



“THEY WERE ALL RUBBED OUT.”

Standing Bear's Account of the Battle of the Little Big Horn

ABSTRACT

On June 25 and 26, 1876, the Seventh United States Cavalry Regiment attacked a combined village of Lakota and Northern Cheyenne allies along the Little Big Horn River in then Montana Territory. At the end of the fighting, five of twelve cavalry companies were killed to a man and losses among the Lakotas and Cheyennes numbered in the forties. Among the Indian men and women who defended their people, thirty would later capture their memories of and exploits in the battle in the traditional Plains Indian art form. Standing Bear was sixteen years old in this battle. This version is one of five known muslins about the battle. Painted on Pine Ridge in 1890, it is the only one of the five with a direct provenance from Standing Bear. There is at least one other version known to have been painted but has yet to be found.

After this we started down the hillside in formation toward the village, and there were dead men and horses scattered along there too. They were all rubbed out.

Standing Bear, 1931.

It is often claimed that the amount of literature about the Battle of the Little Big Horn over two days – June 25 and 26, 1876 – is exceeded only by that about the entire Civil War. At last count, over 12,000 books and articles have been listed in a bibliography of references about the battle. Few of them accurately, if at all, present the stories of the victors and the number is probably less than 100. Bias against their versions became more intense over time particularly when those warrior narratives did not support the prevailing white theories. It still influences narratives today.

Often called “the greatest defeat at the hands of the Indians,” it paled in comparison to that suffered by Major General St. Claire on the banks of the Maumee River in 1791. There, with a force of over 1,300 men, St. Claire found himself surrounded in a dawn attack that resulted in the deaths of over 900 of the men. Almost half of the entire United States Army then in uniform was wiped out. The Little Big Horn fight in 1876 grew, and continues to grow, primarily due to the reputation of the army leader who was killed, along with a brother, a nephew and 260 soldiers and scouts. George Armstrong Custer still enters conversations whenever and wherever people discuss the history of this country. His name still engenders arguments, debates, and at least two biographies a year.

The reasons for the battle and how the combatants got to the Little Big Horn is beyond the scope of this discussion. On the morning of June 25, 665 or thereabouts soldiers, Indian scouts, and civilian employees started toward the river valley. In that valley, about 7,500 to 8,000 Lakotas and Cheyennes were in the process of breaking camp, continuing to hunt and preparing for the winter, or returning to the reservations now that hunting and religious ceremonies were over. The army thought they might have to engage 1,500 to 2,000 warriors if it came to combat. It did and that is about the number of men they engaged.

Touted as the “largest encampment ever on the Plains,” and while large, it didn’t even make the top ten. But it had to be the “largest” for such a disaster to happen to the “greatest Indian fighting regiment” in the army. That Indian soldiers outfought white soldiers seldom enters discussions about the battle, even today.

150 or so warriors told of their parts in the fight, translated and recorded in English but seldom used. Used even less are the drawings and paintings thirty of them did. Such are the depictions of Standing Bear, a sixteen-year Miniconjou youth who came of age that day. His memories of the battle provide a visualization of his recorded narratives. “I was sixteen...” he said...sixteen. He earned two coups that day.

The pages that follow detail the elements in the painting. They mirror the recorded narratives provided by Standing Bear to several people. Given the terrain over which he rode and the actions in which he took part, it is an amazing story for anyone much less a sixteen-year-old. Each of the Standing Bear muslins is attached as well for comparison.

Several points about this version and with some comparisons with the others.

•**People.** I’ve not located Standing Bear in any of his art. The usual ways of identifying the protagonist don’t seem to work here. He told of tying a red bird in his hair the day of the fight and that should be a clue. While several men have birds shown on their heads, none are red. The leather suited individual seen in the center being attacked by two men is not in all the versions. He is not shown in the Philbrook or the Powell painting. He is in the Diker painting but by himself. In the May the attackers are reversed. We cannot with any certainty say who this is. We can, I believe, with certainty name one soldier casualty, that being Farrier Vincent Charlie, killed in the retreat from Weir Point as described later. He is the only soldier that I feel comfortable naming in any part of the painting. Is Custer shown? Some artists did but Standing Bear does not at least to my view. This depiction is not about who specifically died but rather how they died and most importantly Standing Bear’s actions in defense of his people.

•**Casualties.** Only three Indian casualties are shown, and this is seen in the others except one that shows only two. Red Face, in the Deep Ravine, is in all but the Diker painting. He is the only warrior I feel comfortable in naming in any part of the painting. While Miniconjou, Standing Bear lived with the Oglala. The Oglala suffered five killed and the Miniconjou suffered three killed so hard to equate with the figures shown. Again, “how” not “who.”

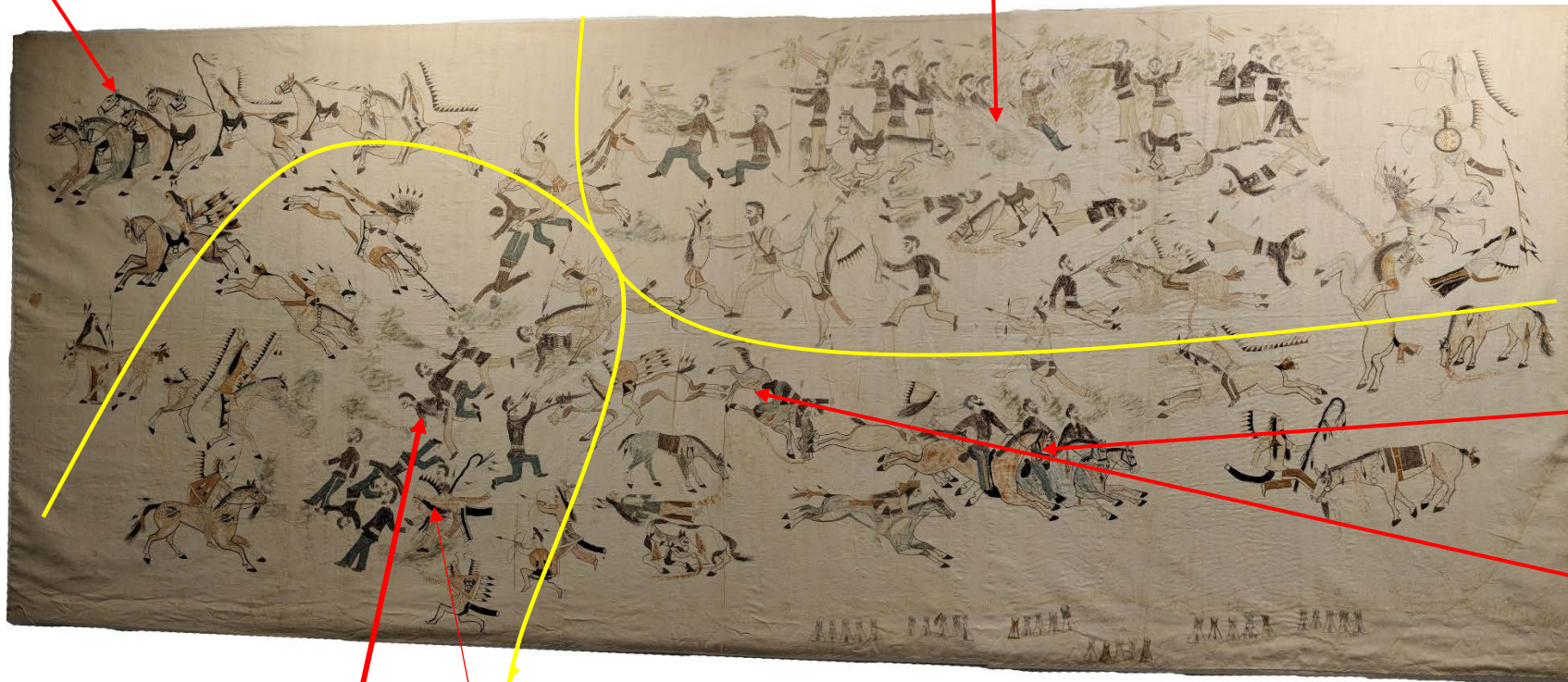
•**Dress, headdress, weapons, shields.** Differences in shields, headdresses, and occasionally weapons between versions. Not unusual as this art form served more as a mnemonic than an actual “picture.” The warrior capturing a guidon seen at the top is seen only in this one and the May, Diker, and Powell versions. This scene is on the right side of the line of troops in the Powell painting making it fit more with the act of Yellow Nose, a Cheyenne man who captured a guidon and used it to count coup. This may be that act but different dress in each version does not tell us much. Figures wear society regalia, bustles, sashes, belts, headdress, carry leader staffs, and items associate with their spiritual help in battle.

Almost all the artwork about the battle depict the capture of the cavalry horses and Standing Bear shows this in all five of his paintings of the battle.

"Many of the soldiers' horses had broken loose..."

"Last Stand Hill." The remnants of five companies of the Seventh Cavalry were killed in this end of what is now known as "Battle Ridge." Three companies, L, C, and I, were shattered on the east end of the ridge and the few survivors fled north along the ridge to meet up with the combined group of two companies, E and F, and the Regimental headquarters. Those not killed on the hill ran downhill into what is known as "Deep Ravine" and were killed there ending the fighting on this part of the battlefield. Only three guidons are shown in this version. The others show five, one for each company.

"We were going to meet the second band of soldiers. By the time we got there, they must have been fighting on the hill already...I was sixteen years..."



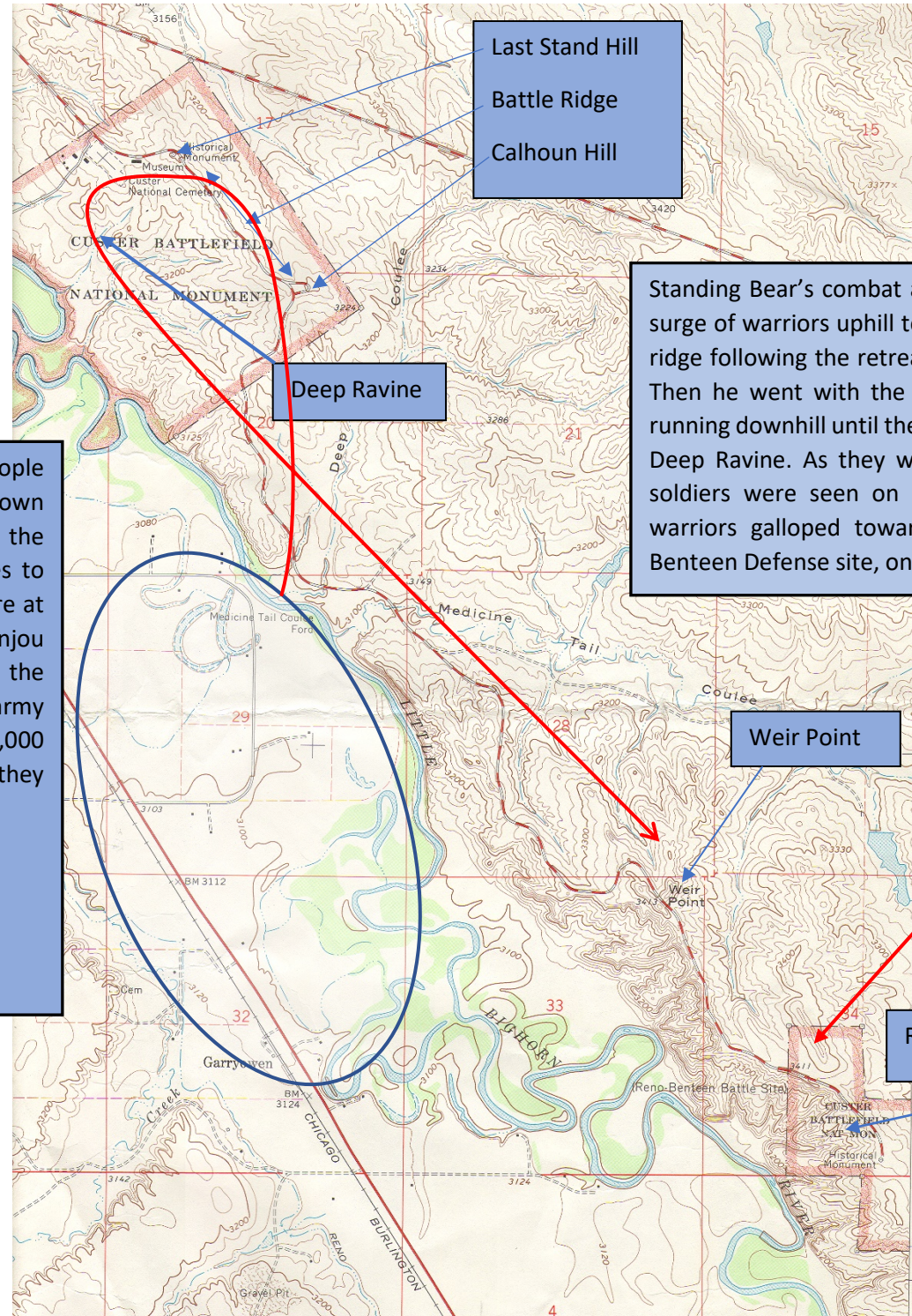
Deep Ravine. This was the true "last stand" as 20-25 soldiers ran downhill toward the river from what is now known as "Last Stand Hill." They were all killed in the ravine. Two Indians, a Cheyenne teenager - Noisy Walking and a Hunkpapa man - Red Face, were killed in the ravine with the soldiers. Standing Bear shows only Red Face as he was not aware of the Cheyenne casualty. Several other warrior artists also show this scene some with both warriors depicted.

"The soldiers that fell back along the ridge uniting with those left alive on Custer Hill broke and ran on foot down toward the ravine and river, and were killed by Indians surrounding them, with arrows, guns and war clubs."

Village. All the bands of the Lakota were represented. Standing Bear shows them in the six groups of lodges. The Northern Cheyenne made another group of lodges but are not shown. Most were on the west side of the river although some families were on the east side in the area below Weir Point. The thin brown line represents the Little Big Horn River lined with trees.

Standing Bear did not fight in the initial fighting in the valley against the Reno battalion. None of that action is in this painting. What was left of that force and Benteen's force did move north to what is now Weir Point but retreated when they came under direct attack. Standing Bear tells of this and shows it in all his art. This is NOT part of the fighting with the Custer forces. Standing Bear said one soldier was killed in this retreat and the army recorded the death of Farrier Vincent Charlie.

"Then we saw soldiers coming on a hill toward the south and east. Everybody began yelling: 'Hurry!' And we started for the soldiers. They ran back toward where they came from. One got killed, and many of us got off and couped him. Then we chased all the soldiers back to the hill where they were before..."



Approximately 7,500 to 8,000 people were in the tribal circles in the area shown in the oval. The Cheyenne were in the northern edge and the Lakota circles to the south. The Hunkpapa people were at the southern edge. The Miniconjou people were in about the center of the oval according to Standing Bear. The army expected to find an estimated 1,500-2,000 warriors and that is about what they encountered.

Last Stand Hill
Battle Ridge
Calhoun Hill

Deep Ravine

Standing Bear's combat actions (the red line) started in the surge of warriors uphill toward Battle Ridge, then along that ridge following the retreating soldiers to the Last Stand Hill. Then he went with the warriors in pursuit of the soldiers running downhill until they were surrounded and killed in the Deep Ravine. As they were returning to the village, more soldiers were seen on Weir Point to the south and the warriors galloped toward them. In the retreat to Reno-Benteen Defense site, one soldier was killed.

Weir Point

Sharpshooter Ridge where the next day, June 26, Standing Bear joined others on the high ground shooting down into the encircled soldiers. This is NOT shown in this painting but an important part of his story. He does show it in a stand-alone drawing on paper.

Reno-Benteen Defense Site

St. Joseph Museum 1890





Philbrook Museum 1892-1900



Diker 1895-1920



Powell 1899



Pierre – Sun Dance – Undated

