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“THIS MUST HAVE BEEN A GRAND SIGHT” GEORGE BENT AND THE BATTLE OF PLATTE BRIDGE

STEVEN C. HAACK

The Battle of Platte Bridge, July 26, 1865, is a noteworthy event in the annals of the American Indian Wars. An alliance of Cheyenne, Sioux, and Arapahoe, numbering in excess of 2,000 warriors, traveled three days to a specific military objective, an undertaking unusual both in terms of its magnitude and its level of organization. The battle is also of interest because we have a detailed description of the event written from the Native American viewpoint. This description comes in the form of a number of letters written to George Hyde by Southern Cheyenne George Bent.

George Bent, son of the famous trader William Bent and Owl Woman, a Southern

Key Words: Caspar Collins, Indian Wars, Kansas, North Platte River, Oregon Trail

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Cheyenne, was educated in white schools in Westport, Missouri, and St. Louis. Injured at the Sand Creek Massacre, he joined the hostile forces that traveled north in the spring of 1865 to ally themselves with the Native Americans in the Powder River region. Bent joined the raiding parties that came down to the North Platte in May and June and was a participant in the Battle of Platte Bridge and the Battle of Red Buttes, both of which took place on July 26, 1865. Bent went on to serve as a translator and government liaison to the Cheyenne for decades on the reservation in Oklahoma.¹

Bent established relations with a number of historians and ethnographers, most notably George Bird Grinnell. Although productive, these relationships frequently proved frustrating for both parties. Bent often felt that the researchers worked in a piecemeal way, were not deferential to the elders with whom he had arranged interviews, and failed to publish the information they acquired in a timely manner.² As he watched the elders around him age and die, he was acutely aware that the history, wisdom, and lore of the Cheyenne people were vanishing. It was his desire that a book be produced preserving all that he and others

could remember about his people. In 1904 Bent began a correspondence with George Hyde, an independent scholar in Omaha, Nebraska. From 1905 until his death in 1918, Bent wrote over 300 letters to Hyde. Hyde completed the manuscript shortly before Bent's death but was unable to find a publisher for it. He eventually sold the manuscript and a number of the letters to the Denver Public Library. His manuscript was rediscovered in 1966 and the book was finally published in 1968.³

Hyde was particularly interested in the geographic locations mentioned by Bent, especially those along the Arkansas River in Colorado and Kansas and the watershed of western Kansas. Bent would occasionally draw maps to illustrate his narrations, but Hyde would also prepare maps, some quite detailed, and mail them to Bent, requesting that particular trails or encampments be marked and the map returned. Bent was generally accommodating in this regard, though Hyde's notes occasionally express frustration over Bent's lack of cooperation. It appears that in the course of writing his book, Hyde separated the maps from their corresponding letters, and in most cases, they were never reunited.

Eight of the letters Bent wrote to Hyde mention the Battle of Platte Bridge, and three of them have long, detailed descriptions of the preparations for the battle, the journey to the area, and the battle itself. In addition, two of the letters, dated May 22, 1906, and November 10, 1915, refer to maps that apparently accompanied those letters. The 1906 letter is now held in the Coe Collection at Yale University, which in fact holds the bulk of Bent's letters. The 1915 letter is held in the Western Americana Collection at the Denver Public Library. Neither of these archives, however, has the maps, which are held in the archives of the University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries.⁴ These maps are among fourteen acquired in 1928 from John Van Male, a Denver book dealer who had purchased them from Hyde.⁵

Terrain is always a major factor in any military confrontation, and the battles of July 26, 1865, are no exception. The dominant feature

of the area was the North Platte River, a wide, braided river with deep channels and a broad floodplain in which the channels wandered. When the water ran high, the river constituted a barrier that wagons could cross only by bridge. At other times, it could be readily crossed at a number of fords. The sandy soil around the river was easily eroded, and the many ravines leading to the river were quite deep, with steep sides. These ravines and the vegetation that grew in them provided good cover for combatants. Bluffs and mesas are common in the area and provide high ground from which the surrounding area is visible for many miles. The high ground may seem to be the ideal location for a military installation, but in the arid environment of the High Plains, the availability of water is more important than the tactical advantage of elevation. Platte Bridge Station was located in a loop of the river. The terrain was open to the south and east. A tributary enters the river from the northwest about a mile downstream from Platte Bridge Station. Known by the soldiers as Dry Creek, it is now known as Casper Creek.

What follows is a description and explication of the Battle of Platte Bridge as it was presented in the letters of George Bent. I also examine one map he created of the battlefield, as well as another map drawn by George Hyde and annotated by Bent. Additionally, a comparison of these maps to a contemporary topological map of the area is introduced to help in our understanding of Bent.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In large part, the motivation for the attack at Platte Bridge Station lay far to the south on the plains of western Kansas and eastern Colorado. The government's relationship with the Native Americans throughout the Great Plains had been in a state of deterioration since the early 1860s. The settlements and emigrant trains had depleted many of the resources upon which the Native population depended. August of 1864 saw an explosion of violence against white settlers, starting on the Little

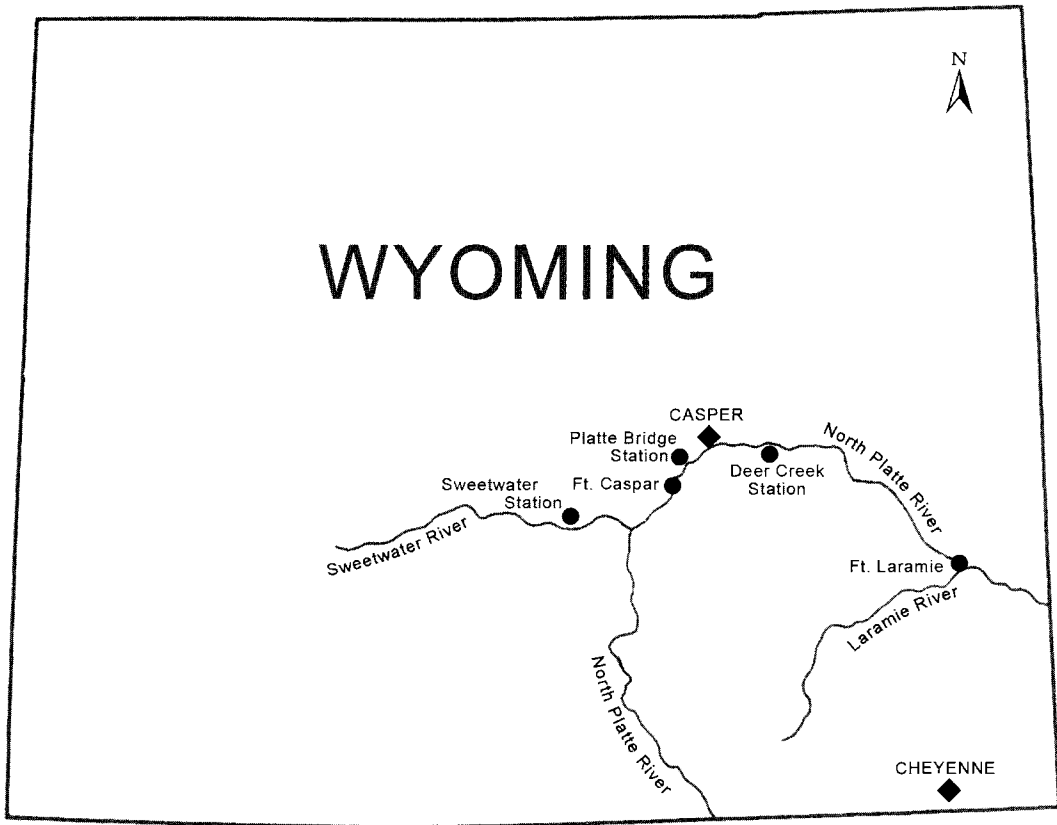


FIG. 1. Map of Wyoming showing current day cities Casper and Cheyenne in relation to the North Platte River, Platte Bridge Station, and Ft. Caspar. Based on the map, "Indian Battles and Skirmishes, 1854-1876," in *State Maps on File, Mountain & Prairie, Wyoming*, 8.17, by Facts On File Publishing, New York, NY, 1984. Used by permission. Map is not to scale.

Blue River in south-central Nebraska and spreading out along the Overland Trail. The escalating pattern of raids and reprisals came to a head in late November of 1864 with the Sand Creek Massacre, when Col. John Chivington led an attack of Colorado Volunteers on an encampment of Arapahoe and Southern Cheyenne Indians. Some 200 were killed, mostly women, children, and the elderly. In response, large numbers of Arapahoe, Sioux, and Cheyenne came together and headed north, raiding ranches, outposts, and emigrant trains as they went. In early February the army post at Julesburg was attacked. Soldiers were led by decoys into an ambush and eighteen were killed. Raiding at the ranches and along the

road resulted in the closing of the Overland Trail to all but heavily escorted traffic.⁶

After confronting the party at Mud Springs and Rush Creek in early February, William Collins estimated the force to consist of between 2,000 and 3,000 warriors and their camp at 800 to 1,000 lodges. He was prescient in his warning that these Indians would join their brethren in the Powder River area and organize attacks on the traffic and installations along the North Platte River:

They are well armed and mounted; have many rifled muskets and plenty of ammunition, including minie cartridges with ounce balls; are full of venom and bent on revenge

for the loss of their people south. So soon as they reach the Indians north they will excite and perhaps compel them to become hostile. The posts on the Platte, especially Deer Creek and Platte Bridge, which are within 100 miles of Powder river, will be in immediate danger.⁷

In response to Collins's warning, the stations along the North Platte River, spaced at intervals of about fifty miles, were improved with the addition of stockades and facilities adequate to accommodate about one hundred soldiers.

Other plans were in the offing as well. In February, Brig. Gen. Patrick Connor was put in charge of the newly created District of the Plains. He immediately began organizing a punitive expedition into the Powder River Basin. On March 29, Maj. Gen. Grenville M. Dodge, commander of the District of Missouri, wired Connor that he had 2,000 mounted men en route: "I want this force pushed right on after the Indians." In a second wire sent on the same day he states, "With the force at your disposal you can make vigorous war upon the Indians and punish them so that they will be forced to keep the peace." Dodge went on to outline a plan to construct and provision depots and recruit manpower from the ranks of Confederate prisoners.⁸ The plan was to strike before the grass grew, catching the enemy before their war ponies recovered from the rigors of the High Plains winter.

Thus, as spring stretched toward summer, both sides were expecting a major confrontation—one that would, depending upon the side consulted, either strike a blow of vengeance for Sand Creek and keep the white man out of the Native Americans' last stronghold, or punish the Indians for their years of depredations and force them to accommodate westward expansion. Both sides were planning. The army set to work utilizing a complex system involving centralized production, supply lines, and troop movements. This system had already been stretched to its limits by the Civil War. Horses and equipment were in short supply and soldiers were clamoring to be mustered out of

service. The Native Americans, unencumbered by such concerns, got in the first shot.

PLATTE BRIDGE STATION

The bridge that would become the focus of the Indians' summer campaign was a very impressive structure. Built in 1859 at the location of present-day Casper, Wyoming, it was about 1,000 feet long. Spanning across twenty-eight log cribs, it served as a toll bridge for wagons on the Oregon Trail. Several rude buildings had stood at its southern end since its construction, serving the needs of telegraph operators and Pony Express personnel, but in the spring of 1865, construction was commenced on improvements. The accommodations would eventually include a laundry, a blacksmith shop, officers' quarters, squad rooms, storehouses, and a kitchen. A small stockade, measuring forty-five feet square, was bordered by structures on the north, stables on the west, and a nine-foot-high palisade to the east and south.⁹

The Kansas Eleventh Cavalry was ordered to report to Fort Laramie in February. Starting from Fort Riley, they commenced upon a miserable trek through winter storms via Fort Kearney and Julesburg, arriving at Fort Laramie on April 19. Most of the men were inadequately clothed for such a journey, and a third of them had no horses. Half the companies were sent south to Fort Halleck while the rest were distributed among the stations along the North Platte. The Kansas Eleventh set up headquarters a few miles south of the bridge at the base of what is now Casper Mountain, the northern terminus of the Laramie range. This site, named Camp Dodge, would serve as headquarters for several months. Timber was hauled from the mountain for the construction of the improvements at the bridge. The Kansas Eleventh moved into their new accommodations in early July. Most of the men had signed up for a three-year enlistment in August of 1862, so their period of enlistment was nearing its end. They were informed on July 15 that they would be returning to Kansas as soon

as they were relieved by the Michigan Sixth Cavalry.¹⁰

The soldiers stationed on the North Platte were bedeviled by undependable supply lines, inadequate rations, and poor mounts. The task of patrolling and repairing the telegraph line was frustrating. Their horses were no match for the sturdy Indian ponies and would often give out under the stress of a chase. The Indians had come to understand the strategic importance of the telegraph lines and could easily tear out a few hundred yards of it while passing through the area. Sometimes they would break the line at a point where the surrounding terrain facilitated an ambush, and there they would wait for the repair crew. The soldiers learned that it was necessary to travel in groups of twenty or more.¹¹

The war party that arrived in the vicinity of Platte Bridge on the morning of July 25 did a masterful job of concealing its true size. The soldiers at the bridge had been confronted a number of times by raiding parties consisting of a few dozen to a few hundred warriors, and the initial confrontation appeared to fit this pattern. The morning started with routine duties. John Crumb and two others were tending the horse herd. According to Crumb,

I with two other of the boys had taken our herd of horses across the bridge to the north to graze. There was a nice little bottom covered with good grass extending down to the mouth of Casper Creek. We were well down to the lower end of this bottom when the boy I had out on picket on a high hill east of the creek fired three shots, our danger signal. He could see well nigh the whole length of the creek. We got the horses well started for the bridge when I sent the other boy down to the water's edge, opposite camp to fire the signal, as the wind was blowing very strong from the south, and I didn't think they could hear the first signal. That brought the boys out, they met us on the bridge and secured their horses.

In the meantime, Indians rushed out of Casper Creek and swarmed up the bottom,

but we had the horses all on the bridge as they rushed past. They didn't even exchange shots with us as they rushed by not more than twenty-five yards from us three that were driving the herd.

Thus began an unsuccessful decoy operation. The Indians were less interested in the herd than they were in baiting the soldiers into pursuing them five miles to the northwest where the main body of warriors awaited. Crumb continues:

The whole company scattered out over the hills, two to a dozen in a place and followed the Indians back well onto the hills until it looked as though there were Indians enough to eat us all up, but they don't like a man on foot with a carbine in his hands. The Captain had the recall sounded and we returned to camp, followed by the Indians at long range.¹²

Crazy Head, a Cheyenne participant, noted in a statement to Grinnell that the better part of the day was spent attempting to lure the soldiers out, to no avail, until the chiefs sent High Back Wolf out to order them to return to camp.¹³ At that point, a number of warriors, including High Back Wolf, crossed the river near the mouth of Casper Creek to raid the station's beef herd. A detail of about thirty soldiers rushed out to the herd and drove the Indians back, killing High Back Wolf in the process.

The commander at the station, Maj. Martin Anderson, spurred by these disturbing events, took an inventory of the situation. About ninety able-bodied men were on duty with twenty rounds of ammunition available for each rifle.¹⁴ The telegraph line to the east was down. He had no idea, of course, of the mass of warriors behind the hill six miles to the north.

The typical complement of men at the station was just over one hundred, but two dozen members of the Kansas Eleventh Cavalry were absent, having left on the morning of July 22 to escort a contingent of Ohio soldiers fifty miles up the road to the Sweetwater Station. This

detail, led by Sgt. Amos Custard, had started the return trip with three empty wagons on the morning of the 25th, and at about the time of the skirmish at the herd, they were preparing to stay the night at Willow Springs, midway between Sweetwater and Platte Bridge.¹⁵

At about two o'clock the next morning, a contingent of Ohio men arrived on horseback from Sweetwater Station. Major Anderson was awakened and was urged to send an escort to the west to locate the wagon train and bring it back to the station under cover of darkness. Despite the warning signals of the previous day, Anderson said it could wait until morning. Thus it was that two dozen men saddled up shortly after sunrise and, under the command of Lt. Caspar Collins, crossed the bridge and headed up the road to the west. As they were preparing to leave, Lt. George Walker stood atop a building at the station and saw that Indians were concealed along the riverbank to the west of the station and also in the vicinity of Casper Creek. He alerted Major Anderson, who ordered more men to cross the bridge on foot to hold the northern end in the event the detail was attacked and had to return.¹⁶ Soon after crossing the bridge, Collins took his party north of the road, traveling along a ridge from which he had a good view of the surrounding terrain. When the detail was about a mile from the bridgehead, the Indians attacked. All witness accounts express astonishment at the number of warriors coming out of every ravine and from behind every hillock. Collins wheeled his men around and headed back to the bridge through a crush of warriors. Simultaneously, hundreds of warriors poured out of Casper Creek and rushed the men at the bridgehead. The soldiers repelled these attackers and held the bridgehead long enough for the detail to return. Twenty members of the Collins party managed to regain the bridge, most suffering injuries. Five were killed, including Caspar Collins.¹⁷

The men at the station, finally aware of the magnitude of the force they faced, set to work securing their position as best they could.

Before long the wagon train from Sweetwater Station was sighted descending through a gap between hills five miles to the west. The Indians perceived the train at the same time and made a headlong rush in its direction. The ensuing fight would become known as the Battle of Red Buttes, though the geological feature of that name actually lies six miles to the west of the battlefield.

The initial attack at the wagon train was certainly chaotic. It appears that the soldiers stopped their wagons and attempted to form a skirmish line before the leading edge of the attacking force struck them. According to Crazy Head's statement, "American Horse says that when they got near soldiers, these tried to fall in line, but their hearts seemed to fail them and they ran back to the wagons which were close behind. They tried to corral the wagons but there was not time and they halted the wagons in line."¹⁸ Five soldiers were cut off from the main body and escaped down a ravine and across the North Platte River. On the south bank of the river, one of these men killed Left Hand, brother of the famous warrior Roman Nose. Two of the soldiers who escaped across the river were killed, but the other three managed to work their way back to the station. One of them, James Shrader of Company D, would travel to Casper from his home in Oskaloosa, Kansas, some sixty years later to help local historian Robert S. Ellison reconstruct the battle.¹⁹

While most of the Indians were at the wagon train, Major Anderson ordered a detail to find and repair the break in the telegraph line to the east. Bent was with the Indian forces at the wagon train at this time and makes no mention of this sortie, which was ultimately unsuccessful. However, a description of the effort illustrates the difficulties imposed by the terrain along the river. Figure 2 is a reproduction of a map that accompanied an article published in 1918 by Lt. George M. Walker, who led the detail to repair the telegraph line. He wrote:

Over a mile east of the station was a small creek, which, owing to the shape of its

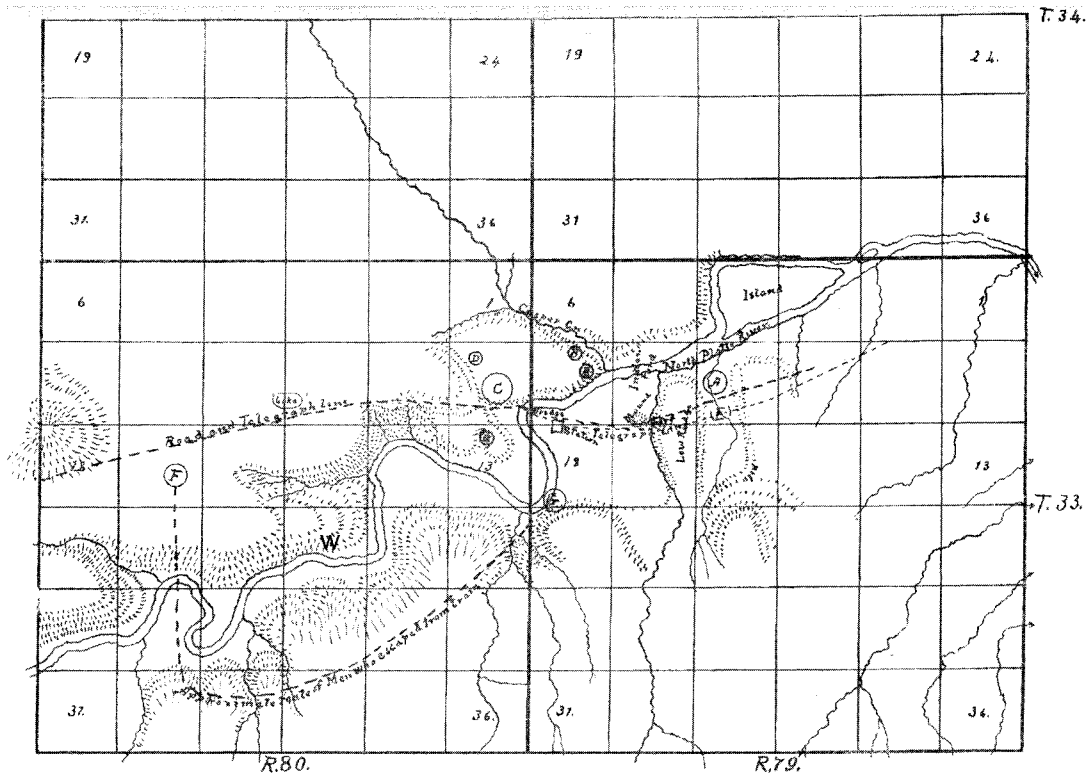


FIG. 2. Lt. George M. Walker's 1918 map, illustrating the terrain in the vicinity of Platte Bridge Station. See Map Note 1.

banks, had to be crossed at fords. The ford on the telegraph road was hidden from view of the station by a low mound. East of the creek was a low ridge a half mile wide, and beyond lay the valley in which the herd had been attacked on the previous day. The ford was considered a danger point, as the Indian ford of the river was about a half mile north, and the Indians were congregating on the north bank. Major Anderson ordered the infantry Captain to take his men to this mound and guard the ford until the repair force returned. He ordered me, in case the howitzer was fired, to drop all work and bring my men in at once. The Indian ford could be seen from the station, but not from the telegraph line east of the creek. We found one thousand feet of wire had been destroyed in the valley near where the herd

had been attacked. I directed one picket to be sent north along the ridge to watch the Indian ford, and two, Chappel and Porter, to the high ground east.²⁰

Soon after the two parties commenced work on the ends of the break, the report of the howitzer signaled imminent danger. In the poorly coordinated retreat, one soldier was killed and another seriously injured.

Sergeant Custard and the other soldiers at the wagon train managed to hold out for several hours, but the end was inevitable. Major Anderson could not send relief. Any detail large enough to avoid being swallowed by the forces opposing them would leave the station inadequately defended. In the late afternoon, smoke was seen rising from the site, indicating that the wagons had been overrun and set on fire.

NATIVE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

Bent's letters constitute an important record of the time, his descriptions often providing the only written account of events from the Native American viewpoint. He makes little pretense to objectivity, often underestimating the casualties suffered by the warriors beside whom he fought. He rarely mentions events that enraged the white population, such as attacks upon civilian settlers and emigrants, concentrating instead on confrontations with the military. His descriptions are so disarming in their simple clarity and economy of words that, especially in conjunction with the maps, it is illuminating to read his descriptions verbatim. Many of Bent's letters are written in an almost stream-of-consciousness manner, skipping from topic to topic with little regard for the rules of punctuation. We are thus fortunate that two of his letters are long and coherent narrations dealing exclusively with the events surrounding the attack on Platte Bridge Station.

The map included with Bent's letter of May 22, 1906, is in poor condition and is difficult to read (Fig. 3.). Bent drew the map from the Indians' perspective with the river running across the top of the page. It has been inverted to agree in orientation with the remainder of the maps.

Figure 4 is a rough map drawn by Hyde and sent to Bent with the request that he use it to show the locations of the various soldier societies. The locations for the camp, stockade, bridge, and the course of the road is drawn by Hyde, not Bent. Bent returned it with a short letter dated November 10, 1915. The letter indicates that Bent had conferred with several other veterans of the battle. He notes that the Indians had all wished Collins had gotten farther from the fort before the attack had commenced, and he claims, "There was no signal. Soon as Big Horn and his party charged from the river, every band made charge for Collins' men." Bent also expresses bewilderment over Collins's failure to detect the ambush. "I am always at loss why Collins did not see the heads

of Indians and not to be such foolish to make the trip up the river."²¹

Figure 5 represents the modern topography of the region corresponding to that of Figure 3. The area covered by the box in the lower central part of Figure 5 corresponds to the area covered by Figure 4.

Several of Bent's letters describe the raids he participated in during the months preceding the main offensive. A number of these are sufficiently detailed that the particular raid can be recognized in the whites' records. While the raiding parties came south in late spring, the main encampment remained well to the north. Such a concentrated population quickly exhausted the resources in any one area, so they constantly traveled about the river basins of northern Wyoming, pursuing the bison herds. Their final encampment before disembarking on the main offensive was on Crazy Woman's Creek, a tributary of the Powder River lying about one hundred miles north of Platte Bridge Station. In contrast to the many raiding parties that worked independently and with little coordination, the attack at Platte Bridge would be a major, carefully planned offensive. The moon was new on July 22 and this may have influenced the choice of the departure date. Upon reaching the Platte, the new crescent would be visible for only a short time after sunset, after which the darkness would help conceal the movements of warriors. Bent offers a detailed description of the painstaking preparation that preceded the trip. The group would bring a large number of horses, each warrior riding a horse and leading his war pony to ensure a mount fresh for battle. Bent himself led a sorrel racehorse of which he was clearly proud; his father had bought it for him in Denver for 500 dollars.²² About 200 women accompanied the war party.²³

Time was drawing for big war party to start. Foolish Dogs soldiers were selected to act as police to see that no war parties started out. Small war parties were even not allowed to start out. Foolish Dogs sent crier right away also announcing if any

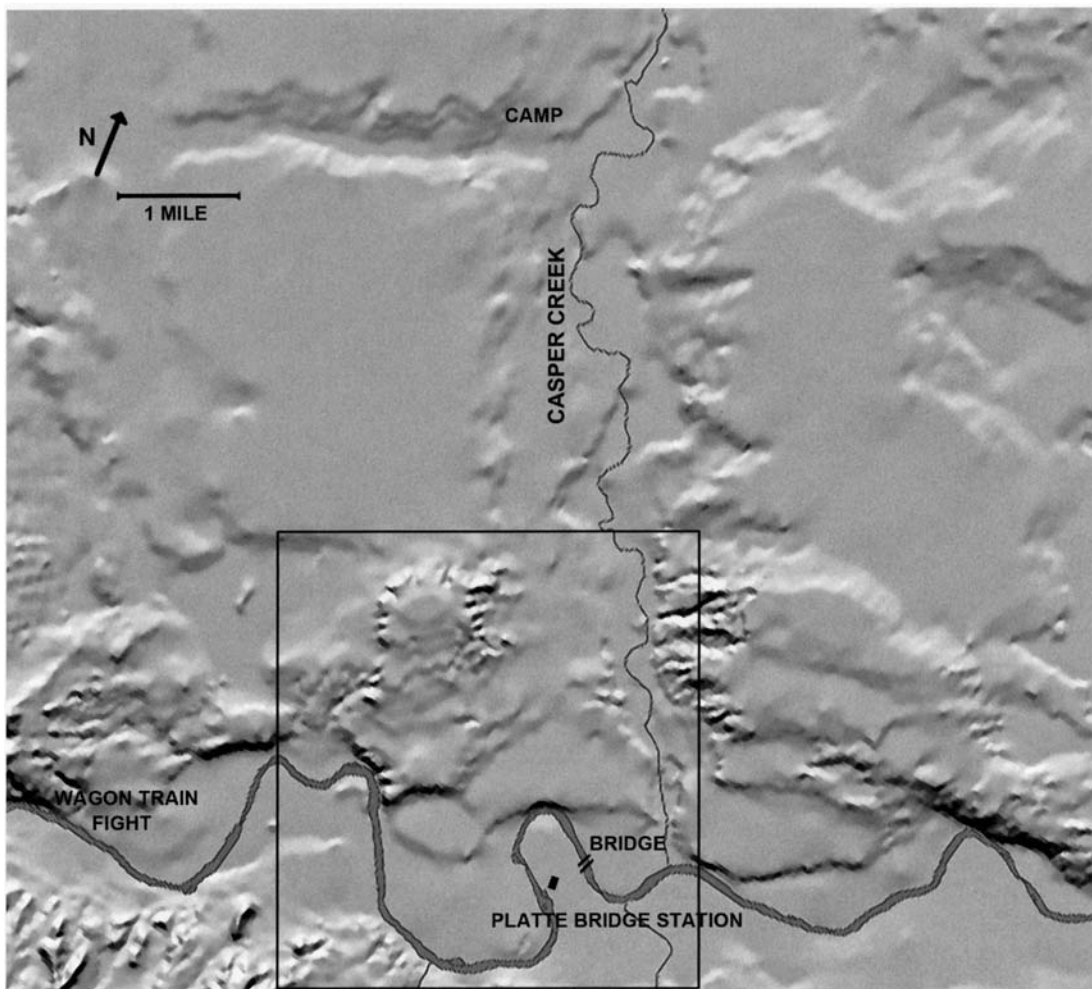


Fig. 5. Modern topography of the area shown in Fig. 4. Comparison to Fig. 4 suggests that the main camp, lay behind the high ground five miles up Casper Creek from the bridge. See Map Note 4.

parties steal away their horses would be killed and whipped also. . . . War dances were commenced. This meant for big raid. Siouxs and Arapahoes had war dances as well as Cheyennes. Crooked Lances or Bone Scrapers, Bow Strings soldiers, Fox soldiers, Red Shield soldiers, Dog Soldiers, Foolish Dog soldiers, these were all notified the raid would be made at Platte Bridge from Crazy Woman's Creek. That is this big war party would start from there. The time had not been set for it to start from there but everyone was told to prepare for

it. All the "charms" that are worn in battle must be fixed up, putting new feathers on war bonnets, shields, lances. Scalps had to be fixed on scalp shirts. If any feathers were broken on war bonnet, shield, lances or lock in scalp shirt is missed, another one is put on. If person goes into battle without these being replaced, person would get killed or wounded that wore these in battle. Of course, these were put in again by medicine men. These medicine men asked blessing in this way to Great Spirit while putting these things on. These medicine

men had to be feasted while doing all this. They were some time getting to Crazy Woman's Creek. After being camped here for several days the chiefs gave it out to get ready for marching towards Platte Bridge. It was a great sight. Day before starting it was announced through the villages for all the bands of soldiers to get up their war horses, paint them up same as going into battle and put on all the war rigs, war bonnets, shields, lances, scalp shirts and all the medicine charms. . . . Those that got ready first rode out to the opening of the circle of the village ½ mile and waited until everybody got there. Each band formed in line. Bravest ones in battle were told to take lead and behind of these lines, there were 2 men in each line, 2 men in lead and 4 in rear. Foolish Dogs took lead of all the bands. Dog Soldiers came last and behind everybody. Siouxs and Arapahoes took part also. These bands rode around inside of the circle of the village. The line must have been 2 miles long. Everybody was singing war songs. Women and old men standing in front of their lodges singing as the bands rode by in front. At night there was singing all through the village. Next morning, horses were in center of the village so the horses could be caught if they were to be taken along. The first day they did not go very far so everybody could come up. Each band of soldiers camped together. Chiefs of the three tribes went ahead always to locate the camp. Foolish Dogs acted as police on this march. Half of them took the lead and half of them came behind to see that everybody kept in the line. The chiefs rode ahead of the Foolish Dogs. The chiefs would dismount on march whenever they came to water and stop for little while for everybody to water their horses and get water for themselves and also take smoke with their pipes.²⁴

Bent does not specify how long the trip took, but Crazy Head is quite specific on the point: "They were three nights on the road and

reached the place the third morning."²⁵ This would have required the line to move about thirty miles per day. Bent continued:

Before getting to Platte Bridge the chiefs selected several warriors to go ahead to Platte Bridge and find out how many soldiers were there and to come back and report what they had seen. These scouts came back that evening. This big party stopped on small stream. No timber on it. They told the chiefs what they had seen. This was given out through the war camp. Three old men on horseback one Cheyenne, one Sioux and one Arapahoe, cried this news out. I think there were 3,000 Indians in this war party. These criers also announced no singing would be allowed by Foolish Dogs. They were police in charge of the whole party. Next morning the chiefs selected ten more warriors to follow the creek they camped on to mouth as this creek ran just below north end of Platte Bridge. The Foolish Dog soldiers got on each side of the whole line of this big war party and the Dog Soldiers got in rear and bunched up the whole line from the rear. There was great crowd of warriors, old men and women. Of course, the chiefs were in lead in long line. Northern Cheyenne, Southern Cheyenne, Sioux and Arapahoe chiefs were all in this line. In this line I seen Red Cloud and Old Man Afraid of His Horses with their scalp shirts on. Everybody was told not to go out of walk as it would make too much dust and the soldiers would see it and would know that big war party was coming. The chiefs came to big hill and stopped behind this hill. Those with spy glasses crawled up this hill to see if scouts had got to mouth of the creek. Now all the medicine making commenced. Everybody was notified to get ready for fight. War bonnets were taken out of sacks. The medicine bonnets were held by owners to south first, then to west, then to north, then to east. Last held up to sun, then put on. Medicine shields were held in right hand and dipped 4 times on ground, then held up

to sun and were shaken 4 times, then put on left side as the right hand is used to carry lance or war club. These warriors were to draw the soldiers toward this big hill. It was 5 or 6 miles from bridge. They knew if they could get the soldiers this far out from the bridge they could kill them all before they could get back. Everybody began to string out behind the hill. Only the chiefs were allowed to look down this valley. Dull Knife, Northern Cheyenne, said in loud voice that soldiers were crossing the bridge, coming this way. It was not long after he said this that we heard firing. Everybody was now anxious to see over and made rush to where chiefs were sitting. The Foolish Dogs soldiers ran back several warriors after firing small arms. We heard cannon go off. Everybody was now talking in excitement. We could all see down the valley and see our scouts and soldiers, cavalry and infantry were on each side of the cannon. We could see the smoke from the cannon whenever they fired it. These warriors seen they could not draw them away. They left them about noon and came back. Jules Seminole, half breed who was at stockade working for government told me that the soldiers and whites had no idea that big war party was after them as they had seen small war parties several times there before. Jules himself thought just small party was there to run off the stock. He said Casper [sic] Collins had orders not to follow any Indians unless they run off stock. This is why he did not follow these scouts or warriors. Said river was very high. Foolish Dogs and Dog Soldiers moved everybody back on this creek behind big hill to camp for the night. More scouts were sent at night to the bridge. My brother Charley went with this party. They did not return that night. Just at daylight everybody got ready for attack. Lot of them followed the creek down. I joined large party that stood behind big hills north of the bridge, 2 miles from the river. The road ran between our party and the river. Big party went west of bridge next to the river behind small bluff. I

will mark the lines of Indians on paper so you will see how Casper Collins and his men came into the trap. About 9 o'clock we seen Collins coming across the bridge and took the road. I always thought he must have seen some heads of Indians. Everybody was on horses looking over towards Collins and his men going up the road. Collins was about one mile and half from the bridge when those at river charged at him first. Then those behind the hill that I was with made charge on him as he was making back for the bridge. Company of infantry with cannon ran across the bridge and fired the cannon at the Indians as they were closing in on Collins from all sides. I seen Casper Collins pass by me with arrow sticking in his forehead on his grey horse. He fell among the Indians the last I seen of him. Some soldiers got away and ran to this infantry. Indian by name of Slow Bull captured Collins' horse. . . . While we were standing on hills talking about the fight, Indians hollered to us that they were signaling on horses that whites were in sight up the river. We all jumped on our horses and rode up the road in plain view of soldiers at the bridge. This must have been a grand sight for them as all the Indians were running up the river towards the government train that Caspar Collins was going out to meet that morning when he was killed. This was about 3 miles from bridge where train corralled in sand hills next to the river. When I got there I looked back down the road. As far as I could see the Indians were still coming. A lot of them were already fighting the soldiers. Just as my party were riding up lot of mules came running towards us. Indians were behind them. The soldiers got under the wagons and used their bedding, sacks of corn and mess boxes for breast works as they had time to do all this before the Indians got all around them. They saw Indians all around the bridge and where Collins' men were laying from where they first come up on hill. They could see plainly to the bridge as it was level to the bridge. They selected good place

to fight from. It was kind of basin. This basin was about 100 yards wide each way as I took good look at it after the soldiers were all killed. 22 soldiers were killed in this party. One driver swam across and got away. This man shot Roman Nose's brother. Two Indians swam after him. He only had pistol buckled around his head when he swam the river. He hid in brush after he crossed and Roman Nose's brother ran onto him without seeing him and he shot him through the head. Nobody did not know he was killed for some time as everybody was busy with the soldiers fighting them. 8 Indians were killed in this battle. 4 soldiers were in wagons that done good shooting. All the wagons had covers on them and these 4 men cut holes in the sheets to shoot through. So much firing was going on, the Indians did not know that they were in wagons for some time. The Indians were shooting at those under the wagons. Someone spoke up. Smoke came from wagons as he seen it plain. He pointed out the wagon, then the Indians shot at this wagon several times, lot of them together. Wolf Tongue, "Twins," Roman Nose in fact several brave warriors said all to get ready, that they were going to ride around the wagons and empty the soldiers' guns, then those in front to charge up against the wagons. I stood up and seen these warriors with their war bonnets and shields on as they rode around the wagons. At first good many shots came from under wagons and only 3 or 4 from wagon, then all the Indians made war-hoop and charged from all sides. When I ran down there, it was only 60 yards, they were shooting the soldiers under the wagons and those in the wagon. 3 of those had been killed. One soldier they threw out of the wagon and killed him on the ground. After this fight we all came back to where we stayed that night as we had left our pack ponies and saddles as Indians ride bare back in all the fights. Next morning good many war parties started again in different directions. Biggest party started for home. I was with this party.²⁶

Unfortunately, Bent reveals little of the battle plans, if any, the Indians had. In an earlier letter he states, "The river was very high. The Indians intended to rush across the river but could not do so on account of the river being up."²⁷It is possible that they originally intended to attack the station, at least in part, from the south side of the river rather than concentrating on the more easily defended bridgehead. Bent was depended upon for his skills in reading and speaking English. The Indians would often bring him objects of white manufacture they were unfamiliar with, such as canned goods, and ask him to explain them. He would also read written documents they had found. He was later employed as an interpreter when the Indians parlayed with the Sawyers Expedition. However, his insight into white ways seems not to have been truly exploited by the chiefs, at least not to the extent of bringing him into their tactical discussions. His letters suggest that his role was that of a warrior listening to orders and preparing to execute them.

It is clear that on July 25, the main force of Indians remained behind the hills five miles up Casper Creek, apparently hoping that they could decoy the soldiers out to that area. Early on the second day, they approached much closer to the station. Such a large-scale operation probably began before dawn. A large contingent of warriors managed to conceal itself behind the hill a mile to the northwest, and others occupied the ravines west of the fort and along Casper Creek. The previous day, they had gotten the soldiers to fan out over the bottomland and along the creek, but they hadn't come far enough to fall into the Indians' ambush. It is possible that the Indians brought their forces into the immediate vicinity of the fort preparatory to another attempt at decoying the soldiers over the bridge, this time into a closer ambush. They did not attempt to entirely conceal their presence. One witness states that on the morning of the 26th,

As soon as we could distinguish objects, we scanned the surrounding country to see if we could find any of our last evening's opponents. We did not make out any on our side

of the river, but on the north side there were some moving about and others squatted on the hills. Altogether there seemed to be about ninety in sight, just about the number we had been fighting the day before.²⁸

The much greater force remained concealed. When the attack on Collins commenced, the body that rushed the bridge from Casper Creek was estimated at five hundred.²⁹ Of course, the Indians had no way of knowing that Collins would come over the bridge that morning and lead two dozen men between two of their forces, those behind the hill and those along the river. Whatever their plans were, the unexpected arrival of the Collins detail forced the Indians to act, revealing the true magnitude of the force and derailing any plans that required the element of surprise.

The unexpected events of the morning, or possibly the difficulty of coordinating a large and diverse group, led to internal disruption. One of the “friendlies” living on the station grounds took the quite courageous step of eavesdropping on the enemy:

[W]e heard a good deal of loud talking among the Indians who were gathered together in a large body on the bluff, about three-fourths of a mile from us. They seemed very much excited and we expected they were making arrangements to make another charge on the bridge, and we prepared ourselves for the onset. . . . At this time a half-breed Snake Indian, who lived in a “Tepee” or tent between the station and the bridge, and who had crawled up to the bluff to find out what tribes were there, their numbers, etc., returned and reported that the Sioux and the Cheyennes were having a big quarrel among themselves, the Cheyennes charging the Sioux with being great cowards for not taking the bridge when they attempted it, and the Sioux retaliating on the Cheyennes by charging them with shooting a great many of their warriors when they fired down the hill at Lieutenant Collins’ retreating party. The half-breed stated that it might

have the effect of breaking up the whole party, as each tribe declared they would not coalesce with the other in the future, and in fact were just about ready to turn their weapons against each other.³⁰

It is clear from Bent’s narration that the chiefs were actively guiding the operation. They, as well as the warriors, were obviously familiar with the tactics used in raiding, but they had little experience in organizing such a large group, the equivalent of two regiments, into an effective fighting force. The resulting chaos was costly.

Bent’s statement that only eight warriors were killed at the wagon train is likely not true. When the soldiers ventured out to the site a few days later to bury the dead, they counted the tracks of some forty travois used to carry off the dead and wounded. Furthermore, though the Indians scalped all the dead soldiers, they abandoned the scalps, which were found lying about the site. This was interpreted as an indication that they had suffered an unacceptable number of casualties and thus could not exult in the victory.³¹ Many casualties were also sustained in the course of the Collins battle. The casualties suffered by the Native Americans were always difficult to estimate owing to their tradition of removing all their fallen comrades from the field of battle, even at great risk to themselves. However, it was later indicated that Indian runners in the vicinity of Fort Halleck reported that the war party had suffered 200 dead and wounded.³²

This, then, may explain the extraordinary events of the morning following the battle. As one witness describes the scene:

At daybreak, hundreds of the enemy were seen standing on the north side of the river, but appear more quiet and passionless. Standing about in groups, a few came down to the shore, making great lamentations, and appeared to be mourning. Several squaws called out to some Indian women at the station that “heap Indians killed yesterday—many braves”; also that they would kill all the

soldiers today. The number in view increased, until the forces of yesterday appeared to be all purposely shown to us in a grand parade. Thus they stood until about 11 a.m. when slowly and reluctantly they moved off in small squads, till all were gone. On the distant hills their pickets and rear guard could be seen till late in the afternoon.³³

Later that day, reinforcements arrived from Deer Creek Station. On July 29, a burial detail ventured out to the site of the wagon train fight. The soldiers dug a trench and buried their comrades. The grave was never marked and was soon absorbed into the landscape. Its location remains unknown but is currently the object of research as development in the area threatens to destroy the site.

July 26 had been a terrible day for the men of the Kansas Eleventh, but it could have been much worse. Had the river been lower, allowing a large number of warriors and horses to cross, the station would have been vulnerable to a massive attack from the southeast. It is difficult to speculate on the course the war would have taken had the station fallen. Such an event would certainly have inspired the war party, and other Native Americans in the region, to employ the same tactic against other stations along the North Platte, and they too may have been confronted by overwhelming forces. As it was, the soldiers had exacted too great a price for the operation to continue.

Thus ended the offensive of July 1865. Though bold in design and breathtaking in magnitude, the operation failed to adapt to unanticipated aspects of the battlefield. The grand war party broke up, and raiding parties headed in different directions to continue the war on a scale with which they were more experienced. George Bent returned to the Cheyenne encampment.

CONNOR EXPEDITION

It was a few days later that Connor's line finally pulled out of Fort Laramie. The events of July 26 may have given his mission new impetus,

but he was still ill prepared: "I start with scant supply and barefooted horses."³⁴ The previous months had been a confusion of changing plans, failed supply deliveries, and claims of illegal appropriations of supplies on Connor's part. Properly outfitting the cavalry was a particular problem. The time to catch the Indians before their horses were healthy was long passed. It was the army's horses that were now inadequate in number and poor in health. Corn meant to be stockpiled for the expedition was used as fast as it arrived. Mules were scarcely able to carry their saddles. Connor requested six portable forges, 5,000 horseshoes, and a commensurate supply of nails. He needed mowing machines. The horses purchased in Canada and sent to him were utterly worthless. "Rascally" contractors were letting them down and holding things up. On July 15, Connor writes to Dodge that he has heard nothing of the Indians to the north he is about to engage, but "I wish they had contractor Buckley under their scalping knives."³⁵ With the end of the Civil War, it was assumed that manpower would be plentiful, but the soldiers were all eager to get home and often became mutinous when placed under orders to head west for yet another war. Even the most fundamental stance of the expedition was a point of contention. On August 11, when Connor was ten days out, Maj. Gen. John Pope wired Dodge:

I have just received copies of instructions from General Connor to the commanders of his expedition, in which I find the following words: "You will not receive overtures of peace or submission from Indians, but will attack and kill every male Indian over twelve years of age." These instructions are atrocious, and are in direct violation of my repeated orders. You will please take immediate steps to countermand such orders. If any such orders as General Connor's are carried out it will be disgraceful to the government, and will cost him his commission, if not worse. Have it rectified without delay.³⁶

Sand Creek was casting its shadow. The public reaction to the massacre had been one of

widespread horror and disgust. A senate investigation had reached conclusions quite critical of the officers and men of the U.S. Army. Pope was not about to watch those events replayed.

The final form the expedition took was a three-pronged advance into what is now northeast Wyoming and southeast Montana. It was an abject failure. The western prong, led by Connor, saw the most success. He started out from Fort Laramie with 400 soldiers, 145 Pawnee scouts, and 200 teamsters running a train of some 185 wagons. By August 12 he was constructing a small fort on the headwaters of the Powder River, which he named, with characteristic modesty, Fort Connor. The name was later changed to Fort Reno. Numerous small battles erupted with groups of Indians returning to the region from post-Platte Bridge raiding. The Pawnee scouts were particularly adept at luring them into traps. (Bent's stepmother, Island, was killed in one of these fights.) Connor then proceeded down the Powder River and crossed over to the Tongue River on August 26. Moving down the Tongue, he located and attacked a village of Arapahoe on August 29, destroying some 250 lodges and their contents. Turning back, he reached Fort Connor on September 24 and was back at Fort Laramie by October 4.

The eastern prong had left Omaha on July 3. It was led by Col. Nelson Cole and consisted of sixteen companies, totaling about 1,400 men, and a wagon train of 140 six-mule wagons. On August 14 they passed Bear Butte, some twelve miles northeast of present-day Sturgis, South Dakota. At this point, grass, water, and game became scarce. A few days later they were encamped on a tributary of the Cheyenne when they met a party from the central prong of the expedition.

These men had left Fort Laramie on August 5 under the command of Col. Samuel Walker. Leading some 600 men and thirteen wagons, Walker had moved almost straight north. He was in trouble within six days, finding little grass and only brackish water. By the time they reached the base of the Black Hills, Walker's horses were subsisting on cottonwood bark.

Scouts were continually sent out and returned to report that there was no grass to be found. Picking up Cole's trail, they learned that his situation was no better than theirs, and though they had planned to join forces at this point, they traveled separately to maximize use of what sparse resources they found. The horses began to fail, which at least provided the men with meat. Even minor streams and ravines required the wagons to be unloaded, moved across, and reloaded. Cole estimated that he lost at least 20 percent of his provisions while repeatedly performing this task. Attempts to rendezvous with Connor, as planned, met with repeated failure. At this point, the Indians began to strike and there was little they could do but attempt to defend themselves. The campaign, organized to "punish" the recalcitrant Natives and secure safe passage to the Montana gold fields, was in shambles. On the night of September 9, a storm blew in snow, sleet, and freezing temperatures. Four hundred and fourteen of Cole's horses dropped dead. He burned the wagons and provisions that could no longer be hauled and began the long walk out of the Powder River Basin, the Indians constantly harassing his rear guard. On September 20, Cole and Walker straggled into Fort Connor leading shoeless, gaunt, and starving men. Despite this, Cole's report claimed they had swept the area clean of the Native Americans, killing or wounding an estimated 200 to 500 of them. Hyde must have mentioned this claim to Bent, whose terse reply was, "He did not kill no 200 Sioux."³⁷

With the escalation of violence experienced in 1864, both sides were anticipating a definitive confrontation in 1865. However, neither the punch nor counterpunch actually connected. The Native Americans brought an overwhelming force to bear upon a military objective, but they were tactically out of their element, attempting warfare on a scale well beyond their traditional experience or ability to effectively manage. Likewise, the U.S. Army was out of its element when it attempted to take a style of warfare dependent upon centralized industrial production and supply lines into

a wilderness, one that was also the enemy's home and stronghold. The rough terrain and unforgiving environment provided as great a challenge as did the enemy.

George Bent witnessed the entire ordeal. With his unique combination of assets—a Cheyenne upbringing, a white man's education, and ties of friendship and sympathy stretching across the gulf that separated the two cultures through tragic times—he was able to provide priceless insight.

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NOTES

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2. Lincoln B. Faller, "Making Medicine against 'White Man's Side of Story': George Bent's Letters to George Hyde," *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 69-70.

3. George E. Hyde, *Life of George Bent: Written from His Letters*, ed. Savoie Lottinville (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968).

4. Map corresponding to letter of May 22, 1906, is in Box 1, Folder 11, and map corresponding to letter of November 10, 1915, is in Box 1, Folder 13, Bent-Hyde Papers, Archives Department, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries.

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13. Statement of Crazy Head, September 10, 1908, George Grinnell, Notebook 348 (1908), MS 5, Grinnell Collection, Southwest Museum, Los Angeles.

14. William Y. Drew, "The Platte Bridge Fight by One Who Was There," *Osage County (Kansas) Chronicle*, April 20, 27, May 11, 18, and 25, 1882.

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21. George Bent to George Hyde, November 10, 1915, Western History Collection, Denver Public Library.

22. Bent to Hyde, September 23, 1913, Coe Collection, Yale University.

23. Bent to Hyde, October 12, 1905, Coe Collection, Yale University.

24. Bent to Hyde, May 15, 1906, Coe Collection, Yale University.

25. Statement of Crazy Head, September 10, 1908.

26. Bent to Hyde, May 22, 1906, Coe Collection, Yale University.

27. Bent to Hyde, October 12, 1905, Coe Collection, Yale University.

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29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

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34. Connor to Maj. J. W. Barnes, July 27, 1865, *Official Records*, vol. 48, pt. 1, chap. 60, p. 357.

35. Connor to Dodge, July 15, 1865, *Official Records*, vol. 48, pt. 1, chap. 60, p. 1084.

36. Pope to Dodge, August 11, 1865, *Official Records*, vol. 48, pt. 1, chap. 60, p. 356.

37. Bent to Hyde, September 21, 1905, Coe Collection, Yale University.

MAP NOTES

1. Walker notes that the survey lines and streams are from U.S. survey plats and other topography is rendered principally from memory. His legend reads as follows: (A) Indians attacked the herd on July 25. (B) Each of three bands of Indians seen from the roof of the station in the early morning of July 26. (C) Fight on the morning of July 26 in which Lt. Caspar Collins was killed. (D) Body of Lieutenant Collins found. (E) Break in the telegraph line, which Lieutenant Walker and his detail attempted to repair. (F) Sergeant Custard and members of wagon train were killed. (G) Men who escaped from the train were met by men from the station. (Walker's placement of the wagon train fight, F, is incorrect. This position would put it well to the west of intervening terrain. W, inserted by the author, marks the most likely position for the wagon train fight.) This map must be turned about 20 degrees clockwise to comport in orientation with the maps that follow.

2. This map is entirely in Bent's hand. Originally drawn from the Native American perspective with the river across the top of the page, the map is inverted here to comport in orientation with the maps that follow. Bent's notes read: "This is the way the Indians stood around when Casper [sic] came across to be killed," "Camp night before the battle," "Where High Back Wolf was killed," "Where Roman Nose's brother was killed," "Collins killed here," and "Where 22 soldiers killed." In addition, he indicates the locations of the Platte River, the

bridge, the stockade, the creek and in several places, the locations of the soldiers and lines of Indians. The "line of Indians" along Casper Creek in Fig. 3 comports well with Walker's description.

3. Bent marked the map and returned it with a short letter dated November 10, 1915. Hyde indicated a long string of bluffs as the high ground rather than the single large hill featured in Figs. 2 and 5. Bent indicates the locations of the Crooked Lances (the band to which he belonged), the Bow Strings, the Foxes, and near Casper Creek, the Chiefs. He locates the Dog Soldiers along the river west of the bridge and at the mouth of Casper Creek, corresponding to Walker's observations. The path taken by Collins was drawn by Hyde and appears to indicate the point where the Collins party left the road to mount a ridge. Bent places an "X" where Collins was attacked. Below that, he writes "this band made 1st charge," indicating the Dog Soldiers concealed along the bank of the river. This is reiterated by the memo written across the bottom of the page: "Note: D. Soldiers were closer to Collins than other bands." Hyde's notes state: "The broken lines and arrow-points indicate the direction of the Indian charge." Hyde does not indicate what "A" and "B" stand for, nor is there any indication of their meaning in Bent's accompanying letter. The actual location of the camp was farther up the creek than is indicated on this map.

4. Bent's map suggests that warriors were concealed not only behind the hill northwest of the station but also in a line all the way east to Casper Creek. Modern construction has destroyed the original terrain, but note that Walker's map shows a tributary of Casper Creek running through this area that would correspond to such a position. Bent's map also shows that a line of warriors reached from the hill northwest of the bridge down to the river. Ravines in the area would have provided adequate cover for such a line. The most likely position of the wagon train fight, is indicated in the lower left corner. The rectangle overlaying the lower central portion of this map corresponds to the area shown in Fig. 4, <http://seamless.usgs.gov/index.php> (accessed January 2010).