

The Crow Indians

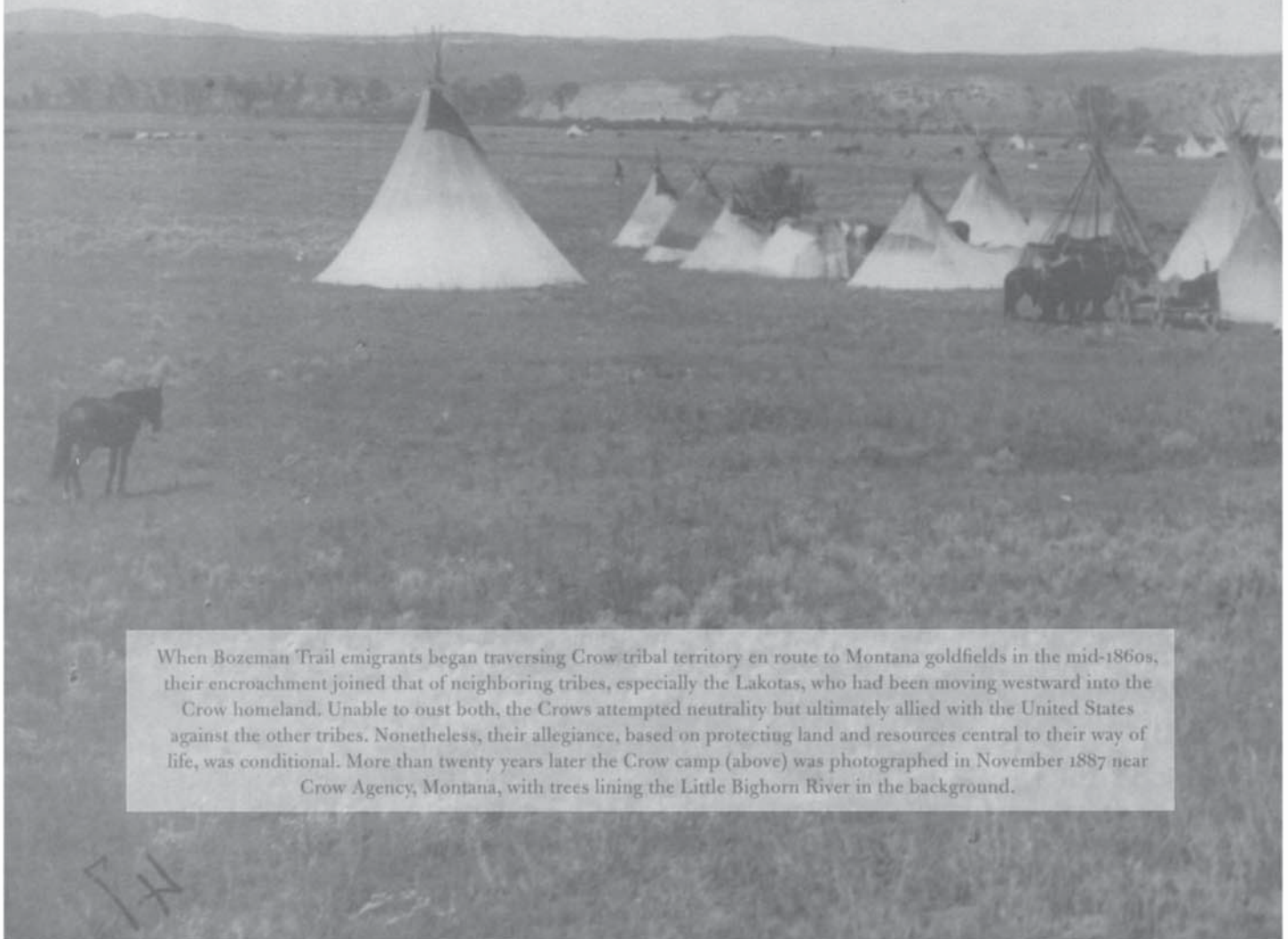
by Frank Rzczkowski

Prior to the opening of the Bozeman Trail in 1864, the United States, and white society in general, had at most an indirect effect upon the Crow people. Remote from previously established emigrant trails and occupying lands not yet exposed to settlement, the Crows' main contacts with whites had been sporadic, limited largely to fur traders, explorers, and occasional military expeditions.¹ Creation of the Bozeman Trail through lands the Crows considered theirs and the ensuing conflict between the United States and the Lakota Sioux and their allies marked a watershed for the Crows. Too often, however, Crow actions during this era have been stereotyped as an unconditional alliance with the United States against a common enemy, namely the Sioux. A closer look at the Crow response to the Bozeman Trail reveals the time as a turning point that forced the tribe to make a number of fateful deci-

sions regarding allies, enemies, and the circumstances under which they would survive as a distinct people.

To be sure, the Crow ultimately allied with the United States, but their allegiance was not unconditional. Instead, it was based on Crow desires to protect the land and resources central to their way of life. Although the Crow welcomed United States assistance in fighting the westward-expanding Lakota, they likewise opposed white occupation of their homeland and the increased emigrant pressure the Bozeman Trail brought.²

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the heart of the Crow homeland was the Powder River country. Fur traders so strongly identified this region with the Crows that they referred to it as "Absaroka," the Crows' name for their tribe. Besides encompassing the valley and watershed of the Bighorn River, the area extended



When Bozeman Trail emigrants began traversing Crow tribal territory en route to Montana goldfields in the mid-1860s, their encroachment joined that of neighboring tribes, especially the Lakotas, who had been moving westward into the Crow homeland. Unable to oust both, the Crows attempted neutrality but ultimately allied with the United States against the other tribes. Nonetheless, their allegiance, based on protecting land and resources central to their way of life, was conditional. More than twenty years later the Crow camp (above) was photographed in November 1887 near Crow Agency, Montana, with trees lining the Little Bighorn River in the background.

and the Bozeman Trail

east to the Rosebud, Tongue, and Powder rivers. Rich in game and other resources vital to Plains Indian societies, the region was prized by Crows. "The Crow country is in exactly the right place," the Crow chief Rotten Belly told trader Robert Campbell. "Everything good is to be found there. There is no country like the Crow country." In 1855 veteran fur trader Edwin Denig concurred, calling the Crows' homeland "perhaps the best game country in the world."³

The same attributes Rotten Belly and Denig extolled also made the area irresistible to neighboring tribes, the Sioux in particular. One of the few Plains tribes to increase in population during the first half of the nineteenth century, the Sioux had steadily moved westward across the plains into Crow territory. The Crows resisted this encroachment, but the attraction of immense

buffalo herds and the formation of an alliance between the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes hastened the movement. Sioux raids impoverished the Crows and led some observers to predict their eventual extermination.⁴ Although such dire forecasts proved inaccurate, by 1864, the first year emigrants traveled the Bozeman Trail, the Crows had been forced beyond the Bighorn River.⁵

The Sioux were not the only outsiders exerting pressure on Crow lands. Gold strikes at Alder Gulch and Emigrant Gulch (the latter in the northwest corner of Crow treaty lands) helped produce the early 1860s gold rush that led to creation of the Bozeman Trail. Although the whites posed a less immediate threat, the Crows regarded these miners and emigrants—like the Sioux and their allies—as interlopers.

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



Despite their relative weakness, the Crows did not passively accept Sioux or white trespass. In both 1858 and 1860, Upper Platte Agent Thomas Twiss complained of Crow raiders harassing his Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho charges. As was true with other Plains Indian societies, such raids were a means for gaining honor and status within the Crow tribe. Until the early 1860s, loss or gain of territory in such conflicts was largely incidental, but white westward expansion and diminution of the buffalo herds meant tribes were competing for a steadily shrinking resource.⁶

By 1865 the Crows could not move much farther west without abandoning the buffalo plains entirely. Not only were the Sioux applying pressure from the east and south, the Blackfeet, another long-standing Crow enemy, blocked movement to the northwest. Like the Sioux, the Blackfeet considerably outnumbered the Crows, and their excellent connections with British traders meant they were generally better armed.⁷ Caught between two powerful enemies, the Crows were running out of options.

From this perspective, Crow friendship and alliance with the whites would seem inevitable. But whites also faced Crow wrath. The tribe generally maintained friendly relations with fur traders, but not with miners. In 1863 Crow warriors attacked prospectors on the Yellowstone and Bighorn rivers, stealing horses, killing one miner, and driving the rest out of the area. In fact, in the years before the Crows lost control of the Powder River country, any intrusion by whites not connected with the fur trade was unwelcome. Several times Crows told military explorers they could travel

through the region but insisted they leave as soon as they were finished.⁸

Prior to the Bozeman Trail era, relatively few whites traveled through Crow country. Most emigrants to Montana either followed the water route up the Missouri River to Fort Benton or took the Platte Road as far as Salt Lake City before turning north to the goldfields. The Salt Lake City route was some 450 miles longer than the 600-mile Bozeman route, however, and required two crossings of the Continental Divide.⁹ The Missouri River route was complicated by the presence of northern bands of Sioux, who by 1863 had rendered the river impassable for emigrants except in large parties.¹⁰ In addition to helping prompt the search for an overland route to Montana, Sioux attacks on the river route cut the Crows off from both the fur trade and annuities promised by the Treaty of 1851.¹¹

From the Crows' viewpoint, loss of contact with the fur trade was critical. As the Crow chief Plenty Coups noted, the bow was unrivaled as a tool for hunting buffalo, but it was inferior to the gun in warfare. In this respect, Plenty Coups said, the Crows were virtually unarmed compared to their enemies. "The northern tribes [Blackfeet and Piegans] could easily trade with the Hudson's Bay people, while the tribes eastward of us [Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho] traded furs and robes to the American Fur Company for guns, powder and lead."¹²

In spring 1863, disappointed gold-seeker John Bozeman planted the seeds of future conflict when he and frontiersman John Jacobs left Montana to blaze a new emigrant trail along the eastern base of the Bighorn Mountains. The trail left the Platte Road just west

1. Edwin T. Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri: Sioux, Arickara, Assiniboine, Cree, Crow*, 2d ed., ed. John C. Ewers (Norman, 1969), 149.

2. See Colin Calloway, "The Only Way Open to Us: The Crow Struggle for Survival in the Nineteenth Century," *North Dakota History*, 53 (Summer 1986), 24-34.

3. Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 2 vols. (1902; reprint, Stanford, Calif., 1954), 2:855; David J. Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807-1840* (Lincoln, 1992), 189; James Bradley, "Arapooash," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, 10 vols. (Helena, Mont. and Boston, 1876-1940), 9:306-7; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 139.

4. Richard White, "The Winning of the West: Expansion of the Western Sioux during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of American History*, 65 (September 1978), 333-34; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 19-22, 142, 144-45, 204; Jerome A. Greene, "Lt. Palmer Writes from the Bozeman Trail, 1867-68," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 28 (July 1978), 31-32; Anthony McGinnis, *Counting Coup and Cutting Horses: Intertribal Warfare on the Northern Plains, 1738-1889* (Evergreen, Colo., 1992), 63; F. E. Server, interview by Eli S. Ricker, "Tablets," reel 2, Eli S. Ricker Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society Library, Lincoln (hereafter NSHS); James Tufts, acting governor and ex-officio superintendent of Indian Affairs, to N. G. Taylor, commissioner of Indian Affairs, November 23, 1868, in *Appropriations for Crow Indians*,

40th Cong., 3d sess., 1868-1869, H. Doc. 42, serial 1372, p. 7; George E. Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk: A History of the Oglala Sioux Indians*, 3d ed. (Norman, 1967), 91-92; Robert Utley, *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (New York, 1993), 38-39, 73.

5. Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, 91-92. Hyde says that in 1859 Crow annuities were sent by mistake to the Upper Platte Agency, home agency for the Crow's Oglala enemies. Hyde believed this mistake, combined with loss of contact with the fur trade the same year, was the main reason for the Crows being driven out of the Powder River country.

6. McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 62-63, 103; James H. Chambers, "Fort Sarpy Journal," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, 10:100; Robert H. Lowie, *The Crow Indians* (New York, 1956), 215, 218-30; Frank Raymond Secoy, *Changing Military Patterns on the Great Plains Seventeenth Century through Early Nineteenth Century* (1953; reprint, Seattle, 1966), 75-76.

7. McGinnis, *Counting Coup*, 30-31, 103-5.

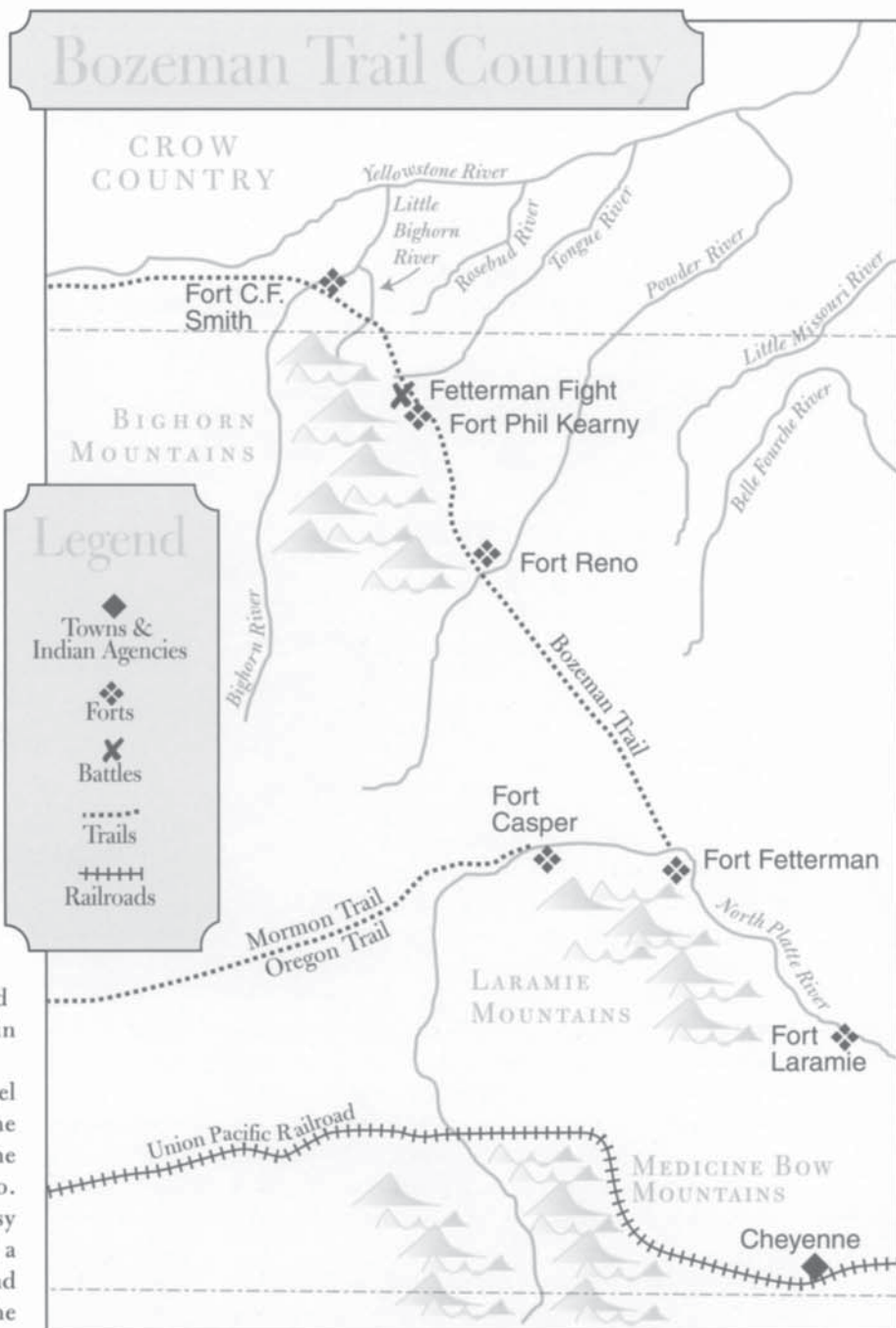
8. Granville Stuart, "The Yellowstone Expedition of 1863," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, 1:149-233; Report of Lieutenant Colonel W. F. Reynolds, in *Exploration of the Yellowstone River*, 40th Cong., 2d sess., 1867-1868, S. Doc. 77, serial 1317, pp. 16-17.

9. Merrill J. Mattes, *Indians, Infants, and Infantry: Andrew and Elizabeth Burt on the Frontier* (Lincoln, 1988), 108-11.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Crow country included the Bighorn River drainage in northern Wyoming and southeastern Montana and extended east to encompass the Rosebud, Tongue, and Powder rivers. The Bozeman Trail cut right through this territory (as shown on map at right), although by 1864 rival tribes had forced the Crows mostly west of the Bighorn River.

of Fort Laramie and skirted the east face of the Bighorn range to a crossing of the Bighorn River. From there the trail continued northwest to the Yellowstone River, then west across Bozeman Pass to the future site of Bozeman City. En route, the two were confronted by a war party of seventy-five Indians who stripped them of their clothes and equipment and ordered them out of the country. Undeterred, Bozeman advertised his shortcut to emigrants the next summer and led a train to the gold camps without incident. Three other trains followed, conveying an estimated fifteen hundred people to Montana via the trail in 1864.¹³

In 1865 the army interdicted travel on the Bozeman Trail to mount the Powder River Expedition against the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. Traffic resumed in 1866, and a clumsy attempt to secure the trail sparked a full-fledged war between the Sioux and the United States. Still, opening of the



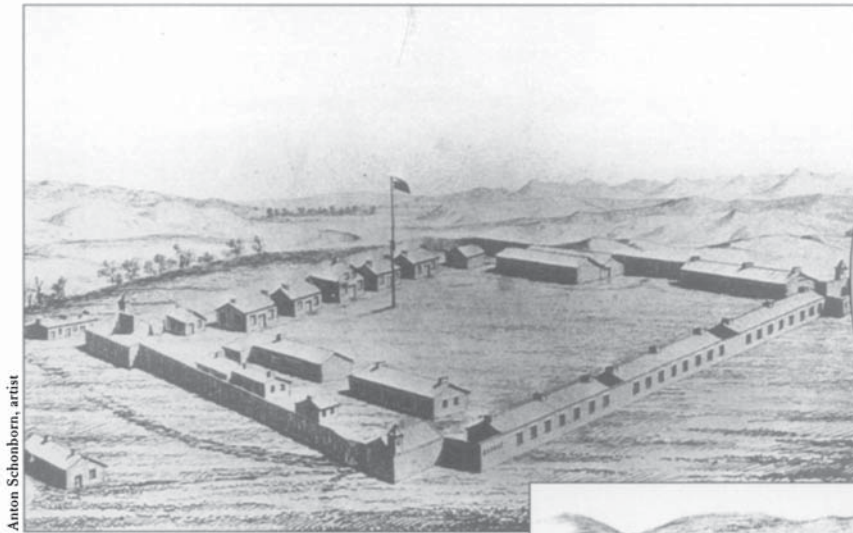
10. John Hutchinson to William P. Dole, commissioner of Indian Affairs, September 23, 1863, in *Commissioner of Indian Affairs Annual Report, 1863*, 38th Cong., 1st sess., 1863-1864, H. Doc. 1, serial 1182, p. 273; Uley, *Lance and the Shield*, 4-5, 51. The Sioux who made travel on the Missouri hazardous were not the same Sioux as those who evicted the Crows from the Powder River country. The Powder River Sioux mainly belonged to the Oglala and Brulé Sioux, while those on the Upper Missouri were Hunkpapas, Blackfeet, and Sans Arc Sioux.

11. Hutchinson to Dole, September 23, 1863, in *Commissioner of Indian Affairs Annual Report, 1863*; Samuel N. Latta to Dole, August 27, 1863, in *Commissioner of Indian Affairs Annual Report, 1863*, pp. 288-89; Major Mahlon Wilkinson to Governor Newton Edwards, ex-officio superintendent of Indian Affairs, August 31, 1864, in *Commissioner of Indian Affairs Annual Report, 1864*, 38th Cong., 2d sess., 1864-1865, H. Doc. 1, serial 1220, pp. 406-7. The Crow tribe, like the Sioux, were not a single entity. The River Crows generally ranged north of the Yellowstone; the Mountain Crows lived south of

the Yellowstone farther to the west. A third group, the Kicked-in-the-Bellies, were identified separately from the River and Mountain Crows, but lived in the same area as the Mountain Crows and will be included with them for purposes of this article. Lowie, *Crow Indians*, 4. On loss of the fur trade, see John Sunder, *Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri, 1840-1860* (Norman, 1965), 45, 59-60; Mahlon Wilkinson testimony, September 12, 1865, in *Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Report on the Condition of Indian Tribes*, 39th Cong., 2d sess., 1866-1867, S. Record 156, serial 1279, p. 416.

12. Frank B. Linderman, *Plenty Coups, Chief of the Crows* (reprint, Lincoln, 1962), 49; John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains* (Norman, 1958), 230.

13. John S. Gray, "Blazing the Bozeman and Bridger Trails," *Annals of Wyoming*, 49 (Spring 1977), 23-51. The identity of the Indians who stopped Bozeman and Jacobs has never been satisfactorily determined. See Susan Badger Doyle, "Journeys to the Land of Gold: Emigrants on the Bozeman Trail, 1863-1866," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 41 (Autumn 1991), 56-59.

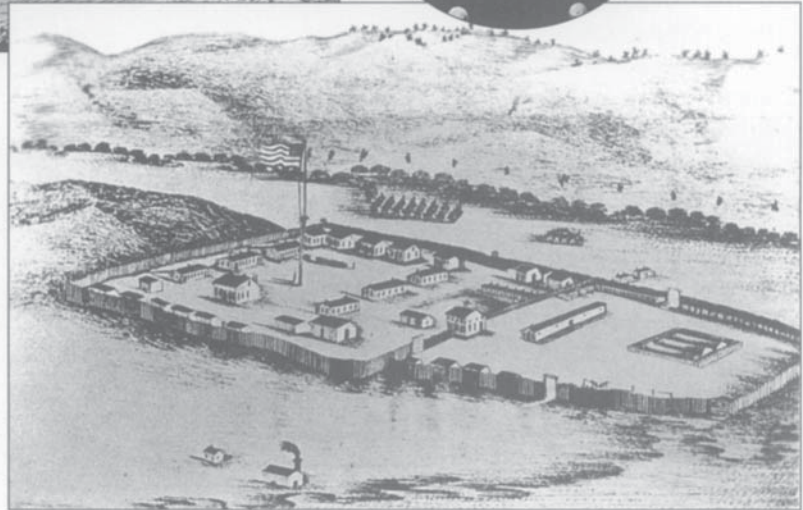


Anton Schonborn, artist



The United States government attempted to secure the Bozeman Trail through peaceful means in negotiations at Fort Laramie, but simultaneously sent Colonel Henry B. Carrington (above right, circa 1867) to occupy the route. Ultimately, Carrington could do little more than defend Forts C. F. Smith (above, 1867) and Phil Kearny (right, circa 1867).

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Antonio Nicolli, artist

Bozeman Trail itself appears to have created little conflict between Crows and whites. The Crows controlled little of the land the trail traversed, except for part of the final leg west of the Bighorn River. Moreover, the tribe was hardly in a position to contest that portion of the trail, which ran through rich hunting lands east of the Bighorn Mountains by then dominated by the Sioux.¹⁴

In a way, opening the trail benefited the Crows because it created new opportunities for contact with independent traders such as John Richard, Jr., William S. "Mac" McKenzie, John Baptiste "Big Bat" Poirier, and Matthias Mounts, who operated out of newly established towns like Bozeman. By fall 1864 several of these men had established trade relationships with the Crows. Trading was still a hazardous venture, but the Crows once again had access to a regular flow of supplies and ammunition.¹⁵

The United States government recognized the shifting balance of power in the Powder River country, and

in fall 1865 emissaries attempted to open negotiations with the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho bands in the vicinity of the trail. In so doing the government quietly permitted the Treaty of 1851 to die. Gaining permission to continue using the trail was the negotiators' main objective, but although the trail ran through the heart of Crow country as defined by the treaty, the Crows played no part; indeed, they were not even invited to parley when the negotiations were held at Fort Laramie in June 1866.¹⁶

Unfortunately for the United States, the government would prove to be as inept in dealing with the Sioux as it had been negligent in dealing with the Crows. While it attempted to secure the Bozeman Trail through peaceful means, it simultaneously moved to occupy the trail militarily. Colonel Henry B. Carrington's command of the Eighteenth Infantry arrived at Fort Laramie on June 13, 1866, even as the negotiations were underway.

14. Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, 56-81.

15. Baptiste Poirier, interview by Eli Ricker, "Tablets," reel 3, NSHS; Brian James, "John Richard Jr. and the Killing at Fort Fetterman," *Annals of Wyoming*, 43 (Fall 1971), 238; Virginia City, *Montana Post*, March 30, 1867.

16. Colonel Henry Maynadier to the commissioner of Indian Affairs, March 24, 1866, reel 82, Letters Received, Upper Platte Agency, RG 508, NSHS.

17. Colonel Henry B. Carrington, *Indian Operations on the Plains, 1866*, 50th Cong., 1st sess., 1887-1888, S. Doc. 33, serial 2504, pp. 5-6. Margaret Carrington, *Ab-sa-ra-ka, Home of the Crows* (Philadelphia, 1868), 72-80.

After Carrington's arrival, Red Cloud and other militant Lakota leaders angrily left the conference, and when Carrington's contingent headed north from Fort Laramie on June 17, the Bozeman Trail war was underway.¹⁷

The Crows learned of the events at Fort Laramie—and the Sioux response—at least as quickly as Carrington. After negotiations broke off, Red Cloud and several other Sioux chiefs visited the Crow camps—not to raid, but to seek an alliance. Bearing ceremonial gifts of tobacco and more substantial presents of horses and ammunition, the Sioux leaders asked the Crows to join them in fighting the whites and closing the trail.

The offer placed the Crows in a quandary. Several young warriors favored an alliance, but the chiefs hesitated. They knew the Sioux only as enemies, and at least once before had offered to help the whites fight the Sioux in hope of regaining the Powder River country. Politely, the Crows returned the visits but declined to join the Sioux.¹⁸ Judging from subsequent events, however, their answer was probably not a definite no. More likely, they simply made no commitment.

Having talked with the Sioux, the Crows wasted little time attempting to open communications with the soldiers. On August 27, seven Crows appeared on the opposite side of the Bighorn River from newly established Fort C. F. Smith. Steadily more Crows joined the group, until about sixty warriors clustered on the far bank. Although hindered by the lack of an interpreter, the Crows managed to tell the soldiers they belonged to a large party camped a short distance downstream and that they wished to talk. Next day the Crows reappeared, this time accompanied by an interpreter and White Mouth, a prominent Crow leader.

Through the interpreter, White Mouth told of the Sioux offer of alliance and advised that fifteen hundred hostile Sioux were camped on the Tongue River. White Mouth also spoke of a treaty the Crows had signed at Fort Benton in which they were promised a reserva-

tion. According to Lieutenant George M. Templeton, an officer at Fort C. F. Smith, White Mouth expressed eagerness to receive a reservation both for farming and trading and told the whites that "he was like a crazy man—had no place to trade." Fort C. F. Smith's commander, Captain Nathaniel C. Kinney, replied noncommittally but intimated that the government would support the Crows in any conflict with the Sioux. Providing the Crows with rations and papers attesting to their friendship, Kinney permitted them to trade with post sutlers Alvin C. Leighton and John W. Smith.¹⁹

Although Templeton's account does not say so explicitly, the context of the meeting indicates that White Mouth, having heard Red Cloud's offer, wanted to discern the government's stance in regard to the trail, the Sioux, and the Crows. The dilemma facing the tribe became apparent the next month, when scouts Jim

Bridger and Henry Williams returned from a visit to a Crow village of five hundred people on the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone. Talking with the scouts, Carrington learned that "White Mouth, Blackfoot, Rotten Tail (chiefs) insisted they were at peace and wished to be always. The young men in some cases wished to join the Sioux, and compromise their old title to this country." Despite tribal dissension, Bridger said many Crows were eager to help fight the Sioux.²⁰

A potential split among the Crows was a serious matter. The chiefs evidently felt the best chance of regaining possession of the Powder River country lay with the army. There also may have been some sentiment that a Sioux alliance would reduce the Crows to submission to their former enemy with no guarantee of continued peace between the two tribes should they succeed in driving the whites out. Worse yet, dissension posed the threat of Crows being pitted against friends

and kin. The motives and reasoning of those Crows who wished to join the Sioux is more difficult to discern. Some may have hoped to ease Sioux pressure by joining them, or they may have recognized the effect the Bozeman Trail was having already upon game resources. Still, Sioux persuasion failed to win over more than a few Crows.



Fort Laramie National Historic Site, Wyoming

If an adequate number of troops were available, wrote Lieutenant George M. Templeton (above, n.d.) in October 1866, "the Crows would be glad . . . to pitch into the Sioux and give them a good whipping."

So wrote Templeton in a diary he maintained from 1866 to 1868, during what came to be called Red Cloud's War.

18. Carrington, *Indian Operations*, 20. Half Yellow Face, a Crow scout serving with the army during the Sioux War of 1876, told Lieutenant James Bradley about the gifts of horses and ammunition. "What Half-Yellow Face Knows about the Fort Phil Kearney Massacre," book F, folder 4, box 3, MC 49, James A. Bradley Papers, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena.

19. *Ibid*; John Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed* (Lincoln, 1991), 53. A former American Fur Company employee living with the Crows was the interpreter.

20. Carrington, *Indian Operations*, 20, 22.



Fred Miller, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Nonetheless, even Crows friendly to the whites disliked the trail's presence. Not only had it been blazed without permission through a region they claimed, it scared away game, especially buffalo. In the camp on the Clarks Fork, Iron Shell told Bridger that the Crows had signed a treaty in which they gave up a route south of the Bighorn Mountains (the Bridger Cutoff) in exchange for \$25,000. In Iron Shell's opinion, the treaty gave no permission for the Bozeman Trail, but he was willing to remain at peace until the matter could be negotiated.²¹

The army's method of protecting the trail undoubtedly added to Crow ambivalence. Hamstrung by lack of troops, Carrington could do little more than defend the forts. Even near the posts, particularly at Fort Phil Kearny, Red Cloud's warriors harassed troops almost daily. The futility of trying to protect a 545-mile route with fewer than one thousand men was so evident that, to officers on the trail, retaining Crow friendship soon took priority over safeguarding a trail no emigrants dared use. "[F]rom all I can see I am of the impression that if the government does not take decided measures very soon in regards to the Sioux, that the Crows will enter a league and for the first time make war with the whites," wrote Lieutenant Templeton after an October 31 council with the Crows. He added:

If the proper number of troops could be sent out next spring, the Crows would be glad of an oppor-

21. *Ibid.*, 22.

22. Lieutenant George M. Templeton 1866-1868 diary, October 31, 1866, Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

23. On Crow actions, see *ibid.*, October 31, November 2, 11, 15, 19, 23, 1866.

24. Susan Badger Doyle, "Indian Perspectives on the Bozeman Trail," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 40 (Winter 1990), 56-67.

Crow chief Plenty Coups (left, circa 1900), who would have been in his mid to late teens during the Bozeman Trail era, later observed that his tribe could not have survived if it had been cut off from the fur trade, which armed the tribe's enemies to the north and east with guns and ammunition.

tunity to pitch into the Sioux and give them a good whipping. But as it is now they are so few in number in comparison with the Sioux that they are afraid to make war, but would rather submit to a disgraceful peace.²²

Despite Templeton's fears, the Crows showed no signs of defecting to the Sioux. In fact, the Crows were beginning to realize the advantages of neutrality. The Sioux, concentrating their efforts on harassing Fort Phil Kearny, were still trying to convert the Crows to allies, and Sioux preoccupation with fighting the whites freed the Crows from Sioux raiding. Already the Sioux had effectively stopped emigrant traffic on the trail, which meant that buffalo and other game remained undisturbed. With greater freedom of movement and an abundance of game, the Crows moved their village close to Fort C. F. Smith in late October and in early November mounted a large buffalo hunt for robes to trade with Smith and Leighton. The Crows also used their position to shut other tribes out of the trading loop, forbidding a party of Cheyennes from trading without a permit from the post commander. The Crow position as an intermediary led a group of seventy-six Arapaho lodges to join their village in order to trade with Smith.²³

The Crows further demonstrated their ability to maintain neutrality when the Sioux scored their great-

25. Spotted Blue Body, a Miniconjou Sioux, said four Crows were present among the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho combatants at the Fetterman fight. Spotted Blue Belly testimony, May 9, 1867, Fort Laramie, in *Investigation of Fort Phil Kearny Massacre* (hereafter *Investigation*), roll 1, microform M740, RG 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter NA). Half Yellow Face told Lieutenant Bradley the Crow participants consisted of three men and one woman. "What Half-Yellow Face Knows."

26. Templeton diary, December 28, 31, 1866, January 2, 1867; Captain N. C. Kinney report, February 9, 1867, in *Investigation*.

27. "What Half-Yellow Face Knows."

est victory over the army. The engagement, the so-called “Fetterman Massacre” (referred to by the Indians as the “Hundred Men Killed Fight”), came on December 21, 1866, when a force sent out from Fort Phil Kearny to relieve a wood train under attack was itself ambushed and destroyed, with all eighty-one men in the command killed.²⁴ The Crows learned of the fight sooner than the soldiers at Fort C. F. Smith—indeed, at least four Crows had fought with the Sioux and Cheyennes in the battle.²⁵

The Fetterman Massacre shocked the army and the nation, but it also marked a watershed for the Crows. Perhaps fearful that the army would abandon the forts—and the region—to the Sioux, the Crows resumed their overtures of assistance. At the same time the Sioux were warning the Crows to move away from the forts before they became embroiled in the conflict. Moreover, the Fetterman debacle could not have improved Crow confidence in the army’s fighting ability. Templeton accurately stated the Crows’ position when he observed: “The Crows are in a quandary about the Sioux. They have received orders from them to leave our vicinity and they are afraid to disobey, and yet would like to remain and help the whites.” Captain Kinney reported that several Crows had volunteered to carry messages between Fort C. F. Smith and Fort Phil Kearny before the massacre but that none would do so afterwards.²⁶

For some Crows, the idea of joining the Sioux was anathema under any circumstances. According to Half Yellow Face, Crows who had been camping with their

erstwhile enemies separated from them after the Fetterman fight. To drive the point home, Crow raiders took five Sioux scalps and sent a message via an elderly Sioux prisoner that they would kill every Sioux who fell into their hands.²⁷

Although the Crows were unwilling to serve without compensation, Kinney was able to formalize the relationship between the army and the tribe in January by hiring ten Crows as scouts and spies. The Crow village near Fort C. F. Smith was making preparations to leave for the Wind River valley, and Kinney did not care to lose his only source of reliable information.²⁸ Nevertheless, groups of Crows, ranging in size from a few individuals to whole villages, continued to frequent the area around C. F. Smith for the rest of the winter, trading and hunting. Those Crows who did remain evidently perceived little threat from the Sioux.

Sioux reaction during winter and spring 1866–1867 is difficult to gauge. The Sioux continued to warn the Crows to move away from the whites, but there are no indications of aggression against the Crows over the winter. Indeed, the Sioux apparently went out of their way to avoid having to fight the Crows. In this respect, the Crows’ presence may well have saved the small garrison at Fort C. F. Smith from attack. Kinney acknowledged as much when he reported that no hostile Indians had been sighted near C. F. Smith during the winter, partly due to the weather “but chiefly to the fact of the Crows being camped within a few miles.” Both the Sioux and the whites took advantage of the

Even Crows friendly to the whites resented the Bozeman Trail. Crow headman Blackfoot (below, second from left, 1871) rejected treaty overtures and blamed emigrants and gold seekers for his tribe’s wars and misfortunes. Another chief, Iron Bull (right, front row center, 1881), served as an army courier and thus helped strengthen ties between the tribe and the U.S. military.



W. H. Jackson, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



F. Jay Haynes, photographer, Haynes Fund Coll., MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Crows' position as intermediaries to obtain information about and communicate with their opponents. In January the Sioux sent information via the Crows that they planned to attack Fort C. F. Smith with three thousand warriors. Kinney later used the Crows to deliver a message to a Sioux chief who was believed to be wavering between peace and war.²⁹

As a result, the Crows enjoyed freedom of movement during January and February 1867. Blackfoot's band of Kicked-in-the-Bellies arrived near the fort in early February, and Kinney's Crow scouts continued to gather information. Several Crows, including Long Horse, The Bear in the Water, The Dog that Bats His Eye, and Iron Bull, agreed to serve as couriers for \$33.00 per month, although some officers considered their services less than reliable. In March, for example, Templeton grew exasperated with a pair of couriers carrying mail to Phil Kearny when they turned back upon sighting buffalo at Lodgegrass Creek. "I don't know what ideas they have of running courier," he observed.³⁰

Actually, the Crows knew exactly what they were doing. For the Indians, reporting the movements of buffalo during winter, often a season of scarcity, was far more important than delivering messages between forts. The presence of buffalo also called for a heightened state of alertness, in case the Sioux were following the herds. Just where the Sioux were located became a matter of increasing concern as spring approached because the Crows were finding it difficult to maintain their dual role. One Crow who had visited a Sioux village, for example, returned with word that the Sioux were planning to fight both the whites and the Crows unless the Crows committed themselves to an alliance. Sioux pressure may have had an effect. On March 18, Templeton reported that eight lodges of Crows had supposedly joined the Sioux. There were

also rumors that even more Crows were planning to join the Sioux after trading with the whites for powder.³¹

The Sioux continued to pressure the Crows through spring 1867, but service as couriers had strengthened ties between the tribe and the army. Templeton, who assiduously kept track of the Crows' disposition, said the couriers influenced other members of the tribe. "I think I can notice a difference in the demeanor of the Indians since the return of the couriers," he wrote.

"They seem to think there are more white people than they had any idea of." As the weather improved, Crow couriers made the trip from C. F. Smith to Phil Kearny with increasing frequency, while others camped in the vicinity of the Bighorn post. Some thirty lodges were camped near the fort in mid-April, and Long Horse, accompanied by some Nez Percés, brought his band to trade in early June.³²

Visible signs of a Crow-white friendship brought about a Sioux ultimatum. Although the Sioux had inflicted heavy losses on the troops manning the forts and had succeeded in halting emigrant traffic, they had failed to drive the whites out of the Powder River country entirely. With another summer of warfare in the offing, the Sioux could no longer tolerate continued Crow friendship and assistance to the troops. In May bands of Sioux and Cheyennes hung about Fort C. F. Smith, running off mules belonging to the post sutler and some Crow ponies.³³ Until then, the Crows' presence had largely insulated the fort

from the sort of attacks that had been taking place at Phil Kearny for more than half a year.

For a time, the Crows continued to play one side against the other. In late June, when twelve Indians



Acting Montana Territorial Governor Thomas Meagher (above, 1865) authorized formation of the Montana Militia after Gallatin Valley settlers panicked over John Bozeman's murder just east of the Bridger Mountains. Indians, alternately identified as Blackfeet, then Crow, were blamed for the killing.

28. The Wind River region was apparently a traditional wintering spot. Lowie, *Crow Indians*, 4.

29. Kinney report, February 9, 1867, in *Investigation; Returns from U.S. Military Posts, Fort C. F. Smith, January 1867*, roll 1190, microform M617, RG 98, Records of U.S. Army Commands, NA (hereafter Army Com. Records); and Virginia City, *Montana Post*, March 16, 1867.

30. Templeton diary, January 23, February 5, 6, 15, 18, 27, March 6, 1867. Blackfoot was also known as Sits in the Middle of the Land. Peter Nabokov, *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* (1967; reprint, New York, 1970), 201; Edward Curtis, *The North American Indian*, 20 vols. (1909; reprint, New York, 1976), 4:51.

31. Templeton diary, March 10, 18, 25, 1867. Templeton received the information about Crow defections from Medicine Wolf Bow, described as a "Minnasaperrie," which may be a corruption of Minnetarees, another name for the Hidatsas. Chittenden, *American Fur Trade*, 2:858.

32. Templeton diary, March 29, April 17, June 2, 1867. Templeton's March-May entries refer almost weekly to Crow couriers arriving at or departing from Fort C. F. Smith.

33. Returns from U.S. Military Posts, Fort C. F. Smith, May 1867, roll 1190, microform M617, RG 98, Army Com. Records.

34. Templeton diary, June 25, 1867.

35. See the Virginia City, *Montana Post*, April 27, 1867. For Bozeman's death, see the May 4, 1867 issue.

drove off thirty-nine mules and four horses from C. F. Smith, the Crows were accused of helping the raiders. When it appeared that the stampeded stock was headed toward the fort, some of the Crows camped nearby galloped between the animals and the post, turning them back toward the Sioux. Such cooperation may have been appreciated by the raiders, but not by the post commander, who promptly ordered all Crows away from the fort.³⁴ Compared to the Fetterman fight and other episodes in the Bozeman Trail war, these two raids seem of little significance. For the Crows, however, they demonstrated how untenable neutrality was becoming.

Indeed, events in Montana now threatened to accomplish what Sioux entreaties and gifts could not. Panicked first by the Fetterman Massacre and the reported presence of hostile Sioux, as well as the death of John Bozeman at the hands of Indians near Livingston, settlers in the Gallatin Valley urged raising a military force to guard the settlements, which acting Governor Thomas Meagher subsequently authorized.³⁵ Those joining the "Montana Militia," as it was called, were promised the right to keep any spoils of war they captured from "hostile" Indians.³⁶

Tom Cover, Bozeman's companion, had identified the killers as either Blackfeet or Bloods, but rumors persisted that Crows were responsible, and the Montana Militia commander gave the rumors credence in his first dispatch. "I had no idea that the Crows were willing en masse to break their peaceful relations with the whites and go to war," the commander said,

but just last night I had a conversation with five men just from Ft. Smith who say that the Crows will first help take that fort, and then pass to the northern part of the territory through this valley. It was they who killed Bozeman and wounded Cover. I believe they are the worst of all.

The *Montana Post* fanned suspicion further. Earlier, the paper had recommended arming the Crows against the Sioux, while holding their families hostage as a guarantee of good behavior. Now the paper printed letters from members of the militia alleging the Crows were

sheltering Bozeman's killers in their camp, stealing horses, and plotting to join the Sioux.³⁷

Greed spurred such warmongering, for Indian scares were profitable. Money could be made from freighting supplies and contracting with the government for goods at highly inflated prices.³⁸ Lieutenant Templeton grasped the ulterior motives of many when he wrote, "every one seems to be trying to see how much he can make off the government." In addition, Montanans had long speculated about the mineral wealth Crow lands might contain. Crow efforts to take advantage of the conflict by remaining neutral and insulating themselves against attacks by the Sioux fostered misunderstandings among Montanans, who were quick to interpret the lack of Sioux-Crow hostilities as evidence that the two tribes had formed an alliance.³⁹

Neither Sioux nor Crow warriors ever attempted to attack the Gallatin settlements. For its part, the militia escorted a supply train to Fort C. F. Smith in late May and early June. En route to the Bighorn River it met parties of Sioux and Crows, but the Indians offered no resistance. Without explaining who the Indians were or the cause, a militia officer reported that the militia hanged one Indian and shot two others during the trip. Meanwhile, on August 23, a prospecting party exploring in Crow territory along the Stillwater River was surrounded and attacked by a group of two hundred Indians. Two miners were killed, and the two survivors driven off. A militia force sent to relieve the group and recover the bodies encountered a band of Crows, killing one and recovering items identified as belonging to the dead miners.⁴⁰

That the Crows had been defending their own country and apparently allowed the two survivors to escape was ignored in militia letters and reports. But United States officials, striving to maintain friendly relations with one of the few tribes not actively fighting the whites, took a dimmer view of the militia's exploits.

36. August H. Chapman to N. G. Taylor, commissioner of Indian Affairs, July 5, 1867, in *Commissioner of Indian Affairs Annual Report, 1867*, 40th Cong., 2d sess., 1867-1868, H. Doc. 1, serial 1326, pp. 259-60. Leforge, a white man who later married a Crow and became a member of the tribe, served in the Montana Militia in 1867. Leforge said, "The first Montana Militia was composed largely of ex-ruffians of the Missouri-Kansas border. As soldiers they were utterly unruly. One company drowned its first captain. . . . Desertion was a matter to be determined merely by personal inclination." Thomas B. Marquis, *Memoirs of a White Crow Indian (Thomas H. Leforge)* (1928; reprint, Lincoln, 1974), 19.

37. Virginia City, *Montana Post*, April 13, May 11, June 8, July 20, 27, 1867. On the Crows sheltering Bozeman's killers, see Templeton diary, May 6, 1867.

38. Contracts for supplies totaling more than \$980,000 were presented to the government. An army investigator eventually recommended payment of \$515,343. Merrill G. Burlingame, *The Montana Frontier* (Missoula, Mont., 1980), 125.

39. Templeton diary, June 18, 1867. On reports of gold in Crow lands, see the Virginia City, *Montana Post*, February 3, 1866, September 9, 1867, and March 7, 1868. See also Thomas Francis Meagher to commissioner of Indian Affairs, December 14, 1865, and April 20, 1866, in *Commissioner of Indian Affairs Annual Report, 1866*, 40th Cong., 2d sess., 1867-1868, H. Doc. 1, serial 1284, pp. 196-97, 200. Allegations of a Sioux-Crow alliance filled columns of the *Montana Post* throughout spring and summer 1867. On confusion over Crow intentions, see "Volunteer," dispatch to Virginia City, *Montana Post*, July 27, 1867.

40. Virginia City, *Montana Post*, July 13, August 31, 1867.

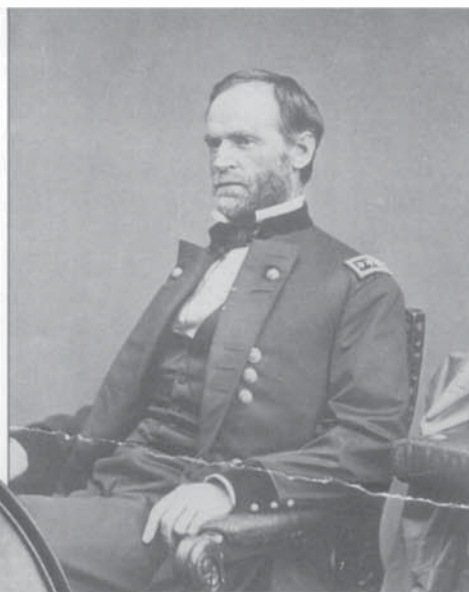
Fearing that Meagher's militia would ignite a war with the Crows, Lieutenant General William T. Sherman (right, 1877) intervened, castigating Meagher for his actions and disbanding the volunteers. For the Crows, who never attempted to attack the Gallatin settlements, matters took an even better turn soon after with the appointment of General Alfred Sully (below, n.d.) to an 1867 peace commission formed as a result of the Fetterman fight.

Sully was an ally who supported reinstating Crow lands.

Memories of the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, in which a unit of Colorado militia sparked a war by slaughtering a village of friendly Cheyennes, spurred both the army and the Office of Indian Affairs to intervene. Lieutenant General William Tecumseh Sherman, rarely an advocate of softness towards Indians, disavowed Meagher's actions in raising the militia and castigated him for threatening to bring on a war with the Crows. The Office of Indian Affairs, which rarely found itself in harmony with Sherman, wholeheartedly agreed.⁴¹

Meanwhile, the creation of a peace commission, formed as a result of the Fetterman fight, offered an opportunity for the Crows to voice their complaints and desires. In February 1867 Secretary of the Interior Orville Browning ordered the six-member board to gather information about the battle and investigate the causes of the Bozeman conflict. In addition to hearing the Sioux side of the story, the commission had orders to meet with friendly tribes and confirm their allegiance to the United States. Judge John F. Kinney was specifically assigned to meet with the Crows.⁴²

On the surface, composition of the committee seemed to bode well for the Crows. General Alfred Sully, an old acquaintance of the Crows, was on the Crow side from the start. In a letter to Browning, Sully claimed that maintaining friendly relations with the Crows was not only good policy but "an act of justice." Sully reiterated the history of the Sioux conquest of



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



D. F. Barry, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

the region and his own belief that Sioux hostility "forfeited all claim on our Government to any recognition of their rights and title to that country to the exclusion of the Crows." Sully and the rest of the commission advocated sending a sufficient military force to drive out the Sioux and reinstate the Crows. The government could then negotiate with the Crows for necessary roads.⁴³

Sully's letter carried the promise of everything the Crows had sought for the past eight years. If the commission held to Sully's views and the government acted upon them, the Crows could be the beneficiaries of a 180-degree turn in the tribal power structure on the northern plains.

While the rest of the commission gathered information and prepared to meet with other tribes, Kinney attempted to meet with the Crows. The Crows were more than willing to meet with Kinney but disliked the prospect of venturing all the way to Fort Laramie, preferring instead to meet at the more congenial surroundings of Fort C. F. Smith. Eventually General Henry Wessells, Carrington's successor, convinced them to come to Fort Phil Kearny, but they refused to venture farther south.⁴⁴ Three Crow warriors had recently disappeared, and the Crows suspected the Sioux had killed them.⁴⁵

41. Ibid., September 7, 1867; *Secretary of War Annual Report, 1867*, 40th Cong., 2d sess., 1867-1868, H. Doc. 1, serial 1324, p. 33; Robert G. Athearn, *William Tecumseh Sherman and the Settlement of the West* (Norman, 1956), 133-48; John Marszalek, *Sherman: A Soldier's Passion for Order* (New York, 1993), 379-83; Chapman to Taylor, July 5, 1867, in *Commissioner of Indian Affairs Annual Report, 1867*, 259-60; Virginia City, *Montana Post*, February 8, 1868.

42. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, "Letter on Indian Hostilities," 40th Cong., 1st sess., 1867, S. Doc. 13, serial 1308, pp. 55-56.

43. General Alfred Sully to Secretary of the Interior O. H. Browning, April 4, 1867, in *Investigation*.

44. Templeton diary, April 12, 1867. On arranging a meeting at Fort Laramie, see General Henry Wessells to General Alfred Sully, April 22, 1867; General C. C. Augur to General Alfred Sully, April 26, 1867; General Alfred Sully to General N. G. Palmer, April 26, 1867; and General N. G. Palmer to General Alfred Sully, April 30, 1867, in *Investigation*.

45. General Henry Wessells to Assistant Adjutant General Brevette Major Henry G. Litchfield, April 26, 1867, reel 5, RG 533, Department of the Platte, Register of Letters Received, NSHS (hereafter Platte Letters Rec'd).

Delayed en route by commission business, Kinney arrived at Phil Kearny on May 31 only to find the majority of Crows had decamped. Their departure for a buffalo hunt in the Tongue River valley may have been hastened by a Sioux raid that captured forty-three Crow ponies. Only a small group of Crows, led by White Mouth, Bad Elk, and Roman Nose, remained. Kinney promptly asked Roman Nose to bring the rest of the tribe back for a council.⁴⁶

Kinney's arrival occurred at a critical juncture. Crow attempts to reap the benefits of neutrality had not only provoked renewed Sioux hostilities but were threatening to alienate the army as well. Fort C. F. Smith's new commander, Lieutenant Colonel Luther Bradley, was suspicious of Crow intentions, and even Lieutenant Templeton feared the Crows would assist the Sioux in attacking the fort by providing information about the post and its defenders.⁴⁷

At Phil Kearny, Kinney learned that the Crows were still willing to fight the Sioux, but Lakota aggression had prompted them to reopen negotiations for an informal truce. Impressed by the Crows' precarious position, Kinney recommended extending protection and assistance, including foodstuffs such as flour, beans, rice, sugar, corn, and coffee. Kinney included a request by Thin Belly that the Crows be compensated for the loss of ponies incurred while waiting for the commission to arrive. More significantly, Kinney agreed to advocate restoring lost lands to the Crows. As a last act before departing, Kinney dispatched guide Rafael Gallegos and trader John Richard, Jr., who had interpreted at the meeting, to join the tribe and deflect Sioux influence.⁴⁸

There are no accounts of the meeting from Crow sources, but if Kinney expressed the same sentiments to the Crows that he did to his superiors, the Indians could only have come away from the meeting with heightened hopes. Moreover, subsequent Crow actions and the Sioux response to Kinney's visit provide clues to the effect the meeting had on the tribe. On June 18, Crows cooperated with troops at Phil Kearny to thwart a Sioux horse-stealing raid, and at C. F. Smith Crows warned the garrison of an impending Sioux attack, a warning fulfilled when the Sioux unsuccessfully at-

tacked a hay contractor's camp on August 1. Gestures of Crow friendship were clouded, however, by a report from a Crow named The Swan that alleged the Crows were hiding the presence of six hundred Sioux in their camp.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, Richard and Gallegos had joined Crazy Head's camp on the Little Bighorn River. According to Gallegos, the Crows had agreed to move out of the area, but before they could do so a Sioux messenger arrived with word that the Sioux were approaching and that the Crows could either trade with them willingly or fight. The Crows decided to trade with the Sioux and then attempt to move away. Fighting the Sioux, the chiefs decided, would result in the loss of Crow horses and many warriors. But even trading was at best a bad bargain because the Crows would have to trade many of their best horses and accept inferior animals in return. When the decision was reached, Gallegos, Richard, and about forty Crows slipped out of camp, fearing to remain behind lest they be killed. The group arrived at C. F. Smith on July 11, where their report of the Sioux threats caused a general exodus of Crows from the fort's vicinity.⁵⁰

When Gallegos returned to Crazy Head's camp, he interrogated the chiefs about whether any Crows had traded ammunition to the Sioux. The chiefs were adamant they had not done so. In Gallegos's opinion, the Crows wanted to retain their ammunition for self-defense. His testimony is eloquent on the threats the Crows faced. "[B]eing so inferior in numbers to the hostile Indians, they were in constant fear of them, expecting every day a fight . . . while I was with them their village was constantly guarded against their attacks, and their horses kept close about their camps, for fear of their being stolen by the Sioux."⁵¹

Gallegos's testimony showed that the Crows' meeting with Kinney had not eased the tribe's situation. In some respects the Crows were worse off than they had been before. Unless the United States abandoned its defensive policy and committed enough troops to drive the Sioux out of the region, the Crows would continue to be vulnerable. The final breakdown of Crow-Sioux relations would also make it increasingly difficult for the Crows to hunt buffalo and prepare vital supplies of meat for the coming winter.

The tumultuous events of late spring and early summer persuaded the Crows to abandon neutrality and

46. Kinney report, June 4, 1867, in *Investigation*.

47. Wessells to Litchfield, April 11, 1867, Platte Letters Rec'd; Templeton diary, July 18, 1867.

48. Kinney report, June 4, 1867, in *Investigation*; Captain N. C. Kinney to Secretary of the Interior Orville H. Browning, October 7, 1867, in *ibid.*; Templeton diary, July 11, 1867.

49. Thomas Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers: Indian Scouts and Auxiliaries with the United States Army, 1860-90* (Lincoln, 1982), 39; Templeton diary, July 15, 17, 1867. Kappler lists The Swan as one of the signers of the May 7, 1868, treaty between the United States and the Mountain Crows. Charles Kappler, ed., *Indian Affairs: Laws, and Treaties*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1904), 2:1011.

50. Raphael Gallegos testimony, August 4, 1867, in *Investigation*; Templeton diary, July 11, 12, 14, 16, 18, 1867.

51. Gallegos testimony, in *Investigation*.

ally with the United States. Although events and outside pressures had made it impossible for the tribe to maintain its neutrality, the final decision to reject a Sioux alliance was a conscious Crow choice, based upon the potential benefits and costs of such a move. Siding with the United States, embodied for the Crows by representatives such as Kinney and Sully, meant they might regain the Powder River country *provided* the United States proved willing to commit the necessary force to evict the Sioux. Whether the public and official policymakers were willing to do so in the wake of the Sand Creek incident, the Fetterman fight, and the general antimilitary mood of the country following the Civil War was another matter.

Additionally, other members of the commission were more inclined to recognize Sioux control of the region via conquest rather than honor Crow treaty rights. As early as June, several commissioners argued for abandoning the trail and ceding control to the Sioux. Even Kinney, the Crows' main supporter, pursued an agenda ultimately incompatible with tribal goals. Sympathetic to the Crows' loss of the Powder River county, Kinney nonetheless had a different idea of what the tribe's future should be. Instead of permitting the Crows to continue their nomadic, hunt-based life-style, Kinney saw restoration of the Powder River country as a first step in transforming them into a sedentary, agricultural, Christianized people. What Kinney saw in the Crows was an opportunity to "civilize" a tribe without first subduing it militarily. In this respect, restoring the Crows to the Powder River country would actually be counterproductive to Kinney's stated goal.⁵²

It was a fundamental difference in objectives, and further evidence of it came on July 20, 1867, when Congress appointed a seven-member commission to negotiate an end to the Bozeman Trail conflict. Comprising the panel were Commissioner of Indian Affairs Nathaniel G. Taylor, Senator John B. Henderson, Indian Agent Samuel F. Tappan, John Sanborn (late of the Fetterman commission), and generals William T. Sherman, William S. Harney, and Alfred H. Terry. The absence of the Crows' two chief supporters, Sully and Kinney, was almost as conspicuous as the presence of Sanborn, who advocated acknowledging Sioux dominion over the Powder River country. As it organized in

St. Louis in early August, the commission dispatched two representatives to gather the Indians for a fall council at Fort Laramie. Geminien Beauvais was to contact the Sioux, Dr. Henry Matthews the Crows.⁵³

Matthews arrived at C. F. Smith on September 12 to find at least some Crows in a restive mood.⁵⁴ Troubles with the militia had crested in August with the attack on the mining party, and the Crows would soon want to begin their fall hunt to lay in food for winter. Whether they could do so might depend on federal ability to keep the Sioux occupied. Matthews received a cordial reception in an initial meeting with about a dozen Crow headmen, but he noted that "one or two of their speakers touched upon our occupancy of this country, in such a manner, as . . . would lead one to infer that they did not acquiesce in it very cordially." More ominously, the chiefs said the young warriors violently opposed making a trip to Fort Laramie for council.⁵⁵

A week later Long Horse brought in a group of his followers for an acrimonious talk with Matthews. Long Horse's specific grievances are impossible to ascertain; Templeton reported only that his conduct was "saucy" and that after being ordered to keep quiet the chief left the fort in a huff. On the other hand, the Crows assisted in a search for two deserters two days later, and on September 24 Iron Bull, himself a prominent chief, signed on to carry mail twice a month to Phil Kearny for \$100.00 per month. Three other Crows agreed to carry mail for \$33.33 a month.⁵⁶

If some Crows were confrontational and others cooperative, each group had good reason. Lack of military action had left the Crows at the mercy of the Sioux throughout the summer. Kinney's advice to stay away from the Sioux, while reasonable, also meant the tribe could not hunt buffalo, and by fall 1867 the Crows faced the prospect of starvation. Indeed, by January 1868, Lieutenant Colonel Luther Bradley, commanding Fort C. F. Smith and the Mountain District, estimated that fully half the Mountain Crows would need assistance to prevent suffering.⁵⁷ Through February 1868, Matthews reported he had purchased twenty-five head of cattle and one hundred sacks of flour from supply

52. Commissioner N. B. Buford report, June 6, 1867, and John B. Sanborn report, July 8, 1867, in *Letter on Indian Hostilities*, 40th Cong., 1st sess., S. Doc. 3, serial 1308, pp. 67-71; Captain N. C. Kinney to N. G. Taylor, commissioner of Indian Affairs, June 17, 1867, reel 82, RG 508, Letters Received, Upper Platte Agency, NSHS; Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, 2 vols. (Lincoln, 1984), 1:485-88.

53. *Commissioner of Indian Affairs Annual Report, 1868*, 40th Cong., 3d sess., 1868-1869, H. Doc. 1, serial 1366, p. 486; *New York Times*, August 11, 1867.

54. Templeton diary, September 12, 1867. Some writers list the agent sent to the Crows as Dr. Washington Matthews. Commission records and the agent's own reports identify him as Dr. Henry Matthews, who had previously served as post surgeon at Fort C. F. Smith. See also Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign*, 74-75.

55. Dr. Matthews to N. G. Taylor, September 13, 1867, entry 663, box 3, RG 48, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, NA (hereafter Sec. Interior Records).

Like Sully, United States Judge John F. Kinney was a member of the 1867 peace commission and a Crow ally. But where the Crows hoped to maintain their traditional way of life, Kinney saw restoration of the Powder River country as the first step toward transforming the Crows into a Christianized agricultural people. That the latter was realized, at least in part, was confirmed in this early twentieth-century view (right) of Crow farmers working in the Black Lodge District of Two Medicine Rocks.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

officers at C. F. Smith to provision the Crows, who were “clamorous for food.”⁵⁸ During the fur-trade era, the Crow trade had been restricted to exchanges for what might be called luxury items—goods that made life easier but were not essential to survival. Now the Crows were relying on the government for food and clothing. Instead of enabling them to maintain their independence, cooperation with the United States was making them dependent.

In subsequent meetings, Matthews continued to urge that a Crow delegation go to Fort Laramie. He also sent Crow couriers to the Sioux and Cheyenne camps to bring them to council. Matthews had greater success in the first endeavor than in the second, although White Forehead, returning from a Matthews-sponsored mission, reported that the Sioux had agreed to suspend hostilities until after the Fort Laramie negotiations ended. Even more interesting was White Forehead’s report that a war party of Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapahos, and Crows was leaving for a raid against the Snakes. Three days later a supply train arriving at C. F. Smith reported that when it had met this war party, some three hundred warriors strong; the Indians had sent a Crow emissary to the train to assure the soldiers they had no hostile intent.⁵⁹

When Matthews finally convinced the Crows to make the 327-mile trip to Fort Laramie to meet the commission, the decision may have hinged more on Sioux willingness to suspend hostilities than

Matthews’s persuasiveness.⁶⁰ Whatever the circumstances, some three hundred Mountain Crows and Kicked-in-the-Bellies, led by nearly twenty prominent chiefs, including Blackfoot, Bear’s Tooth, White Horse, Wolf Bull, and Shot in the Face, left C. F. Smith on October 13, 1867. Accompanying them were Matthews and a military escort.⁶¹

The peace commission’s councils on November 12–13 exposed fundamental differences in Crow and white goals. Taylor opened the proceedings by proposing the Crows sell off the land on which the whites had trespassed. In return, the Crows would receive an agency, farm implements, and teachers “so that your children may become as intelligent as the whites.” No mention was made of the Bozeman Trail or the Sioux presence on Crow lands. Taylor’s only concession was to offer the Crows the right to hunt on their ceded lands “so long as the buffalo remain there.”⁶²

Bear’s Tooth quickly made the Crow stance clear. Standing in the center of the council circle, he said the whites had no right to seek further concessions. “It is my white father who will answer yes, yes, to all the requests I shall make of him,” he declared, adding:

Call back your young men from the mountains of the bighorn sheep. They have run over our country; they have destroyed the growing wood and the green grass; they have set fire to our lands. Fathers, your young men have devastated the country and killed my animals, the elk, the deer, the antelope, my buffalo. They do not kill them to eat them; they leave them to rot where they fall. Fathers, if I went

56. Templeton diary, September 21, 23, 24, 1867; Returns from U.S. Military Posts, Fort C. F. Smith, September 1867, in *Investigation*.

57. Luther Bradley to Dr. Matthews, January 10, 1868, roll 488, Letters Received, Montana Superintendency, 1864–1868, microfilm M234, RG 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, NA.

58. Matthews to Taylor, February 18, 1868, entry 663, box 3, Sec. Interior Records.

59. Templeton diary, September 26, October 23, 26, 1867.

60. Louis Simonin, *The Rocky Mountain West in 1867*, trans. Wilson O. Clough (Lincoln, 1966), 93. Simonin says the Sioux could have prevented the Crows from making the trip to Laramie had they so desired.

61. Templeton diary, October 13, 1867; Simonin, *Rocky Mountain West*, 93; *New York Times*, December 23, 1867.

62. Simonin, *Rocky Mountain West*, 100–5.

into your country to kill your animals, what would you say?

Reminding the commissioners that the Crows had rejected Sioux overtures to fight the whites, Bear's Tooth noted that past Crow-white relations had not always been smooth. Once he had gone to meet with the officers at C. F. Smith, "but they responded by putting their fists in my face and throwing me to the ground."⁶³

Another Crow headman, Blackfoot, said the Crows had come to doubt the worth of signing any more treaties. Like Bear's Tooth, he rejected the idea of learning to farm and the possibility of ceding land coveted by the whites. He condemned the presence of the Bozeman Trail, telling the commissioners to "recall your young men who have camped all along this path and all those who seek for gold. They are the cause of all our wars and misfortunes." After a third Crow repeated Bear's Tooth and Blackfoot's injunction to close the Bozeman Trail, the council, exhausted by three hours of speeches, adjourned until the next morning.⁶⁴

Taylor's second speech could scarcely have been more satisfactory to the Crows than his first. Insisting on retaining their lands and closing the Bozeman Trail, the Crows said they would not abandon their hunting life-style. In cold, formal remarks, Taylor bluntly warned them that disappearance of the buffalo was inevitable. They must select a reservation now, before whites occupied all their lands. As for the Bozeman

Trail, Taylor promised that the matter would be given consideration but said a decision on whether to abandon the route would not be made until next spring. To get the Crows to sign a treaty, Taylor said the government would consider "re-ceding" the Powder River country to the Crows if abandoning the trail led to an end to Sioux hostilities.⁶⁵

With equal bluntness, Blackfoot said his people would not give up their way of life until they had to. The quickest way to achieve peace, he said, would be to give up the Bozeman Trail immediately. According to Blackfoot, the Crows had spoken with the Sioux chiefs Red Cloud and Man Afraid of His Horses (Blackfoot's brother-in-law), and both had refused to consider a treaty until the trail was abandoned.⁶⁶

Likewise, the Crows unanimously refused to sign the treaty the commissioners offered. They had three objections: first, the Sioux were not present; second, the treaty made no mention of abandoning the Bozeman Trail; and third, all Crow headmen should be present to sign an important agreement. The best the commission could salvage from two days of talks was agreement to meet again at Fort Phil Kearny in the spring.⁶⁷

Although the treaty proceedings had proved abortive, they crystallized the final Crow position on the Bozeman Trail. The most surprising aspect of the Crow arguments is the demand they did not make: removal of the Sioux from the Powder River country. That goal had been central to Crow-white friendship, but it was now eclipsed by the demand for abandoning the Bozeman Trail. Why the shift in objectives? Clues can be found in the Crows' speeches, particularly those of Blackfoot and Bear's Tooth. From their perspective, the Crow-white relationship had been more antagonistic than Lieutenant Templeton's diary, Judge Kinney's reports, or other white accounts indicated. Such accounts do not mention the Crows being physically abused or threatened as Bear's Tooth and Blackfoot claimed. In the view of many whites, the Crows and the United States sought a common goal—defeat of the Sioux. For the Crows, however, defeat of the Sioux had gradually been equaled if not superseded by another objective: retention of their culture, life-style, and integrity as a people. It was a goal threatened much more directly by the whites than by the Sioux. Should the buffalo be wiped out and the Crows forced to subsist on the white man's handouts or an agricultural way



Huntington Library, San Marino, California

In many respects, the Crows wanted the same things that Red Cloud (left, circa 1870) wanted for his Oglala Sioux—retention of their traditional way of life, culture, and integrity as a people.

of life, retaining the Powder River country would be meaningless.

In many respects, the Crows' demands were indistinguishable from those Red Cloud and his supporters would have made had they attended the council. This was not because the Crows had submitted to the Sioux, although they may have agreed to act as their proxy. Rather, it was because Sioux and Crow interests were identical in many respects.⁶⁸ But commonality of interests did not represent submission. From the Crow viewpoint, the whites and the Crows still had a common objective in defeating the Sioux, but that could not obscure the fact that the Crows had never given permission for establishing the Bozeman Trail.

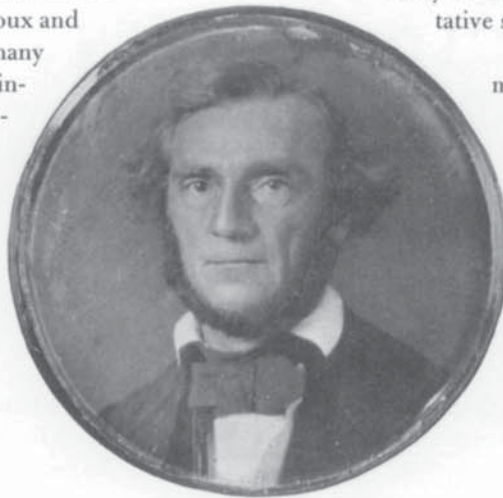
In February the government decided to abandon the Bozeman Trail and the hated forts. Once again, runners went forth to summon the tribes to a council at Fort Laramie. Once again, the peace commission headed west with treaties in hand, reaching Fort Laramie on April 10. This time, with a promise to abandon the trail forthcoming, there was no difficulty in gathering representatives from the hostile Cheyennes and Arapahos. Only Red Cloud and the resistant Sioux refused to come in. Leery of more unkept government promises, the Oglala leader would not sign the treaty until November, well after Forts Phil Kearny, C. F. Smith, and Reno had been abandoned.⁶⁹

The Crows were also late in arriving. By the time Matthews led the Crow delegation into the council grounds on May 1, representatives of several Sioux and Arapaho bands had already signed a document legalizing Sioux conquest of the Powder River region and containing provisions for abandoning the Bozeman Trail

and the forts along it. Thus, the Crows were presented with a *fait accompli*. Failure to sign the treaty the commission brought would leave the Crows with no allies against the Sioux or white trespassers. Amid bitter protests that the whites treated their enemies better than their allies, ten Mountain Crow and Kicked-in-the-Belly chiefs and one River Crow representative signed the treaty on May 9.⁷⁰

The treaty was a setback more devastating than any Sioux defeat. The thirty-eight-million-acre region the tribe had claimed under the Treaty of 1851 was reduced to eight million acres. The treaty surrendered all Crow land in Wyoming and that portion of the Powder River country lying in Montana. Instead, the Crows received a reservation bounded on the north and west by the Yellowstone River, on the south by the Montana-Wyoming border, and on the east by the 107th degree of longitude, which runs just east of the Bighorn River. In return, the Crows were promised an agency, government doctors, teachers, four years of provisions, and assistance in converting from a nomadic to an agricultural life.⁷¹

Why did the Crows agree to such a drastic document? Crow scholar Fred Hoxie notes that six of the eleven signers (Pretty Bull, White Horse, Wolf Bow, White Forehead, The Swan, and possibly Shot in the Face [or Jaw]) can be identified as having previous connections with the military, either as scouts, emissaries, or couriers. Hoxie concludes that on the whole, the eleven probably represented "the most trusting



Longtime fur trader Edwin T. Denig (above, circa 1855) would scarcely have believed that the Crows, Sioux, and Sioux allies could exchange gifts, talk of alliances, and camp peacefully near each other. But such was the case during the Bozeman Trail era, when former enemies contemplated banding together to resist a new foe.

From Edwin T. Denig, *Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, Smithsonian Institution, 46th Annual Report of the American Bureau of Ethnology, 1928-1929 (Washington, D.C., 1930), plate 63

63. *Ibid.*, 105-9. See also the December 23, 1867, *New York Times* article that contains the same speech, with slightly different wording but the same context, and an explicit reference to the Bozeman Trail in the quote.

64. Simonin, *Rocky Mountain West*, 109-12. Simonin identified the third speaker as The Wolf, while Keith Algier identifies him as Wolf Bow, a River Crow who spent much time with his Mountain Crow kin. Algier's identification is most likely correct. Keith Algier, *The Crow and the Eagle: A Tribal History from Lewis and Clark to Custer* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1993), 219.

65. Simonin, *Rocky Mountain West*, 115.

66. *New York Times*, December 23, 1867; Simonin, *Rocky Mountain West*, 115-16.

67. Simonin, *Rocky Mountain West*, 116-17.

68. Kingsley M. Bray, "Lone Horn's Peace: A New View of Sioux-Crow Relations, 1851-58," *Nebraska History*, 66 (Spring 1985), 28-47.

69. Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign*, 77-78; A. Glenn Humphreys, "The Crow Indian Treaties of 1868," *Annals of Wyoming*, 43 (Spring 1971), 82; Kappler, *Indian Affairs*, 2:1006.

70. Kappler, *Indian Affairs*, 2:998-1003, 1008-11; Frederick E. Hoxie, *Parading through History: The Making of the Crow Nation in America* (New York, 1995), 93.

71. Kappler, *Indian Affairs*, 2:1008-11.

72. Hoxie, *Parading through History*, 92.



With the decision in Washington to abandon the Bozeman Trail forts came another peace commission (left), which produced the 1868 Fort Laramie treaty. Ironically, that agreement gave the Sioux better treatment than it did the army's allies, the Crows. Surrendering all Crow land in Wyoming and a portion of the Powder River country in Montana to the Sioux, the treaty relegated the Crows to a Montana reservation reduced in size to less than a quarter of what it had been under the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851.

members of the tribe.⁷² Hoxie's judgment may be too harsh. Undoubtedly, contact between the army and some of the Crow signers had some influence, but it is difficult to accept such an explanation for leaders like Blackfoot, whose fiery speeches at the November councils had evidenced distrust and even disdain for the whites and their legalities. More likely, the Crows, after discussion, simply concluded they had no better option than to sign.

An examination of the Crow response to the Bozeman Trail reveals a much more complex story than traditional narratives, which emphasize Crow-white friendship and Crow-Sioux enmity. The Crow response to both warring parties ran the gamut from friendship and cooperation to suspicion and outright hostility. Though in the end the Crows refused to cooperate with the Sioux against the whites, this decision did not push the Crows to the opposite extreme of unconditional allegiance to the United States. Whatever cooperation the whites did receive from the Crows came about because the Crows perceived it as serving their best interests.

Longtime fur trader Edwin Denig surely would have been shocked to hear of the peace overtures and decline in hostilities between the Oglala Sioux and the Crows during the Bozeman Trail era.⁷³ Not only were the two tribes' exchanges of presents and gifts unusual, but the close proximity of their camps at times during 1866 was unprecedented. Under normal circumstances neither tribe would have dared erect its lodges so close to its enemies. Doing so would have been a foolhardy

invitation to constant raids and warfare.

It may be that Denig and other white observers overstated the intensity and persistence of intertribal warfare. Still, the period of peace and coexistence that characterized Sioux-Crow relations from the breakdown in negotiations at Fort Laramie in June 1866 until the resumption of warfare by both sides in July 1867 is remarkable—unless one recognizes that tribes were capable of making and breaking alliances the same as whites. One author has uncovered evidence for a prolonged truce between the Crows and several bands of Sioux in the mid-1850s, based on the Sioux need for access to Crow hunting grounds and the Crows' desire to participate in the fur trade along the Platte River Road.⁷⁴

Throughout the Bozeman Trail era, the Crows never wavered in their response to the trail itself. From Iron Shell's statement to Jim Bridger that the trail's legality could be settled through negotiation, to Blackfoot's preemptory demand that the trail be abandoned, the Crows never deviated from their stance that the trail violated their treaty rights. Evidence is strong that as the perceived benefits of the trail dwindled, the Crow position hardened. While Iron Shell had been willing to negotiate a settlement rather than join the Sioux, Blackfoot's position at the November 1867 Fort Laramie council was virtually identical to that of the resistant Sioux. Although emigrant traffic on the trail had been minimal, the effects of white occupation of the territory were all too apparent.⁷⁵

Nowhere is this independence of thought and action more evident than in the Crow response to incur-

73. Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, 21, 95.

74. Bray, "Lone Horn's Peace," 28-47.

75. Carrington, *Indian Operations*, 22; Simonin, *Rocky Mountain West*, 109-11. See also Colin Calloway, "Army Allies or Tribal Sur-

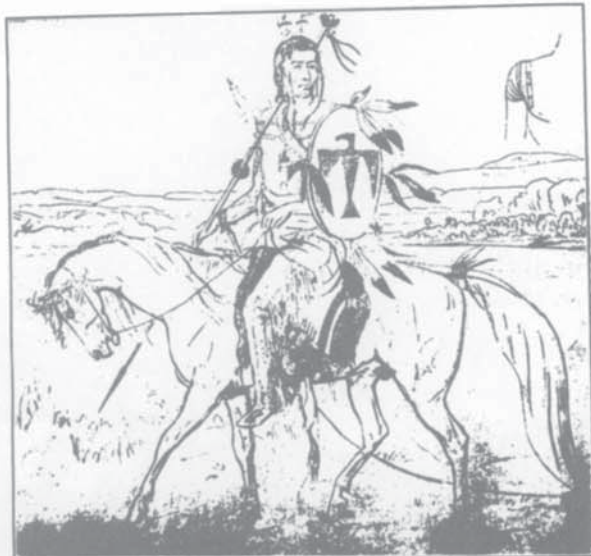
vival? The 'Other Indians in the 1876 Campaign,'" in *Legacy: New Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, ed. Charles E. Rankin (Helena, Mont., 1995), 71-72, 75-77.

sions by miners. The Crows viewed the army as a potential ally in driving the Sioux out of the Powder River country, but they viewed miners in much the same way they viewed the Sioux—as intruders and trespassers. Most Crow actions during the Bozeman Trail conflict were based on self-interest, not sympathy or identification with either whites or the Sioux. The middle ground the Crows sought to occupy during the initial stages of the conflict did not result from indecision on their part. Rather, neutrality was a conscious response to existing circumstances. Neutrality—albeit a neutrality weighted towards the United States—gave the Crows a measure of freedom in their movements and relief from the threat of attacks by the Sioux and their allies. It was only when the Sioux lost patience with the Crows and resumed raids that the tribe was forced to choose sides, and even then, the Crows' decision did not reflect an abiding friendship for the whites but rather their conclusion that the Sioux posed the more immediate threat.

Like all peoples, the Crows sought to control their own destiny. The significance of the Bozeman Trail in Crow history is that for the first time the Crows found

themselves in close contact with an alien culture (that of the whites) which threatened control of the Crows' society and its future. For the Crows, the Bozeman Trail introduced them to a relationship that would profoundly affect the tribe in coming decades. *M*

FRANK RZECZKOWSKI is a doctoral student in history at Northwestern University. He earned a master's degree in history at the University of North Dakota and has presented several papers on the subject of nineteenth-century intertribal relations, including "Catalyst to Change: Intertribal Relations and the Bozeman Trail" at the Bozeman Trail Heritage Conference held in Bozeman in July 1999. This article won the 1996 Merrill Burlingame-K. Ross Toole Award for best graduate student manuscript submitted to *Montana The Magazine of Western History*.



From *Journal of Rudolph Frederick Kurz*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 115 (Washington, D.C., 1937), plate 48

Life changed radically for the Crows as a result of the events of the 1860s. By then the Crow leader depicted by Rudolph Frederick Kurz in a drawing he titled, "probably Rottentail," on October 26, 1851 (right), would have been trying desperately to protect Crow country and the life that it provided for his tribe. Below is a view of Bighorn Canyon, on the present Crow Reservation but now inundated by Bighorn Reservoir.

Ed Kopac, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

