

AN ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM ON THE BATTLE OF LITTLE BIGHORN  
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE INDIAN DESCENDANTS

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Objectives

The general objective of this research is to develop an oral history program on the Battle of Little Bighorn from the perspective of the Northern Cheyenne Indian descendants of this famous encounter with General George A. Custer and the U.S. 7th Cavalry. The specific objectives are:

1. Complete oral history interviews with no less than 15 informants of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, who shall be selected by the National Park Service;
2. Transcribe all interviews in the form of typed manuscripts; and
3. Develop a cross-referenced retrieval index system.

An optional objective is to provide training in oral history methodology for personnel identified by the National Park Service who might continue the program.

Methods

In August of 1985 a residence was established in National Park Service quarters at Custer Battlefield National Monument and the research was actively commenced. Several weeks were spent reviewing primary and secondary historical materials in the Monument's reference library, where an office was provided. A preliminary interview format was constructed consisting of more than 50 questions centering on the Battle, Plains Indian culture, and the early reservation period. Initial contacts were made with individuals in the Crow and Cheyenne communities and extensive travel to the Northern Cheyenne Reservation (45 miles from the Battlefield) was carried out in order to become familiar with the physical environment as it relates to the Custer battle. Assistance was provided by National Park Service personnel, as well as by individuals at Little Bighorn College on the Crow Reservation and Dull Knife Memorial College on the Cheyenne Reservation. Knowledgeable persons in the private sector were also consulted, i.e., individuals associated with the retail outlets in the immediate environs, such as trading posts and other businesses. The public library in nearby Hardin, Montana was also utilized for contemporary information about the Cheyenne.

After the initial familiarization period, key informants were sought out in the Indian community. Particularly helpful was the Park Service's Indian Historian, Mardell Plainfeather, who accompanied the investigator to Lame Deer to make contacts with potential informants. A useful technique in oral history is to locate a local resident who is well known in the community, is interested and knowledgeable in history, and is willing to serve as an intermediary between the investigator and the informants. Such an individual was encountered—Jim King, a descendant of Brave Wolf who was a Battle participant—and he agreed to assist in the Project. Mr. King is widely known as the Cheyenne community's unofficial historian; he also has a small collection of historical artifacts, many of which relate to the Battle of Little Bighorn.

A list of potential informants was gradually developed over the course of numerous meetings. The primary criterion was that the individual had to be a descendant of a participant in the Battle. Between September 15th and October 17th, fourteen informants located throughout the Northern Cheyenne Reservation were interviewed. A preliminary interview was always carried out to determine the potential informant's eligibility for the study, his general level of English comprehension and knowledge of the Tribe's history, and to set the stage for the subsequent interview.

#### Progress Toward Objectives

Objective #1. To complete oral history interviews with no less than fifteen informants of the Cheyenne Tribe, was almost accomplished. Fourteen persons were interviewed. Objective #2. The transcription of all interviews, is presently underway. Eight of the fourteen have been transcribed and the auditing and editing of transcripts is in progress. All tapes will be transcribed and audited by March 1986. Objective #3. The development of a cross-referenced retrieval index system, will be a simple matter once all tapes are transcribed. The Department of Resource Recreation Management has adequate software to perform this task using the key words which will be identified.

#### Some Methodological Problems

Considerable time and effort has been expended in identifying and locating eligible and willing subjects for the study; general reluctance to participate was encountered by the investigator. This stemmed in part from the previous experience of the Indians with persons from outside the Reservation who collected extensive data and subsequently published their findings. Many pointed out that whites had been coming to the Reservation since the Battle occurred in 1876 in order to interview Indians and "write books and make a lot of money." They felt that the Indians from whom the information was obtained had profited very little, while the writers had received handsome monetary rewards. Specifically mentioned were Dr. Thomas B. Marquis (Two Days After the Custer Battle, and many other publications) and George B. Grinnell (The Fighting Cheyennes and other books). Ultimately, the payment of a small informant fee overcame this methodological hurdle.

A second problem stemmed from the general reluctance of some older informants, especially women, to converse in English with an outsider. Interpreters were used on several occasions, but both the quality and quantity of information is somewhat limited in using this procedure. Personal introductions by well-known community members such as Mr. Jim King, helped to overcome this obstacle.

### Preliminary Findings

In spite of some difficulties, the interviewing is yielding some interesting data regarding the Battle, from the perspective of the descendant. Since the Northern Cheyenne people have continuously inhabited the region where this historical event occurred, there has been a continuity over time between the people, the landscape and the Battle's mythology. A few of the emergent themes deal with Custer's previous relationship to the Cheyennes (he smoked the peace pipe then later attacked them); the reasons for the U.S. military debacle (the soldiers were either drunk or committed suicide); Custer's aspirations (he would get to be president if he wiped out the Indians); and the lack of interest on the part of present day Indians in this conflict ("why can't the white man forget what's in the past?") Most informants generally approve of the manner in which the National Park Service is telling the Custer story at the Battlefield, but some have expressed a desire for a monument to the Cheyenne who fell in that struggle.

### Additional Data Collection

The focus of a second data collection period — approximately August 15–October 1, 1986 — will be the Busby–Lame Deer area and the Ashland area. Three individuals have emerged, as a result of this field research, as being key informants with much potentially useful information. Bill Tall Bull, Jim King, and Ted Rising Sun are important sources who have not been interviewed. Lengthy discussions have been carried out with two of these individuals, but neither has yet consented to an interview. There might be a possibility of bringing several of these individuals together at the Battlefield for a composite interview.

A second area of concentration would be Ashland and St. Labre School, which has had an oral history program under way for several years. The Catholic Church has shown some interest in preserving local history and it might be helpful in locating additional informants in that section of the Reservation (extreme eastern side of the Reservation). The objective would be to interview three to five more individuals to further complement the historical information already obtained. Gaining the cooperation of the three key informants might not be possible, but it warrants a serious effort.

The investigator solicited and received the cooperation of Dull Knife Memorial College and the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. A memorandum of agreement detailing the project was submitted to and gained the official approval of the Tribal Council. The President of Dull Knife College, James Rowland, agreed to

facilitate the research through use of the College's facilities and through collaboration with the Native American Studies program.

Copies of all tapes and transcripts will be placed in the College's library, and will constitute the beginning of their oral history collection. Thus, it is hoped that these linkages will increase the investigator's effectiveness in attaining the research goals.

### Conclusions

The preliminary findings indicate that there is a body of orally-derived and transmitted knowledge relating to the Battle of Little Bighorn, which has been passed from generation to generation by the Northern Cheyenne people. While the specifics of the Battle have been somewhat blurred with the passage of time, there continues to be some consistent themes regarding this extraordinary event and its relationship to the contemporary and historical people and places of the Little Bighorn region.

### Literature Cited

Marquis, Thomas B. 1935. Two Days After the Custer Battle. Hardin, MT.

Grinnell, George B. 1915. The Fighting Cheyennes. New York: Univ. of OK Press.