

Sacred Ground

“A gaze fixed on the past becomes more and more untrustworthy (eventually reporting that there is no past at all, only a boundless present). American Heritage Book of Indians, 1961

In the summer of 1865 thousands of American Indians¹ from many tribes including Crow, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Sioux – from all eight *tiospaye* [bands] of the Lakota² – were in the Black Hills, singly and in small bands, communing with the Great Spirit, beseeching his pity, and seeking visions.³

The Sioux were newcomers to the Hills.⁴ Originally hunters in the woodlands of the upper Mississippi River and the plains east of the Missouri River (and before that, from the Carolinas), they were pulled onto the Great Plains by the vast solar economy that grew rich grass and fed millions of buffalo and eventually sustained their great herds of horses, all the while fighting a rearguard action against Anishinaabe [Ojibwa (Oh-JIB-way or Chippewa)]⁵, Crees, and Assiniboines who had acquired guns by 1690 from French and English traders coming from the East and Northeast. The Sioux acquired guns after 1680 when the French opened direct trade and from their eastern relatives who traded with the British on the Saint Peter’s River, but they did not get horses until after the Pueblo revolt of 1680 made horses widely available across the southern Great Plains and eventually into the hands of the Sioux who stole horses from other tribes in the first decade of the eighteenth century and from the Cheyenne and possibly Nez Perce as gifts.⁶ Guns and horses combined with widespread small pox epidemics in 1771-1781 to break the wall of enemy tribes along the Missouri River including the many villages of Mandan-Arikaras who blocked the Sioux advance to the West. American Horse recorded in his family’s winter count (a picture history recorded on buffalo hide) that Standing Bear led the first party of Oglalas to the Black Hills in 1775 or 1776. “Most Lakotas were still east of the Missouri at [that] time where they occupied a large swath of buffalo country in North and South Dakota.”⁷

Guns and horses also created what observers have called “an entirely new kind of American Indian,” faster, better armed and more mobile than any before and the Sioux, particularly the Lakota, were the apex of this new development. The Sioux crossed the river and explored west

¹ In keeping with current style and usage by authors including Pevar in The Rights of Indians and Indian Tribes, a publication of the American Civil Liberties Union, and the naming of properties including the Museum of the American Indian, the terms “American Indian” or “Indian” are used in this text to mean people who occupied the North American Continent prior to 1492. While tribes use “native American” and “Indian” interchangeably, “American Indian” or “Indian” appears to be the preferred terms in Indian Country.

² Brown, Dee. Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee. Henry Holt and Co., 1970. p. 273-276.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Modern Sioux claim an aboriginal connection with the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming but the historical and archaeological record, including the well documented statements of Sioux elders and leaders in the 19th century, do not support the claim. See Raymond Demallie and others.

⁵ Calloway, Colin G., One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark, 2003, University of Nebraska Press, pp. 306-309

⁶ Sturtevant, William C. and Raymond J. DeMallie, volume editor, Handbook of North American Indians: Volume 13, Plains. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2001. Pp. 56, 260-261.

⁷ Calloway, p. 309. Most northern Mexican tribes and the Apache and Navajo had horses by 1600. The Apache and Navajo rode into the American conscience on horseback.

toward the Big Horns and the Powder River, pushing other tribes in front of them. They were nomads living in separate family groups,⁸ perfectly adapted to the seasons of the buffalo, and excelling in warfare for dominance of the solar economy and solar resources of the Great Plains (grass and grass-fed animal life). And while they were not by culture or custom owners of land, they quickly became the masters of the Black Hills and the territory between the Missouri River and the Powder River (what would become by 1868 the Great Sioux Reservation).

For the tribes these Paha Sapa, or Hills that are Black, were and are the literal center of the earth, the place of the First Gathering of the Stone ceremonies for the Sundance; Eden, from where the hoop of the world bends to the four directions. On the western boundary in what is now Wyoming lays Inyan Kara, a misspelling and misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the Cheyenne word of Hinhan Kagha⁹ [pronounced HEEN-han KAH-ha], the Owl or Ghost Butte, the place that is the womb of the woman, the place where the Indian people pray in thanksgiving for everything the Creator has given them, especially for the birth of children. While the sweat lodge is the symbol of renewal for men, the Holy Mountain serves that purpose for women. It is the place where the past, present, and future of the people are fused and come together in one sacred place. The Big Race began at Inyan Kara and The Race Track, a formation of red clay and stone that surrounds the Black Hills, was the site of a primordial race between the birds (two-legged), representing human kind, and animals (four-legged). The birds won, establishing the natural order by which people kill buffalo and other game for food.¹⁰

Pioneers moving up the North Platte River missed these Black Hills altogether, calling the Laramie Range the Black Hills instead. It is the Laramie Range often referred to as the Black Hills in early treaties including the 1851 Fort Laramie treaty. Long after the Westward migration started, the Black Hills of South Dakota were Indian Country, unknown and unwanted. As late as 1868 the government in Washington could see no particular use for the Hills so they gave to the Tribes what the Tribes wanted, the Great Sioux Reservation as Indian Country, reserved and set aside for the use, benefit, and enjoyment of Indians in perpetuity, that they might occupy and hold the Black Hills, all of current South Dakota west of the Missouri River, and access to the hunting grounds of the Powder River country and the Big Horns (as long as buffalo held out, and the Indians realized the buffalo were at risk¹¹) as their own forever, with no white men allowed except by tribal consent. By signing the Treaty of 1868 the Tribes felt that at least the most important places were held safe and sacred, and the beginning of land ownership and land control entered Lakota thought and would come to dominate Lakota and other American Indian tribes to the present day. Signed in response to the Fetterman massacre on December 21, 1866,

⁸ Ibid, p. 6. "Tiospaye" There is no historic basis for later Tribal claims that family groups were once part of the legendary "Seven Council Fires," a great Sioux political confederacy. "...the family groups were not degenerate forms of earlier, more complex systems, but were fully functional ones that provided effective organizations for life on the grasslands."

⁹ Custer spelled it properly as Inyan Kaga from a Lakota perspective in the journals of the 1874 trip but the name is derived from the Cheyenne whose religion and icons were incorporated by the Lakota.

¹⁰ Sturtevant, William C. and Raymond J. DeMallie, Handbook of North American Indians: Plains, Part II, Volume 13. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, 2001. p. 795.

¹¹ Red Cloud's War following the 1851 Fort Laramie treaty was fought to keep the whites from using the building or using the Bozeman trail on a line Fort Laramie, Casper, Lodge Grass, Billings, Bozeman through the heart of the last great expanse of unceded Indian Country. After he signed the Fort Laramie treaty of 1868 Red Cloud put away his weapons and did not continue to fight, realizing that the in-migration of whites had changed the world.

in part the treaty said, “No white persons shall be permitted to settle upon or occupy any portion of the territory, or without the consent of the Indians to pass through the same.”

In 1869 a group of Sioux attacked the Cheyenne at Battle Mountain near Hot Springs, South Dakota for control of the sacred geothermal water there that was believed to have great healing power. The following year the Sioux made peace with the Cheyenne and agreed that the springs, being sacred to many, should be open to all.

But the white men were many and their lust for land and gold was unquenchable. The presence of gold in the Black Hills was known for years when, in 1873, rumors of gold in the Black Hills reached larger populations and brought first a trickle and then a flood of miners to Custer and Deadwood and Hill City. Spotted Bear, a Sioux chief, trying to explain to a peace commission in 1876 the value of the Hills to Indian people, told them he wanted “\$70 million dollars for the Black Hills” to be put in the bank drawing interest so Indians could buy all they needed of food and supplies if the Black Hills were taken from them. “The Black Hills are our bank,” he told the men from Washington. Miners were robbing the bank.¹² And the man sent to stop the white miners from occupying the Black Hills merely affirmed the presence of gold. The Indians knew him as the “big thief,” George Armstrong Custer, who built an illegal road into the Hills for other thieves to use as far as the Indians were concerned.

When the government’s treaty failed to stop immigration into the Hills, a government peace commission tried to buy the Black Hills from the tribes. The tribal leaders would not hear of it. They were not prepared to give up their nomadic life ways, they did not understand much of what was proposed in the treaties, and they had no political machinery to enforce treaty provisions in any event.¹³ Instead, after a council of Sioux, Cheyenne and related tribes at Bear Butte, they left for the Powder River and Yellowstone country in the spring of 1876, to the Rosebud and the Little Big Horn (Greasy Grass) Rivers, to find the last of the buffalo herds and to live the free life of the plains. When they got there, they found the Army coming after them in three columns. The Indians defeated Crook’s column from Fort Laramie on the Rosebud River on June 17, 1876, and then turned to the Little Big Horn, and there they met Custer. In a single sharp fight on June 25 – now called Indian Day, a reservation holiday in South Dakota – the allied tribes killed Custer and most of his command, including many of Custer’s Crow and Assiniboin scouts. Custer’s chief scout, Mitch Boyer, was one of the few who died that day whose actual place of death is documented from the recent archaeological discovery of the front part of his skull. Custer’s last stand was all about the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming. Out of ammunition, the warriors left the Little Big Horn to General Terry and his main column, and left forever the free life of the Plains Indian.

The treaty of 1868 had prohibited white people from entering these Black Hills without the express permission of Indian peoples. The agreement of 1877¹⁴ abrogated (revoked) the Treaty

¹² Ibid, Footnote 10.

¹³ Sturtevant, William C. and Wilcomb E. Washburn, Handbook of North American Indians: History of Indian-White Relations, Volume 4. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, 1988. p. 53.

¹⁴ Congress stopped treaty-making by the act of 1871. From then on treaties became agreements which could be made without the Indian’s knowledge or consent as Congress has plenary power (absolute power) over Indians and Indian Tribes.

of 1868 and forced the Indians to sell the Hills and much of the rest of their territory (except that the treaty still fell under the Just Compensation clause of Article 5 of the Constitution, requiring the government to pay for taking private property including the value of the land and all things on or under the land) and though the United States Supreme Court later held that the Indians must be compensated (and the eight *tiospaye* of the Lakota were compensated on June 13, 1979 for \$175 million dollars which they did not and do not accept) the Congress can and does change or abrogate treaties and treaty rights at will, and so government actions in the aftermath of Crazy Horse's and Sitting Bull's war against those who would take the Black Hills and all their treasure ensured that the Tribes were effectively evicted from Paha Sapa. The Indians never gave anyone permission to be here, not then, not now, not ever.