

Kate Bighead's Story of the Battle

A Cheyenne woman's account of the Battle of the Little Bighorn taken down in 1922

Eighty years ago I was born when my people were in camp near Geese River (North river). I am of the Cheyenne tribe, and am now living with the Northern Cheyennes, in Montana. My name on the agency roll is Kate Bighead. I was with the Southern Cheyennes during most of my childhood and young womanhood. I was in the camp beside the Washita river, in the country the white people call Oklahoma, when Custer and his soldiers came there and fought the Indians (November, 1868). Our Chief Black Kettle and other Cheyennes, many of them women and children, were killed that day. It was early in the morning when the soldiers began the shooting. There had been a big storm, and there was snow on the ground. All of us jumped from our beds, and all of us started running to get away. I was barefooted, as were almost all of the others. Our tepees and all of our property we had to leave behind were burned by the white men. The next spring Custer and his soldiers found us again (March, 1869). We then were far westward, on a branch of what the white people call Red River, I think. That time there was no fighting. Custer smoked the peace pipe with our chiefs. He promised never again to fight the Cheyennes, so all of us followed him to a soldier fort (Fort Sill). Our people gave him the name Hi-es-tzie, meaning Long Hair. I saw Long Hair many times during those days. One time I was close to where he was mounting his horse to go somewhere, and I took a good look at him. He had a large nose, deep-set blue eyes, and light-red hair that was long and wavy. He was wearing a buckskin suit and a big white hat. I was then a young woman, 22 years old, and I admired him. All of the Indian women talked of him as being a fine-looking man. My cousin, a young woman named Me-o-tzi, went often with him to help in finding the trails of Indians. She said he told her his soldier horses were given plenty of corn and oats to eat, so they could outrun and catch the Indians riding ponies that had only grass to eat. All of the Cheyennes liked her, and all were glad she had so important a place in life. After Long Hair went away, different ones of the Cheyenne young men wanted to marry her. But she would not have any of them. She said that Long Hair was her husband, that he had promised to come back to her, and that she would wait for him. She waited seven years. Then he was killed. Me-o-tzi mourned when she learned of his death. I was not then with those people, but I heard that she cut off her hair and gashed her arms and legs for mourning. Her heart was much the more sad on account of his having been killed in a battle where the Northern Cheyennes fought against him. About a year later she married a white man named Isaac. They had several children. One of her daughters is now a middle-aged woman living with us Northern Cheyennes on Tongue river. The mother lived to old age and died in Oklahoma six years ago, some time after Christmas (in January, 1921). But her name is continued among us.

IN THE EARLY summer [of 1876], we set up camp near Little Big Horn River. Soldiers were spotted by some hunters to the south of the camp. Some young men went off to fight them and when they returned the next day they carried the bodies of several dead warriors with them. The chiefs then decided the group should move to the mouth of the river where there was plenty of game. On the first day of camp the peace was shattered when two boys ran into the camp warning of soldiers. Then shooting could be heard. Women and children went to hide in the brush, some women carried away tipis and their belongings, others just ran with their children.

Old men helped young men put on their war paint and dress. War ponies were brought into camp from the herds and the warriors mounted them and galloped away.

I found a pony and followed the warriors to watch the fighting as I often did since my nephew, **Noisy Walking**, expected me to watch and sing songs to give him courage. I rode around the outer fringes of the fighting, staying out of range of the bullets as I searched for **Noisy Walking**. In this way I could see what was happening. More and more soldiers were getting off their horses, preferring to hide or crawl along the ground. The ride by the river became a focal point as bands of warriors moved toward the waiting soldiers. Hundreds of Indians had begun to crawl toward them along crevices and gullies. Some soldiers mounted an attack off the ridge, galloping on their horses toward a group of Cheyennes and Oglalas. The Indians scattered to safety, and the white men dismounted again to hide along a second ridge. As hundreds of Indians surrounded this ridge I saw one of the soldiers point his pistol at his head and pull the trigger. Others imitated his example, shooting sometimes themselves, sometimes each **other**. When Chief **Lame White Man** reached the soldiers all of them were already dead. Indians then attacked the first ridge, and again most of the white men were already dead. The only thing remaining for the Indians to do was pick up the abandoned guns and ammunition. As warriors walked among the white men, they cut off the legs or feet or arms of many of the bodies. Some of the soldiers were still living, having only been wounded, but they were quickly killed and parts of their bodies were also severed.

Only a few soldiers were still alive and able to fight at this point, and they joined forces at the west end of the ridge where they were surrounded by warriors and killed. When the shooting stopped the Indians thought all the soldiers had been killed, but seven soldiers were still alive and they rushed out from behind their horses and started running. I could not see what happened to these seven because of all the dust raised by the Indians and their ponies. I rode away searching for my nephew who had been shot and stabbed. I stayed with him, and brought him to his mother, but **Noisy Walking** died that night. He was one of the few Indians to be killed -- only half a dozen Cheyennes and two dozen Sioux lost their lives. The Indians said this was because of the Everywhere Spirit who had caused the white men to go mad and kill themselves thus saving many lives from the guns of the soldiers. They said this madness was the Everywhere Spirit's way of punishing the white men for attacking a peaceful Indian camp.

After the battle according to Cheyenne custom the dead were buried while some of the Sioux dead were placed on scaffolds. Then lodges and tipis were dismantled and we traveled down river when we received word that more soldiers were coming toward Little Big Horn. When we reached the junction of the Little Big Horn and Powder Rivers the group divided and the Cheyenne made camp near the mouth of the Powder River. Soldiers once again attacked us during the winter destroying our food and hides, so we moved into the Little Big Horn Valley. We were finally persuaded to go with the soldiers and sent to Oklahoma.