The War Pipe

It’s strange how we just don’t hear much about Sand Creek. I mean, considering the terrible betrayal of it … and the horror. There’s a kind of agreed upon denial we’ve been living with in the American West where Sand Creek is concerned. Going to school in the state of Colorado my whole life, I never once learned about it. Not once.

I first read about it in Dee Brown’s book *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee* in my late twenties, and I couldn’t believe what I was reading. At the time I was working at the front desk in a forest service office, giving people hiking and hunting advice. Between customers, I read that section about Sand Creek and I just broke down. When someone came in with questions, I had to smile and pretend I hadn’t just learned about how exactly these public lands came to be managed by the US government. After that, I started looking for it…references to Sand Creek. They were few and far between and when it was mentioned, it was an isolated incident, and it wasn’t called a massacre but a fight or a disaster.

“It's almost like one episode, from Sand Creek in ‘64, on up through Little Bighorn. I mean, it's a series, it all connects, it's all one big battle.”

Here’s a guy who knows this history like the back of his hand, Donovin Sprague.

“My Lakota name is Chakahou Wecantaya,” he tells me, “which translates to High Backbone Hump, which I earned from the Minneconjou Lakota, born and raised on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. And my title is a university instructor and author of ten books.”

Minnicoujou
Itazipco
CHEYENNE RIVER SIOUX TRIBE
Siha Sapa
1868
Oohenum
HUMP

Prof. Sprague in his office on the campus of Sheridan College.

Credit: Ana Castro

I'm visiting Donovin in his campus office in Sheridan Wyoming, where a lot of the fighting after Sand Creek took place. Today, he's going to take me out to visit some of the battlefields. On the wall behind him is a Minneconjou Lakota flag and dozens of images of his relatives. You'd probably recognize one of them: Crazy Horse. Donovin got his name from his great great grandfather Chief Hump, who adopted Crazy Horse after his sister took her own life and left his nephew alone.

"And that's why Hump stepped in and raised him," says Donovin. "So that's the Hump that's in all the books, they call him his mentor, his instructor. And they wonder why there's this big guy who was six foot five and 300 pounds and they call them like David and Goliath and the bear and the cub and stuff like that, but they don't get the uncle part. That's the uncle's job then to step in."

Chief Hump and Crazy Horse went on to become incredible warriors and war strategists. So that name, Hump, it's very special.

"See, the Hump name is an earned name," Donovin says. "And the way I got that from my family is I am the keeper of all this history and these old photos, and winter counts. And so when somebody contacts our tribe, about history and all that the person that they look for, they say contact Donovin, he has all that history."

But just like I didn't learn the history of the Plains Indian Wars in school, neither did Donovin. He had to work to find his own history because he'd been cut off from it as well.

"My parents gave me away," he says. "So I learned all this myself. My parents had a divorce, I stayed on the reservation and was raised, they gave me to some friends. And my dad went to San Diego, and my mother went to Utah. And then the fire chief there said how our trailer house, before they split up, caught on fire. And they were called there, and me and my brother, the parents were gone. My parents, and they pulled us out, they pulled me out as a baby. And just said, the whole trailer house went up and burned totally to the ground. And all that survived, I have a little baby shoe that was out in the yard that one of the neighbors gave me. And that's what I think keeps me and can keep others strong as those keeping those values going, that I mentioned, and the things that pull at you and things. But nothing's going to take away your family history."

To learn this history Donovin didn't rely on the history books in the local library…he went to the source. Oral histories that his family had painted onto hides each year going *way* back, just like Ben Ridgely's family painted for Sand Creek. You'll recall that they're called winter counts because in the cold months, people had time to sit down and remember all the most significant events of the year.

“And so those could be on a deer hide or buffalo robe,” Donovin says. “And they could be 300 years of history. I have one on my shelf full of those winter counts, it's called ‘the year the stars fell’ is how they described it. But those were confiscated when they surrendered on the reservation, ended up in museums, and people would say, ‘that's wonderful artwork,’ you know. But what that was, was the whole history of our nation now, out of our hands, and gone, and that's a sad thing, too. So I've spent my life reconnecting all those winter counts.”

Donovin’s been on a lifelong hunt to find the winter counts wherever they were scattered – taken by archaeologists or so-called art collectors, they’re now often locked away in museums and private collections. But Donovin’s family has been actively re-assembling them. Using these winter counts, he’s writing a history of Crazy Horse and Chief Hump and how they experienced their world, post-Sand Creek. Because like Donovin says, the battles of the late 1800s, they were all connected in a very straight line from the massacre at Sand Creek.

The War Pipe

So let’s trace that straight line. When we left off last episode, the Sand Creek survivors fled on foot out into the winter prairie. No food, no shelter, no wood for a fire, they slept on the ground in the bitter cold.

All night, they shouted names into the wind in hopes that other survivors would find them. They walked in the direction of a Lakota camp 50 miles away on Smoky Hill that they knew about. Over at that camp, word had spread of the massacre and a rescue party rode out with plenty of extra horses and blankets to find the survivors. George Bent, the Northern Cheyenne warrior, son of the trader William Bent, remembered what happened next.

Bent recalled, “Before long we were all mounted, clothed and fed, and then we moved at a better pace and with revived hope. As we rode into that camp there was a terrible scene. Everyone was crying, even the warriors, and the women and children were screaming and wailing. Nearly everyone present had lost some relations or friends, and many of them in their grief were gashing themselves with their knives until the blood flowed in streams.”

That anger and bottomless grief, it felt like there was no place for it to go. Plus, the Cheyenne and Arapaho had no food or supplies to survive the winter. They were totally reliant on the Lakota for aid, straining everyone’s resources.

Bent said, “After Sand Creek, in the camp on the head of the Smoky Hill, while the Indians were all mourning for the dead, they made up their minds to send around a war pipe and attack the whites at once. This was an uncommon thing, to begin a war in the dead of winter, but the Cheyennes were very mad and would not wait."

The Cheyenne, Arapaho, Lakota, their chiefs all agreed – after what happened on Sand Creek – war was justified.

Donovin says it was a great alliance: "The word went out, criers went out to help, they needed help to join them. So we had one big group down in that Julesburg area. So they went to them and said please come and join us, so many of them did."

He says only a few weeks after Sand Creek, in early January, the tribes attacked the settlement on the South Platte. His tribe wasn't there, but they heard about it.

"We made the journey down from the Tongue River area to Sand Creek," he tells me. "It had already happened. But the first thing that they did was they came in to the Julesburg area – all that's recorded – and started cutting telegraph lines and harassing settlers, killing settlers, capturing anything to try to stop the the flow of settlers and all that so that was the first thing that happened."

George Bent recalled Julesburg fondly:

"The Indians circled around the stockade, yelling and shooting but they soon turned off and charged down on the stage station, which they began to plunder. The women came out of the hills with the extra ponies, and these were soon packed with all sorts of goods. At the station, breakfast had just been put on the table and was still hot. I sat down with several Indians and ate a good meal. It was the first meal I had eaten at a table for a long time. One old warrior took a great fancy to the big sugar bowl and tied it to his belt. I saw him afterward riding off with the big bowl dangling from his belt behind him."

For the victims of the Sand Creek massacre, Julesburg felt like a relief. They weren't victims. They were survivors. They were warriors.

"There was great rejoicing in the village when we came in with the plunder from Julesburg," said Bent. "Ever since Sand Creek the Cheyennes had been mourning for the dead, but now that the first blow had been struck in revenge, everyone began to feel better and that night the young men and young women held scalp dances in all the camps, for all the soldiers who had been killed at Julesburg had been scalped by the warriors, and the young people kept up the dances and drumming until after daylight."

But not all the chiefs embraced war. For instance, Black Kettle, the Northern Cheyenne chief who'd flown the flag of truce during the massacre.

Bent remembered, "Even that terrible affair could not make [Black Kettle] join the war against the whites and he even succeeded in keeping a large part of the Cheyennes from taking part in the raids…He came with us to White Butte Creek, but the day before we left that camp to strike the Platte Road, he left us with eighty lodges of Southern Cheyennes who did not wish to join in the war. I went around among the lodges and shook hands with Black Kettle and all my friends. These lodges under Black Kettle moved south of the Arkansas and joined the Southern Arapahos, Kiowas, and Comanches, and in the spring they made peace and signed a new treaty."

This is how the two bands – the Northern Cheyenne and Southern Cheyenne – were separated and have been ever since. The same thing happened with the Northern and Southern Arapaho. But the non-treaty tribes kept raiding ranches and stage stations and cutting off the trails. The attacks were so successful that it caused the price of goods to skyrocket in Colorado. People in Denver panicked, on the verge of famine. But the coaches carrying supplies just couldn't use the roads to bring food. The whole project of settling the West came to a grinding halt.

"At night the whole valley was lighted up with the flames of burning ranches and stage stations, but these places were soon all destroyed and darkness fell on the valley," recalled Bent. "All of this trouble was the result of Col. Chivington's 'great victory' at Sand Creek."

Colorado Governor Evans' worst nightmare was seeing the plains erupt into all out warfare. But that's exactly what Sand Creek ignited. And the US government had severely underestimated the military prowess of the Plains tribes. Only eight months after Sand Creek, in late July, the Plains tribes started devising an even bigger attack, this time on the North Platte in Wyoming territory.

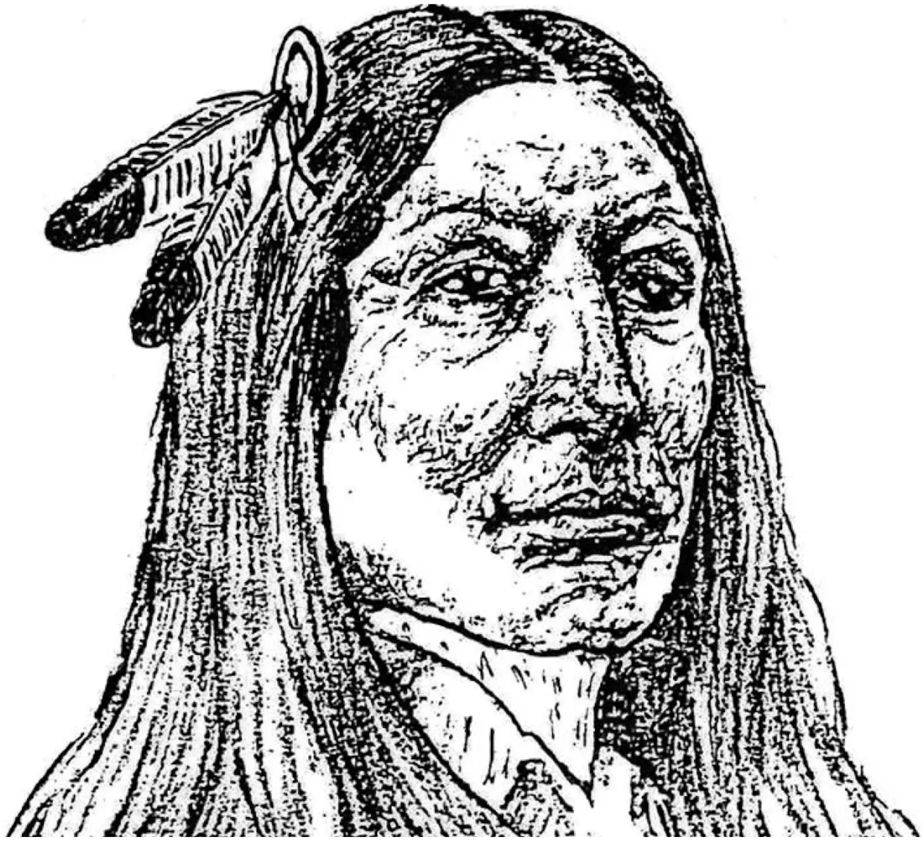
"Planning is made," Donovin tells me. "And then the trek is made down to Platt Bridge, because there's more soldiers coming in, they want to stop this tide of settlement and all that on the Bozeman Trail."

The Bozeman Trail was bringing gold rushers up from the Oregon Trail so they could access gold mines in southern Montana. Donovin's great great grandfather Chief Hump helped plan the attack.

They decided to lure the soldiers into a trap by sending in two decoys from each of six tribes. The twelve warriors pretended to be alone and surprised to encounter the U.S. army.

Donovin says they then lured them off to where thousands of warriors were waiting to attack:

“I think there were maybe 12 decoys that eventually were selected, but about eight of them or so are selected on the route down so they're making the route down pretty close to where the interstate is today down towards Casper, and Hump selected them and he selected Crazy Horse to be the leader of those decoys.”



Donovin says there are no verified photographs of Crazy Horse and he never allowed anyone to take his photo. This is the only known drawing of him but it may not be authentic either.

Credit: Ana Castro

George Bent said these scouts lured the army led by Lt. Casper Collins straight into the jaws of the biggest war party George had ever seen…as many as 3,000 warriors strong.

Donovin tells me, “Another wagon train is coming in from the southwest and then the whole Casper Collins story, you know, and he takes it on himself, a very brave person to attack one of those groups. And his horse spooks and carries him right into the enemy.” He laughs. “It's pretty embarrassing.”

George Bent saw the whole thing. “As we went into the troops,” he remembered, “I saw [Lieutenant Caspar Collins] on a big bay horse rush past me through the dense clouds of dust and smoke. His horse was running away with him and broke right through the Indians. The lieutenant had an arrow sticking in his forehead and his face was streaming with blood. He must have fallen soon after he passed me, for he dropped right in the midst of the warriors, one of whom caught his horse."

Donovin says those U.S. soldiers must have been in total awe to witness that many Plains Indian warriors in action. He described it to me on our tour:

"The soldiers called the Indians the greatest mounted horsemen they'd ever seen in the world. They showed off the finery with their regalia of flowing in the wind, the feathers and the mane of the horse and the tail, and colors. And they just ride circles around them. And they were releasing these arrows so fast compared to during the reload that could probably be releasing 50 arrows by the time they reload again. But they were just no match for them, either. And that was real evident."

Showing me around a visitor center on our tour, Donovin shows me dioramas of just how athletic the warriors' fighting technique was. They shot arrows under the necks of their horses as they circled their enemy.

"A horse like this and arm up around over the top and then peeking out down here and the bow on this side and releasing arrows," Donovin describes.

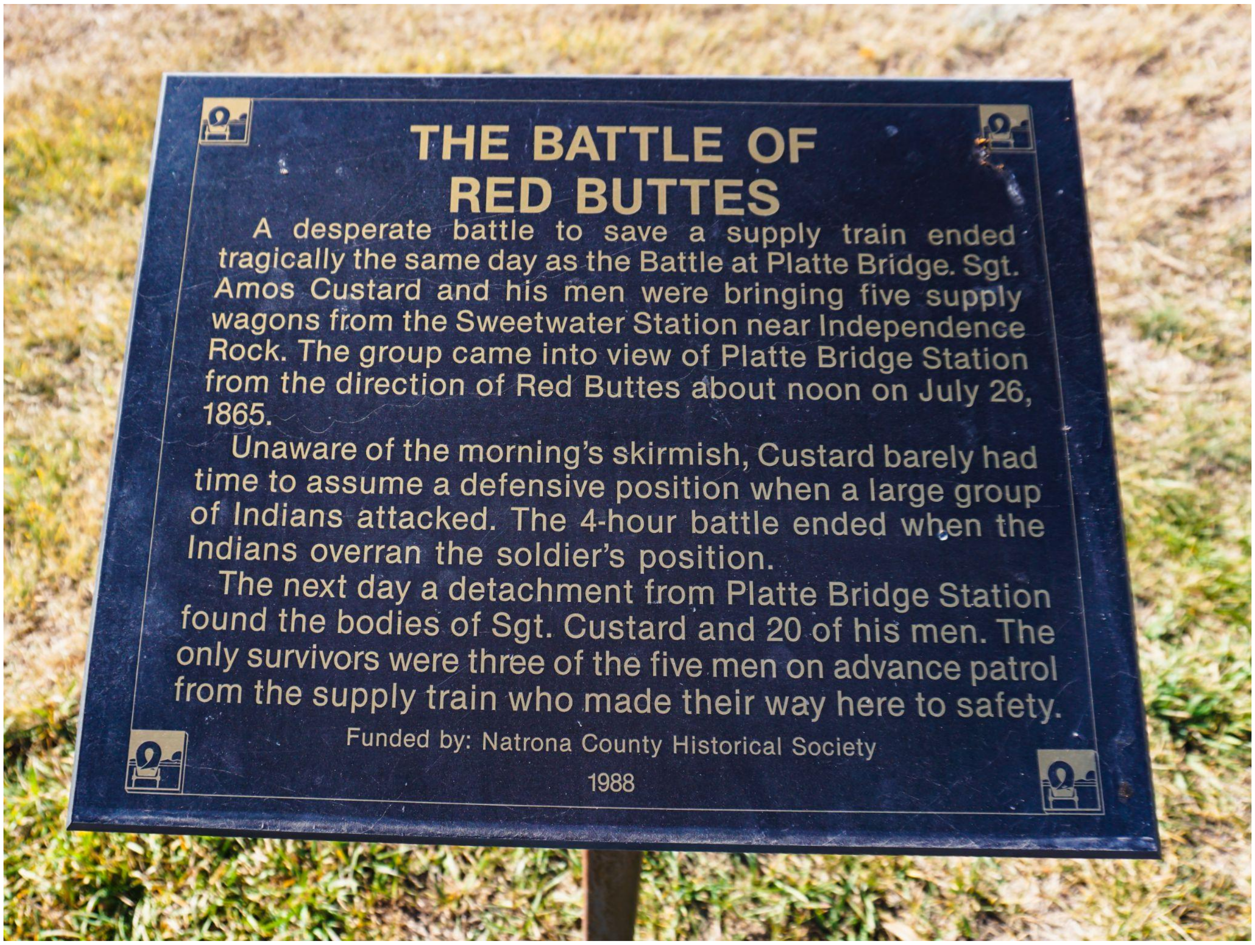
"Under the horse!" I say.

"The horse is running in a circle," says Donovin. "Soldiers described it as you know, they are so confused and dizzy just you know, with this constant circle. And another way of fighting, it's crazy, it's clear under, the decoys were clear under the horse. The men didn't use saddles, the women did. But just sinew and that wrapped up and then he would fall off the horse and take a little tumble and act like there's something wrong and hop on his horse and take off. And the soldiers are saying, almost can get that guy."

Donovin says by pretending to fall off their horse, they convinced the US soldiers to chase them and lured them right into their trap where the full force of their war party attacked…a strategy they used successfully at Platt Bridge and later at the Fetterman fight.

But one strategy they didn't use? Torture. Not even after what they went through at Sand Creek.

George Bent was offended by the mere idea. "I never saw a printed account of this fight except one newspaper version which alleged that the soldiers were unarmed and were massacred by the Indians, who tied some of the men to the wagon wheels and burned them alive," he said. "This is all nonsense. The Plains Indians never tortured prisoners, they never took men prisoners but shot them at once, during the fighting."



THE BATTLE OF
RED BUTTES

A desperate battle to save a supply train ended tragically the same day as the Battle at Platte Bridge. Sgt. Amos Custard and his men were bringing five supply wagons from the Sweetwater Station near Independence Rock. The group came into view of Platte Bridge Station from the direction of Red Buttes about noon on July 26, 1865.

Unaware of the morning's skirmish, Custard barely had time to assume a defensive position when a large group of Indians attacked. The 4-hour battle ended when the Indians overran the soldier's position.

The next day a detachment from Platte Bridge Station found the bodies of Sgt. Custard and 20 of his men. The only survivors were three of the five men on advance patrol from the supply train who made their way here to safety.

Funded by: Natrona County Historical Society
1988

A plaque at the Platt Bridge Battle Site telling the story of the Red Butte Battle, which happened right afterwards.

Credit: Ana Castro

After the battle was over, the warriors hurried back to move their families to safety. Donovin says that wasn't something the US soldiers had to think about on the battlefield:

"Right in the middle of some of this attack, our family is going back across the river to check on the flight of the women and the children, just to double check that, yes, they're moving away and getting out."

Donovin says that the history books often depict Native Americans as brutal because they sometimes attacked ranches where women and children lived. But for the tribes, the warriors were always thinking about their families who were camped nearby.

“They don’t think about how the women and children were affected,” he says. “Well, that's exactly what they were doing within our camps. And, like our people said, we are just trying to get away and move further and further and further. And we couldn't get away from the battles. And so you have to stand your ground at some point.”

The US government was definitely *not* thinking about families. It was only a few weeks later, in late August, that they struck a Northern Arapaho village without warning.

The Battle at Tongue River

Donovin and I drive in his little sedan north out of Sheridan toward the Montana border. He takes an exit off the interstate and follows the highway headed straight toward the Bighorn Mountains. It’s the height of autumn, cottonwoods turned brilliant gold along the creeks.

“Okay, here's the battlefield right here,” I say.

“So it's basically the city park here,” Donovin tells me. “And they came in and the camps are all along this nice waterway here.”

In a little town park in the town of Ranchester, RVs are camping out along a creek. Right where Chief Black Bear was camped with his Northern Arapaho band that day. After Sand Creek, some of the Arapaho followed the peace chief Little Raven and agreed to sign treaties and ended up in Indian Territory in what’s now Oklahoma and are now known as the Southern Arapaho. These were the non-treaty Arapaho, the ones that history books call the quote hostiles. The US Army sent in a three pronged expedition to try to stop the attacks on the Oregon and Overland Trails. General Connor headed up the attacks with the guidance of the mountain man Jim Bridger.

Donovin and I stop at a monument marking this as the place where the Battle of Tongue River took place. Donovin reads the plaque:

A monument at the Tongue River battle site, in Ranchester, WY.

Credit: Ana Castro

“So see – August 29, 1865. That's like days after Platt Bridge. So Platt Bridge is in July, like I'm thinking the 25th, So, General Connor’s 200 troops attack Black Bear’s Arapaho village. He had came from Fort Laramie. And that's that Powder River Expedition.”

Donovin says before they attacked, Connor’s troops were in bad shape:

“Every day was like, ‘Okay, is it gonna be mule meat today or horsemeat’ and there were hundreds of horses dying from starvation and then they were eating them because they were out of food. They were totally desperate.”

So desperate that the soldiers didn’t even have enough gun powder at the battle. The Arapaho survivors reported getting shot by soldiers with pellets that felt like bee stings because there was so little oomph in them.

We pull over and roll down the windows. It’s a peaceful spot, shady under the trees with the river nearby. I imagine the village of 500 Arapaho. Once again, most of their warriors were out hunting, women, children and elderly left behind here.

“They hadn't been doing anything,” Donovin says. “Women, children in there, most of the able men were raiding to the north against the Absorka, and were gone that day. So many horses, hundreds of horses were taken.”

Then suddenly, the arrival of troops to this little campground.

“So this whole region here right here… ” Donovin begins.

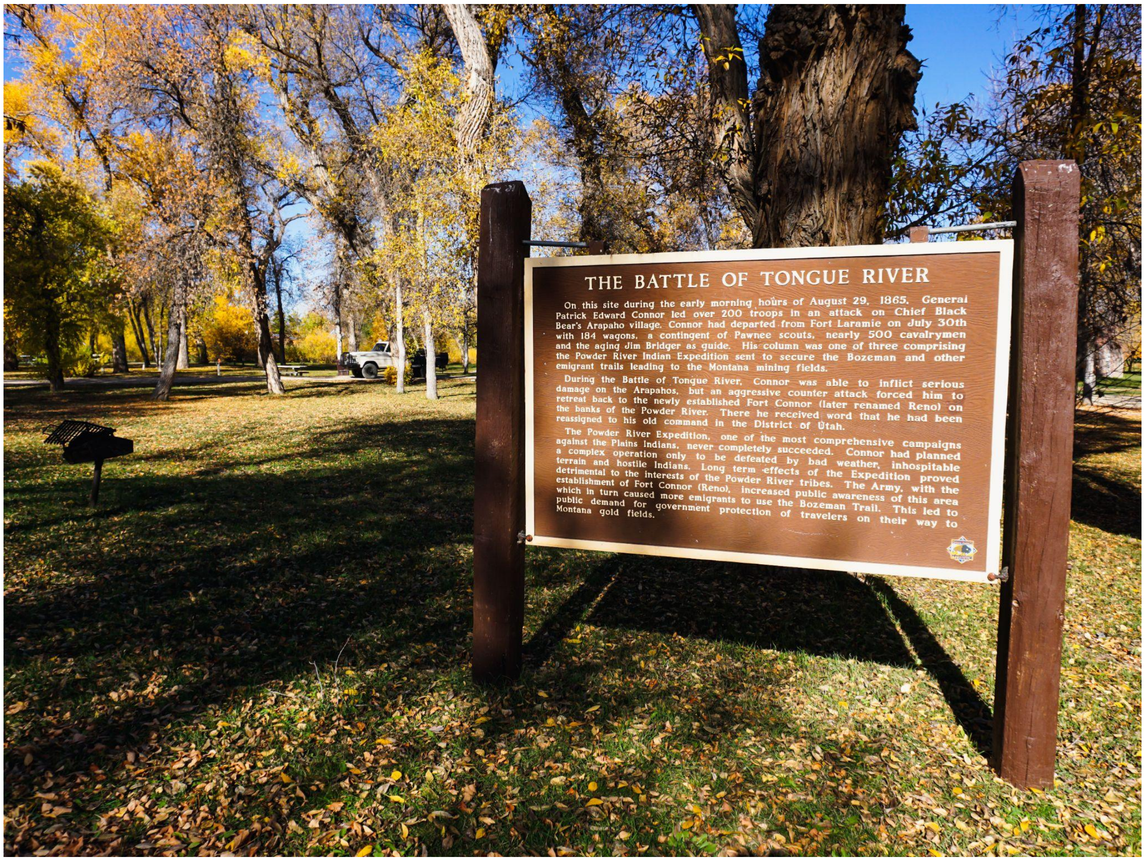
“Along this river?” I ask.

“Teepees through here, this is where they would have been camped,” he says. “And then as they fled over here. They took hundreds of their horses but which they got back later on. Horses are always are really important things to Natives.”

But even though Connor’s troops barely had enough food or ammunition, the U.S. had to extract a punishment on the Plains tribes because of their embarrassing defeat at Platt Bridge. The Arapaho counterattacked the next day, with the help of their friends, the Lakota and Cheyenne, and got some of those horses back. Not as many people died as at Sand Creek – around 60 people – but the effects of Connor’s attack *did* change everything for the Northern Arapaho.

Donovin says, “The thing is the Arapaho never did recover in their history. Their provisions for months ahead, supplies, all that was burned, and they never recovered. So after that they had to always be with the Cheyenne to even kind of survive out here.”

The monument we read at the battle site, it doesn’t tell this aspect of the story – how it changed the Arapaho’s whole trajectory.



THE BATTLE OF TONGUE RIVER

On this site during the early morning hours of August 29, 1865, General Patrick Edward Connor led over 200 troops in an attack on Chief Black Bear's Arapaho village. Connor had departed from Fort Laramie on July 30th with 184 wagons, a contingent of Pawnee scouts, nearly 500 cavalrymen and the aging Jim Bridger as guide. His column was one of three comprising the Powder River Indian Expedition sent to secure the Bozeman and other emigrant trails leading to the Montana mining fields.

During the Battle of Tongue River, Connor was able to inflict serious damage on the Arapahos, but an aggressive counter attack forced him to retreat back to the newly established Fort Connor (later renamed Reno) on the banks of the Powder River. There he received word that he had been reassigned to his old command in the District of Utah.

The Powder River Expedition, one of the most comprehensive campaigns against the Plains Indians, never completely succeeded. Connor had planned a complex operation only to be defeated by bad weather, inhospitable terrain and hostile Indians. Long term effects of the Expedition proved detrimental to the interests of the Powder River tribes. The Army, with the establishment of Fort Connor (Reno), increased public awareness of this area which in turn caused more emigrants to use the Bozeman Trail. This led to public demand for government protection of travelers on their way to Montana gold fields.

The sign doesn’t recognize the impact the battle had on the Arapaho long term.

Credit: Ana Castro

“They were never able to recover as a tribe after the devastation that took place here,” says Donovin. “And all the supplies and clothing and utensils and tools and all that.”

But it’s a devastation the U.S. army won’t be able to repeat for quite some time.

“Dakotas, I Am For War!”

The reason all these U.S. troops were crawling all over the plains was because they’d been called in to protect the brand spanking new Bozeman Trail. Colorado’s governor was trying to spin the whole Sand Creek thing off as a success. And the troops were busy building new forts including Fort Phil Kearney to protect the new trail. But the powerful leader of the Oglala Lakota, Red Cloud, set up camp just a few miles away and harassed the troops there regularly.

This wasn’t what the tribes agreed to, Red Cloud said.

“Hear ye, Dakotas!” he proclaimed. “We were told that they wished merely to pass through our country, not to tarry among us, but to seek for gold in the far west. Our old chiefs thought to show their friendship and good will, when they allowed this dangerous snake in our midst. They promised to *protect* the wayfarers. Yet before the ashes of the council fire are cold, the Great Father is building his forts among us. His presence here is an insult and a threat. It is an insult to the spirits of our ancestors. Are we then to give up their sacred graves to be plowed for corn? Dakotas, I am for war!”

So Hump, Crazy Horse and Red Cloud started planning a fight. They brought in a Lakota healer who rode his horse in a zigzag…and saw a vision of collecting 100 soldiers in each hand. That’s why the tribes later called it, “The Battle of the Hundred In the Hands.”

Donovin says, just like at Platt Bridge, they sent decoys out to lure Captain Fetterman and his men into a trap. They didn’t know it but over a thousand warriors awaited them.

He tells me, “The Fetterman was the biggie, that was the biggest, most important battle in American Indian Wars up till that time, and on December 21 1866. And it was overshadowed 10 years later by little Bighorn. They said, well, the reason that was done was because of Sand Creek.”

It took weeks of planning, but all told, the Fetterman Battle lasted about 20 minutes. And when it was over, every single one of Fettermen’s soldiers and the captain himself lay dead in a tight huddle in the snow. Their bodies were found mutilated in eerily similar ways to those endured at Sand Creek…bodies parts – brains, ears, noses – laid carefully out on the rocks. Think about it, about a year since that massacre. But still, it was one of the only times such atrocities were committed by the tribes during the Plains Indian Wars. About 14 warriors died. One of those, Donovin says, was an adopted brother of Hump and Crazy Horse, what they called their *cola*.

“Hump and Crazy Horse were looking for their friend Lone Bear up there,” he says. “He couldn't be found. They finally found him in that blizzard, sitting, and he spoke his last words and died in

Hump's arms. And the scout Frank Gerhard said Crazy Horse and Hump wept. They lost their *cola* friend. That kind of adopted friend. We'll *make* ourselves brothers or sisters."

It was the most consequential loss for the U.S. army up to that point in these wars…but the history books don't often recognize it was also the greatest victory for the tribes.

Donovin points out, "The sign on the marker that was erected talks about the overview of the battle, and then it says in the last sentence there were no survivors. Well, we survived."

Donovin is also a musician. Here, he holds a flute he made and plays.

Credit: Ana Castro

The Plains tribes demonstrated their military prowess in the Fetterman Battle. Looking back, we can see it was so resounding that only a year and a half later the U.S. started negotiating the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. It gave the Lakota, Dakota and Arapaho only a small portion of their original homeland across the Great Plains, but it did include the Paha Sapa –that translates from the Lakota as the Black Hills. And for ten years, the prairie went relatively quiet. The U.S.

realized that gun and cannon power couldn’t defeat the prowess of a warrior with a bow and arrow on horseback. Instead, the government started fighting the Plains tribes on other kinds of battlefields.

The ink on the Fort Laramie Treaty was barely dried before the government started a full scale extermination of bison. Why? Because the Plains people’s entire economic and spiritual world revolved around the animal. *And* the US started taking the children of tribal leaders off on trains to distant boarding schools never to be seen again. We’ll hear lots more about these proverbial battlefields in future episodes. So the Plains Indian Wars weren’t over by a long shot. These tactics prodded the Plains tribes into the granddaddy of them all… on the banks of the Greasy Grass.