

THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN, NARRATED BY AN INDIAN WHO FOUGHT IN IT

Newspaper/Magazine Article

Author(s): Two Moons

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Two Moon was a Cheyenne chief who fought with Red Cloud (c. 1822-1909) in his efforts to close the Bozeman Trail. The result of Red Cloud's War was the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, reserving much of present-day South Dakota for the Sioux Nation.

In 1898, Two Moons (1847-1917), the nephew of Two Moon and also a chief, lived on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. He gave this interview to the short-story writer Hamlin Garland (1860-1940), who published it in *McClure's Magazine* and used it in *The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop*, published in 1902, in which he described the mistreatment of Indians by Whites. There is every reason to believe that this is a completely authentic account.

Two Moons describes how he joined Crazy Horse (c. 1842-1877) and the Lakota Sioux after being left homeless by a U.S. Army raid. He also gives a participant's account, and one from an Indian point of view, of the Battle of the Greasy Grass—the Native American's name for the Battle of the Little Bighorn in June 1876—in which Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876) and all of the Seventh Cavalry troops present with him were killed. The remarks of Two Moons indicate that this was indeed a defensive battle for the Indians; according to him, all they wanted was for the "white man" to go away.

This account is one of a number by Native American participants. Two Moons himself gave another in September 1909 to Dr. Joseph Dixon. Although there will never be a last word on the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the account reprinted here comes as close as any to giving us a sense of being there.

What Two Moons does not relate, but what is nonetheless important to an understanding of the battle, is the actions of Custer leading up to the engagement. Custer had about 655 men under his command as he scouted along the Little Bighorn River. In the event he encountered "hostiles," as the Indians were called, he was under orders to wait for the larger body of troops commanded by his superior officer, General Alfred H. Terry (1827-1890). Disregarding these orders, Custer moved quickly ahead when he discovered signs of a Native American encampment. He was far in front of his pack train, with its supply of ammunition, when he came upon the sprawling Indian village at the Greasy

Grass. From the heights overlooking the camp, Custer hastily dictated a note to call the pack train up and dispatched some 50 men to go back for it. He then divided his remaining force—about 580 men—to attack the village. Estimates put the size of the Indian camp at 4,000 people.

Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen each took three companies. Reno was ordered to attack into the village, while Benteen was to remain in reserve. Custer himself took five companies—264 men—and rode in a sweeping motion to fall on the Indians' flank. Those five companies rode over an embankment and flew headlong into a hornet's nest of Indians from which they would not escape. Two Moons's narrative of the battle tells the story of what happened there.

PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT

Battle of the Greasy Grass (Battle of the Little Big Horn) by Two Moons

That spring I was camped on Powder River with fifty lodges of my people—Cheyennes. The place is near what is now Fort McKenney. One morning soldiers charged my camp. They were in command of Three Fingers [Colonel McKenzie]. We were surprised and scattered, leaving our ponies. The soldiers ran all our horses off. That night the soldiers slept, leaving the horses one side; so we crept up and stole them back again, and then we went away.

We traveled far, and one day we met a big camp of Sioux at Charcoal Butte. We camped with the Sioux, and had a good time, plenty grass, plenty game, good water. Crazy Horse was head chief of the camp. Sitting Bull was camped a little ways below, on the Little Missouri River.

Crazy Horse said to me, "I'm glad you are come. We are going to fight the white man again."

The camp was already full of wounded men, women, and children.

I said to Crazy Horse, "All right. I am ready to fight. I have fought already. My people have been killed, my horses stolen; I am satisfied to fight."

[Here the old man paused a moment, and his face took on a lofty and somber expression.]

I believed at that time the Great Spirits had made Sioux, put them there [he drew a circle to the right], and white men and Cheyennes here [indicating two places to the left], expecting them to fight. The Great Spirits I thought liked to see the fight; it was to them all the same like playing. So I thought then about fighting. [As he said this, he made me feel for one moment the power of a sardonic god whose drama was the wars of men.]

About May, when the grass was tall and the horses strong, we broke camp and started across the country to the mouth of the Tongue River. Then Sit-

ting Bull and Crazy Horse and all went up the Rosebud. There we had a big fight with General Crook, and whipped him. Many soldiers were killed—few Indians. It was a great fight, much smoke and dust.

"From there we all went over the divide, and camped in the valley of Little Horn. Everybody thought, "Now we are out of the white man's country. He can live there, we will live here." After a few days, one morning when I was in camp north of Sitting Bull, a Sioux messenger rode up and said, "Let everybody paint up, cook, and get ready for a big dance."

Cheyennes then went to work to cook, cut up tobacco, and get ready. We all thought to dance all day. We were very glad to think we were far away from the white man.

I went to water my horses at the creek, and washed them off with cool water, then took a swim myself. I came back to the camp afoot. When I got near my lodge, I looked up the Little Horn towards Sitting Bull's camp. I saw a great dust rising. It looked like a whirlwind. Soon Sioux horseman came rushing into camp shouting: "Soldiers come! Plenty white soldiers."

I ran into my lodge, and said to my brother-in-law, "Get your horses; the white man is coming. Everybody run for horses."

Outside, far up the valley, I heard a battle cry, *Hay-ay, hay-ay!* I heard shooting, too, this way [clapping his hands very fast]. I couldn't see any Indians. Everybody was getting horses and saddles. After I had caught my horse, a Sioux warrior came again and said, "Many soldiers are coming."

Then he said to the women, "Get out of the way, we are going to have hard fight."

I said, "All right, I am ready."

I got on my horse, and rode out into my camp. I called out to the people all running about: "I am Two Moon, your chief. Don't run away. Stay here and fight. You must stay and fight the white soldiers. I shall stay even if I am to be killed."

I rode swiftly toward Sitting Bull's camp. There I saw the white soldiers fighting in a line [Reno's men]. Indians covered the flat. They began to drive the soldiers all mixed up—Sioux, then soldiers, then more Sioux, and all shooting. The air was full of smoke and dust. I saw the soldiers fall back and drop into the river-bed like buffalo fleeing. They had no time to look for a crossing. The Sioux chased them up the hill, where they met more soldiers in wagons, and then messengers came saying more soldiers were going to kill the women, and the Sioux turned back. Chief Gall was there fighting, Crazy Horse also.

I then rode toward my camp, and stopped squaws from carrying off lodges. While I was sitting on my horse I saw flags come up over the hill to the east like that [he raised his finger-tips]. Then the soldiers rose all at once, all

on horses, like this [he put his fingers behind each other to indicate that Custer appeared marching in columns of fours]. They formed into three bunches [squadrons] with a little ways between. Then a bugle sounded, and they all got off horses, and some soldiers led the horses back over the hill.

Then the Sioux rode up the ridge on all sides, riding very fast. The Cheyennes went up the left way. Then the shooting was quick, quick.

Pop—pop—pop very fast. Some of the soldiers were down on their knees, some standing. Officers all in front. The smoke was like a great cloud, and everywhere the Sioux went the dust rose like smoke. We circled all round him—swirling like water round a stone. We shoot, we ride fast, we shoot again. Soldiers drop, and horses fall on them. Soldiers in line drop, but one man rides up and down the line—all the time shouting. He rode a sorrel horse with white face and white fore-legs. I don't know who he was. He was a brave man.

Indians keep swirling round and round, and the soldiers killed only a few. Many soldiers fell. At last all horses killed but five. Once in a while some man would break out and run toward the river, but he would fall. At last about a hundred men and five horsemen stood on the hill all bunched together. All along the bugler kept blowing his commands. He was very brave too. Then a chief was killed. I hear it was Long Hair [Custer], I don't know; and then the five horsemen and the bunch of men, may be so forty, started toward the river. The man on the sorrel horse led them, shouting all the time. He wore a buckskin shirt, and had long black hair and mustache. He fought hard with a big knife. His men were all covered with white dust. I couldn't tell whether they were officers or not. One man all alone ran far down toward the river, then round up over the hill. I thought he was going to escape, but a Sioux fired and hit him in the head. He was the last man. He wore braid on his arms [sergeant].

All the soldiers were now killed, and the bodies were stripped. After that no one could tell which were officers. The bodies were left where they fell. We had no dance that night. We were sorrowful.

Next day four Sioux chiefs and two Cheyennes and I, Two Moon, went upon the battlefield to count the dead. One man carried a little bundle of sticks. When we came to dead men, we took a little stick and gave it to another man, so we counted the dead. There were 388. There were thirty-nine Sioux and seven Cheyennes killed, and about a hundred wounded.

Some white soldiers were cut with knives, to make sure they were dead; and the war women had mangled some. Most of them were left just where they fell. We came to the man with the big mustache; he lay down the hills towards the river. The Indians did not take his buckskin shirt. The Sioux said, "That is a big chief. That is Long Hair." I don't know. I had never seen him. The man on the white-faced horse was the bravest man.

That day as the sun was getting low our young men came up the Little Horn riding hard. Many white soldiers were coming in a big boat, and

when we looked we could see the smoke rising. I called my people together, and we hurried up the Little Horn, into Rotten Grass Valley. We camped there three days, and then rode swiftly back over our old trail to the east. Sitting Bull went back into the Rosebud and down the Yellowstone, and away to the north. I did not see him again.