

War Houses in the Sioux Country

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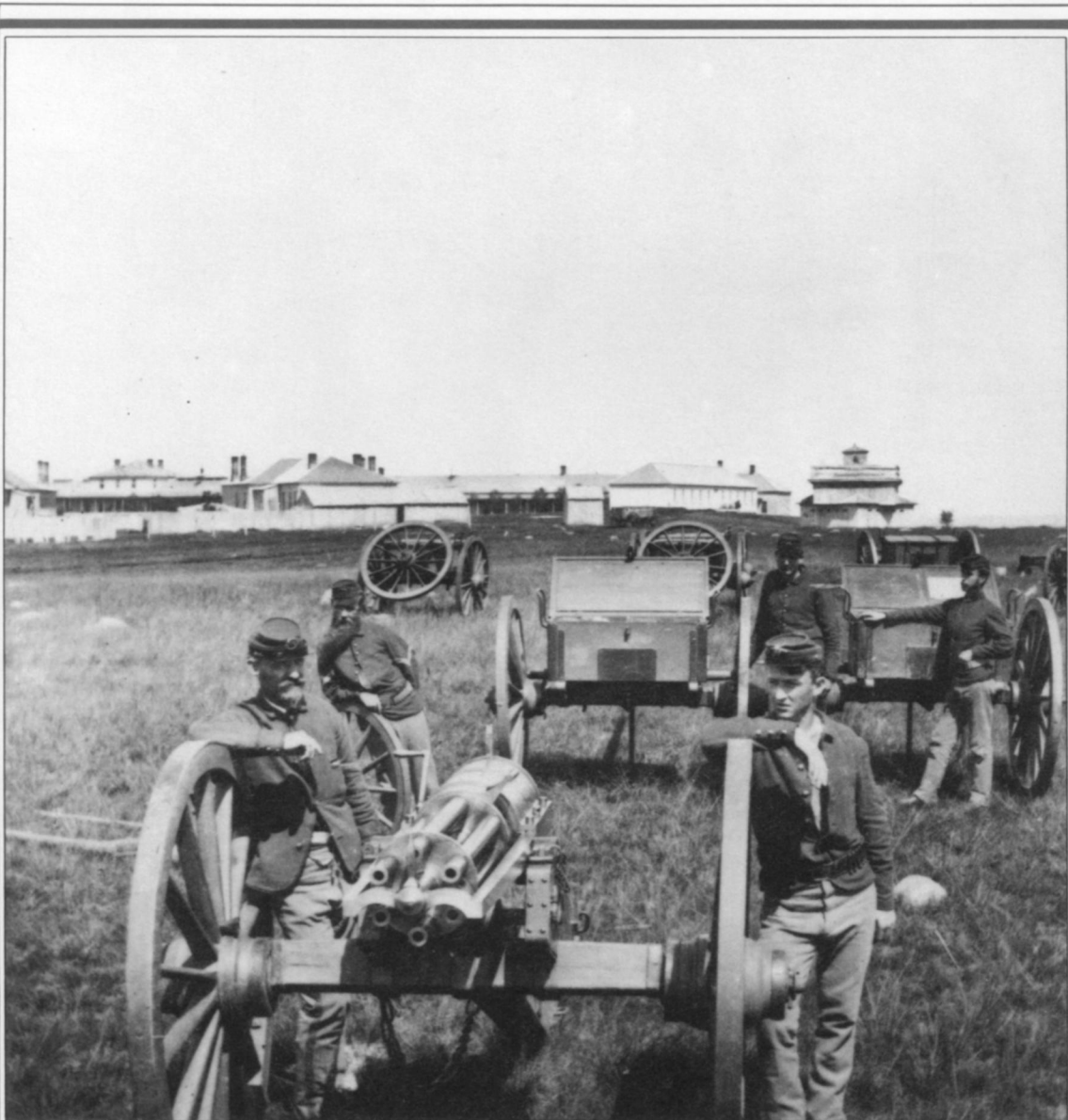
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War Houses

by Robert M. Utley



This gatling gun battery, photographed by F. Jay Haynes in 1877 at Fort Lincoln, Dakota Territory, was part of the formidable arsenal the military brought to bear on the Indians in the Yellowstone Valley.

in the Sioux Country

On July 16, 1877, the broad valley where the Tongue River emptied into the Yellowstone provided the setting for a scene rich in meaning for the future of the northern plains. Here, on the south bank of the Yellowstone a short distance upriver from the collection of rude huts in which the Fifth Infantry Regiment had wintered, civilian laborers busily worked at constructing the fine new quarters and barracks of a permanent post. It would be named Fort Keogh, in honor of an officer killed a year earlier in Custer's bloody disaster on the Little Bighorn. A hundred miles to the southwest, another post rose from a flat bench above the junction of the Bighorn and Little Bighorn rivers. It was to be named Fort Custer, for the flamboyant commander who had led Keogh and more than two hundred of his comrades of the Seventh Cavalry to death and immortality.

On this bright July day in 1877 the steamer *Rosebud*, Captain Grant Marsh at the wheel, nosed into the bank at the Tongue River Cantonment and landed a distinguished military group. William Tecumseh Sherman, grizzled and acerbic head of the U.S. Army, had come to inspect the new forts in the Yellowstone country. Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry, commanding the Department of Dakota, and a bevy of staff officers filed down the gangplank behind Sherman. The post boasted no artillery to salute the four-star general, but the smartly uniformed Fifth Infantry band blared forth the honors and escorted the party to the cantonment.

Also a part of the group was the local commander, Colonel Nelson A. Miles, who had boarded the vessel at the mouth of Glendive Creek. More than any other officer, Miles had cleared the way for the new forts. This was a solid achievement, the result of ability, leader-

ship, courage, energy, and above all persistence. Shamelessly vain and ambitious, the young colonel made certain the general in chief fully understood where the credit belonged. He deserved special recognition, Miles believed, not only because of his success but also because his wife Mary happened to be General (and Senator) Sherman's niece.¹

Sherman and his party stayed for three days. Mary was at the post, so Sherman lodged with the Mileses while the rest returned to the *Rosebud* at night. They toured the old cantonment and the new fort and socialized with the garrison's officers at the quarters of the colonel and his lady. On the final day the regiment drew up in formation. Sherman pinned medals on the tunics of thirty soldiers in recognition of combat heroism. Then, behind its proud colonel, the band playing and banners flying, the Fifth Infantry passed in review before the commanding general. Only a week afterward, Miles again played host as Lieutenant General Philip H. Sheridan, commander of the Division of the Missouri, arrived with his staff to inspect Fort Keogh.²

In one sentence Sherman summed up the significance of these ceremonies: "The Sioux Indians," he said, "can never again regain this country." At last, with the establishment of Fort Keogh and Fort Custer, the Great Father's "war houses" had been planted in the very heart of the Teton Sioux domain. The generals, the bands, the flags, and the medals symbolized the culmination of almost fifteen years of striving for this goal. During this time, virtually all military activity in the lower Yellowstone Basin was either an effort to establish such posts or a costly demonstration of the need for them. Now the war houses had finally come, and, as Sherman had predicted, never did the Sioux regain the Yellowstone country.

The need for war houses on the Yellowstone, of course, was strictly a perception of the white people, not the Indians—an essential step if this country were to be taken from its Teton Sioux inhabitants. They had possessed it for nearly a century, ever since seizing it from the Crow. Two groups of Teton tribes overlapped and mingled along the Yellowstone. The Hunkpapa and Blackfoot Sioux tribes ranged north and east as far as the Missouri River. Oglala, Miniconjou, and Sans Arc Sioux, with their Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho allies, ranged southward in the valleys of the Powder, Tongue, Rosebud, and Bighorn and eastward to the Black Hills.

Not until the 1860s did an Indian threat to whites focus serious military attention on the Yellowstone Basin. Fur trappers had worked this country for more than half a century, and here and there they had even constructed short-lived trading posts. Army topographical engineers explored and crudely mapped the area in the 1850s. But it was not until gold was discovered in the mountains to the west in 1862-1864 that Indians confronted whites on the Yellowstone. Argonauts bound for the diggings went up the Missouri River by steamboat or, more ominously, sought overland routes. These travelers upset the Hunkpapa and Blackfoot Sioux. Other gold-seekers pioneered the route that became known as the Bozeman Trail, which angled northwest from the Platte, headed the Powder, Tongue, and Bighorn rivers, and struck the Yellowstone on its upper reaches. These whites disturbed the Oglala, Sans Arc, and Miniconjou Sioux.

Most Teton Sioux had remained haughtily aloof from relations with white officials. Some had signed the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 and another treaty, never ratified, imposed on them at Fort Pierre in 1857 by Brigadier General William S. Harney. A few, held in contempt by their tribesmen, accepted rations and supplies at Fort Pierre each year. But in 1862, even they broke diplomatic relations. The agent at Fort Pierre reported that the Teton Sioux declared they would tolerate no emigration, either by land or water. They said "they would not submit to it,"

he wrote, "as emigrants brought disease and pestilence into their country"; moreover, "the buffalo would not return to that section of the country where they had been pursued by white men."³

But the emigrants came anyway, and so did the army, which could not deal effectively with such insolent Sioux without a base in their country from which to operate. So, at least, reasoned Major General John Pope, the bombastic commander exiled to Minnesota after his defeat at Second Manassas. Pope had been assigned to clean up the wreckage of the bloody Sioux uprising of 1862, which spilled over into Dakota Territory as Santee Sioux fugitives fled from wrathful Minnesotans. Operating in Dakota in 1863 and 1864, Pope's subordinates, Brigadier General Henry H. Sibley and Brigadier General Alfred Sully, stirred up the Teton Sioux. One of Sully's assignments in the campaign of 1864, therefore, was to build a fort on the Yellowstone River from which to control the Teton Sioux.

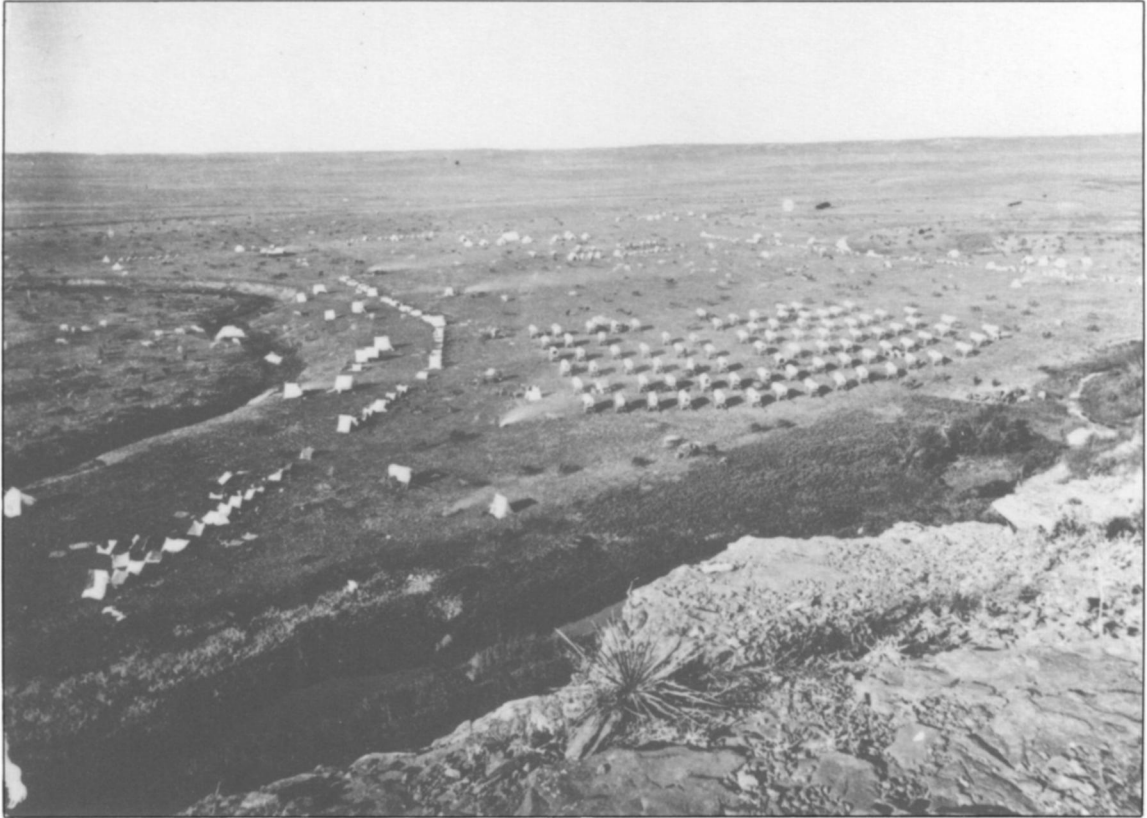
Sully succeeded only partly, although he did extraordinarily well in his other missions. From newly constructed Fort Rice, on the Missouri River at the mouth of the Cannonball, he struck westward at the head of more than two thousand soldiers. Even though burdened with a train of 123 wagons loaded with Montana-bound gold-seekers, he sought out and soundly defeated a large aggregation of Teton Sioux at Killdeer Mountain. Then, harassed by Sioux war parties, he marched across the parched, dusty Little Missouri Badlands—"hell with the fires burned out," he called them—and ultimately struck the Yellowstone. Here, to his great good fortune, two supply steamers met the column.

But no other boats could be expected that season. As would happen often in future years, the river fell so swiftly that the vessels bearing materials for the new fort failed to reach their destination. Sully compromised. Marching downstream to the Missouri, he laid out a military reservation adjacent to the old fur-trading post of Fort Union, established a supply depot, and left a garrison to man it. Although the Yellowstone remained securely in the possession of the Teton Sioux, Fort Rice and the incipient post at the mouth of the Yellowstone (which became Fort Buford in 1866) brought the military frontier to the very edges of the Indians' hunting range.⁴

1. Miles's boastful self-promotion may be traced in letters in the Sherman Papers at the Library of Congress and in Miles's letters reproduced in Virginia W. Johnson, *The Unregimented General: A Biography of Nelson A. Miles* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1962).

2. Secretary of War, *Annual Report*, 45th Cong., 2d sess., 1877, H. Ex. Doc. 1, pt. 2, vol. 2 (Serial 1794), 55-56, 542-545, 574-575; Johnson, *Unregimented General*, 178-181.

3. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report*, 37th Cong., 3d sess., 1862, H. Ex. Doc. 1, vol. 1 (Serial 1156), 196.



William H. Illingworth took this photo of George A. Custer's camp near Hiddenwood Creek in the Black Hills during the 1874 expedition, when the discovery of gold set forces in motion that ended in the two-year war against the Sioux.

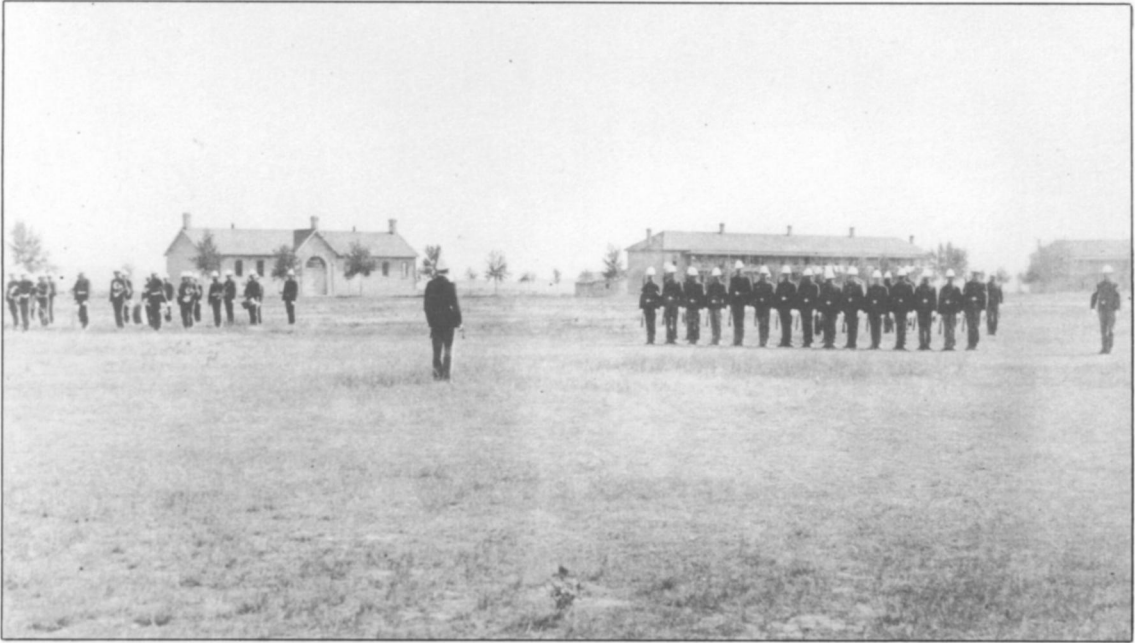
Sully took the field again in 1865, but this year the fort-building mission fell to Major General Patrick Edward Connor, a pugnacious Irishman who had done well in Utah Territory and had been sent to try his hand against the Sioux. From bases to the south, Connor threw three strong columns into the Powder and Yellowstone country. They came close to disaster. The Indians simply kept out of the way while Connor's logistical system broke down and left his striking arms to flounder about in rain, sleet, snow, and mud. Weather killed nearly a thousand horses and mules; and as they fell, starving soldiers stripped the flesh from the bones and devoured it raw. Despite these

reverses, Connor, like Sully, did succeed in placing a fort on the edge of the Sioux country. On the upper Powder River, his men built Fort Connor.⁵

Fort Connor was to prove less than durable. The following year, renamed Fort Reno, it became the first of three forts built in the Powder River country to guard the Bozeman Trail. Sioux anger focused on the other two. In December 1866, Indians wiped out the eighty-man force of Captain William J. Fetterman near Fort Phil Kearny; and despite defeats at the Wagon Box and Hayfield Fights in the summer of 1867, they won the war. In the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, the United States surrendered to Red Cloud and

4. Official reports and correspondence relating to the Sully Expedition are in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 131-174, 795-796; pt. 2, 38-39, 80-81, 228, 591, 616-617, 628, 675-679, 737, 767-768; pt. 3, 219, 466-467, 626-628, 698-701. A good synthesis of the evidence is Rev. Louis Pfaller, O.S.B., "The Sully Expedition of 1864 Featuring the Killdeer Mountain and Badlands Battles," *North Dakota History* 31 (January 1964): 1-54.

5. Reports and documents relating to the Connor operations are printed in LeRoy R. Hafen and Ann W. Hafen, eds., *Powder River Campaigns and Sawyers Expedition of 1865* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark, 1961). For a narrative account, see Fred B. Rogers, *Soldiers of the Overland: Being Some Account of the Services of General Patrick Edward Connor and His Volunteers of the Old West* (San Francisco: Grabhorn Press, 1938), chapters 18-24.



Fort Keogh, established at the confluence of the Tongue and Yellowstone rivers in 1877, was home to the Fifth Infantry, whose guard mount is shown in this 1878 photograph.

his fighting men. The abandonment of Fort Reno, Fort Phil Kearny, and Fort C. F. Smith humiliated the army, but in truth the effort was no longer worth the cost: The rapid construction of the Union Pacific Railroad made the Montana mines much more accessible from points farther west.⁶

The Fort Laramie Treaty ended the war for the Bozeman Trail, but for the U.S. government it laid the groundwork for endless difficulties with the Teton Sioux in the very country where the generals had tried, and failed, to fix a permanent military presence. The treaty set aside all of present-day South Dakota west of the Missouri River as the Great Sioux Reservation, and the Indians were encouraged to settle there and draw rations at the six agencies established for their benefit (and management).

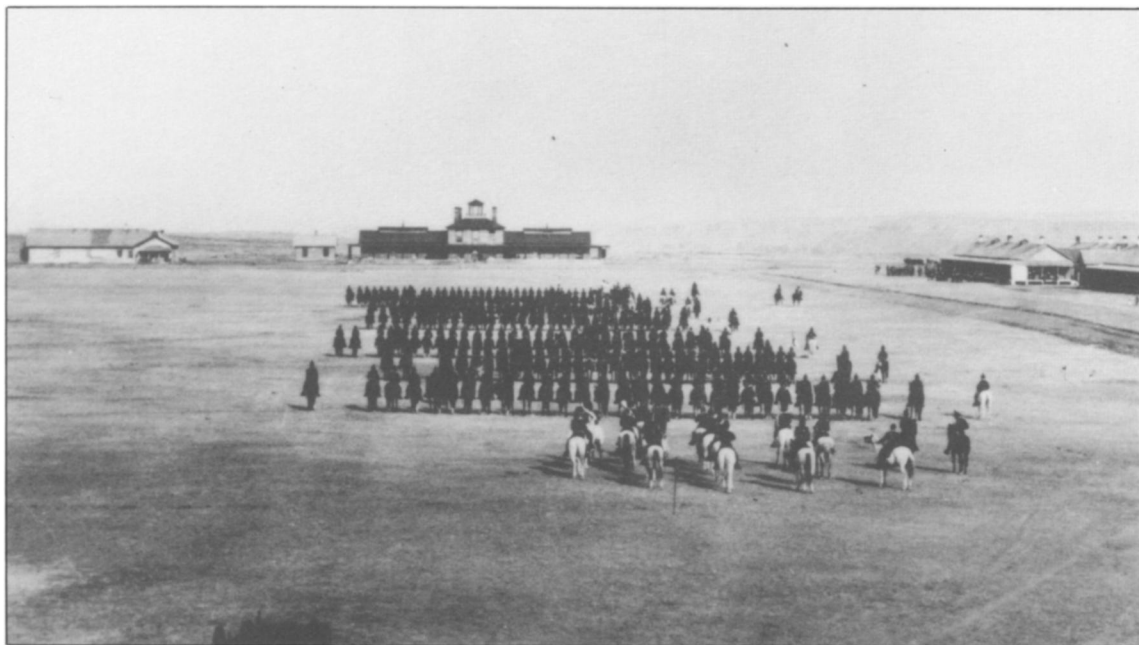
But the Teton Sioux had won the war, and concessions by the United States were in order. They took the form of “unceded Indian territory” west of the reservation. Here, Indians who did not want to live on the reservation could

continue to follow the bison without disturbance from whites, who were excluded altogether. The treaty vaguely defined the unceded territory as north of the North Platte River and east of the Bighorn Mountains.⁷ Whether it extended as far north as the Yellowstone might have been debated, although apparently it was not. In the minds of the Indians, there was no uncertainty; this was Sioux country, and had been ever since they wrested it from the Crow.

Although most of the Teton Sioux, perhaps twenty-five thousand, ultimately settled on the Great Sioux Reservation, the unceded territory afforded a refuge for the “hunting bands,” or “northern Indians.” These people wanted nothing to do with treaties, agencies, or white people, and so long as the bison ran they could maintain themselves comfortably in the valleys of the Yellowstone and its tributaries. These Indians looked for leadership to chiefs such as Black Moon, Gall, Crazy Horse, and, towering over all, Sitting Bull. This chieftain, enjoying commanding authority even beyond his own Hunkpapa tribe, had risen steadily in influence ever since the war with General Sully. He stubbornly resisted all blandishments from white

6. There is an extensive literature of the Red Cloud War. See especially James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), chapters 3 and 4. I have treated the subject and cited sources in Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), chapters 6 and 8.

7. For the text of the treaty see Charles J. Kappler, comp., *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-1941), 998-1007.



Fort Custer, shown here in the 1880s, was built in 1877 at the confluence of the Bighorn and Little Bighorn rivers and stood with Fort Keogh as the government's "war houses" in the Yellowstone Valley.

officials and all material attractions offered by the agencies.

The Indians of these hunting bands and the white people made constant trouble for each other. The groups in the unceded country offered haven for discontented agency Indians. Indeed, great numbers sampled the best of both worlds—the old free hunting life in the summer and the security and rations of the agencies in the winter. They created endless turmoil on the reservation, for they were unmanageable, dangerous to agency officials, and a bad influence on their brethren who remained there year-round. Off the reservation to the west, they and some of the hunting bands as well did not always stay within the unceded territory. Sometimes war parties raided along the Platte and among the Montana settlements at the head of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers.

For their part, the whites did not take too seriously their promise to respect the lands guaranteed the Sioux in the Fort Laramie Treaty. As General Sherman observed in 1870, "I suppose we must concede to the Sioux the right to hunt from the Black Hills . . . to the Big Horn Mountains, but the ultimate title to the land is re-

garded as surrendered."⁸ In fact, the authors of the treaty expected the bison to disappear swiftly and leave the Sioux no choice but to go to the reservation. This did not happen soon enough to forestall conflict arising from white pressure on the Sioux hunting grounds.

The first serious pressure came from the Northern Pacific Railroad, which expected to lay tracks up the Yellowstone Valley. "That Northern Pacific Road is going to give you a great deal of trouble," Sherman wrote to General Sheridan in September 1872, but the army ought to give every possible assistance, "as it will help to bring the Indian problem to a final solution."⁹ Summer expeditions in 1871, 1872, and 1873 escorted railroad surveying parties into the Yellowstone country. In several armed clashes with the bluecoats, the Sioux made clear their attitude toward this invasion.

However disturbing these harbingers of an approaching railroad, the truly infuriating act of

8. Sherman to Brig. Gen. C. C. Augur, June 9, 1870, *Sherman Papers*, vol. 89, 168-169, Library of Congress.

9. Sherman to Sheridan, September 26, 1872, *Sherman-Sheridan Papers*, Library of Congress. Sheridan's role as commander of the Division of the Missouri is ably set forth in Paul A. Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).



Laton A. Huffman photographed this guard mount at Fort Keogh in about 1879. Colonel Nelson A. Miles and his soldiers wore buffalo coats to keep out the cold during the winter, prompting the Indians to call Miles "Bear's Coat."

bad faith came in 1874, when the Custer expedition explored the Black Hills and discovered gold. The Black Hills were not in the unceded territory, but were part of the Great Sioux Reservation itself. The stampede to the diggings that inevitably followed stirred up the Sioux, agency and hunting groups alike, as no other provocation could.

So, early in the 1870s, the waning hope of war houses on the Yellowstone was reawakened in the minds of the generals. Already a blue cordon had tightened around the frontiers of the Sioux domain. Backing up Fort Rice and Fort Buford, Fort Stevenson (1867), Fort Lincoln (1872), Fort Yates (1874), and Fort Bennett (1870) sprouted along the line of the Missouri River in Dakota Territory. In western Montana Territory, where the Missouri curved around the

far western reaches of Sioux country, the army established Fort Benton (1869), Fort Shaw (1867), and Fort Ellis (1867) to shield the Montana mining settlements. To the south, Fort Fetterman (1867), on the North Platte north of Fort Laramie, watched over the southern boundary of the unceded territory. Now, with the Sioux contesting the advance of the Northern Pacific, the generals once again wanted to leap into the midst of Sioux country.

Both Sherman and Sheridan urged Congress to appropriate \$200,000 to build two permanent posts in the Yellowstone Basin. Explaining the need early in 1873, Sherman wrote: "This railroad is a national enterprise, and we are forced to protect the men during its survey and construction, through, probably, the most warlike

10. February 14, 1873, as read in House debates on the army appropriation act, *Congressional Globe*, 42d Cong., 3d sess., March 3, 1873, 2096.

11. The literature of these events is vast. I have treated them, and cited selected sources, in *Frontier Regulars*, chapters 14-15. A particularly cogent analysis of the role and movements of the hunting bands is John S. Gray, *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876* (Fort Collins, Colorado: Old Army Press, 1976).

nation of Indians on this continent, who will fight for every foot of the line. It is a matter of war requiring near two thousand troops, who in winter must be sheltered.”¹⁰

That was the nub of it. If the troops were to fight a war of such magnitude, they must be sheltered in the winter. Connor’s experience in 1865 had dramatized the perils that awaited strong columns trying to operate in this country without fixed bases. Most of their energies went into keeping themselves supplied, and even then they courted logistical collapse.

Sherman’s justification turned out to be an accurate forecast of events to come. Each year for three years Congress debated the request without providing the money. Then, as the government made its final move against the unceded territory, the great Sioux War of 1876 broke over the northern plains. Like Connor before him, Sheridan launched three heavy columns into the Powder and Yellowstone country. The supply system—wagon trains provisioning Brigadier General George Crook from the south, steamboats supporting General Terry and Colonel John Gibbon on the Yellowstone—proved to be adequate during the summer months. The military reverses sustained by Crook on the Powder and Rosebud and by Custer on the Little Bighorn sprang from other than logistical failings. But after the Custer disaster, as the Indians scattered, the weather turned bad, and the columns swelled with reinforcements, General Terry and General Crook came close to duplicating Connor’s record. Crook’s “Starvation March” was only the dramatic culmination of a logistical nightmare produced by supply lines that were too long and tenuous to support the scale of operations.¹¹

Colonel Miles made up for the failures of Terry and Crook. The Indians called him “Bear’s Coat” in tribute to the cold-weather gear he and his foot soldiers wore in their operations during the winter of 1876-1877. To the south, Crook and Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie hounded the Indians, but it was the unrelenting pursuit of

Miles, working out of the ramshackle cantonment at the mouth of Tongue River, that so demoralized them that they either gave up or fled north to the land of the Great Mother and her redcoats.

Miles’s winter campaign validated the judgment of Sherman and Sheridan. They needed the permanent forts in the Yellowstone country. Even before “Bear’s Coat” threw up the huts of the Tongue River Cantonment, the long-sought authorization had materialized. Scarcely two weeks after news of Custer’s annihilation electrified the nation, Congress made haste to strengthen the army. One of the measures was to appropriate \$200,000 for the new posts.¹²

The appropriation allowed the army to remain permanently on the Yellowstone. But for Fort Keogh and Fort Custer—and the tireless Miles—Chief Joseph and his Nez Perce could not have been cut off in their flight for Canada in 1877. But for these forts—and Miles—the Sioux refugees in Canada could not have been kept away from the Montana bison herds, their only hope of survival, and ultimately forced to surrender. By the time Sitting Bull handed over his rifle at Fort Buford in 1881, Sherman had persuaded Congress that Fort Keogh and Fort Custer were not enough, and he pointed proudly to Fort Maginnis and Fort Assiniboine while complaining that he needed still one more.

As he prepared to hand over his office to Sheridan and step into retirement, Sherman also took pride in the spread of settlement and the advance of railroads that such permanent military garrisons made possible. Even as the last spike went into the Northern Pacific tracks in 1883, stockmen and farmers overspread the Yellowstone and its tributary valleys. “Prosperous farms and cattle ranches exist where ten years ago no man could venture,” the general wrote in 1880. “This is largely due to the soldier, but in equal, if not greater measure, to the adventurous pioneers themselves, and to that new and greatest of civilizers, the railroad.”¹³

Truly, as Sherman prophesied in 1877, Fort Keogh and Fort Custer ensured that the Sioux would never regain the Yellowstone Basin. ❧

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12. 19 Stat. 95-96 (July 22, 1876).

13. Secretary of War, *Annual Report*, 46th Cong., 3d sess., 1880, H. Ex. Doc. 1, pt. 2, vol. 2 (Serial 1952), 4, 54.