

## Native Americans React to a Changing World

We don't know exactly what the young Native American boy, Grey Wolf, thought as he sat on his pony and saw that first long line of white covered wagons rolling through the valley. He had seen trappers and trailblazers when he was younger, and their skin had been the same pale color as the people on the wagons, but his father told him that the new group of 'white skins' did not hunt, wore odd costumes, and spoke a strange language. Grey Wolf was warned that many more were on their way, and that he must not get too close to them.

The early pioneers to the West were few in number and had limited contact with the Native Americans of the West. For many years they were able to avoid major conflict. As more and more people ventured west in search of new opportunities it became clear that they would not be able to avoid each other forever.

The Native Americans of the West were a proud people from many great nations. This included the Sioux, Crow, Blackfoot, Arapaho, Navajo, Cheyenne, Apache, and many others. They were brave and took pride in their courage and strength of their tribe.

Native American men shared stories around the camp-fire of battles, hunting, and **counting coup** (touching an enemy or a wild beast to show bravery). Chiefs were respected by their people and had great influence on tribal decisions, but they were rarely in total control of the tribes. Native Americans allowed for individual differences in their culture. This limited the chief's power in forcing others to do things against their will. Some Native Americans were peculiar, but that was fine by others. For example, Cheyenne "contraries" did everything backward; they greeted others with "Goodbye" and said "Hello" as they left. They would even ride their horses backwards.

Native American's learned their history around the campfire, and men told how their people had struggled to keep up with the buffalo herds before they had the horse, and how the firestick (rifle) first appeared among their people. They told how the pale skinned man appeared from the east. At first they were few in number. Some were good, but most were terrible—especially those who dressed in dark blue uniforms that forced their people to leave their lands.

By 1851, the **Fort Laramie Treaty** was signed between the U.S. military and the Lakota Sioux that began the establishment of reservations for many of the western tribes. The treaty gave the tribes full ownership of their land and guaranteed that henceforth it would be closed to all whites. However, many young warriors refused to acknowledge the agreement and chose to roam freely. Also, it was nearly impossible for the U.S. military to monitor the vast American territories and stop whites from settling on the reserved land.

When gold was discovered in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado a flood of white settlers began infringing on Native American lands. In retaliation for a group of Cheyenne warriors killing a white family, Colonel J.M. Chivington and his men attacked and brutally murdered 160 Cheyenne and Arapaho villagers at Sand Creek in 1864. The following year a group of Cheyenne warriors got their revenge by attacking Julesburg, Colorado, and killing 18 settlers.

Fighting continued to intensify and warriors from several nations began to join forces against the U.S. military. Captain William Fetterman boasted that he could take 80 soldiers and wipe out the entire Sioux nation. A large band of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors, led by Crazy Horse and Red Cloud, set a trap for him near Fort Kearney in Wyoming, and he fell into it. Fetterman and 80 bluecoats were killed in the attack.

Bitter feelings were growing by the 1870's, leading to serious conflict between the races. With the completion of the transcontinental railroad it was easier and quicker for people to go west. For many



**Sitting Bull**



**George Armstrong Custer**

people, especially in the South, this was a chance to start anew. When gold was discovered in the Black Hills of South Dakota it would lead to a dramatic meeting at the Little Big Horn.

With his long yellow hair and his goatee, **George Armstrong Custer** was an impressive man. In the summer of 1876, he was anxious for an opportunity to make a name for himself, and it came on a June day of that year.

Custer graduated from West Point at the bottom of his class in 1861, but he won many honors during the Civil War, and he ended the war as a major general of volunteers at the age of 23. After the war, he was reduced to the rank of captain in the regular army. When the Seventh Cavalry was formed, he commanded it and was promoted to lieutenant colonel.

In 1874, he led 1,200 soldiers into the Black Hills to disprove rumors that gold was there. When his soldiers did discover gold, more miners flooded into the region, which angered the Sioux. This was not what the government had intended to happen. After that trip, he was called back to Washington D.C., where he testified against the Secretary of War involving kickback

scandals before a Congressional committee. His testimony angered President Ulysses S. Grant and Custer was removed from command and was replaced by General Alfred Terry. Custer's popularity with the public led to fierce criticism of the situation. Eventually, Grant was forced to back down and reinstate Custer.

By 1876, so many Native Americans had left the reservations that the government ordered them to return by February. Dealings with the Indian agents assigned to the reservations by the government frequently ended in disputes. Untrained and poorly paid, Indian agents were sent by the Interior Department to give the Native Americans food and supplies promised by treaties. Many of the agents were corrupt, and sold the people food and supplies that they were supposed to receive for free. President Grant tried to solve this problem by having churches select good men as agents, but the plan did little to solve the problem. Instead of going back to the reservations, many headed for the camp **Sitting Bull** and **Crazy Horse** had established on the Little Big Horn River. They had defied the U.S. government.

The army sent three columns of soldiers under the command of General George Crook, General Alfred Terry, and Colonel John Gibbon to the region to deal with the problem. Because of the large area involved, and having no idea exactly where the Native Americans were, much of their effort was spent on locating their position. Once started, the three commanders were out of touch with each other, so Terry did not know about Crook's battle with the Sioux at the Rosebud River, which added to the Native American's confidence. Those warriors joined the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho gathered at the Little Big Horn.

On June 22, 1876, George Armstrong Custer's 655 men were ordered to search the Little Big Horn region. Custer was offered Gatling guns (rapid firing guns mounted on carriages), but he turned the offer down because the guns would slow him down in his search and often didn't work. When they came upon a path of horse tracks almost a mile wide, Custer did not follow orders to send for reinforcements. Instead, on June 25, he divided his men into three columns—one under Major Marcus Reno, one under Captain Fred Benteen, and his own column of 265 men. These units were widely separated, and unable to do much to support each other. Reno's command came under fierce attack, and took a defensive position on a bluff. Benteen's men joined them and were able to hold off the attacks.

The main attack was focused on Custer's column, and he, along with all 265 of his men were killed. Custer had always dreamed of glory; he would find his place in history at the Little Big Horn.

The Native Americans had won a major victory, but they knew it was only a matter of time before they were rounded up and sent back to the reservations.