

WHO GETS LAST WORD ON CUSTER'S 'LAST STAND'?

By Bentley Boyd

The way we remember that battle tells us about our changing view of the first Americans.

The fight in Montana between Lakota Indians and Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer's cavalry had instant symbolism because it happened just as the United States celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

"The timing was important to Custer himself," said University of Wyoming history professor Phil Roberts. "He knew the Centennial was coming up. He thought a big victory over the Indians in the West would certainly put him on all the front pages. There's been a lot of speculation about his political ambitions. And he got on the front pages -- but not the way he wanted."

The retelling of the Battle of Little Bighorn has changed radically over the decades, through thousands of books, movies, plays and paintings:

The 1876 view:

U.S. citizens demanded revenge for Custer's defeat, and the Army stepped up its campaign to wipe out American Indian warriors. The federal government declared the Little Bighorn battlefield a national cemetery and put up a monument in 1881. Headstones marked where each soldier fell. For decades, Custer's widow, Libby, campaigned for the history of the battle to be a hero worship of him.

"There were people, even at the time the news first arrived, who were seriously questioning Custer's judgment," Roberts said. "She was constantly at the ready to defend his reputation and his decisions."

Stephen Vincent Benet's "A Book of Americans" in 1933:

*The Indians of the Wild West/ We found were hard to tame,
For they seemed really quite possessed/ To keep their ways the same.
They liked to hunt, they liked to fight/ And (this I grieve to say)
They could not see the white man's right/ To take their land away.
So there was fire upon the Plains/ And deeds of derring-do,
Where Sioux were bashing soldiers' brains/ And soldiers bashing Sioux'.
And here is bold Chief Crazy Horse/ A warrior, keen and tried
Who fought with fortitude and force/ But on the losing side.
Where Custer fell, where Miles pursued/ He led his native sons
And did his best, though it was crude/ And lacked the Gatling guns.
It was his land. They were his men./ He cheered and led them on.
The hunting ground is pasture, now./ The buffalo are gone.*

This account balancing the deeds of the soldiers and the Indians reflects a more humane view of the Indians that came during the progressive New Deal era. "It's simplistic, and there are some loaded words like 'tame' and 'crude,' but it has it fairly close to right. It's a very modern and very even-handed ending," Roberts said.

"Makers of American History" elementary school textbook, 1969:

In an era influenced by Walt Disney's Davy Crockett, this book has a heroic full-page drawing of Custer surrounded by his men in the battle; only one American Indian is faintly visible in the background.

The text does not mention Custer going onto reservations to find gold in 1874, but there is a quarter page about him in the Civil War, noting, "He was among the bravest of the brave. He received promotion after promotion." Then:

"After the end of the Civil War, Custer was stationed in the West and achieved lasting fame as an Indian fighter. In 1876, news was received that the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians were on the warpath. General George A. Custer was sent to head them off. Upon hearing that the Indians were camped near the Little Big Horn River in Montana, Custer pushed forward. As he approached the Indian camp, he divided his force into three groups. He took charge of one of these groups, consisting of about 200 mounted cavalrymen, and went on ahead. When he reached the camp of the Sioux, he ordered his soldiers to dismount and fight on foot. They were hoping that the other soldiers would come to help them, but the Indians had already driven back the other groups. Custer and his men were left to fight it out alone with the Sioux who outnumbered them 5 to 1. The soldiers fought bravely, but they were overwhelmed. Custer was one of the last to die. He kept firing until all his ammunition was gone. Then, he grappled in a life and death struggle with White Bull, a Sioux chieftan, and lost. Not a soldier was left alive."

"Oh boy where do you start?" Roberts said. "There's 'Indian fighter,' there's 'warpath,' there's all this loaded language. This is dubious, to say the least."

"America, Past and Present" high school textbook, 1991:

"On the northern Plains fighting resulted from the Black Hills Gold Rush of 1875. As prospectors tramped across Native American hunting grounds, the Sioux gathered to stop them. They were led by Rain-in-the-Face, the great war chief Crazy Horse, and the famous medicine man Sitting Bull. The army sent several columns of troops after the Indians, but one, under flamboyant Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer, pushed recklessly ahead, eager to claim the victory. On the morning of June 25, 1876, thinking he had a small band of Native Americans surrounded in their village on the banks of the Little Bighorn River in Montana, Custer divided his column and took 265 men toward it. Instead of finding a small band, he discovered that he had stumbled on the main Sioux camp with 2,500 warriors. It was the largest Native American army ever assembled in the United States. By mid-afternoon it was over; Custer and his men were dead. Custer was largely responsible for the loss, but 'Custer's Last Stand,' set in blazing headlines across the country, signaled a nationwide demand for revenge."

"This one is generally accurate, but it goes too far the other way. For example, I'm not sure it was the largest Indian army ever assembled. I don't know how you'd ever have the numbers to make that claim," Roberts said.

"A History of US" elementary school textbook, 1999:

The Battle of Little Bighorn is mentioned several times in this multicultural textbook series but only in quick doses, such as a timeline. An account under a Sioux drawing of the battle reads:

"In 1876, Indian fighter Lieutenant Colonel George Custer pays no attention to his orders or to his scouts' reports and leads 266 men against thousands of Cheyenne and Sioux Indians who are gathered at the Little Bighorn River in central Montana. It is 'Custer's Last Stand,' and it is a massacre. The only U.S. Army survivor is a horse named Comanche."

Roberts said, "Custer is being set apart as being the one who is responsible for this debacle. It's an interesting way of isolating him. What about General Crook's views of the Indian? He was no less evil and reckless than Custer. What about General Sherman? The assumption is that if there was a 'good' man in that position, that this wouldn't have happened. But Custer isn't any different than his contemporaries in the way they viewed the Indians." *

SUGGESTED RESEARCH ON LITTLE BIGHORN

If you'd like to catch up on your Custer and re-examine the clash of Europeans and American Indians on the Great Plains, here are some recommendations:

"The Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876" by John Stephens Gray, 1988

This book is light on analysis but gives a good overview of the political and economic situations that fed the conflict between the United States and the Indians. It puts Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer in context -- as one of several Army men pursuing the people who would not relocate to barren reservations.

"Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" by Dee Brown, 1970

This is the book that put the American Indian viewpoint into the story of the West and showed the nation their bravery in the face of campaigns to exterminate them. The book covers the 30 years between the Long Walk of the Navahos in 1860 and the shooting of Sioux men, women and children at Wounded Knee, S.D.

"Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of An American Myth" by Brian W. Dippie, 1994

The author studies the battle re-enactments, poems, novels, paintings, movies and jokes that built the Custer legend. His look at Custer pop culture becomes a way to understand how History is made and how it reflects the national character.

Anything by Robert M. Utley

Utley was a longtime historian for the National Park Service who wrote about the Great Plains in such books as "Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian," "Indian Wars" and "After Lewis and Clark: Mountain Men and the Paths to the Pacific."

Movies about the Battle of Little Bighorn

"The accurate movie about Custer is yet to be done," said University of Wyoming history professor Phil Roberts. Of the Dustin Hoffman movie "Little Big Man" he said, "'Little Big Man' is a relic of its time. It was made during the Vietnam era, and it reflects that era. The problem with 'Little Big Man' is that it simplifies the story and sets him up to be an extremely evil man."

ABOUT THE WRITER

Bentley Boyd has written on historical issues for the Daily Press since coming to the paper in 1992. He was a history and literature major at [Harvard University](#), covered the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation as a beat reporter, and wrote and illustrated the paper's award-winning "Chester the Crab" historical comic.