

CHAPTER 17

Legacy of an Expedition

The beginning of the end for the Old West

The Expedition passed to the east of Bear Butte and crossed the Belle Fourche River on August 16, the first of five punishing days on the dry plains. Grazing would be very poor or burned off entirely by extensive fires, and several horses or mules were shot each day when they could no longer keep up. The command was forced to make one march of more than 35 miles (think of the men in the infantry) and averaged 30 miles a day before traveling far out of its way to stop for rest at the Little Missouri River. (See the map on page *x*.) Conditions began to improve after that, but not in time for Sergeant Charles Sempker. He died of dysentery on the 25th, the final casualty of the Expedition.

The larger casualty was peace with the Lakota Sioux, who called Custer's trail the "thieves' road." A chief named Fast Bear used that term the following year, when the Black Hills had already been invaded by hundreds of prospectors. We cannot say that the Expedition was *the* cause for the Lakota's loss of the Hills. It is clear now that it would have happened eventually, given human nature and the rumors of gold and the increasing population along the frontier. But the Expedition was still the *immediate* cause of the gold rush that ensued, and it played a key role in a series of events that would close out the frontier.

The first prospectors known to have followed Custer—literally—were members of the Gordon Party, who intersected his trail along the Boxelder that December and traced it back to French Creek. They had left Sioux City, Iowa, in October, just a few weeks after the Expedition's return to Fort Lincoln. There had been plans for a large exploring party, but the Army threatened to burn its wagons and arrest its leaders. Indeed, detachments began to patrol the routes to the Black Hills. Just 28 souls of the Gordon Party persisted, including Mrs. Annie Tallent and her young son Robert. Pretending to be settlers bound for the O'Neill Colony in Nebraska, they braved not only the Army patrols but the Lakota as well. Their efforts are memorialized in a reconstruction of the stockade they built that winter, not far from Permanent Camp.

The Army learned of their presence and sent three separate detachments into the Hills, finally evicting the prospectors who were still at the stockade in April 1875. The Army was making a legitimate effort to prevent a rush to the Hills, as was their duty under the Fort Laramie Treaty. A number of prospectors were caught and escorted out, and at least one party saw its wagons burned and its leader arrested, just as General Philip Sheridan had promised.

The motive for this diligence was in part pragmatic. Pressure was mounting on the government to negotiate the

sale of the Black Hills, which would be much harder to do if the Lakota were aroused by trespassing miners. When it became clear that a second reconnaissance was needed to assess the value of the Hills more carefully—to know exactly what the government was negotiating for—the high-profile Custer was passed over in favor of Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Irving Dodge.

This would be called the Newton-Jenney Expedition, for its leaders Henry Newton and Walter P. Jenney. They and their 15 assistants, escorted by 400 soldiers, conducted a thorough geological exploration of the Black Hills from early June through the end of September in 1875. They even had help from some of the prospectors they encountered along the way, after Dodge let it be known that he had no interest in arresting them.

But the prospectors did create a problem for the government, which had already begun negotiations with the Lakota. Red Cloud, Spotted Tail and other chiefs had been invited to Washington in the spring to talk about selling the Black Hills. When the chiefs insisted on consulting with their people, they were sent back with assurances that a special commission would visit them in September. In the meantime, the Army made another attempt to clear the Hills of intruders. General George Crook met with the miners near the end of July and again on August 10. He said he would remove them by force, if necessary, but he worked out an arrangement that would protect their claims until after the purchase of the Black Hills—which everyone thought was imminent—if the miners left with him voluntarily. Only a few holdouts remained behind, deep in hiding.

As it turned out, none of these efforts would make a difference in the outcome of the commission's meeting with 20,000 Lakota on the White River in September. It did not go well. The young men had no interest in selling the Black Hills, while the older men named a price that the commission couldn't live with. It has been said that those who named the price were victims of bad advice about the value of the Hills, which was probably half true. The estimations of value were conservative, if anything, but it should have been clear that the government would balk at paying a spectacular price.

The failed meeting in Nebraska was another turning point in a rapidly deteriorating situation. The hostile bands might have reacted in pretty much the same way no matter what happened there, but President Grant's reaction was to withdraw all troops protecting the Black Hills. From that point on there was no official hindrance to the prospectors, who poured in by the thousands. Among them was Horatio

Nelson Ross—credited with making the first discovery on French Creek the previous summer—leading a large party from Bismarck. The gold rush was now at full bore.

Some prospectors paid the price, dying at the hands of passing Lakota, most of whom were gathering along the Powder and Yellowstone Rivers under Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull and Gall. The government suddenly decided to call in all the hunting parties early in 1876, ordering them to return to their respective agencies. It was an unreasonable order with a short deadline in the middle of a harsh winter. The government instigated the Sioux War that followed by labeling all those who did not return as hostile. Crazy Horse fought Crook on the Rosebud, and Custer had a reason to make his headlong attack at the Little Big Horn.

While the Black Hills Expedition was a real source of bitterness among the Lakota, it was not the only one. They saw the buffalo disappearing, and were angered by plans for building the Northern Pacific Railroad across their hunting grounds in Montana. “They had lost, in their own generation, everything,” said Donald Jackson in *Custer’s Gold*. “Custer did not die because he found gold in the Hills, but because he trapped himself by a foolish military move.”

The Lakota and their Cheyenne allies must have been gratified to see Custer destroyed so completely that day on the Little Big Horn, but for them it was the classic case of winning the battle and losing the war. The voices of moderation were drowned out after June 25, and the Army went to work with renewed feeling. Most of the hostile forces were trapped at the end of October and forced to surrender. By then a new treaty commission had met with hand-picked chiefs at Red Cloud’s Agency and dictated the terms under which they would surrender the Black Hills. Gone was the \$6 million offered by the government the year before. The Lakota essentially gave up the Hills and all the gold they contained in return for the promise of rations.

The new treaty was ratified in February of 1877, legal-

izing the occupation of the Hills that had already taken place. Scattered bands of Lakota were still attacking miners that year, but gradually they gave up. Crazy Horse himself surrendered in May, only to be killed later that summer at Fort Robinson in Nebraska. Sitting Bull, having found refuge for a time in Canada, returned in 1881.

Cowboys, trappers and homesteaders are the most common inhabitants of the West in our collective imagination, but it was gold that moved the great populations. Railroads would begin to play a role, of course, but the gold had to come first. Otherwise who would have wanted to lay tracks across a nearly empty continent to the sleepy village of Yerba Buena, now known as San Francisco? The California Gold Rush put westward expansion into fast forward, and the Black Hills Gold Rush was its coda—at least in the continental United States. For a short time, people reading dime novels about the Wild West could go to Deadwood and see the real thing.

It was an odd era of overlap between the Old West and what we think of as the modern age. While the hostile Lakota were gathering in Montana in 1876, Alexander Graham Bell was tinkering in a lab in Massachusetts. It was on March 10 that he said, “Watson, come here. I want you.” Custer missed reading about the telephone by only a month or two, and in 1879 a phone line was installed between Lead and Deadwood—so one town could warn the other of impending floods. The phonograph was nearly two years old by then, and the first two gas-powered cars were built ten years later in Germany, in 1889.

There was an encore for the old days, of sorts, when the Ghost Dance raised hopes among some of the Lakota that they could return to the life that had been taken from them. That hope was destroyed forever in 1890 by soldiers on horseback at Wounded knee, just 13 years before the first airplane flew at Kitty Hawk. There would be no turning back.