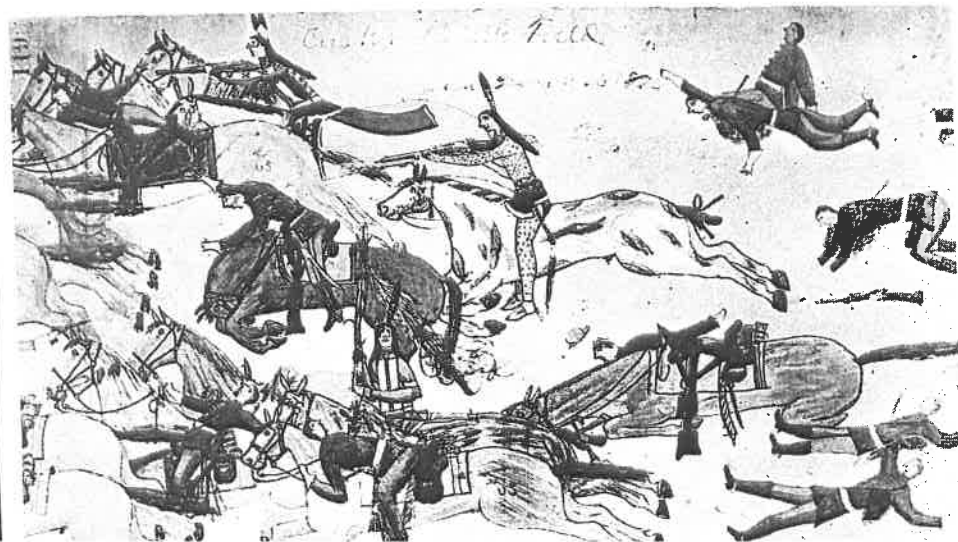
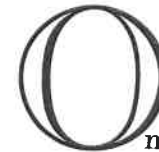


The Death Struggle of General Custer, printed in the New York Graphic Newspaper, July 1876. Library of Congress

The Battle of the Little Bighorn, ledger art drawn by Amos Bad Heart Bull, a Lakota, around 1890. His family was part of Crazy Horse's band at the Little Bighorn in 1876. University of Nebraska Press



Prologue



One summer morning in 1990 I received a phone call from a filmmaker named Paul Stekler. He was calling from Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he has a film company called Midnight Productions. He sounded young, but his voice was calm and patient as he explained what the deal was. He had received a good sum of grant money to make a film about the Battle of the Little Bighorn, or Custer's Last Stand, whichever sounded most familiar to me. He went on to establish his credentials—he had produced and directed two of the *Eyes on the Prize* episodes, a series which encompassed the black civil rights experience in this country; he had made his own film on Louisiana politics; and he had worked as a writer on several other film projects. He had a Ph.D. from Harvard, had taught at Tulane for a few years, kicked around New Orleans for a while, hanging out in cafés, drinking strong coffee, then became involved in filmmaking. He wondered if I would be interested in helping him write the script for the Little Bighorn film. I had been mentioned favorably by two historians and writers, David McCullough and Alvin Josephy, both of whom I had met and liked very much.

I also liked the way Paul described the film—largely told from the Indians' point of view, with much historical background of both sides and interviews with descendants of both the Indians and whites who fought at Little Bighorn. He talked about using ledger art (Indians were given ledger books by agents to draw their perceptions

of historical events), old footage of a Cheyenne warrior named Two Moons describing the battle ("It took about as long as it takes a hungry man to eat his dinner"), and Buffalo Bill's Wild West (which featured many of the Indian participants, including Sitting Bull and Black Elk). He talked of using old photographs of immigrants, city life back east, settlers, soldiers, and Indians—portraits of Indian chiefs, Indian camps, Indians on the move, Indians on reservations. He wanted a strong, simple narration to go along with these images.

As I listened to him talk about the project, I felt a small flicker of enthusiasm which surprised me. I had been approached by filmmakers before and I had always declined. Either I wasn't interested in the subject or I was involved in a novel or I didn't like the tone or point of view of the film. I am not a prolific writer, and to spend a lot of energy on a project I didn't fully believe in seemed wasteful. Besides, I am a fiction writer and sometimes poet who has worked in solitary for twenty-five years, and to get involved with such a communal activity as filmmaking goes against the grain.

But Paul's voice, now rising with enthusiasm, was starting to get to me, and I thought, maybe I could work with this guy. But I had one problem—I was absolutely inexperienced in film writing. It should be easy for you to learn, he said. I'll send you a bunch of documentaries, study them, see how other people do it. How much time does a writer normally spend on a project like this? You work in bursts, with time off to do your own writing in between, say three or four periods of two weeks each, initial script, rough cut, fine cut, locked cut, etc. These were foreign terms to me, but the whole thing sounded easy enough—a few intense writing sessions and time in between to pursue my own writing. I guess I felt at the time that documentary-script writing was not real writing. It was more like writing small bridges between images or to explain something we were seeing on the screen. Not difficult at all once I got the hang of it. I have since learned how complicated and sometimes convoluted a script can get. And I have also learned that filmmakers are notorious for underestimating the amount of time a writer will spend on a project.

Although Paul was beginning to convince me that this would be an important film, I didn't want to commit myself to such a large project without some time to think. I was due to teach a two-week summer writing workshop in Colorado the following week, so I gave

him the phone number of the condominium where I would be staying and told him to call in midweek. During the drive down to Colorado, my wife and I discussed the pros and cons of getting involved. She knows how wishy-washy I can be and how I sometimes commit myself without thinking things through and then hate myself afterward. I have agreed to be on boards of advisers for various projects (having been told that the position was largely perfunctory) and have ended up working my rear end off. I served for ten years as a member of the Montana State Board of Pardons (parole board) and just plain burned out on the gut-wrenching sadness of human experience. I have read thousands of pages of manuscripts for the National Endowment for the Arts Literature Panel. I helped put together an anthology on Montana writing that ran 1,160 pages. Of course, there is a good feeling in being a part of such endeavors—you are doing something for others, you are putting back for once, instead of just taking. The fact that you are barely compensated for your time adds to this feeling of altruism. But the work itself is grinding, tense, and often depressing. Although there is no real comparison between this type of work and writing a script for a professional film company, the commitment of time away from one's own writing is similar. And that's what made me uneasy.

Paul, true to his sense of responsibility, called right at midweek, Wednesday morning. I was in the middle of a three-hour session with my group of writers in the living room of the condominium. I let the phone ring a couple of times while I excused myself and went into the kitchen to pick it up. But as I reached for the phone, I heard the cheery greeting of the condo owner on the answering machine, then Paul's voice. I said, "Paul, this is Jim," and he kept talking. I tried again, but it was clear that the answering machine had taken over and I didn't know how to stop it. Paul talked about the script possibilities, the people he had contacted, the research he had done, how if it was all right with me he'd fly out to Montana for a face-to-face talk, etc. I could only stand there and smile sheepishly at my writers as Paul's voice filled the room. When the one-sided phone call ended, the writers were looking at me with a kind of knowing expectancy (the real writer's life). Finally, a healthy young woman, a local who skied (this was Aspen, after all, even if it was summer), said, "Go for it." And so I did.

Paul Stekler came to Missoula about a month later, around the middle of August. He stayed for four days, and mostly we talked and

walked and watched documentaries that he had brought with him. Just as I'd expected, I liked him right away, and it was pretty clear that we could work together, if he had the patience—which it turned out he did. It was only toward the end of the project, when we were cutting out sentences, then phrases, then single words to get the film length down to fifty-two minutes, that our work got tense. But our battle was always with the script (and sometimes with the film editor, who had a sharp ear for language as well as an eye for images), never with each other.

At the end of that first visit we had put together an outline which would serve us for the rest of the project as a compass line, our deviations and meanderings always returning to true north. When I put Paul back on the plane, I had only a vague idea that this small bit of work would mushroom into an ongoing event that would consume my time and energy for the next year and a half. But it *was* an important film, not because we were going to debunk the Custer Myth—that has been done countless times even if not many have paid attention—but because we were going to explore the sometimes mundane reality of the events that led to the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and, more important to me, we were going to tell the Indians' side of the story. We were going to give the Sioux, the Cheyennes, and Custer's much-maligned Crow and Arikara scouts a voice.

The film turned out to be a great success. It was shown on November 25, 1992, the day before Thanksgiving, as part of the American Experience series on PBS. The ratings were high and the reviews were excellent. The project officially came to a close with that screening. As I watched it, my feelings included awe that filmmakers can create something so fine out of such a mountain of material, happiness that I had been a part of it, and relief that I was finished with it. No more research, no more scripts, no more Custer, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse. No more traveling back and forth to the battlefield and Cambridge.

But I wasn't really finished with the Battle of the Little Bighorn. In fact, the film was almost a dry run for a book I had contracted to do for Norton, which would tell the story in more detail than we had time for in the film. The book would be not only historical, but impressionistic—what were my thoughts on the battle, on the participants, on the period, on the “settling” of the northern plains? It was with more than a little trepidation that I began this book. Fortu-

nately for me, Paul Stekler agreed to help out by providing his research, maps, photographs, reading skill, and moral support.

What can one say about the battle that hasn't been said before? Most Americans know (or *think* they know) the basic story. On June 25, 1876, Custer and his 7th Cavalry troopers attacked a large village of Sioux and Cheyenne people on the Little Bighorn River and were wiped out by a swarm of warriors. Custer made his Last Stand and died valiantly on a hilltop. Custer was an overweening fool who was more concerned with glory than good sense. Custer was a martyr at a time when this country, in the throes of a depression, desperately needed a martyr to take its mind off its larger problems. Custer was the flamboyant scamp of American military history. Custer embodied the ideals of a young nation. The Custer Myth.

Surprisingly, there is much to tell about the battle because of recent research which tells the story more exactly than has been done before. While no one will ever really *know* what happened on Calhoun Ridge and Custer Hill and in Deep Ravine, studies have been undertaken recently that make sense of the movements and actions of the 7th Cavalry. One historian uses topographic research and time/motion studies to track military maneuvers; an archaeologist, taking advantage of a fire that swept the battlefield in 1983, plots the entire area with a grid system to analyze artifacts, shot patterns, and groupings of troopers. Both approaches are convincing in their scientific results.

But both accounts are backed up by information supplied by Indian participants. And this is new in itself. For years, historians have tended to discount Indian testimony as unreliable and contradictory. For example, one of Custer's Crow scouts, a seventeen-year-old by the name of Curley, gave an account of Custer's Last Stand that met with ridicule from the beginning. Curley was the last man, on the army side, to see Custer and the 7th Cavalry alive. He was with them at the start of the battle, left under orders, and watched the beginning of the end from a distant hill. He was interviewed several times immediately afterward, then branded a liar and publicity-seeker. Why? Because the translators were incompetent and the interviewers led Curley to say what they wanted him to say. And he wanted to be agreeable. Now, many serious historians believe that he was correct in his original observations.

One of the common fallacies in regard to the Battle of the Little Bighorn is that there were no survivors. There were plenty of survi-

vors—Sioux and Cheyennes. Many of the seeming contradictions in their accounts have been reconciled with the new research. The village was three miles long, and the various participants were at different parts of the battlefield, seeing what was in front of them. The wide-angle lens wasn't available to them at the time. That is why there is no comprehensive Indian view of the battle. But their individual accounts can be stitched together to provide a very plausible story of the fight.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn may be the most depicted event in our nation's history. Hundreds of books, from Custer biographies to as-told-to Indian accounts, have been written; thousands of illustrations, from the famous Anheuser-Busch lithograph of Custer's Last Fight (which hung in saloons and tobacco stores all across America) to Sioux and Cheyenne ledger drawings, have been displayed; and at least forty films, from *They Died with Their Boots On* to *Little Big Man*, have played in theaters around the world. Clearly, from the number of books still being published, there is a fascination with this tiny event that just won't die.

So what's special about this book? Maybe nothing. It certainly will not provide any startling revelations from a historical or military standpoint. But maybe it will offer the reader a comprehensive frontier environment which will provide an explanation for why this battle had to take place. And it did have to take place. It was as inexorable as any showdown in a clash of cultures which has been historically brought on by the whites. Only this time the wrong guys, the "red fiends," won—which is precisely why the battle has assumed such mythical significance in our history. It ranks right up there with such martyr myths as the Charge of the Light Brigade and the Battle of the Alamo. The thought of a large number of bloodthirsty savages slaughtering a small but noble band of white heroes becomes a powerful battle cry. The Sioux and Cheyenne victory at Little Bighorn in 1876 was a great achievement for Indians, but, with the exception of Sitting Bull's band, all of the participants surrendered within a year of the battle and were forced onto reservations. Thus, (white) justice won out and the forces of righteousness prevailed over the forces of darkness in the end.

I begin my account of the conflict between whites and Indians with an event that occurred on January 23, 1870, more than six years before Little Bighorn, in which 173 Blackfeet men, women, and children were slaughtered by U.S. soldiers. The Massacre on the Marias

River was more representative of what happened to Indian people who resisted the white invasion than Custer's Last Stand. I tell it not only because it happened to my own people, but because it needs to be told known if one is to understand this nation's treatment of the first Americans. And to understand the glory and sorrow of that hot day in June 1876 when the Indians killed Custer.