

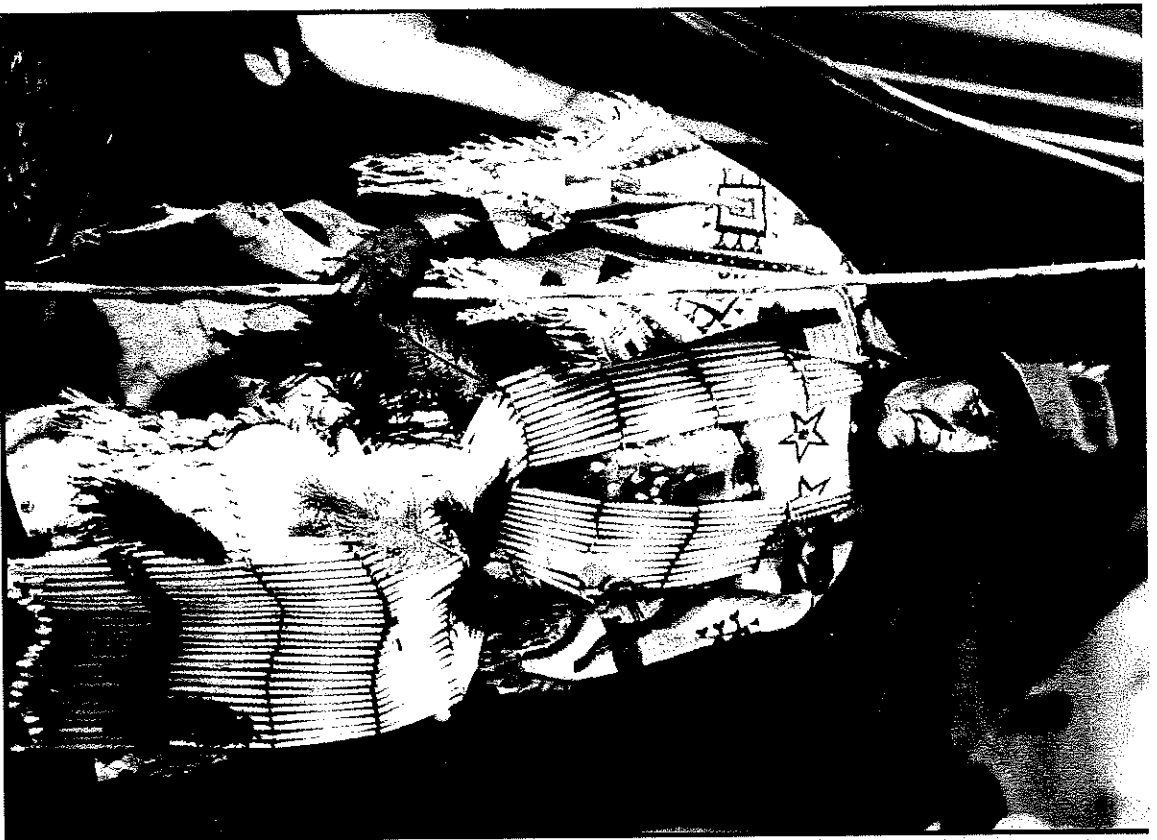
Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight

NEW SOURCES OF
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THE HUNKPAPA LAKOTA, MOVING ROBE WOMAN
This picture was taken by F.B. Fiske of Fort Yates, North Dakota,
ca. 1937, when Moving Robe Woman was about 83 years old.
Courtesy of National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

The Moving Robe Woman Interview

Editorial note: This interview was conducted in 1931 by Frank B. Zahn and was eventually published in the columns of the Pinedale Roundup. The article contains a lengthy introduction by the newspaper editor, which I have omitted. The following transcript of the newspaper clipping includes only the statements attributed to Moving Robe.

Moving Robe Woman
Standing Rock Agency
North Dakota
[1931]¹

I was born seventy-seven winters ago, near Grand River, South Dakota. My father, Slohan [Crawler], was the bravest man among our people. Fifty-five years ago, we packed our tents and went with other Indians to Peji Sla Wakapa

¹ Born about 1854, Moving Robe Woman was the daughter of the Hunkpapa Lakota, Crawler, a celebrated warrior who was instrumental in the release of Fanny Kelly from Sioux captivity in 1864. On the Standing Rock Agency rolls, Moving Robe is listed under her father's name, and having been given a Christian first name, she became known to the whites as Mary Crawler. Moving Robe's account of the Custer Battle appeared originally in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. It was reprinted in the *Pinedale (Wyoming) Roundup*, of which an undated clipping is filed with the Agnes W. Spring Collection, University of Wyoming Heritage Center, Laramie. Moving Robe's recollections were obtained through the services of Frank B. Zahn (1891-1966), who was an agency interpreter and later the

(Greasy Grass [Little Bighorn]).² We were then living on the Standing Rock reservation. I belonged to Sitting Bull's band. They were great fighters. We called ourselves Hunkpapa. This means confederate bands.³ When I was still a young girl (about 17) I accompanied a Sioux war party which made war against the Crow Indians in Montana.

I am going to tell you of the greatest battle. This was a fight against Pehin Hanska (General Custer).⁴ I was several miles from the Hunkpapa camp when I [saw a] cloud of dust rise beyond a ridge of bluffs in the east. The morning was hot and sultry. Several of us Indian girls were digging wild turnips. I was then 23 years old. We girls looked towards camp and saw a warrior ride swiftly, shouting that the soldiers were only a few miles away, and that the women and children, including old men, should run for the hills in an opposite direction.

I dropped the pointed ash stick which I had used in digging turnips, and ran towards my tipi (teepee). I saw my father running towards the horses. When I got to my tent, mother told me that news was brought to her that my

²Presiding judge of the Standing Rock Court of Indian Offenses. It is interesting to note that Judge Zahn was the son of Flying Hawk's daughter and William P. Zahn, a former soldier who had served in the 17th U.S. Infantry at Custer's Fort Lincoln. See Vestal, *Sitting Bull, Champion of the Sioux*, pp. 64, 66; *Bismark Tribune*, 7/5/1966.

³The stream called Greasy Grass by the Sioux was identified by the Cheyennes as Goat River, and by the Crows as Little Big Horn. Since it was named after the mountain sheep which dwell in this region, the English name for the river should be written as "Little Bighorn." See Hammer, *Custer in '76*, pp. 161, 212; Walter Camp Manuscripts, Indiana University Library, p. 824.

⁴Although the Sioux word *Lakota* means "confederate bands," the word *Hunkpapa* properly translates into People Who Camp at the Entrance," meaning the eastern entrance in a circle of lodges. See Hassrick, *The Sioux*, pp. 3, 13; McLaughlin, *My Friend the Indian*, p. 7.

⁵*Pehin Hanska*, literally translated as "Hair Long", was the Lakota name for Gen. George A. Custer. Although this name was also adopted by the Northern Cheyennes, the southern branch referred to Custer as Red Nose, which name resulted from the extreme sunburns Custer received during the field campaigns on the Southern Plains. Walter Camp Manuscripts, Indiana University Library, p. 21.

brother had been killed by the soldiers. In a few moments we saw soldiers on horseback on a bluff just across the Greasy Grass River.⁵

I heard Hawk Man shout, "Hoka He! Hoka He! (Charge! Charge!)." The soldiers began firing into our camp. Then they ceased firing. I saw my father preparing to go to the battle. I sang a death song for my brother who had been killed. My heart was bad. Revenge! Revenge! For my brother's death. I thought of the death of my young brother, One Hawk. I ran to a nearby thicket and got my black horse. I painted my face with crimson and braided my black hair. I was mourning. I was a woman, but I was not afraid.

By this time, the soldiers (Reno's men) were forming a battle line in the bottom about a half mile away. In another moment, I heard a terrific volley of carbines. The bullets shattered the tipi poles. Women and children were running away from the gunfire. In the tumult I heard old men and women singing death songs for their warriors who were now ready to attack the soldiers. The enchanting death songs made me brave, although I was a woman. I saw a warrior adjusting his quiver and grasping his tomahawk. He started running towards his horse, when he suddenly recoiled and dropped dead. He was killed near his tipi.

⁵There are other Lakotas who confirm this statement. After many years of diligent inquiries, Indian Agent James McLaughlin learned that the southern camps were alerted by the unexpected sight of soldiers on the bluffs, and that Reno's sudden appearance in the valley came as a complete surprise to these startled Indians. See the statements by Gall and Pretty White Buffalo Woman to James McLaughlin in *My Friend the Indian*, pp. 36, 38, 44. However, it is quite certain that Custer's descent of Reno Creek had been sighted earlier by Indians collected near Reno Hill, and that these men signalled Custer's approach by waving their saddle blankets to the camps below. See Hammer, *Custer in '76* p. 92 n.3, n.6.

⁶Hawk Man was a Hunkpapa head soldier who was killed by a gunshot in front of Reno's skirmish line in the valley.

⁷One Hawk, or Lone Hawk, may have been the formal name of the boy generally known as Deeds.

Warriors were given orders by Hawk Man to mount their horses and follow the fringe of the forest and wait until commands were given to charge. The soldiers kept firing. Some women were also killed.⁸ Father led my black horse up to me and I mounted. We galloped towards the soldiers. Other warriors joined in with us. When we were nearing the fringe of the woods, an order was given by Hawk Man to charge. The warriors were now near the soldiers. The troopers were all on foot. They shot straight, because I saw our leader killed as he rode with his warriors.

The charge was so stubborn that the soldiers ran to their horses and, mounting them, rode swiftly towards the river. Their horses had to swim to get across. Some of the warriors rode into the water and tomahawked the soldiers. In the charge, the Indians rode among the troopers and with tomahawks unhorsed several of them. The Indians chased the soldiers across the river and up over a bluff.

Then the warriors returned to the bottom where the first battle took place. The warriors rode in a column of fives. They sang a victory song. Someone said that another body of soldiers was attacking the lower end of the village. I heard afterwards that these soldiers were under the command of Long Hair (Custer). With my father and other youthful warriors I rode in that direction.⁹

⁸ This statement is corroborated by the *Bismarck Tribune* of 7/6/1876, which reveals that ten women had been killed, alleged to have been the work of Reno's Indian auxiliaries. Among the slain was probably the family of the Hunkpapa, Gail.

⁹ Moving Robe's participation in the Custer Battle is corroborated by the Hunkpapa, Rain in the Face, who near the end of his life still recalled his reaction upon seeing her: "Behold, there is among us a young woman! I shouted. 'Let no young man hide behind her garment!' I knew that would make these young men brave! The woman was Tashenamani [Tashna Mani], or Moving Robe, whose brother had just been killed. Holding her brother's war staff over her head, and leaning forward upon her charger, she looked as pretty as a bird." See Eastman, "Rain-in-the-Face," p. 511. Although reticent to tell Zahn the details of her involvement, it was learned, nonetheless, that Moving Robe fought Custer's troopers as fiercely as any of the warriors. She had secured a revolver, and when the battle was over she had killed two of Custer's wounded troopers—shooting one,

We crossed the Greasy Grass below a beaver dam (the water is not so deep there) and came upon many horses. One soldier was holding the reins of eight or ten horses.¹⁰ An Indian waved his blanket and scared all the horses. They got away from the men (troopers). On the ridge just north of us, I saw blueclad men running up a ravine, firing as they ran. The valley was dense with powder smoke. I never heard such whooping and shouting. "There is never a better time to die!" shouted Red Horse.¹¹

Long Hair's troopers were trapped in an enclosure. There were Indians everywhere. The Cheyennes attacked the soldiers from the north, and Crow King from the south.¹² It was not a massacre, but a hotly contested battle between two armed forces. Very few soldiers were mutilated, as oft has been said by the whites. Not a single soldier was burned at the stake. Sioux Indians do not torture their victims.¹³

After the battle the Indians took all the equipment and horses belonging to the soldiers. The brave men who came to punish us that morning were defeated; but in the end the

and hacking the other man to death with her sheath knife. See Nelly Snyder Yost, *Boss Comman: The Recollections of Ed Lemmon, 1857-1946* (Lincoln, 1969), p. 88.

¹⁰ Cavalry companies were divided in sets of fours, and when ordered to dismount and fight on foot, the horses of each set were held by one trooper, freeing the other three to concentrate on combat activities. Considering the stresses caused by combat noise, it would have been virtually impossible for one man to control four horses by merely holding them by their reins. For that reason, the bride was supplied with a strap on each side, along with a snap ring, which allowed the holder to link the bridles of the four horses together. See Magnusson, *Peter Thompson's Narrative*, p. 117, n19. When Moving Robe saw these horseholders near Calhoun Hill, she noticed them burdened with twice the number normally allowed, which suggest a heightening crisis in which horseholders were deployed on the front line.

¹¹ Red Horse was a respected tribal chief of the Minneconjou Lakotas whose band surrendered at Cheyenne River Agency in 1877. For his two accounts of the Custer Battle, see Graham, *The Custer Myth*, pp. 56-62.

¹² Crow King was a Hunkpapa Lakota who gained prominence after his surrender to the U. S. Military in 1880. His progressive leadership is noted in McLaughlin, *My Friend the Indian*, pp. 21-25. For Crow's King's account of the Custer Battle, see Judson Elliott Walker, *The Campaigns of General Custer* (New York, 1966), pp. 101-103.

Indians lost. We saw the body of Long Hair. Of course, we did not know who the soldiers were until an interpreter told us that the men came from Ft. Lincoln, then Dakota Territory. On the saddle blankets were the crossed saber insignia and the figure "7".

Over sixty Indians were killed, and they were brought back to the camp for scaffold burial. The Indians did not stage a victory dance that night. They were mourning for their own dead.

The next day we packed our tents and started north to the Canadian line. We crossed the border and remained in Canada for four years. We were brought down by steamboats in the spring of 1881. Sitting Bull surrendered to the military at Ft. Buford. In his death, the Sioux Nation lost a great leader. They are all dead now—Sitting Bull, Rain in the Face, Crow King, Gall, Crazy Horse, Red Cloud, Flying Cloud, and soon the Great Spirit will call the remaining warriors.

In this narrative, I have not boasted of my conquests. I am a woman, but I fought for my people. The white man will never understand the Indian. Eyas Hen La! I have said everything!

¹³ Moving Robe is contradicted by not only the Cheyenne, Two Moons, but also by her Hunkpapa tribesman, Little Knife, who admitted in 1879, that a soldier with stripes on his arm (NCO) had been taken prisoner and was killed during a wild dance held later that night. *Billings* (Montana) *Gazette*, partially dated, 1926, clipping in Billings Clipping File, Billings Public Library. On the subject of captives, Sergeant John M. Ryan recalled: "I think the Indians took some of our men prisoners, and when the reinforcements joined us, we found what appeared to be human bones and parts of blue uniforms where the men had been tied to stakes and trees. . . . We found three of our men's heads, suspended by wires through the back of the ears from a lodge pole, with the hair burned off." *Hardin* (Montana) *Tribune*, 6/22/1923. Unable to forget the horrors of the Little Bighorn, Major Reno wrote: "Many of their skulls had been crushed in; eyes had been torn from their sockets; hands, feet, arms, legs and noses had been wrenched off; many had their flesh cut in strips the entire length of their bodies, and there were others whose limbs were closely perforated with bullet holes, showing that the torture had been inflicted while the wretched victims were yet alive." See Hardorff, *The Custer Battle Casualties*, pp. 97-98.