

Kid's Korner

Fire Removes Mysteries Of Little Bighorn

WASHINGTON — A 1983 prairie fire has shed strong light on the still-controversial Battle of the Little Bighorn, where Lt. Gen. George Armstrong Custer and some 260 of his men made their historic last stand — and lost their lives — in 1876.

The fire was "a blessing in disguise," says archeologist Richard A. Fox Jr. The flames had laid bare the field of combat, named after a river in southeastern Montana. "Some of that land was impenetrable before the fire," he says.

For 110 years, Custer and his disastrous encounter with as many as 2,000 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors have held captive the imagination of the public. More has been said about the struggle than any other battle in American history except perhaps Gettysburg.

Controversy Still Rages

"Argument and speculation swirl about it, partly because Custer remains an enigma and mysteries obscure the course of the fight," Robert Paul Jordan

writes in the December National Geographic.

"Those who rode with him to the end left only death's mute testimony," Jordan writes. "Indian accounts varied, generally were long in coming, and often conveyed what the white man wanted to hear. Even today Indian resentment lingers at terms such as 'hostile' and at the mythology surrounding Custer."

But the fire that burned the grass and sagebrush cover off the undulating heights and wrinkled draws where Custer met his doom cleared the way for two seasons of toil by archeologists and volunteers equipped with metal detectors, trowels, and sieves.

The results are surprising. More than 4,000 artifacts have been unearthed: bullets and cartridge cases, iron arrowheads, pieces of firearms, buttons, a watch, and horse trappings. The almost complete skeleton of a trooper was also found.

It is the first time a battlefield has been systematically plotted into a grid to chart a fight's

progress; the first time that modern ballistic techniques have been applied to a field of combat; and one of the few times that precise information has been recorded on the location of every relic found.

"The archeologists learned that the soldiers were relatively stationary, while the Indians moved freely about as they overran one position after another," Jordan writes.

Codes on one computer printout suggest the tragic scenario of a trooper who may have been the last man to die in the struggle. Archeologists speculate that Indians fired at him with at least six guns as he tried to escape the waning battle. When he dropped, they hacked at his body with knives and hatchets. They decapitated him.

Indians Outgunned Cavalry

Archeologists and firearms specialists have concluded from the evidence that the Indians outgunned the soldiers. Custer's Seventh Cavalry troops carried single-shot carbines and six-shot Colt revolvers. Ballistic studies show that the Indians had at least 41 kinds of firearms, including 16-shot repeating rifles.

The investigators' interpretation: "With the relative lack of cover available to Custer and the dispersed deployment of his command against superior numbers of Indians with greater firepower, the reason for the outcome of the battle can no longer be significantly debated."

The studies affirm the truth of the legend of Last Stand Hill. One by one, the survivors of Custer's five companies dropped in the gunsmoke and confusion. As the troopers' fire dwindled, the warriors, helped by women, rushed in and finished them off



Sitting Bull, preeminent leader of the seven bands of Western Sioux Indians and revered medicine man, had a prophetic vision of the defeat of George Armstrong Custer's troops at Little Bighorn. In spite of his later billing as "Custer's killer" Sitting Bull did not fight in the famous battle.

with rifles, bows, clubs, and hatchets. Most were stripped naked. Some were mutilated.

News of the June 25 debacle reached the American public right after the July 4, 1876, celebration of the nation's centennial, bringing disbelief, shock, and anger.

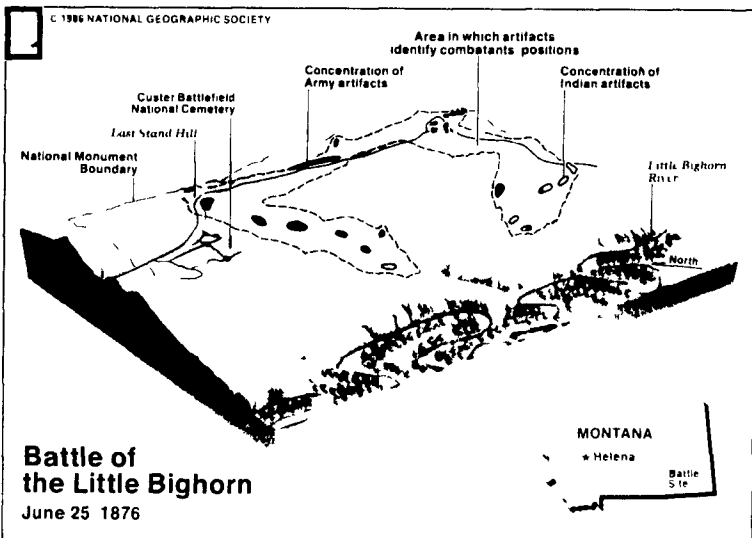
Nobody knows exactly how many Indians died in the brief but bloody battle. A good guess might be 100, says Jordan.

"It was over," he writes. "But most of all it was over for the Indians. These people of the plains long had been doomed by the white man's inexorable westward expansion. The Army had perpetrated cruelties in earlier Indian battles as savage as any inflicted on Custer's men. But in thrashing

the Seventh Cavalry, the Indians sealed their own fate. Within a year the Army hounded most to the hated reservations. Like the vanishing buffalo, their way of life was no more."

In contrast to the Custer cultists who revere the name of their hero, many of today's Native Americans despise it. They dislike even the name of the Custer Battlefield National Monument; after all, it was they who won.

"Sitting Bull National Monument would be more appropriate," says Caleb Shields, Sioux tribal councilman at the Fort Peck Reservation in northern Montana, "or Little Bighorn National Monument Custer is no hero of ours."



COLOR THIS!

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|-------------|---------------|
| 1. BLACK | 6. PEACH |
| 2. RED | 7. GREEN |
| 3. YELLOW | 8. LT. BROWN |
| 4. DK. GREY | 9. LT. GREY |
| 5. BROWN | 10. LT. GREEN |

BARTER: TRADING WITHOUT THE USE OF MONEY IS CALLED BARTER. IT WAS USED BEFORE MONEY WAS INVENTED. IT IS STILL A COMMON WAY OF TRADING IN SOME CIVILIZED COUNTRIES TODAY. THE EARLY EXPLORERS GAVE THE INDIANS BEADS IN EXCHANGE FOR FOOD. THE EARLY SETTLERS IN AMERICA TRADED LAND FOR A SHOT-GUN AND A YOKE OF OXEN.

