

# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xvii</i>

---

INTRODUCTION	1
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---

PREHISTORY	3
	4
	4
	8
	11
	14
	15
	18
	27
	29
	31
	The First People
	Occupying North America
	Means of Subsistence
	Distribution of Pronghorn
	Vulnerability to Hunting
	Capturing Pronghorn
	Quantifying Foods Used
	Prehistoric Weapons
	Artifacts
	Burial Offerings

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HISTORY	33	
	34	Spanish
	37	French and English
	38	Introduction of the Pronghorn to Science
	39	Corps of Discovery
	45	Indians of the West
	48	The Coming of Horses
	50	Bows and Arrows
	52	Firearms
	53	Aboriginal Hunting
	75	Distribution, Processing and Transporting
	77	Cooking and Preserving
	77	Indian Uses of Pronghorn
	86	Captive Pronghorn
	87	Petroglyphs and Pictographs
	90	Decoration
	90	Clans, Societies and Kachinas
	92	Spiritualism
	97	Music
	99	Orientation
	101	Language
	103	Trade
	105	Near Demise of Bison
	107	Near Demise of the People
	114	Near Demise of Pronghorn
	132	Prairie Wraith and the Genesis of Conservation

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*Appendices* 135

*References* 151

*Index* 171



## Introduction

The age-old battle between the wilderness and civilization was waged anew on the western plains, with the age-old results: the disappearance of the wilderness, the depletion and degradation of its aboriginal population, and the virtual extinction of its characteristic fauna.

—Hoopes (1975:12)

Early in *wecukanheyaye* of a sweltering day of *Wípazuk wašté wi* in the year remembered as *Pehin Hanksa ktepi*, fewer than 500 *akixéita ceuktayka*, led by vainglorious *Hi-es-tze*, fell upside down into a huge village of *Tsististas* and *Lakota* temporarily encamped along a 3-mile (4.8 km) serpentine stretch of the *Hetanka* watercourse of the *Cukanweta* region. The aggression was ill-conceived, poorly timed and badly executed. Unable and perhaps unwilling to retreat, as many as 1,200 *mdetahunka* swarmed from the encampment to defend against the improvidently divided force of *wasichus*.

When the dust of the season When the Ponies Grow Fat finally settled a day and a half later, still during the moon of the chokecherries, the Allies and the People retired south from Greasy Grass Creek to

safer havens and better pasturage, 263 longknives were dead, including the man they called Creeping Panther, Long Hair and Yellow Hair.

The defeat by Northern Cheyenne and Sioux Indians of the U.S. Army's Seventh Cavalry under command of Colonel George Armstrong Custer along the Little Bighorn River in Montana Territory occurred nine days before the centennial celebration of the founding of the United States. The battle was a decisive victory for the Indians. But, it also signaled the last truly successful military resistance by North American Indians to social subjugation and cultural dispossession. Custer's Last Stand was duplicitously the highwater mark of American Indian defense of homeland, but, in fact, a pyrrhic victory, it was their own last stand.

The fateful scenario that played out on the rolling and gullied steppelands of southcentral Montana actually was a tragedy long in the making. In many respects, such a violent clash of humanity was made inevitable by grossly disparate societies, forced by misunderstanding, arrogance, racism and mutual antipathy to compete for independence on common landscape. In broad, historical context, the Little Bighorn battle site represents the convergence of myriad, backlogged, anthropological indignities. In an empirical, geophysical context, the site, 14 miles (22.5 km) upstream from confluence with the Bighorn River, was mostly a matter of happenstance.

The conjoining of approximately 12,000 “renegade” and AWOL “agency” Hunkpapa, Oglala, Minneconjou, Sans Arc and Blackfeet Sioux and Northern Cheyenne was an alliance borne of desperation and wishful thinking. Brought together to strengthen against offensive actions by the U.S. Army, to escape the drudgery and meager charity of reservation life, and to embrace again the relatively carefree, drifting, hunter/gatherer mode of living, the temporary confederation undoubtedly was the largest assembly of Indians ever on the Great Plains and perhaps anywhere in North America.

Twelve thousand people and their “gigantic” horse herd represented an unprecedented logistical problem (Ambrose 1986:415). They needed an abundance of fresh food, water and forage. A week before the battle, the Indians moved from the valley of Rosebud Creek to adjacent Little Bighorn Valley in search of bison. Despite initial plans to travel elsewhere, they eventually camped (June 22) at the location where

Custer was to find them because it was a favorable place from which “hunters went across to the west side of the Bighorn River and killed antelope from vast herds” (Marquis 1967:3, see also Stewart 1955). Interestingly, at the time of the Reno column’s attack on the south end of the sprawling encampment, the Indians were planning to relocate because the horse herd had depleted grasses on benchlands above the camp and because the pronghorn—*vó-ka-e* to the Cheyenne and *tatokadan* to the Sioux—had been scattered, and the quest for bison needed to continue.

Hundreds of pieces of literature have been written about the Little Bighorn battle—its causes, players, mysteries and far-reaching consequences—from which emerged a certain loser and, ultimately, no winner. Because no one of the divided command with Custer survived, the perspective of the vanquished was lost, except to the speculation and imagination of chroniclers who invariably are drawn to historic events so momentous as to defy objective reporting. No matter the viewpoint and discovery of new information, the battle’s outcomes remain the same. The investigators and reporters seem unanimous only about that and the fact that, had the Indian encampment been anywhere else along the Little Bighorn River at that particular time, the conflict and history itself, for better or worse, would have been significantly different. Ironically, “little bighorn” is a Lakota idiom for pronghorn (Hill 1979).

By no means was that propitious occasion in *Ipehin Hanksa Ktipi* the first time that pronghorn had been an important aspect and variable in the culture, economy and general welfare of Native Americans.