



MEMORIAL HONORS INDIANS WHO DIED IN FIERCE BATTLE WITH CUSTER'S TROOPS

By GWEN FLORIO

Denver Post

June 26, 2003

CROW AGENCY, Mont. - The federal government finally acknowledged the sacrifice of Indians who successfully fought off U.S. troops they considered invaders with the dedication Wednesday of a new memorial commemorating the Battle of the Little Bighorn. A hilltop granite obelisk and white headstones on the battlefield had been the only tribute to the fighting here 127 years ago, and Indians have long complained about not being recognized for their bravery in battle. Until recently, the fight was remembered from the perspective of white Americans as either Custer's Last Stand or the Custer Massacre, because Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and roughly 260 of his men of the 7th Cavalry were wiped out.

Now stands a memorial featuring a graceful bronze sculpture of mounted Indian warriors dashing toward the battle and a walk-in circular enclosure lined with engravings that commemorate the Indians who fought and died. The memorial atones in many ways for years of slanted history, many attending the ceremony said. "We are here today not to mourn them but to honor ... the beauty of their death," George Amiotte, an Oglala Lakota from Pine Ridge, S.D., said in morning prayers at the new monument. "I myself can't think of a better way to die than to surrender myself back to the ground ... for something I believe in." "It was always the losers being honored," said Herbert Bear Chum Sr., from the Northern Cheyenne Reservation east of here. The new memorial, said Bear Chum, 68, who wore dabs of scarlet paint on his cheeks, will remind people "that we are still here.



Never forget."

An estimated 4,000 people attended the ceremony, which also included speeches from tribal leaders and politicians. Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a Northern Cheyenne, participated in a sunrise prayer and pipe ceremony on the yucca-studded

hillside overlooking the battle site. Interior Secretary Gale Norton and Montana Gov. Judy Martz also spoke, as did the parents and children of Pfc. Lori Piestewa, a Hopi soldier killed in Iraq earlier this year.

As the sun climbed higher, hundreds of Indian people on horseback, most of them in traditional dress, thundered back and forth on the prairie surrounding the battlefield. Veterans with eagle feathers dangling from their military caps danced-stepped in a large circle. Not until 12 years ago did Congress finally change the name of the National Park Service site from the Custer Battlefield National Monument to the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. That same year, 110 years after the granite marker was placed on Last Stand Hill, Congress authorized the Indian memorial. Funding would take another decade. Within a few years of the battle, most of the tribes involved were settled on reservations. Chiefs Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, who led the battle, died ignominious deaths, stabbed in captivity in separate incidents.

Today, the nation's 2.5 million Indians are its poorest ethnic group, and wrestle with a host of social and economic problems. But in 1876, Indians still dominated the Great Plains. When bands of Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho gathered in the Greasy Grass Valley on the banks of the Little Bighorn River in July of that year, they numbered 7,000 strong. Custer, with 600 cavalymen and 35 Crow and Arikara scouts, didn't see the encampment until he was relatively nearby. Apparently underestimating the Indians' numbers, he divided his men into three groups, keeping 210 men in five companies with himself and attacking with alacrity. At least 54 Sioux and Cheyenne fighters died that day, as well as some women and children. The names of the known Indian dead from the five tribes involved are inscribed on the walls that form the circle of the new memorial.

Most of Wednesday's events took place at the memorial or near the Park Service visitor center, and were attended by huge crowds. But early Wednesday morning, on a lonely hillside just a hundred yards south of the battlefield, nine Northern Cheyenne gathered to honor two of their own who fought and died that day. Bernard Red Cherries stood before two red markers and spoke in Cheyenne, then stooped to touch the earth. "If it wasn't for these people who sacrificed their lives," said Red Cherries, "I don't think we'd be here as a Cheyenne nation."