transmitted by word of mouth.

Having suggested that any language can express anything, it should now be added that in a subtle conceptual sense this may not be true. If a work of literature "loses much in the translation"

from Russian, say, to such a closely related language as English, we can be sure that the accurate translation of "exotic" languages is much more difficult, especially in the case of ideas and values with which the translator is not familiar. Most American Indian speakers of native languages by now have had to learn reading and writing in English. Many if not most members of older generations were uncomfortable with spoken English, and tended to go back to speaking their own languages once out of school, thus helping the native languages survive for another couple of generations. The more traditional people tended to be the least competent in English, an important factor in Indian wars research because those who had the most information often conveyed it the least well.

Very few Indian accounts of Indian fights were obtained in the informant's language. Most were derived from an interpreter or through the use of sign language, and sometimes both. Indian informants were often reluctant to cooperate fully or disclose everything they knew for fear of reprisal to themselves or to others they might tell about. Why else, an informant might reason, were these interrogators interested? As a result, answers to questions were often partial or incomplete. Questions could also be misunderstood. Indeed, problems of interpretation arose from inaccurate translation in both directions.

Differing agendas and abilities, moreover, affected various respondents. What was to be gained by telling these stories? A little money? Favors from a government agent if one cooperated? Penalties or loss of privilege if one did not? The wish to preserve such things in writing for future generations? The annoyance of (and possible punishment by) an informant's companions if he or she talked? How much did informants know directly through their own experiences, and what had they learned from others? How accurate were their memories, and which things were they unwilling or unable to tell?

Differing agendas and abilities affected interpreters as well. Was this part of their job? Whose side were they on? How fluent were they in each language? What things did they omit or withhold from translation, and why? Did they have special theories to prove or disprove? Were they after sensational details concerning "atrocities" or arguments to support a specific political agenda or

individual reputation? How much time could they spend, or did they want to spend? Did they return to clarify ambivalent responses? Other limiting factors might be the circumstances of the interview—the physical discomfort, the presence of others, or the role of coercion. An example is the determination of Thomas Marquis, in *A Warrior Who Fought Custer and Save the Last Bullet for Yourself*, to prove that many Little Bighorn soldiers killed themselves in preference to facing what they believed was the inevitable torture of captives. Gathering much of his informant Woodenleg's information through sign language, Marquis derived a theory that few others have found acceptable.⁵

The desire for new Indian accounts is much greater among non-Indian historians or "Custer buffs," some of whom would give all they own for, say, new details concerning Custer's death. Surely some Indian family must know such things, they reason. Surely such details are to be found somewhere in yet undiscovered sources—someone's memory, a hidden ledger book, an untranslated tape recording, a clipping from some old trunk that offers a new interview account. Descendants of Indian participants, who tend to view the Custer fight in particular as a source of ethnic pride and, along with many other American citizens, something of a joke, have less fascination for such details. Often they are surprised at the continuing passion of whites for such knowledge—after all, they lost!

Requests for new Indian information from Indians these days are generally funneled through someone known as a tribal historian, who is informally selected in most cases for his or her interest in native history and culture, and because of his or her tolerance for and patience with inquisitive outsiders. Some of these people, such as Joe Medicine Crow, are real stars.⁶ Some have had this duty thrust upon them and tend in the course of time to become irascible, especially with film crews. Investigations into tribal traditions also may be referred to officially appointed cultural committees for review and approval. (At Lame Deer, for example, each new film documentary is supposed to be authorized by the tribe.) The cultural committees change with each new tribal chairman, meet on an irregular basis (if ever), and are often difficult to find and convene. There is also concern for "intellectual

property," along with the belief that the originators or owners of unwritten ideas should benefit from them. Among the Northern Cheyennes in recent years there has been a virtual "gag order" on descendants of certain tribal heroes who have access to accounts of such things as the Northern Cheyenne outbreak from Oklahoma. It is believed that any money derived from sharing such accounts should be distributed equally to all descendants, who may number in the hundreds. Often, the amount of money involved is overestimated. Nonetheless, individuals can get into trouble for "selling" information believed to be group property.

Money remains an important consideration in communities where many people live below the national poverty level. Although private film companies usually pay cash for interviews, public television guidelines for documentaries using oral history often prohibit payment of those interviewed on tape or camera. Funding agencies like the Montana Committee for the Humanities have similar guidelines. One tribal member interviewed for a major national series on western history said that she had traded her whole life for a box of candy.⁷ Moreover, many interviews for use in documentaries wind up on the cutting room floor and never find their way into permanent archives. Elders selected for interviews because of their knowledge and experience may make less than dashing figures on screen and are thus excluded in the final cut. Such interviews are often the only material obtained from such elders, however, and they are vitally important to tribal history. An effort to gather and preserve such throwaways for future tribal use is urgently needed.

Before the advent of tape recorders, Indian and white accounts were gathered through face-to-face interviews sometimes for possible publication in little-known places, either at the time or subsequently. As a result, many accounts taken from old soldiers, or written by them or their relatives, have remained unknown for years, eventually surfacing in obscure newspapers such as the *Army and Navy Journal*, the *Army and Navy Register*, and the *National Tribune*, or in any one of thousands of small-circulation regional weeklies that may now be extinct. Despite their obscurity, such publications may offer accounts of whites interviewing Indians "on the spot" or close to it, for example, in early prison facilities.

Such accounts must be approached with caution. They may be so biased or sensational that they are of little historical use. Use of the term "Red Devil," for example, casts considerable doubt on the accuracy of the source.

Reminiscences by Indian participants often came down through several generations via oral tradition. How many reminiscences of authentic value have survived is a moot question; many now circulate as folklore. Examples include Cheyenne stories of the Cheyenne woman who killed Custer with her hatchet (he came to and sat up, having been earlier knocked out). We also hear of the warrior's son who broke an appointment with a historian because his friends, in jest, persuaded him he would be sent to jail for talking. There are also new speculations by Indians as well as whites. A Lakota pipe carrier told me in May 1994, for example, that Sitting Bull (p. 114) was not present at the Custer fight, having been so badly weakened by injuries resulting from his well-known sacrifice of one hundred pieces of flesh at the Rosebud Creek Sun Dance that he was unable to participate in the battle. The informant also said the body of Crazy Horse, cut into two pieces to help hide it, was demanded by the soldiers but saved for native burial by his relatives' substitution for the body of two bundles of old clothes!

To many tribal members, accounts that have come down through oral tradition in Indian families are today considered more authentic and less biased than written accounts of any kind, old or new, especially those by whites. I have been told of a loss of power, in an almost mystical sense, when such stories are written down.⁸ Allowing for changes through time, and the overall limitations of human memory, it is unlikely that much new information will surface, but there always remains the chance of recovering that one telling detail.

My own experience with Indian oral history began four decades ago, when in 1954 I taught elementary school for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the Northern Cheyenne Reservation community of Birney, Montana. Here I met the widely respected Cheyenne tribal historian John Stands in Timber, and we began the collaboration that was to become our book *Cheyenne Memories*.⁹

Born in 1884, John Stands in Timber worked at a time when research was easier because old-timers were still alive. Educated at

Haskell, Kansas, he spent much of his life collecting historical material from older members of his and other tribes. He served as an interpreter for such non-Indian researchers as J. W. Vaughn, Verne Dusenberry, and Peter Powell. His grandfather was the Cheyenne chief Lame White Man, killed at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. A cultural insider, he began gathering stories in 1900 when he was sixteen years old and continued doing so until his death in 1967 at age eighty-three. He visited and revisited chosen sources and gathered much information at intertribal events, such as fairs, powwows, and rodeos, consulting virtually anyone and everyone for additional details. He could write perfectly well in English, and several of his handwritten accounts and memoranda are in my possession. Like many tribal historians, however, he preferred to talk and listen.

Although his memory was amazing (we often filled several hours with a single story), Stands in Timber used written records in his work. He frequently checked tribal rolls to verify the ages of his informants, especially Little Bighorn battle participants. He would make certain calculations: "Let's see," he would say, "he was born in 1870 so he was six years old in 1876"; or, "She is seventy-five now and the census was in 1933, so she was forty-eight then." He also used written materials as reminders. A celebration program or banquet menu or some old clipping, while having nothing to do with the subject directly at hand, would spark his memory, and then he would be off like the Ancient Mariner. The stories remained in his head in living color, and he was always careful to cite his sources: Old Man Whitebird said this, but Dan Oldbull said something else.

Stands in Timber's original transcript, which I typed directly from the tape recordings made with him in 1958-1959, has been indexed recently, so that details not used in *Cheyenne Memories* are now retrievable.¹⁰ Of interest are his comments on research experiences and methodology, as well as problems in achieving accurate translations. In his original narrative on the Horse Worship ceremony, for example, Stands In Timber commented that in "a lot of things, there's no word to compare the exact meaning with English." He reported that serious mistakes were sometimes made in the early days, as when some men smoked black gunpowder

because the same English word, "powder," was used for kinnikinnick tobacco. In another instance, in an early baseball game, a player on his way to home ran through the cooking fire of his astonished wife after his teammates yelled to him in English: "Run Home! Run Home!" It was not uncommon for two men with varying proficiency in Cheyenne and English to talk back and forth in both languages. Stands in Timber recalled: "One talked Cheyenne and one talked English; they would sit there and talk and laugh. It sounded kind of funny." He also noted that sign language did not work well for all occasions, citing the case of Box Elder who married a Crow girl and had to talk in signs. "The marriage did not last very long," he said.¹¹

More than most others of his generation, Stands In Timber investigated the Custer fight, which was remembered as a great triumph by his people. He held firmly in mind the locations of events important to the Cheyennes, and he hoped to see them marked for future generations. He succeeded with one—the death site of his grandfather, Lame White Man, on Custer Ridge, thanks to the efforts of research historian Don Rickey, Jr. It remains the only remembrance of an individual warrior found on the battlefield. As Rickey noted in 1961: "As you know I have been over parts of the Custer Battle with John Stands in Timber and he has pointed out several places where specific events occurred. Some of these are marked with small rock cairns. I made notes on some of his explanations, which should be in the research files."¹²

Other sites remained unmarked, however. In interviews with me in August 1961, when I was a seasonal ranger and historian at what was then Custer Battlefield National Monument, Stands In Timber told of some of these sites. Three are of particular interest: the story of a brother's suicide; the tale of a solitary escaping soldier; and the story of a Cheyenne coup counted with a cavalry guidon.¹³

In relating the story of the brother's suicide, Stands In Timber told of two large rocks at the Reno-Benteen battle site that may still be seen. The rocks, which are only partially exposed, lie near the east fence a short distance below the Thomas Meador marker, and indicate where a Sioux warrior and a small boy were shot by the soldiers. One of the rocks lies to the left of the draw, and one to the right. The one on the right is further down; the one on the

left is closer to the soldier lines. The story given is this: A young Sioux boy had been captured by Indian scouts at the Battle of the Rosebud a week before the Custer fight. Presumably he was killed. The brother of this boy, also quite young (Stands In Timber's informant said they were boys, not yet men) was deeply grieved, and told his parents that he would die the same way. The Reno men were in siege position, and when an older Sioux warrior made a charge past the soldier lines, the boy followed him. The two of them galloped past from the north side (that is, from the left of the draw). The warrior swung down away from the soldiers but his horse was hit. When it fell, the warrior tried to run away but was killed. The boy, who did not see the line of soldiers, passed by them too closely and was killed as well, fulfilling his wish to die like his brother.

In the second story, Stands In Timber told of a solitary rider and speculated that he may have been the last man to die in the Custer fight. Stands In Timber got the story from Littlesun, a witness to the killing. Littlesun took Stands In Timber to the site in the vicinity of the Butler marker, not yet located on the field, when he visited the battlefield during the fiftieth anniversary celebration in 1926. Here, Littlesun said that he and Low Dog were on their way to join the fight against Custer and his immediate command when they met a solitary rider. "Low Dog and Littlesun were two warriors that went back and forth between the fights," Stands In Timber related.

They were just leaving the Reno fight and going down toward Custer when a soldier on a fast horse broke from Custer's lines and galloped across towards Reno Hill. Low Dog and Littlesun met this rider, and tried to head him off but he got through them; then they turned and chased him. When they crossed the draw which the soldiers had come down in the first skirmish (Medicine Tail), Low Dog, who was a good shot, jumped off his horse and sat down to take good aim. He fired and knocked the rider off as he was going over a little knoll. Just then two or three Sioux came by and they took after the horse, but Littlesun said he could not see whether or not they caught it.¹⁴

Stands In Timber located the site where the rider fell about halfway

up Medicine Tail Coulee, where a dim road used for scattering salt for range cattle runs below Weir Point and turns to pass through Cedar Coulee.¹⁵

At the third site, Stands In Timber said his informant told him of a warrior named Yellownose counting coup on a soldier with one of the troop guidons. The incident took place below and to the left of the *Lame White Man* marker, a place pointed out to Stands in Timber by Tallbull at the 1926 ceremonies, when Stands in Timber was taken over the field and also shown the death sites of *Lame White Man* and *Noisy Walking*. The soldier may have been among those of I Company. "Yellownose was in there close," Stands in Timber related.

He saw two Indian horses run right into each other—the horses both fell and rolled, and he nearly ran into them himself but managed to turn aside. The dust was so thick he could hardly see. He swung his horse out and turned to charge back in again—it was close to the end of the fight—and suddenly the dust lifted away. He saw an American flag not far in front of him, where it had been set in the sagebrush. It was the only thing still standing, in that place, but over on the other side some soldiers were still fighting. So he galloped his horse past and picked the flag up, and rode on into the fight, and used it there to count coup on a soldier. He told that story many times, when they held those special dances where old men are used to start them that have done great things in battle. At camp gatherings of the Oklahoma Cheyennes the Dog Soldiers used to sing all night in front of different tepees along the village, and early in the morning when people started getting up they danced toward the center and any brave man could come before them on foot or on horseback and stop them, and tell what he had done. And Yellownose told that story then, too.¹⁶

An addendum to the Stands In Timber enterprise has recently come to light. In 1952, two years before my time at Birney, Stands In Timber participated in a project during which Northern Cheyenne tribal elder Dan Oldbull, one of the last of the traditional Cheyenne chiefs, met with anthropologist Robert Anderson, now

deceased, to tape record some aspects of Northern Cheyenne culture. The material was made available to me by Anderson's widow in 1992. Oldbull lived at Birney, where four of his grandchildren attended school. As yet untranscribed and untranslated for lack of funding, these tapes include material on war customs among much else. Other such material will surely be found.

It is perhaps in the Oldbull tapes and other information like it, gathered previously by ethnologists, that more real Indian details of the Indian wars will be told. Not only will such data help us better understand existing Indian accounts, it will provide benchmarks to help authenticate or dismiss those that may be found in the future. But most important, they will help us understand and appreciate the ideas, practices, and beliefs the Plains Indians defended at the Little Bighorn in June 1876.

Notes

1. See Thomas B. Marquis, *A Warrior Who Fought Custer* (Minneapolis: Midwest Company, 1931); Thomas B. Marquis, *The Cheyennes of Montana*, ed. with introduction by Thomas D. Weist (Algonac, Mich.: Reference Publications, 1978); and Frank B. Linderman, *Plenty-Coups, Chief of the Crows* (1930; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962).
2. See John D. McDermott, "Wounded Knee: Centennial Voices," *South Dakota History*, 20 (Winter 1990), 289-91; and Don Rickey, Jr., *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay: The Enlisted Soldier Fighting the Indian Wars* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963).
3. American anthropology combines four subfields: (1) cultural anthropology, including ethnology; (2) physical anthropology; (3) archaeology; and (4) linguistics. It has long been intimately entwined with study of these things in Native American culture, although much less today than a century ago. See Margot Liberty, ed., *American Indian Intellectuals: 1976 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society* (St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing, 1978).

4. Albert H. Kneale, *Indian Agent* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1950), 48-49.
5. Marquis, *A Warrior Who Fought Custer*; Thomas B. Marquis, *Keep the Last Bullet for Yourself: The True Story of Custer's Last Stand* (Algonac, Mich.: Reference Publications Inc., 1976).
6. Joseph Medicine Crow, *From the Heart of the Crow Country: The Crow Indians' Own Stories* (New York: Orion Books, 1992).
7. Personal communication to Margot Liberty, Summer 1994.
8. This sentiment is not uncommon during transitions from oral to written cultures. See for example typical sentiments in classical Greece described in Mary Renault's novel, *The Praise Singer*: "Men forget how to write upon the mind," says her protagonist Simonides. "To hear and to keep: that is our heritage from the Sons of Homer . . . The true songs are still in the minds of men." Mary Renault, *The Praise Singer: A Novel* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 4-5.
9. John Stands in Timber and Margot Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 3-10.
10. John Stands In Timber and Margot Liberty, original transcript of interviews of 1958-1959, 806 typed pages, 1959, in author's possession, indexed by John McDermott (hereafter transcript of interviews).
11. *Ibid.*, 158.
12. Don Rickey, Jr., to Margot Liberty, August 15, 1961, Midwest Regional Office, National Park Service, Omaha, Nebraska, in author's possession.
13. Margot Liberty, "Sites of Indian Action on Custer Battlefield," typescript, August 20, 1961, in author's possession. I obtained this information from John Stands In Timber on August 19-20, 1961, and other dates.
14. Transcript of interviews, 357-58. George Bird Grinnell's account of this incident is as follows: "Just after the three companies had reached the gray horse company, a man riding a sorrel horse broke away from the soldiers, and rode back up the river and towards the hills, in the direction from which the soldiers had come. Some Indians followed him, but his horse was fast and long winded, and at last only three men were left in pursuit. A Sioux and two Cheyennes, Old Bear and Kills in the Night, both living in 1915, kept on, trying to overtake him. The Sioux fired at the man but missed him; then Old Bear fired, and a little later the man fell from his horse, and when they got to him they found that he had been shot in the back between the shoulders. It is conjectured that this was Lieutenant Harrington whose body was never identified." George Bird Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes* (1915; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 353.