

Custer and Crazy Horse Ride Again... and Again, and Again: Filmmaking and History at Little Bighorn

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M Essays on the West

Custer and Crazy Horse Ride Again . . . And Again, and Again Filmmaking and History at Little Bighorn



Courtesy Paul Stekler

Cinematographer Jon Else films grave markers at the top of Last Stand Hill during production of *Last Stand at Little Bighorn*.

by Paul Stekler

Private Charles Windolph wrote that his first glimpse of Reno Hill was a sight he would never forget. Soldiers staggered aimlessly, many wounded and bleeding, while terror-stricken stragglers fell through a disorganized skirmish line at the top of the ridgeline that looked down at the Little Bighorn River. The wounded lay screaming on the ground, many crying for water in the oppressive heat.

Looking down into the valley, soldiers could see comrades who had been left behind in the panic, surrounded by Sioux and Cheyenne warriors, being cut down and killed. Just six years before, Windolph had fled his home in Bergen, Prussia, to avoid being drafted to fight in the Franco-Prussian War. Unable to find steady work in New York, he had joined the army, saying it might be a good way to learn English. Now he found himself with the survivors of the Seventh Cavalry at Little Bighorn, wondering what had become of the five companies who had ridden to the north earlier that

day with their commander, George Armstrong Custer.

To the north, the soldiers could "hear the sound of distant firing echoing down through the hills and valleys." But they still had plenty to worry about. As the late afternoon neared sunset, hundreds of Indians descended on their precarious position, putting the companies under siege. Snipers began picking off soldiers from the surrounding heights. Windolph later wrote:

The sun went down that night like a ball of fire. Pretty soon the quick Montana twilight settled down on us, and then came the chill of the high plains . . . We felt terribly alone on that dangerous hilltop. We were a million miles from nowhere. And death was all around us.¹

One hundred and fifteen years later, in the summer of 1991, I was making a documentary film, *Last Stand at Little Bighorn*, reexamining the Battle of the Little Bighorn, on that same ground. Standing exposed on top of the hill, in the middle of an approaching thunderstorm, our film crew was trying to re-create visually what Windolph and his fellow soldiers might have seen on the night of June 25, 1876. Lying flat on his stomach on an exposed skirmish line, next to the body of a friend who had been killed by a sniper's bullet, Windolph had

1. Charles Windolph, *I Fought With Custer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 101.

looked down into the valley of the Little Bighorn, where the Lakota Sioux and Cheyenne village lay, and reported seeing “great fires and hear[ing] the steady rhythm of Indian tomtoms beating for their wild victory dances.” Now, far below us, James Welch, the Blackfeet novelist, author of *Winter in the Blood*, *Fools Crow*, and other books, and cowriter of the film’s script, and Gilbert Bird In Ground, the Crow owner of the property along the Little Bighorn, were pouring enough gasoline on two stacks of firewood, cardboard boxes, and newspapers to insure they would continue flaming once lit despite the coming rains.

Those wild “victory dances” that Windolph heard turned out to be Lakota and Cheyenne women singing mourning songs for their dead husbands and sons. Wooden Leg, a young Cheyenne who had fought that day, was later quoted as saying: “There was no dancing or celebrating in any of the camps that night. Too many people were in mourning. Too many Cheyenne and Sioux women had gashed their arms and legs to show their grief.”²

This being a film, and not history per se, the filmmaker begins by asking, “what do we film?” quickly followed by, “what is the audience going to look at?” Our plan was to “re-create” the views that Charles Windolph and Wooden Leg each might have had that night, using their own words over the contrasting sights—Windolph’s view looking down at the distant fires in the valley and Wooden Leg’s view from close by those fires, looking up at the dark hill beyond. The subsequent sequence would do more than merely present a narrative description of the aftermath of the battle. It would demonstrate visually how this “history” could be remembered in completely different ways depending on who you were—and where you were.

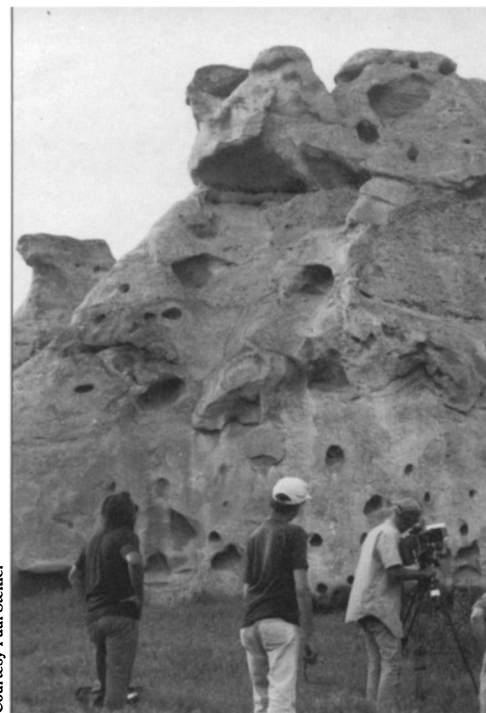
All around us, we could see bursts of lightning, the clouds totally black and pressing in on three sides of us. It seemed like the only place it was not raining and thundering was right around

us on the hill. Our cameraman, spooked by the warning of a park ranger, kept shouting at us to look out for the rattlesnakes that supposedly sought out the warmth of the paved road during storms. Down below, associate producers Anne Craig and Maia Harris were given a “go” over their walkie-talkies, and they signaled Jim Welch to throw the first match on the bonfires. As the lightning grew closer and louder and the flames of the bonfires reached toward the already dark twilight sky, the camera began to roll. Suddenly I smelled sweetgrass burning. I looked around to see our camera assistant, Roy Big Crane, a Salish filmmaker from the Flathead Reservation in Montana, crouched down with burning sweetgrass in his hands, moving slowly in a wide protective circle around us. We were examining a legendary moment in



James Welch, Native American novelist and cowriter of the script for *Last Stand at Little Bighorn*

American history, a popular icon already re-created in scores of movies and in countless paintings, books, poems, cartoons, and advertisements. The difference was that we sought to view the historical moment through a variety of perspectives, white and native. And it somehow seemed very appropriate, even in the midst of the craziness of filming bonfires from a hilltop in the middle of a violent Montana thunderstorm, that those contrasting views of the world around us, those differing



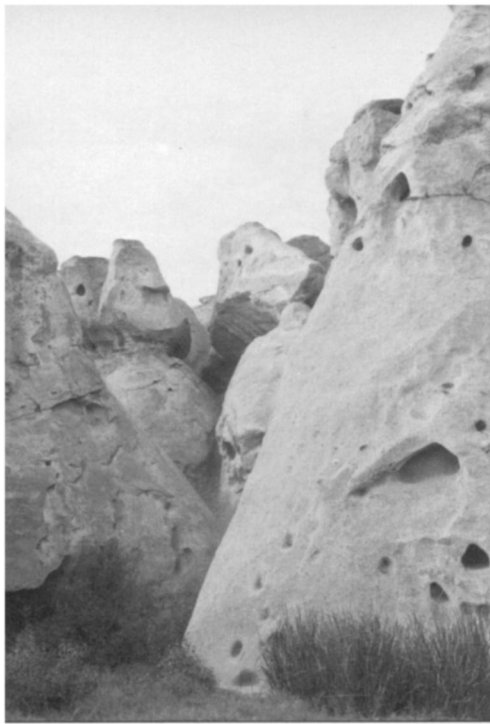
Courtesy Paul Stekler

views of what this history was and what it meant, would pop up while we were making the film as well.

Last Stand at Little Bighorn will be broadcast in late November on public television’s series “The American Experience.” It is the product of more than two years of research and production, photos, drawings, and journal entries from over fifty archives and individuals, location filming in five western states, and the efforts of almost two hundred people. But why, after more than forty Hollywood movies about Little Bighorn, would yet another filmmaker

make another film about Custer and the battle that propelled him to seeming immortality? The easy answer is that Little Bighorn is a story whose popularity has not diminished over time. Hundreds of thousands of people still trek to the battlefield in south central Montana every summer, including busloads of tourists from overseas. Staged reenactments of the battle in nearby Hardin, Montana,

2. Thomas Marquis, *Wooden Leg—A Warrior Who Fought Custer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1931), 256.



Jon Else shooting rock formations on the battlefield (left); Sioux Chief Sitting Bull (right); General George A. Custer, three months before the battle (below)



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

ironically featuring Crow Indians playing Sitting Bull and the Sioux—the ancestors of these Crow were scouts for the Seventh Cavalry that day—and a blonde plumber from Michigan playing Custer, regularly sell out to large, appreciative crowds.

Most depictions of Little Bighorn, especially the dramatic moments leading up to the legendary Last Stand, have focused almost exclusively on Custer.

Generations of Americans, generally unburdened by the actual history of the period, have had a very clear, enduring image of a striking, long-haired, blonde young officer and his small band of men, surrounded by an ever narrowing circle of extremely angry Indians. The actual context for the battle, including the economic forces driving westward expansion, the evolution of the country's Indian policy, and other events that made Little Bighorn one of the final acts in the dispossession of the last free tribes on the northern plains, is rarely part of the picture. What is



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

amazing about this image is that it never changes. No matter if Custer is portrayed as a hero, like Errol Flynn, fighting the first battle of World War II in the 1941 film *They Died With Their Boots On*, or as a genocidal nut, as in the Vietnam-era *Little Big Man* (1970). He is still the center of attention, the character that the cameras follow, the man whose death has always been the point of telling the story. No matter that his famous hairline was beginning to recede or that his hair was cut short that day. Or that the Sioux and Cheyenne had no idea who

attacked them or which particular army commander they were fighting. Show almost any American a photo or caricature of the young general and they will know who he is. More than a century after his death, Custer, along with Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, has name recognition that would make any aspirant for national political office jealous.

Twenty years ago, Alvin Josephy, Jr., in a *Life* magazine article about the Little Bighorn, quoted a Nez Percé man as saying that Custer was “the biggest and most important symbol of all the lies that have been told about us. Destroy the Custer myth, the biggest one of all, and you’ll start getting an understanding of everything that happened and an end to the bias against the Indian people.”³

Our aim was not so much to take Custer down a peg. Today's public perception of him as rash and reckless, leading his men to needless slaughter, has already done that. Rather, we wanted to present both the reality of “what happened” and the myth of Custer and his Last Stand. Both are great yarns. The process of how the utter defeat of the Seventh Cavalry at Little Bighorn was transformed

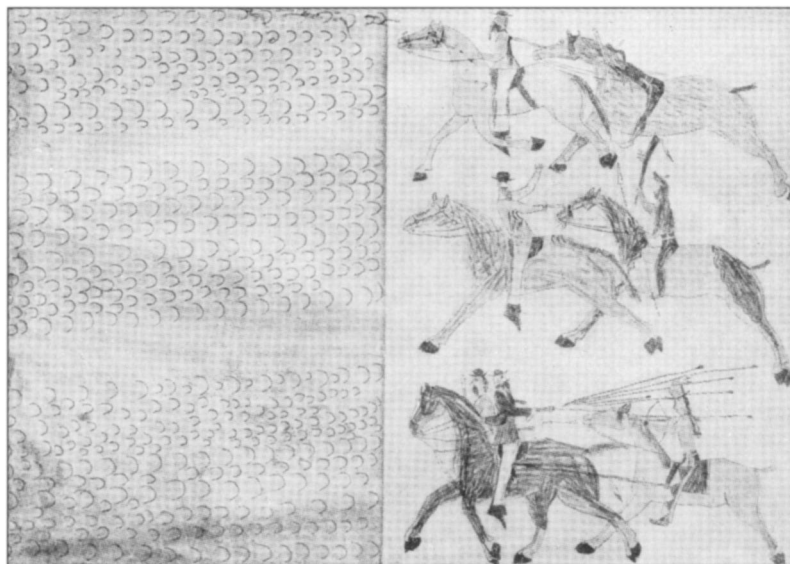
3. Alvin Josephy, Jr., “The Custer Myth,” *Life*, July 2, 1971, pp. 52, 55.

into a glorious legend of self-sacrifice, known as Custer's Last Stand, is not a bad story either.

Dust, however, may be the only thing about this battle that native and white survivors agreed upon. "Hundreds of books have been written about this battle by people who weren't there," recounted Good Fox, a Lakota. "I was there—but all I remember is one big cloud of dust." Sioux and Cheyenne accounts describe warriors totally overwhelming the soldiers on the last isolated hills, with so much confusion, dust, and rifle smoke that no one could tell who was who. Standing Bear, in interviews for *Black Elk Speaks*, remembered "warriors flying all around me like shadows, and the noise of all those hooves and guns and cries [were] so loud it seemed quiet in there and the voices seemed to be on top of the cloud. It was like a bad dream."⁴

In what was their last view of the "Last Stand," soldiers trying to advance from the battered remains of Benteen and Reno's command and find Custer got as far as Weir Point, a high hill four miles to the south of Custer's final position. From there, they claimed that all they could see was a huge cloud of dust and men on horseback firing into the air, some waving cavalry flags. When Captain Weir gave the order to proceed and join what he thought were Custer's forces, one of his more cautious sergeants handed him a pair of field glasses, saying, "Here Captain, you had better take a look through the glasses. I think those are Indians."⁵

One of the allures of Custer's Last Stand was that it remained such an enigma over time. No one knew exactly what happened because it was supposedly a battle without a survivor, a battle fought to the last man. The battle, of course, had hundreds, if not thousands, of survivors. None of them, though, was white. The



Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology (1888-1889)

Red Horse, a Sioux warrior at the Little Bighorn battle, sketched many hooves (left) to indicate large numbers of horses (right) as Sioux warriors charged the soldiers (plate XLII).

Lakota and Cheyenne victors left many accounts, however confused and contradictory, as might be expected from a disorganized running battle fought over a large, hilly, dusty battlefield. What is new in the cottage industry of speculation about "what really happened at Little Bighorn" is that after a decade of new archaeological research on the battlefield, analyzing bullets and bones to trace who had what weapons, what the dynamics of the battle seemed to have been, and so on, is that many of the Indian accounts of the last battle in and around Last Stand Hill are supported by scientific evidence.

In the conclusions of the Little Bighorn archaeological project, what emerges is a last battle without much of a Last Stand.⁶ After dividing his forces and sending Major Reno down into the valley to attack the Indian encampment, Custer and five companies of men rode north looking for a way to encircle the village and capture the women and children, who Custer expected to flee Reno's attack. Custer's

strategy was similar to that employed in his one great Indian "victory" over the Cheyenne at the Washita River in 1868.

Discovering that the village was much larger than expected and that the first river ford they found at Medicine Tail Coulee led directly into the middle of that camp, the command continued north, up and over Last Stand Hill, finding another more suitable ford of the Little Bighorn farther on. Then the companies retreated to the higher ground around Last Stand Hill and waited for Benteen's reinforcements, the additional men they thought they needed to capture so many people.

Cheyenne accounts tell of watching Custer's soldiers, up on the ridgeline, wondering why they were sitting there, as hundreds of warriors, having defeated Reno, crawled through the tall grass and gradually surrounded them. When the final fight began, in response to an attempt by one of Custer's flanking companies to clear what was thought to be only scattered snipers, most of the companies were quickly outnumbered and overrun. Panic was the rule

4. John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 119.

5. Francis B. Taunton, "The Enigma of Weir Point," in Francis B. Taunton, ed., *No Pride in the Little Big Horn* (London: English Westerners Society, 1987), 21.

6. Richard Fox, Jr., "Discerning History Through Archaeology: The Custer Battle" (doctoral dissertation, University of Calgary, 1988).

7. Col. W. A. Graham, *The Custer Myth* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 102.

according to native accounts that describe running down fleeing soldiers as if it were a buffalo hunt. Most of the soldiers around Custer on the last hill were probably unable to stand and fire under the rain of arrows and bullets. And that final fight, as Two Moons, a Cheyenne warrior who fought alongside Crazy Horse, later recounted, "took about as long as it takes for a hungry man to eat his dinner."⁷

We decided to use the native accounts in *Last Stand at Little Bighorn* and to portray the battle as "a Last Stand without Last Stand." Accepting this "new" version as "fact," our film could then go on to more interesting questions like how the myth of Custer's Last Stand was created. And how it became an enduring historical icon, acquiring what Richard Slotkin describes as a kind of "linguistic resonance," where whenever "a writer or moviemaker invokes the name" of the event, they awaken "echoes in the memory" that connect this "storied past" to the ways we look at

ourselves, our history, and our country.⁸

For the filmmaker, perhaps unlike a historian, these kinds of obscured facts, such as the debate over what actually happened on Last Stand Hill, offer a wealth of opportunity—more flexibility—to present a battle like Little Bighorn in whatever way one likes. Because the public was attracted to the icon-image of Custer and his men fighting to the last man in an organized progression to their inevitable deaths, that is what Hollywood served up for much of this century. History is certainly no constraint on Hollywood, and a

clear, linear, entertaining story always seems to take precedence over historical detail, especially detail with too much complexity, too many characters, stories, and layers of background. Legends and myths, with clear-cut good guys and bad guys, are easier to deal with.

The very definition of the word "documentary," however, places greater responsibilities on the documentary filmmaker. But the medium of film places similar story and time constraints on both Hollywood and public television. A review of what we intended to do on *Last Stand at Little Bighorn* can help illustrate the limitations on filmmakers in trying to combine the film format with any depth of historical complexity, even when one's historical heart is in the right place.

From the start, our aim was to balance the more common white perspective with an equally compelling native point of view. The perspective of the native peoples of the northern plains seldom gets center stage in discussions of Little Bighorn. Witness last year's made-for-television movie, *Son of the Morning Star* (1991). For four hours of television time, Crazy Horse, supposedly sharing the lead with George Custer, gets to look noble and very spiritual. In one transcontinental vision, he seems to look out at consecutive shots of the Grand Tetons in Wyoming, the South Dakota Badlands, and finally the plains of Montana! But he has not a single speaking line in the whole film.

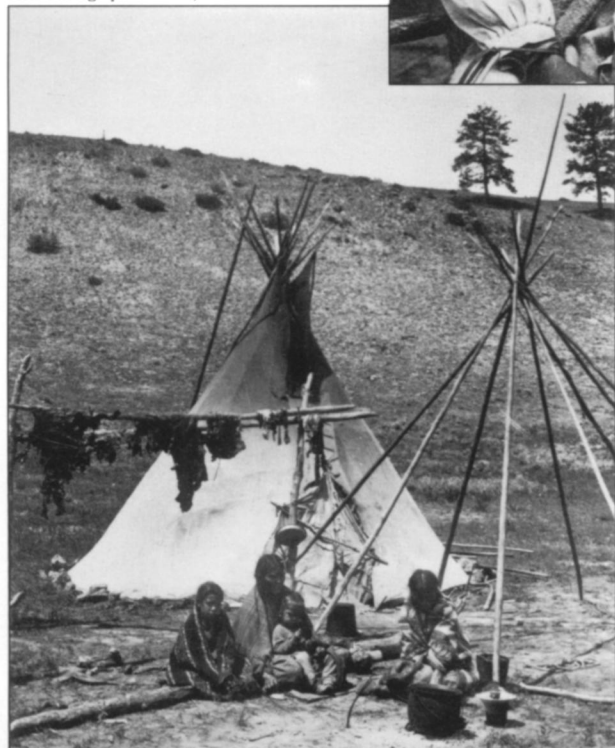
This is not to say that films have not evolved from the days of Anthony Quinn playing Crazy Horse in *They Died with Their Boots On*, one of his first roles, and Sal Mineo being cast as a Sioux teenager in *Tonka* (1958), where a horse that survives Little Bighorn plays the lead. American films have "rediscovered" Indians of late and created a new market in the tracks of the millions of

8. Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment/The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1985), 15-16.

Courtesy G. V. Allen, Lawrence, Kansas



L. A. Huffman, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



Chief Two Moons in a posed stereoscopic view by photographer John H. Fouch, at Fort Keogh, Montana Territory, about ten years after the battle (above); Two Moons's lodge on the Lame Deer Reservation about 1896 (left)

paying customers of *Dances With Wolves* (1990). Most of these films, however, paint a picture of Indian people who are highly idealized and definitely past tense, one that has more to do with the needs of white popular culture than with Native Americans.

Presenting a broader history from a Native American perspective meant dealing with a variety of topics rarely found in Hollywood depictions of Little Bighorn. One was the inter-tribal dynamics on the plains that predated the arrival of white Americans in the West. Recognizing Lakota expansion as one of the later waves of migration and conquest on the plains, Richard White has argued that the conflict between the Lakota Sioux bands and the United States was not strictly a pan-Indian resistance to white invaders, but the clash of two expanding powers—the United States and the Sioux and their allies.⁹ Observers during the mid-nineteenth century noted that while other plains tribes were decimated by smallpox epidemics and by starvation on newly established reservations, the Lakota population was growing. Reacting to American attempts at the 1851 Fort Laramie negotiations to end the tribal warfare, which was interfering with profitable white-Indian trade, Black Hawk, an Oglala, said: “These lands once belonged to the Kiowa and the Crows, but we whipped those nations out of them. And in this we did what the white men do when they want the lands of Indians.”¹⁰

Such sentiments help explain why the Crow and their Arikara allies were riding as scouts for Custer in the Great Sioux War of 1876. Given the choice between the Lakota and the Americans, the Lakota were the bigger threat as they began to push deeper into Crow lands. As Joseph Medicine Crow, the grandson of White Man Runs Him, a Custer scout, told us:

“There was no problem for the Crow Indians to join the military—it was our only chance. So we played it diplomatically. We were looking for our survival and I think we played it smart.”¹¹

Seeing the American conquest of the West from the perspective of those being conquered is something new. Fighting was ultimately useless, but the alternative was an uncertain future with perhaps the surrendering of their culture and their customs. Our aim was to represent those choices as they appeared to the Lakota, the Cheyenne, and the Crow as well as the white point of view. It required a constant shifting back and forth, from white to native point of view in the film, in our choice of speakers and pictures, even in the way things got filmed. One device was to film the expanses of the West to contrast the way emigrant whites saw it—huge, majestic, something out of a Bierstadt painting—with the way native peoples already living there saw it, using closer shots of grass, streams, and animals that represented the intimacy of someone’s home.

Another way of doing this involved simple choices of which way to point the camera. When we first scouted locations in and around the Little Bighorn battlefield, the park staff was surprised to hear us talk about finding shots from the site of the Indian village, down along the river, looking back up at the hills and ridges—the view that the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho would have had when the Seventh Cavalry first attacked their encampment. Of all the many film crews they had helped in the past, none had filmed from the village site. They always filmed down into the river valley, the view that Custer and his men had.

We also continued the Little Bighorn story beyond Custer’s death. What most people know about Little Bighorn is that it was



Courtesy Paul Stekler

Walter Nugent, Andrew V. Tackes
Professor of History in the University of
Notre Dame, and Joseph Medicine
Crow, who grew up among many of
Custer’s Crow scouts, were history
advisors for the film.

the place where Custer and all the men who fought with him were wiped out. What they do not know is how the victors of Little Bighorn were either forced onto reservations, driven across the border into Canada along with Sitting Bull, or killed, like Crazy Horse, within a year of their greatest victory over the United States military.

Finding the right native voices for our contemporary interviews involved 11,000 miles of pre-production driving and interviews with over a hundred people on the Pine Ridge, Standing Rock, and Northern Cheyenne reservations, and on Crow Agency. In that time, we found good storytellers whose grandparents—in one case, whose father—had survived the attack at Little Bighorn. We recorded Joseph Medicine Crow, who grew up knowing most of Custer’s Crow scouts. Reflecting on the Crow’s sense of inevitability of the whites, Medicine Crow said whites were “just like ants on the ground. You

9. Richard White, “The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Journal of American History*, 65 (September 1978), 319-43.

10. Raymond Demallie, “The Sioux in Dakota and Montana Territories: Cultural and Historical Background of the Ogden B. Read Collection,” in *Vestiges of a Proud Nation*, (Burlington, Vt: Robert Hull Fleming Museum), 24.

11. Film interview with Joseph Medicine Crow, Hardin, Montana, March 1, 1991.

12. Ibid.

go up there and kick 'em around, stomp on them, and more come up."¹² We interviewed Ted Rising Sun, whose Cheyenne grandfather looked up at the fight on Last Stand Hill and thought that it looked like "a flock of magpies, swarming over a hill, going round and round."¹³ And we recorded Johnson Holyrock, an Oglala whose father was a young boy in the Little Bighorn encampment. Providing a native view of Manifest Destiny, Holyrock said:

The immigrants that were encouraged to travel, go to the west, they were told about the gold discovery and all the other things which were enticements to encourage people to immigrate. Never told them that you're going to run into people that were already occupying that area. They didn't tell them that. They talked as though, well that's our property, so you can just go right across it, which was not the case.¹⁴

In contrasting native and white stories, we had to deal with alternative ways of thinking about "what is history." Clearly, when Johnson Holyrock says in introducing Crazy Horse in our film, that, "traditional history" tells us that Crazy Horse could not be hit by soldiers' bullets, this is not the same traditional history that millions of American school children read in the classroom. Crazy Horse, for example, clearly exists as both a historical figure and, perhaps more importantly, as a figure of myth for the Lakota people, a great leader and protector of the people, a man who refused to have his photograph taken and so whose very likeness is a mystery. Much of the historical "facts" about Crazy Horse have been passed down from author Mari Sandoz's book *Crazy Horse—Strange Man of the Oglalas* (1942), a book that

Photographer W. H. Illingworth's photo shows the lines of wagons stretching across the land as Custer's Black Hills expedition moved along in 1874.



South Dakota State Archives, Pierre

relied on Eleanor Hinman's 1930s interviews with the few remaining Lakota elders who had known him. Because separating historical fact from fiction regarding Crazy Horse is very difficult, we chose to present him as he is seen "historically" by his own people. Their descriptions tell us as much about the way the Lakota remember history as our own popular media—Hollywood movies, television, even documentary films—demonstrate how much of mainstream America remembers history.

Historical photographs also raised the issue of contrasting points of view. There is a treasure chest of photographs taken in the nineteenth century of plains people in their villages, on horseback, and by tepees and earth lodges. All these photographs, of course, were made by white photographers and represent a white photographer's sense of framing. Although these photographs, taken by Alexander Gardner, William Henry Jackson, Timothy O'Sullivan, and others, are not to be compared to the overtly allegorical work of Edward Curtis, it remains that the photographs of Cheyenne, Pawnee, Shoshone, Lakota, and other native peoples were taken with a white point of view. While we did not entirely avoid using these photographs in the film

(although we tried to use closeups of native faces whenever possible), our decision was to make greater use of the ledger drawings by Lakota and Cheyenne artists from that time. The ledger drawings, we believed, portrayed the world as they saw it. The drawings make an immediate visual impact, clueing the audience that the point of view of the film has changed. With the ledgers of Oglala artist Amos Bad Heart Bull and Cheyenne artist Little Wolf depicting the battle, we present a view of the battle drawn by people who lived through Little Bighorn—and who were drawing the battle as they remembered it.

While we were determined to present a strong native story in this film, we were equally determined to populate the film with voices of the white settlers and soldiers whose coming made Little Bighorn and its aftermath inevitable. We searched the Montana Historical Society's archives in Helena, for example, looking for the right Bozeman Trail journal to help describe the first wave of whites on their way to the rich Montana gold strikes in the 1860s. These emigrants were traveling through hunting grounds recently occupied by the Lakota and the Cheyenne. William Thomas's diary stood out in its eloquence and in its daily recording of both the growing violence on the trail and the sense of wonder and opportunity that Thomas felt as he traveled west.

13. Film interview with Ted Rising Sun, Busby, Montana, March 1, 1991.

14. Film interview with Johnson Holyrock, Pine Ridge, South Dakota, June 6, 1991.

15. William K. Thomas diary, August 3, 1866, SC 1303, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena.

One day's traveling distance out of isolated Fort Phil Kearny in northern Wyoming, the last fort on the trail, Thomas wrote of seeing a grave "containing the bodies of five men who were killed a few days ago by the Indians."

As I passed by the grave, I saw that the wolves had made an opening into the inmates and had torn the flesh from the bodies and left their ribs exposed. Such is the haste and depravity of men out here that he will hardly take the time to pay their last respects to the dead.¹⁵

Two weeks later, frustrated by the slow pace of the 112-wagon caravan he was traveling with and convinced that the Indian danger had passed, Thomas, with his seven-year-old son, decided to push ahead. His final week of entries are full of descriptions of large herds of game, ripe berries, and "the best water that I ever drank of."¹⁶ Upon reaching the Yellowstone River, just days from their final destination, Thomas wrote: "Broke our champagne bottle." It was his last entry. The next day, a wagon train found his campfire embers still glowing, the bodies of Thomas and his son scalped and full of arrows. Thomas's diary lay on the ground beside them. When we filmed a river along the Bozeman Trail that would be on-screen when a passage from Thomas's diary was read, Jon Else, our cameraman, slowly zoomed his shot into a closeup of the river, then twisted the polarizing lens to darken the shot so that the water looked as if a cloud's shadow was passing over it, marking the moment of Thomas's death.

In similar fashion, we wanted to personalize the film's treatment of the common cavalry soldier. In the

real West, the army rarely found Indians to fight, and the life of the common soldier was mostly a dreary one of building and maintaining isolated forts. According to the Second Cavalry's 1867–1868 report to the secretary of war, patrols traveled five thousand miles and, in a year's time, wounded one Indian, buried three murdered settlers, and recovered a single stolen horse. During the same time period, 809 soldiers deserted and nearly as many were court-martialed.

Looking for personalized descriptions of such lives, we found Seventh Cavalry pension letters stored in the National Archives. Written to their families by the soldiers who had died at Little Bighorn, the letters had been sent to the federal government as "proof" of the relationships between the deceased and their wives and parents, the only way they could receive their sons' and husbands' army pensions. For the most part, the letters reveal mundane and sad lives. Many wrote about their shame in not being able to send more money back home, often to their parents in Ireland. William Criddle, on the eve of the Seventh Cavalry's departure from Fort Abraham Lincoln in 1876, wrote his father in Hardware, Virginia:

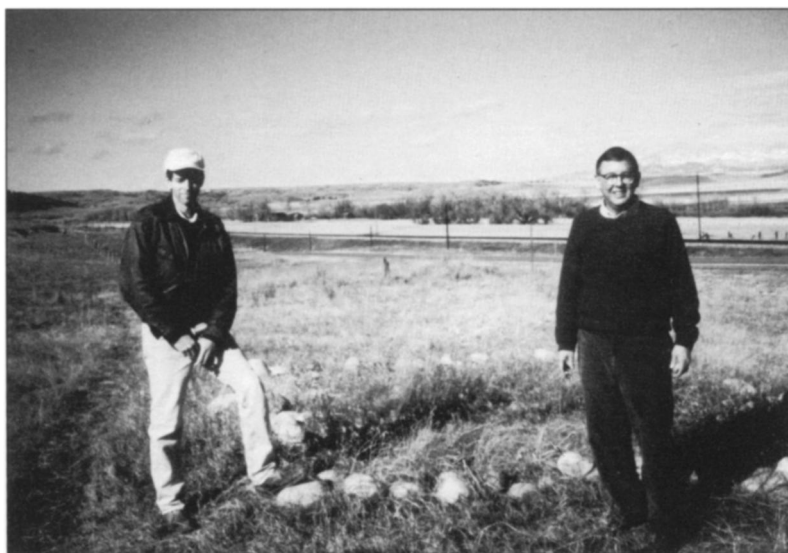
Father, we expect to leave here at any time, but I can't say where we are going. . . .

Some say we are going to bring Sitting Bull in on [a] government reservation, that is if he ain't too many for us.¹⁷

Much of our pre-production scouting also involved looking for descendants of the soldiers who fought at Little Bighorn. Our most rewarding "find" was Charles Windolph's ninety-three-year-old daughter, Irene Fehlman. Windolph mentioned his daughter in his memoirs, *I Fought with Custer* (1987). She had taken care of her father until he died in 1950, at the age of ninety-eight, and we had heard rumors that she might still be alive. After ten phone calls to towns in the Black Hills where she and her father had lived, we found her living in Deadwood, South Dakota. From a phone in the hallway of the only motel in Lodge Grass, Montana, we called her. A spry, lively woman answered. Asked if her father had ever talked about Custer, Ms. Fehlman responded clearly, "My father told me that Custer didn't care at all about the men!" The next morning, we were sitting in Ms. Fehlman's living room.

And then there was Custer. For all our talk of dealing with this story in the words and lives of average people, it is impossible to make a film about Little Bighorn and not include him. The audience expects to see him. And this expectation presented us with an

Film producer Paul Stekler and James Welch stand at the site where the bodies of William Thomas and his young son were found alongside the Bozeman Trail.



Courtesy Paul Stekler

interesting opportunity—to use Custer to help reflect his times, both the Gilded Age economy that fueled westward expansion and the development of a new national press that would transform and immortalize the battle. The “West of the Imagination” did not wait for Hollywood to create it. It was very much a work-in-progress throughout western American expansion. And Custer was an active agent in building his own myth during his lifetime, cultivating the press and supplementing the work of the press with magazine articles written about himself under the pen name of Nomad.

This kind of myth-making was not unique to Custer. Dime novelist Ned Buntline was already creating Buffalo Bill. Railroads employed newspaper reporters to write articles about the utopia of the plains, to attract buyers for the land they owned along their tracks. Ultimately, the same forces that Custer used in life to build his reputation immortalized him in death. The same public bought it—in newspaper exclusives, dime novels, Broadway plays (four plays about Custer were staged in New York City within months of his death), wild west show recreations, and later in Hollywood films. A good story sells.

Custer is also useful in connecting the fight of the Little Bighorn to eastern economic forces that profited from western expansion. Custer spent almost half of his last six years in New York, hobnobbing with wealthy tycoons like John Jacob Astor and August Belmont. Custer sold many of them shares in a Colorado silver mine that later went bust. At one point, Custer wrote his wife Elizabeth: “These New Yorkers are so kind to me. I would like to become wealthy in order to make my permanent home here.”¹⁶ Custer’s non-frontier life, then, allowed us to use him to introduce the industrialized East and to connect East and West. As the film notes, “The road to Little

Bighorn began in the East.”

So, full of good intentions, what kind of job did we do? The verdict is mixed. Some of what we did not do can be traced to the limitations of film, especially film-for-television. Our greatest constraint was covering everything in one hour—actually fifty-two minutes and twenty seconds. We had to leave out a lot of material. In the end, a coherent, tight story always wins, because viewers have trouble with slower pacing and confusing numbers of characters and issues. There is a limit to how much information can be absorbed in a mostly visual medium. Moreover, once the time was used up, adding anything else required cutting material already in the film. An eye for an eye. The rough first-draft script, submitted to our board of scholar advisors for review before on-location filming began, was seventy-five pages, single-spaced, and filled with the gems that a year’s research had provided. When the film was completed a year later, the entire script was twenty-four pages, many of which were filled with descriptions of visuals—what the audience would see.

What did we leave out? All the wonderful pension letters from soldiers who would die at Little Bighorn were reduced to a few sentences from Private Thomas Downing, lamenting his wastrel life. The Thomas diary was reduced to a couple of lines, leaving out the last reference to breaking open the champagne bottle. Crazy Horse, one of the main characters in the film, had no speaking lines and was quoted only once. Entire sections of the evolution of the government’s reservation policy and the impact of corruption in the Grant Administration on western expansion were left on the editing room floor. So were details of inter-tribal warfare, the impact of smallpox epidemics on Lakota expansion, and more in-depth discussions of Lakota customs and religion.

Historians might well ask what

this film adds to the body of knowledge already available and how well this film deals with presenting history. At an early screening of *Last Stand*, appropriately enough at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, one of the film’s advisors, Sherry Smith, a history professor in the University of Texas, El Paso, asked me what I thought audiences would take away from watching the film, what they might learn. It is a good question. I know our intent was to broaden the knowledge of history for a wider audience and to present that history from a broader range of perspectives. But what the audience finally takes away from a film like this is both a good question and, apart from individual polling, hard to answer.

One thing is clear. Films are not history texts. But another thing is clear as well. Films reach a wide audience. And for many in that audience, the history they learn may come exclusively from that film. Witness the public reaction to films like *J.F.K.* (1991) that revel in their ability to manipulate the image of history and even the mass appeal of a public television series like *The Civil War* (1990).

For western historians, the big news is that hordes of documentary filmmakers are descending on the West, like the Sioux and the Cheyenne descended on Custer. Researchers, location scouts, and film crews from a variety of western history series, with titles like “The Old West,” “The Way West,” “Legends of the West,” “The Closing of the West,” even just “The West,” are crisscrossing the plains. Traffic control at the Little Bighorn battlefield has had to contend with the confusion of scheduling film shoots involving different projects sharing the same names.

The number of scholars who have yet to be contacted to advise one or another of these projects is shrinking rapidly. And those same scholars will begin to ask themselves many of the same questions the filmmakers ask.

16. Ibid., August 22, 1866.

17. William Criddle, pension letter, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

18. George A. Custer, quoted in Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 390.



Assistant cameraman Dan Hart (left) and camera assistant Roy Big Crane (right) push cinematographer Jon Else on a camera dolly as he films markers on the battlefield.

How well or how much “history” can these films deal with? Just how much must be sacrificed to make the film’s narrative clear, linear, easy to understand, and fit within time constraints? In the sometimes bewildering medium of film and filmmakers, some people may wonder just what film can really add to history. Ultimately, films do not and cannot take the place of the work of academic scholars. But film can portray the heart of something we call history.

Near the end of our filming at the battlefield, Joe Medicine Crow asked if he might sing his grandfather’s war song on camera. It was not something we had included in our script outline, but Mr. Medicine Crow had already given us a wonderful interview, mostly on the stories that his grandfather and the other Crow scouts had told him about the battle. At the end of a long,

hundred-degree Montana day, we finally had time to record Mr. Medicine Crow before we broke for the day. As he walked down a long, sloping hillside, down from the ridge of Last Stand Hill the thunder of yet another approaching storm grew louder. We quickly set up. Sitting him on an equipment box, two production assistants held a tarp above his head, out of the camera frame, to protect him from the rain that was beginning to fall.

Joe Medicine Crow then turned toward the camera and announced: “I would now like to sing my grandfather’s war song. White Man Runs Him’s war song.” And then he began to sing, a deep raspy eighty-year-old-man’s voice—but strong enough to resonate over the nearby hills. Out on the battlefield, with the ominous thunder clouds framing him in the background, he sang

the same song his grandfather had sung to Custer more than a century ago. As he sang, he shut his eyes and raised his arm, pointing toward a distant horizon. And then, as suddenly as he had begun, his song was over. He opened his eyes and looked off into the distance. The crew stood stunned. Only the distant thunder and a few drops of rain broke the silence. It was an extraordinary moment. It was the kind of moment that film, whatever its limitations, captures best. It was the song his grandfather sang before the most famous battle in American history. It was the same song that his grandson still remembered and sang for us. Films are not history texts, but they can record memory. *M*

PAUL STEKLER is an independent filmmaker whose company, Midnight Films, is located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Besides Last Stand at Little Bighorn, his recent films include Louisiana Boys—Raised on Politics, about Louisiana culture and the state’s Byzantine politics, and PBS’s civil rights series Eyes on the Prize. He has a doctorate in American politics and currently is developing films on George Wallace and on Ian Frazier’s book Great Plains (1989).

Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology (1888–1889)



Sioux warrior Red Horse’s drawing of soldiers charging the Indian camp at the beginning of the battle (plate XLI)