

1876 on the Reservations: The Indian "Question"

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# 1876 on the Reservation



THE INDIAN QUESTION — RED CLOUD AGENCY — DISTRIBUTING GOODS

**F**OR BOTH Indian and white residents of Montana, the Centennial year 1876 was a time of trauma and excitement, the year of the Custer battle, and the major military campaigns which preceded and followed it. Even as they were recognized with a somewhat stylized teepee in the United States Building at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the Indians were experiencing, out in Montana Territory, still another year of mounting problems and narrowing horizons. Their predicament stemmed, as always, from the unending pressure of white stockmen and miners to roll back and shrink the boundaries of their reservations. Then again, especially in this year of exploding scandals in the Grant Administration, much of the trouble arose from uncertainty, negligence, wrong-doing, and bureaucratic rivalries within the government.

Derelection at the agencies was nothing new, of course, but it became especially noto-

rious during the "Indian Ring" scandals of the later Grant years. Moreover, the long-standing contest over control of Indian affairs still flared between the Interior Department and the Army, whose leaders maintained they could uphold honesty at the agencies better than could political appointees. To the surprise and anguish of his old military colleagues, President U. S. Grant, in 1870 and 1871, decided in favor of civilian control of Indian affairs by launching his so-called "Peace" or "Quaker" Policy. This idealistic but tragically unworkable concept was aimed at cleaning up and revitalizing the Indian Service by allowing religious groups to nominate agents and oversee "civilization" of the reservation Indians.

In Montana, the Catholics maintained their presence on the Salish-Kutenai Reserve, while the Methodists received responsibility for all other tribes. In practice, the Peace Policy had small effect, since the Methodists made

# THE INDIAN "QUESTION"

by MICHAEL P. MALONE and RICHARD B. ROEDER



Harper's Weekly, May 13, 1876

little effort to pursue it in Montana. The Territory's newspapers kept up a steady barrage of criticism at Grant's policy throughout the year, usually demanding that the "savages" be turned over to the military for more severe and summary treatment.

There were three huge Indian reserves in Montana Territory in 1876. The Salish-Kutenai Reservation covered much of the Flathead Valley. An enormous domain set aside for the Blackfeet and other northern Montana tribes reached northward from the Missouri and Marias Rivers to the Canadian boundary and westward from the Dakota border to the Continental Divide. The Crow Indians lived on a sizable reservation south of the Yellowstone River.

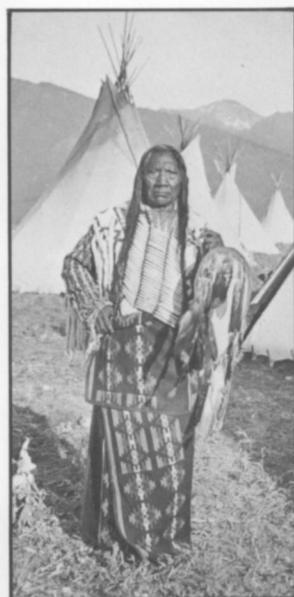
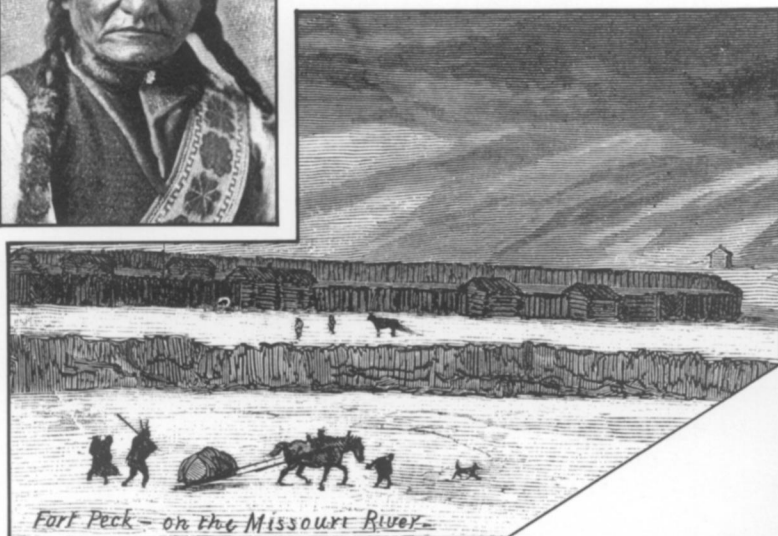
By 1876 the Montana Kutenai and Pend d'Oreille bands were already located on the reservation below Flathead Lake, as were some of the Flatheads. The Salish-Kutenai Agency, where considerable building was taking place,

stood in the Jocko Valley. Since 1854, Jesuits had operated nearby St. Ignatius Mission.

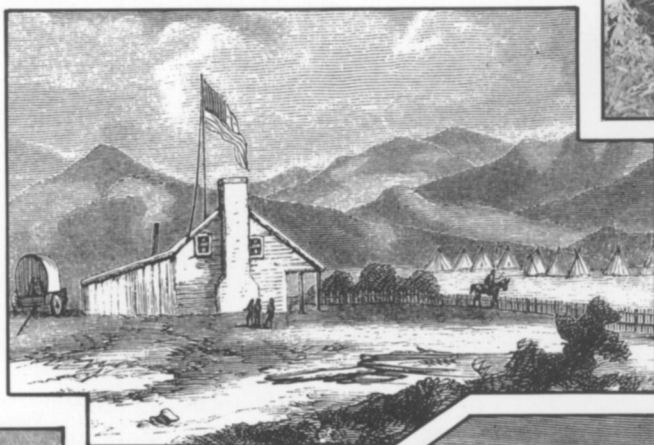
The major problem involved the Flathead tribe. Some of them, under Chief Arlee, had moved to the Jocko by 1876, but many others, although impoverished and pressed by the increasing movement of whites into the area, refused to leave their traditional home in the Bitterroot Valley. Their chief, Charlot, a proud and honorable man, maintained that according to the 1855 treaty which his father had signed with the government, he had the legal right to remain in the upper Bitterroot. Only four years earlier, in 1872, he had refused to sign an agreement presented to him by future President James A. Garfield, which would have moved his people northward to the Jocko. Charlot was especially upset because Garfield had allowed the 1872 agreement, which Chiefs Arlee and Adolph had signed, to be published with the false inference that he, too, had signed.



SITTING BULL



CHARLOT and the  
FLATHEAD AGENCY



RED CLOUD



There were other difficulties. During 1876 the Flatheads carried on an extended argument with Missoula County over whether their Bitterroot lands could be taxed or sold for tax delinquency. This poignant "problem" of the Flatheads would linger for fifteen more years until a sad and disillusioned Charlot finally led his people to the Jocko Reservation.

**T**HE INDIAN reserve which covered most of Montana north of the Missouri provoked less controversy in 1876 than did the others, mainly because it lay well to the north of Montana's white population centers. Under executive orders in 1873 and 1874, the once-hostile Blackfeet had given up some of their best lands and accepted a reservation bounded on the south by the Marias and Missouri Rivers. These agreements opened the Sun, Judith, and upper Musselshell River basins to the penetration of stockmen. They also meant sadness and loss for the Blackfeet. In November, 1876, the Piegan Blackfeet moved northward to a new agency built for them on Badger Creek in the upper Marias drainage. Two Protestant ministers from Madison County who visited the agency in 1876 found it a cold, forlorn place. "It is," wrote one, "an outrage on the Indians to compel them to live here."

Other, smaller tribes lived east of the Blackfeet along what was to become Montana's "Highline." They received their annuity supplies at two posts erected a few years earlier by the firm of Durfee and Peck: Fort Belknap, a subagency on the upper Milk River, and Fort Peck, an agency located near the confluence of the Milk and Missouri Rivers. Gros Ventre, Assiniboiné, and River Crow Indians traded at Fort Belknap, while other Assiniboines and increasing numbers of aggressive Sioux immigrants came to Fort Peck. These two posts became enmeshed in the Grant Administration scandals when, at the instigation of Grant's brother, Orvil, and others within and close to the administration, Durfee and Peck lost their lucrative traderships between 1870 and 1876.

Actually these political goings-on affected the Indians less than might be expected, because in 1876 these tribes were still roving hunters who relied more on the buffalo than on

annuity goods for subsistence. The buffalo was still a viable source of livelihood because by an executive order of 1875, Grant had opened to these Indians the fine buffalo lands lying between the Musselshell, Yellowstone, and Missouri Rivers.

According to historian Edward Barry, agency conditions distressed these Indians less than did the mounting thrust into their territory of Sioux enemies from the east. In mid-1876, for instance, the government closed the Fort Belknap agency in an effort to push the Gros Ventres and Assiniboines down the Milk River to Fort Peck, where they would be near the Missouri River and "civilization." Fearing the Sioux at Fort Peck, the Gros Ventres refused to move, and in 1878 Fort Belknap was reopened to serve them once again.

**T**HE CROW INDIANS, traditionally friendly to whites, faced a difficult situation in 1876. Their reservation, established in 1868 on the south side of the Yellowstone River, had been under pressure from three directions: the Sioux pressed in from the east, Montana miners from the west, and cattlemen from the north and west. In 1873, responding to Montana demands that the gold-rich upper Yellowstone be lopped off the western end of the Crow Reserve, federal commissioners had secured an agreement from the Crows that they would give up their reservation entirely and accept a new, smaller one north of the Yellowstone in the Judith Basin. However, this agreement never worked out. Stockmen and other whites raised a howl of protest over the loss of the rich Judith area, and the Mountain Crows, whose homeland lay south of the Yellowstone, refused to join the River Crows.

Thus, in 1875, President Grant threw out his earlier removal order and placed the Crows on a smaller reservation south of the Yellowstone. White stockmen and farmers ended up getting the Judith, a traditional hunting ground of the River Crows and Blackfeet, and white miners got the upper Yellowstone. Once again the Indians were the losers. Since their agency had been located east of present-day Livingston, within the detached western end of the reservation, the Crows moved eastward to a

new agency on Rosebud Creek, a tributary of the Stillwater River south of present-day Columbus. There, in 1876, they were starting over once again.

Early in 1876, controversy involving the Crow Reservation erupted when Captain Edward Ball of Fort Ellis charged prominent Bozeman contractor and stockman, Nelson Story, with attempting to defraud the government and the Indians. Ball testified that Story, allegedly in collusion with Crow Agent Dexter Clapp, had offered him \$1,000.00 to accept short measure and shoddy goods. The officer said that Story had double-sacked flour, so that the outer sacks could be removed to count each sack twice, and that he had included not only meat in the pork barrels, but also heads, tails, bones and trimmings. He also accused Story of branding reservation cattle as his own.

Story adamantly denied the charges, claiming that Ball held a personal grudge against him and that the officer was trying to discredit the Indian Bureau as part of the military's general effort to regain control of Indian policy. The *Bozeman Times* and the *Virginia City Madisonian* picked up Ball's accusations and publicized them, but the Madison County grand jury which investigated the case returned no indictments and, to the anger of both newspapers, absolved Story and Clapp of any wrongdoings. These charges, although never proven, typified many others of the time.

Despite all these problems, Montanans paid less heed to the native tribes than they did to hostile bands of Sioux and Northern Cheyennes still roaming along the southeastern boundaries of the territory. Pressed from the east and south, the numerous and powerful Sioux were moving into eastern Montana, pushing back the Assiniboinés, Gros Ventres and Crows. A decade earlier, these Indians had fought hard under Red Cloud to close the Bozeman Road, which traversed their best buffalo lands. Then the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 had eased tensions by closing the road and assigned the Indians a more concentrated reservation in southwestern Dakota Territory.

However, after 1868, non-treaty bands such as those of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse roamed freely off the reservation to hunt in the unceded Indian lands south of the Yellowstone in the valleys of the Big Horn, Tongue, and Powder Rivers. These Indians pressed

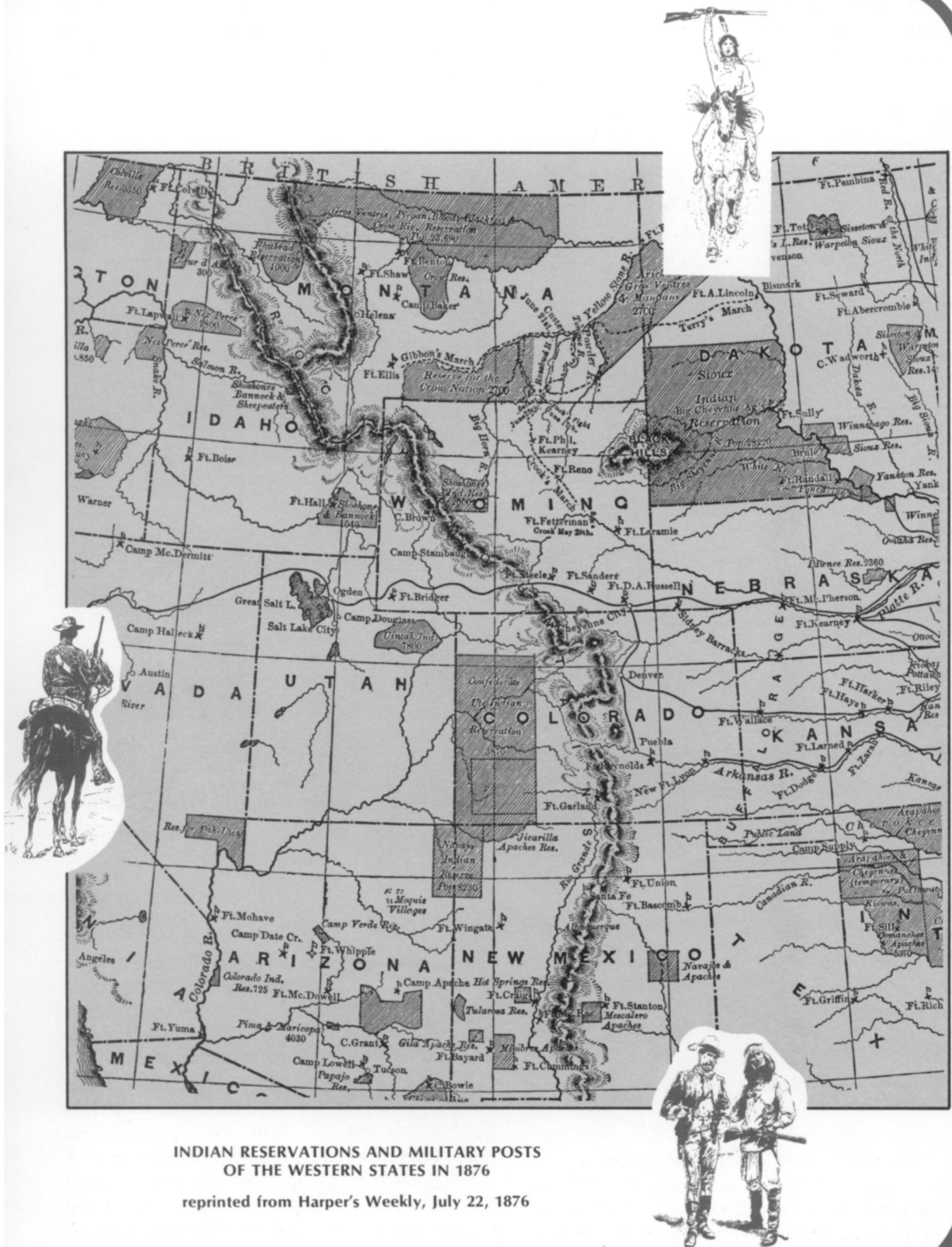
relentlessly northward and westward, into and beyond the Yellowstone Valley, occasionally fighting openly with army units escorting Northern Pacific survey teams along the Yellowstone.

THE BLACK HILLS gold rush, which began late in 1874 and boomed through 1875 and 1876, brought this complicated problem to a head. By the end of 1875, there were roughly 15,000 miners in the Black Hills reservation lands, and thousands of Indians were departing into the hunting areas to the northwest. When these Indians failed to obey ultimatums to return to their ruptured reservation, the Interior Department, on February 1, 1876, handed jurisdiction to the Army, thus beginning America's last great Indian war.

Montanans watched these developments with mixed feelings. The Sioux seemed capable of cutting off their potential rail and water routes down the Yellowstone River and even of mounting full scale attacks against their easternmost settlements. Yet once these Sioux interlopers were removed, most people reasoned, the broad, bountiful Yellowstone Valley might be opened to settlement, setting off a boom which would break the grip of the 1873 Panic. As prominent pioneer Peter Koch later recalled: "We all believed that now surely the time had come, when our front door was to be swung wide open, and we were to roam along the Yellowstone at will."

Residents of Bozeman, the town with the most direct interest in promoting the Yellowstone country, helped nudge that door open through some direct action. In 1875 a group of them ventured down the Yellowstone and established a trading post named Fort Pease opposite the mouth of the Big Horn River. They clearly aimed, not only at trading and prospecting, but at gaining a foothold on the Yellowstone to force out the Indians. The Sioux, however, easily kept them under siege. In February, 1876, appeals for help finally brought a relief force from Fort Ellis under Major James "Grasshopper Jim" Brisbin. (The major gained that nickname because his men laughed at his belief in Montana's agricultural potential).





INDIAN RESERVATIONS AND MILITARY POSTS  
OF THE WESTERN STATES IN 1876

reprinted from Harper's Weekly, July 22, 1876



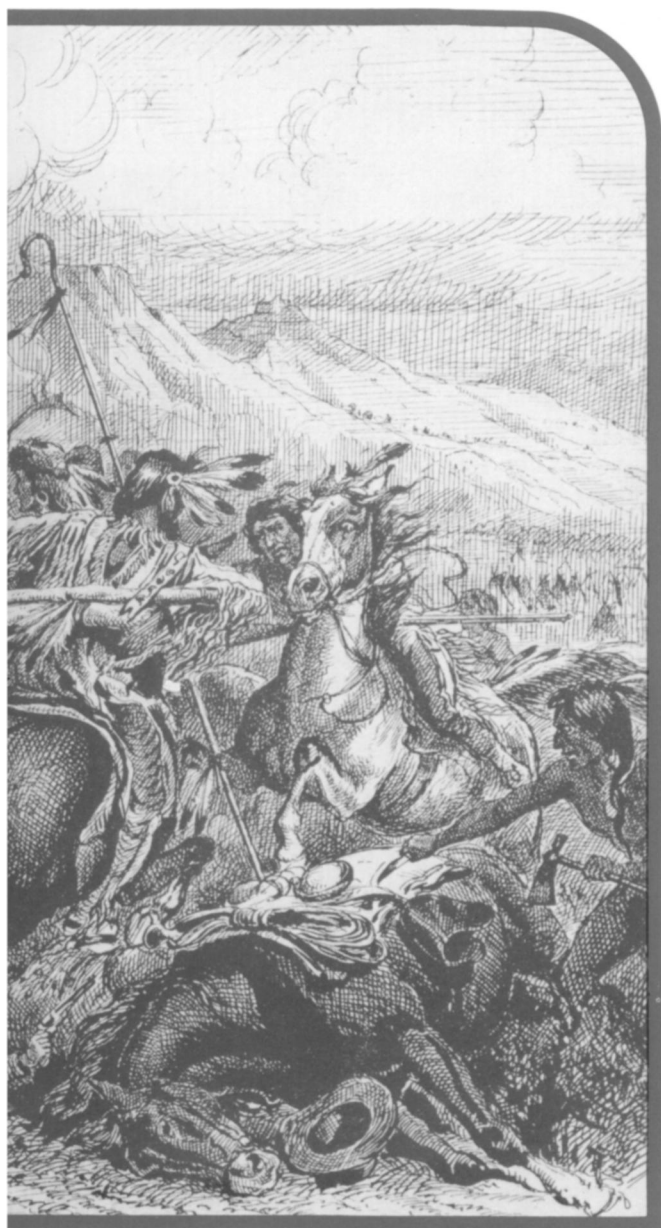
THE BATTLE ON THE LITTLE BIG HORN — THE DEATH STRUGGLE OF GENERAL CUSTER

Brisbin found twenty men at Fort Pease; six others had been killed. He escorted them home, and their Yellowstone adventure ended in failure.

Meanwhile, General Phil Sheridan, commander of the Military Division of the Missouri, plotted a campaign against the hostile Sioux and Cheyennes. His first move against them sent a large army under General George Crook northward from Fort Fetterman, Wyoming, which ended indecisively in March. Then Sheridan decided upon the massive campaign which began to unfold in the spring of 1876. Two

major cavalry-infantry columns, one led by Crook from Wyoming, the other by General Alfred Terry from Dakota, would close upon the hostile tribes from the south and east. A "Montana Column" would descend the Yellowstone to contain them from the north and west. Leading the 450-man Montana Column, Colonel John Gibbon headed out of Fort Ellis and down the Yellowstone in April. Montanans watched the departure of these, the flower of their protective armies, with grim foreboding. Said the *Helena Independent*: ". . . it ain't two to one they don't get away with Gibbon."





From a drawing by W. M. Cary  
New York Graphic Ill. News, July 19, 1876

Of course, it was not Gibbon that they got away with, but rather General George A. Custer and much of his Seventh Cavalry, which represented the major part of General Terry's command. The outcome of this three-pronged "pincer" offensive has been told and retold so often that it need not be extensively recounted here.

First, Crazy Horse turned back Crook's column at the Battle of the Rosebud on June 17, in effect removing his force from the coming showdown. The commands of Terry and Gibbon had meanwhile met on the Yellowstone.

Realizing that the major Indian concentration lay to the south, probably on the Little Big Horn River, the commanders decided to send the swift Seventh Cavalry on a sweep to strike them from the south. In the meantime, they would bring the slower infantry-cavalry forces up the Big Horn to hit the hostiles from the north.

Custer advanced up Rosebud Creek, across the divide to the Little Big Horn, and on June 25 — one day earlier than the target date set by Terry — he attacked the enormous Indian encampment. In the dramatic battle which ensued, Custer and over 260 of his men died. Those surviving, under Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen, were rescued by the arrival of Terry and Gibbon on June 27. The victorious Indians fled southward.

**M**ONTANANS LEARNED the shocking news even before it reached nearby Dakota, and they were the first to relay it to the outside world. General Terry quickly dashed off a report and sent one of Gibbon's scouts, "Muggins" Taylor, to carry it to Fort Ellis for telegraphic dispatch to the east. When he reached the Stillwater River, Taylor met a *Helena Herald* reporter, W. H. Norton, and told him the news. Norton hurriedly wrote his report and persuaded a local rancher named Horace Countryman to take his account to Helena. Taylor arrived at Fort Ellis on July 3, turned over the dispatches to the commanding officer, and passed on the news to *The Bozeman Times*, which put out a frantic special edition that very night.

Bozeman missed the chance of originating the hottest news story of 1876, however, when the local telegrapher held the dispatches for two days before mailing them to Chicago. Countryman reached Helena with the news on July 4, just in time to dampen the festivities commemorating the Centennial of Independence. A. J. Fisk of the *Herald* immediately rushed out a special edition and wired an account of the battle to Salt Lake City, whence it passed to points east. These spotty Helena dispatches preceded the more famous ones from Bismarck, Dakota Territory, by a full day. The news, often wildly exaggerated and inaccurate, hit the nation like a bombshell, just at the Independence Day peak of the Centennial celebrations. George Custer, already a popular

favorite, instantly passed into legend as a martyred hero and Montana became, at least for a moment, something more than an unfamiliar province in the wilds of the American west.

Montana reacted to the news of Custer's defeat with anger, outrage, and fear. Some observers directly criticized Custer himself. The *Weekly Missoulian* accused him of acting "in disobedience to orders," while the *Fort Benton Record* went even further, charging him with "rash and unjustifiable disobedience" and concluding that other officers had been court-martialed and shot for less. Most local commentators, however, viewed Custer sympathetically and blamed his fate on the negligence of his superiors and the shortcomings of the Grant Administration. Virginia City's *Madisonian* voiced a common frontier sentiment by denouncing "the blundering policy of a powerful government which entrusted the care of savages to the prayers of the churches rather than to the muskets of the soldiers."

Citing the Republican President's removal of Custer from command of the Dakota column after the colonel had testified about corruption in the Indian Bureau, the Democratic *Helena Independent* put the blame squarely on Grant's shoulders: "... the heroic Custer fell a sacrifice to Grant's remorseless hate. He sent him to the Indian country to die, and his purpose has been fulfilled."

More to the political point, the equally Democratic *Bozeman Times* contrasted the administration's military neglect of the West with its use of federal troops to occupy the defeated South: "The blame rests with the President—with the War Department—which neglects the soldiers and treats the real enemy with indifference, and uses the army to dragoon the South into the support of the Republican candidate for President."

More immediately, residents of Montana fretted about the Sioux and Cheyennes, who were still on the loose while Generals Crook and Terry seemed unable to apprehend them. Some alarmists feared a bloodbath like the one which the Sioux had inflicted on Minnesota in the early years of the Civil War. Others weighed the possibility that the Sioux might align against them with nearby Indians, like "our old friends, the Blackfeet."

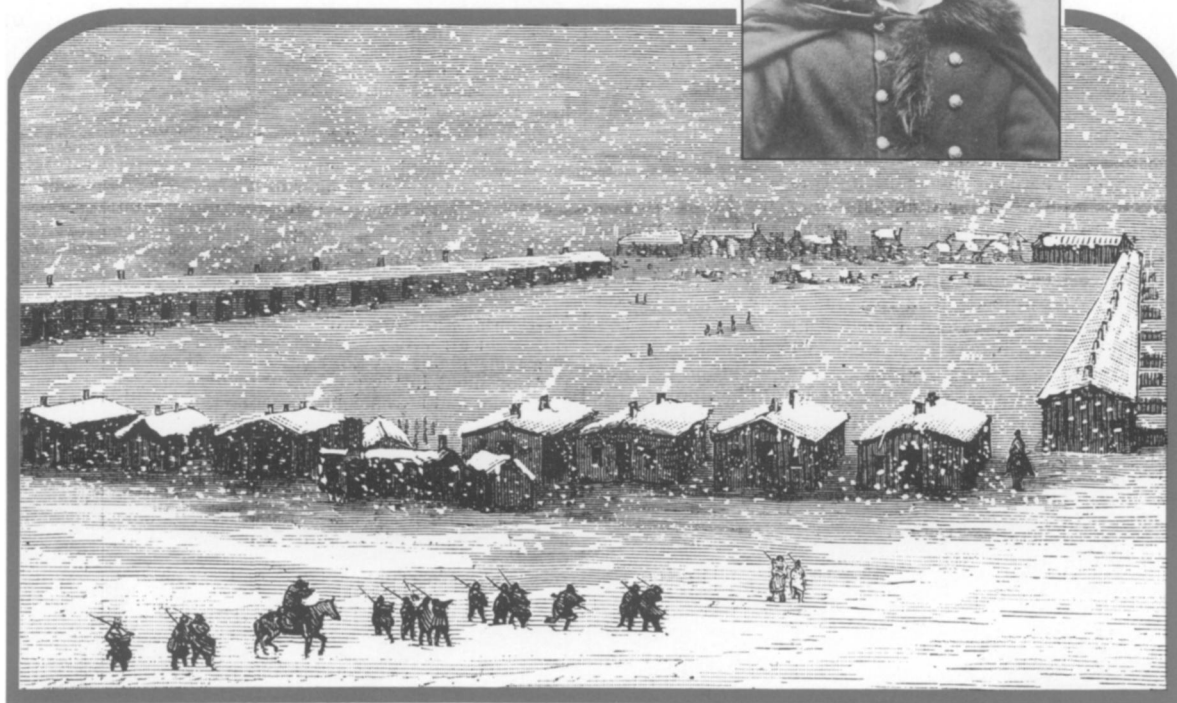
More realistically, many Montanans felt that Fort Ellis and Camp Baker could not adequately defend the eastern settlements. In the nervous Gallatin Valley, ordinarily reliable citizens reported seeing Sioux signal fires in the nearby mountains. Citizens in remote Fort Benton were especially apprehensive. They were afraid that, in its pursuit of Sitting Bull, the Army would push the Sioux through the Judith country toward the river town.

In the meantime, an interesting little counterpoint was being played out. A Philadelphia Quaker and noted paleontologist named Edward Drinker Cope was disregarding local fears and insisting upon outfitting an expedition into the Bears Paw Mountains in search of fossils. Dispite the fact that most of the men deserted him in the field, Cope succeeded in making important finds, identifying twenty-one dinosaur species. In September, his men hauled almost a ton of bones to Carroll for shipment down the Missouri.

IN 1876, HOWEVER, most thoughts were on the hostile Indians, and almost everyone agreed that the Army was too undermanned and too hesitant to retaliate against the hostiles. And they agreed that major military posts must be erected at once in the Yellowstone country. General Sheridan and Delegate Martin Maginnis had been pushing Congress for three years to fund such posts, but now the shock of the Custer debacle prompted fast action. Congress provided the necessary funds, along with an increase in enlistments, and preparations began at once for construction of the Yellowstone posts. These two elaborate military bases — Fort Keogh at the mouth of the Tongue River, and Fort Custer at the juncture of the Big Horn and Little Big Horn rivers — would be completed along with smaller Fort Missoula to the west in 1877.

The months following the Custer battle saw considerable activity in southeastern Montana. Terry and Crook led their large armies in slow and unrewarding pursuit of the hostiles, and other military units arrived to reinforce them. Meanwhile enthusiastic Montana contractors moved supplies for them down

NELSON A. MILES, who went on to even greater fame during the Spanish American War, is seen in the inset during his famous winter campaign in a photograph by L. A. Huffman. Below is the Tongue River Cantonment, near present-day Miles City, reprinted from Harper's Weekly, April 7, 1877.



the Yellowstone in mackinaw boats and Diamond R freight wagons. To the anger and disgust of most Montanans, the great armies of the 1876 campaign broke up early in September and left the Yellowstone country; Crook followed the Indian bands into Dakota, and Terry and Gibbon returned their men to the forts from which they had come.

A relatively small infantry command under Colonel Nelson A. Miles, based in cantonment at the mouth of the Tongue River where the settlement soon to become Miles City began to rise, would police eastern Montana during the coming winter. This, naturally enough, looked like neglect to the edgy Montana settlements. But, beginning in October and November, the able and energetic Miles launched highly successful winter marches against the Indians which soon broke their will to fight. In October he fought a skillful series of battles with Sitting Bull north of the Yellowstone, and in November and December his troops combed through north-central and northeastern Montana, keeping the Indians under constant pressure. As the year ended,

Miles headed southward up the Tongue Valley, and early in January, 1877, engaged Crazy Horse in the stand-off Battle of Wolf Mountain. Harassed by Miles in Montana and by Crook in Wyoming, the hostiles soon gave up the fight and returned to the agencies.

The Centennial year ended on a mixed note, so far as Montana's "Indian question" was concerned. While Montanans still feared the hostile bands, they also felt sure that the coming year would remove this "threat" and would open their communication routes to the east. They began to learn of the dashing Miles' successes at year's end, and they embraced him at once as their hero.

For the Sioux and Cheyennes, on the other hand, the victory over Custer provided only a brief respite. By the autumn of 1877, their war had ended. They, along with the other tribes of the region, faced a dismal future. The great buffalo hunts, already well under way in 1876, would, in the next seven years, erase the once enormous herds which had sustained the Indian way of life. Ahead, on shrinking reservations, lay years of degradation and despair.