

Spring 2012

# BEYOND THE VIOLENCE INDIAN AGRICULTURE, WHITE REMOVAL, AND THE UNLIKELY CONSTRUCTION OF THE NORTHERN CHEYENNE RESERVATION, 1876-1900

James R. Allison III  
*University of Virginia*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

Allison, James R. III, "BEYOND THE VIOLENCE INDIAN AGRICULTURE, WHITE REMOVAL, AND THE UNLIKELY CONSTRUCTION OF THE NORTHERN CHEYENNE RESERVATION, 1876-1900" (2012). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2780.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2780>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# BEYOND THE VIOLENCE

## INDIAN AGRICULTURE, WHITE REMOVAL, AND THE UNLIKELY CONSTRUCTION OF THE NORTHERN CHEYENNE RESERVATION, 1876–1900

JAMES R. ALLISON III

Upon first glance, a specific act of violence seemed to fix the particular location of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. On December 12, 1880, the prominent Northern Cheyenne chief, Little Wolf, staggered into a white-owned trading store near Fort Keogh, Montana Territory, and, in a drunken stupor, shot and killed a fellow Cheyenne named Starving Elk. Enraged at Starving Elk for gambling with his daughter, Little Wolf committed the most atrocious act a Cheyenne could

commit, the killing of another Cheyenne. Blood spilled within the tribe polluted the Mahuts, the four sacred arrows the Creator gave to the Cheyenne people to mark them as distinct from other mortals and forever bind them to him.<sup>1</sup> As one of the four Old Man Chiefs of the tribe, Little Wolf understood that defiling the Mahuts disrupted the unity between the Cheyenne and their Creator, creating trouble for his people. Immediately sobered and embarrassed, and understanding that custom demanded retribution from Starving Elk's kin, Little Wolf dropped his rifle and reportedly declared, "I am going up on that hill by the bend of the creek. If anybody wants me I'll be there."<sup>2</sup>

Although disgraced and initially cast out by much of the tribe, the pull of Little Wolf remained strong, and within a year, eighty-six Cheyenne families followed Little Wolf to his self-imposed exile near Rosebud Creek.<sup>3</sup> To most observers, this blind loyalty to a fallen leader required little explanation. After all, Little Wolf had recently led his people in a costly yet courageous escape from Indian Territory, fighting through the dead of winter back to the Northern Cheyenne's

Key Words: American Indian sovereignty, federal government, Indian-White relations, Little Wolf, Powder River Basin, Montana

*James Allison is a PhD Candidate in History at the University of Virginia completing a dissertation entitled "Sovereignty and Survival: American Energy Development and Indian Self-Determination." A former energy and environmental attorney, his scholarship focuses on global energy development and local indigenous communities. A fellowship from the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, made this project possible.*

[GPQ 32 (Spring 2012): 91–111]

ancestral Montana homeland, and in the process attained a cultlike status. Thankful to have survived their deadly encounters in the Northern Plains, these obedient followers appeared simply to cast their lot with their military and spiritual leader, following him to wherever his violent acts led. When this small community soon prospered to the point that just four years later President Chester Arthur declared a Northern Cheyenne Reservation in the specific area surrounding Little Wolf's exile, the amazing story of the resilient and defiant Northern Cheyenne seemed complete.<sup>4</sup> Little Wolf guided his people through the harrowing escape back to Montana, and his final act of violence dictated the specific location of their federally sanctioned home.

This explanation for the ultimate location of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation fits well within the narrative of violence that too often dominates accounts of this and other nineteenth-century Plains Indian tribes. Typically framed as tales of heroic or bloodthirsty whites combating noble or savage Indians, popular understandings of current reservation locations are either a depressing tale of Indians being herded onto undesired wastelands or a romantic saga of perseverance and violence where Indian groups are ultimately awarded a small piece of their ancestral homeland as a token for past sacrifices.<sup>5</sup> The Northern Cheyenne historiography is as guilty as any other in perpetrating these tales of violence that overshadow other important aspects of frontier life, most notably the many pragmatic adaptations Indians undertook in their search for subsistence and sovereignty. Inevitably foregrounding the improbable escape from Indian Territory to their Montana homeland and concluding with Little Wolf's final act of violence, these Northern Cheyenne histories proudly explain that militant Indian defiance eventually produced a reservation where there was none, and then the tribe fought passionately to defend and expand this refuge by the dawn of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

As with most tidy narratives, however, the reality of the Northern Cheyenne is more complicated. More than blindly following a

martial hero whose violent acts dictated the locale of their new home, those families that joined Little Wolf did so because the land upon which he settled offered greater opportunities for sustenance, and by extension, control over their lives. The sheltered and fertile river valleys surrounding Rosebud Creek not only supported ample game for traditional Cheyenne subsistence hunting, but more importantly to securing a reservation, provided an ideal setting for irrigated farming and ranching, practices the Cheyenne adopted with great success while imprisoned at Fort Keogh. There, under Little Wolf's pragmatic leadership, the Cheyenne learned the value of providing their own subsistence in ways acceptable to federal authorities, noting that the less they depended upon federal rations, the more daily freedom they had to continue indigenous traditions vital to their community. Understanding that subsistence and sovereignty were intimately entwined, the Northern Cheyenne selectively incorporated certain agricultural practices to retain control over their own existence.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to maintaining this control, adopting Anglo subsistence practices that conformed to federal mandates and cultural expectations for "civilizing" western Indians also secured important federal allies, such as Fort Keogh commander and Cheyenne champion Colonel Nelson Miles. In fact, by the time Cheyenne families began leaking out of Fort Keogh after Little Wolf's violent act, Indian efforts to farm and ranch had so pleased federal officers that the military actually supported this otherwise illegal migration, supplying farming supplies and manpower to assist the burgeoning agricultural community. This federal support would continue through the settlement's early years when local whites protested—sometimes violently—the notion of Indians possessing the area's best land, and culminated in a successful petition for the reservation's establishment. In the end, the Northern Cheyenne's willingness to adopt Anglo agricultural practices—which they understood could provide subsistence, greater freedoms, and key federal allies—best explains the creation of the reservation.

To the Northern Cheyenne's white supporters, the 1884 reservation was a crucial step in the project to settle this "most fierce and warlike tribe," circumscribing the Cheyenne in a tightly controlled spatial logic that segregated the tribe from the wild and chaotic frontier conditions so they could be managed to meet white expectations. Trusting that a systematic ordering of the reservation would enhance the Northern Cheyenne's safety, increase agricultural production, and bring important civilizing benefits, Cheyenne allies supported Superintendent John Tully's 1891 explanation that what the Indians really needed was the "boudering [sic] of lines on the East [of the reservation] . . . and that all the whites be bought off and a wire fence be built all around the Reservation hog tight and cattle strong."<sup>8</sup> Clearly demarcated lines segregating the civilizing Northern Cheyenne from the unplanned and chaotic frontier would ensure their safe progression to civilization.<sup>9</sup>

As events played out, however, it became clear that the original reservation grant was insufficient to meet either Indian or white expectations. As more Northern Cheyenne returned to Montana, and the military enrolled them in the civilizing project on the tiny reservation, land and resources became scarce, forcing some Indians to look off-reservation for subsistence. When a few Cheyenne began to prey upon the country's animal stock, including both wildlife and white-owned cattle, area ranchers denied these were survival tactics and deplored them as evidence of the Indians' immutable savagery. Similar to the spatial logic used by Northern Cheyenne allies to confine Indians to the "orderly and productive" reservation, critics imposed temporal limits upon Northern Cheyenne actions, refusing to conceive of Indians as anything but primitive, nomadic savages incapable of progressing into civilization. Faced with perceived intractable hostiles in their midst, non-Indian ranchers then launched a passionate effort to remove the Northern Cheyenne from the region's prized bottom lands.

During the reservation's early years, predictably violent encounters ensued between

the mobile and hungry Cheyenne and fearful ranchers protecting their livestock. While historians have seized upon these recurring episodes to justify the narrative of violence driving explanations for the 1900 expansion of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, these encounters are understood best not as the product of militant Indian defiance, but within the context of diverse groups struggling to possess pockets of highly desirable land in a region short on such attractive options. The result was a clash of mutually exclusive claims to the land, neither of which allowed room for the presence of the other in this contested space. Thus, even when the Northern Cheyenne seemed to accept white patterns of subsistence like farming and ranching, local whites engaged in those same practices refused to see Indians as capable of such civilized pursuits. Fortunately for the Northern Cheyenne, efforts to farm and ranch did transform federal perceptions of these Indians into a people capable of civilization and deserving of a reservation. Federal allies consistently intervened on the Northern Cheyenne's behalf and ultimately expanded the reservation's boundaries and removed troublesome whites. Again, the Northern Cheyenne's ability to understand the changed conditions in the Northern Plains and adopt settled subsistence practices that met federal expectations resulted in the unlikely construction of an enlarged and exclusive reservation.

#### A HOME OF THEIR OWN: EARLY NORTHERN CHEYENNE AGRICULTURAL EFFORTS

Most histories of the Northern Cheyenne provide the infamous 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn as the high-water mark of tribal resistance in the Northern Plains. From this heroic peak, the saga of the Northern Cheyenne typically devolves into a tale of a fragmented tribe being relentlessly pursued by an embarrassed and angered federal military. Ultimately, this reinvigorated military force would pressure the Northern Cheyenne into surrender, resulting in the tribe's removal to Indian Territory. There, in an unfamiliar land plagued by

insufficient rations, inhospitable hosts, and virulent diseases, two Northern Cheyenne leaders—Dull Knife and Little Wolf—would make the fateful decision to lead approximately 300 Cheyenne out of Indian Territory and back to Montana. As the story goes, this group fought a heroic, rearguard battle through the dead of winter back to Montana, eliciting the respect, sympathy, and outright fear of federal authorities, who ultimately chose the path of least resistance and granted the tribe a small reservation in a sparsely populated region. In this traditional telling, only militant resistance and the loss of Cheyenne blood could eventually produce a home of their own.<sup>10</sup>

While these colorful and important histories do good work in reversing the more typical declension narrative of the helpless and doomed Indian tribe, they fail to provide a convincing explanation for how the Northern Cheyenne came to secure this home of their own without the benefit of a federal treaty providing one. Certainly, armed resistance played a key role in delivering particular groups of Northern Cheyenne back to Montana from their exile in Indian Territory, but as Christina Berndt points out, these groups arrived in the Powder River Basin in the spring of 1879, a full five years before the reservation's establishment. Berndt shows there is little evidence indicating that the tragic events surrounding Dull Knife and Little Wolf's escape from Indian Territory influenced federal officials to look favorably on the Northern Cheyenne's situation.<sup>11</sup> If anything, federal officials were more divided over what to do with the Northern Cheyenne after their return to Montana, contemplating options ranging from removal back to Indian Territory to placing the Northern Cheyenne on the nearby Crow or Sioux reservations. At the very least, it is clear that violence alone cannot explain why the federal government would exert so much energy to defeat a recalcitrant tribe in 1877 and yet cave to these same methods seven years later and award a reservation. There is more to this story.

Foremost among the complicating factors that resulted in a Northern Cheyenne

Reservation was the Indians' willingness to engage in the "civilized" pursuits of settled ranching and agriculture.<sup>12</sup> Almost immediately upon their return to Montana, the Northern Cheyenne began raising crops and cattle in an attempt to provide subsistence and avoid further confrontations. The flight from Indian Territory had taken a terrible toll on the tribe, delivering barely half its original participants back to their Montana homeland in the spring of 1879. Beyond the cost in human lives, however, this trek clearly revealed to the Northern Cheyenne the changed circumstances in the Northern Plains and cemented their desire for a settled existence. Harassed at each point along their journey, there was no part of that country where the tribe could now live undisturbed. Little Wolf clearly recognized this, and upon entry to Montana, he quickly sought to surrender to Lieutenant William Philo Clark, an officer he had previously scouted with and grown to respect. Finding Clark accompanied by his chief scout, the Northern Cheyenne Two Moons, who had surrendered shortly after the Battle of Little Bighorn, Little Wolf explained his travails in the south and then noted his few remaining people only "wanted a little ground where we could live." Thanking Clark for his willingness to "talk before fighting," Little Wolf seemed to grasp the enormity of this final surrender, declaring in poetic terms, "[I]t looks as though the wind, which has made our hearts flutter for so long, would now go down."<sup>13</sup> Coming to terms with these changed circumstances, Little Wolf and his people determined to lead a new, settled life in their old, reclaimed home.

Convinced of the Northern Cheyenne's resolve to settle in Montana, Clark lobbied against another costly removal. Writing to his superiors that spring, Clark argued,

[The Northern Cheyenne] are weary with constant fighting and watching. They want peace, rest, and a home somewhere in this country where they were born and reared. . . . Should they be ordered back, they may seek escape by throwing them-

selves against the bullets and bayonets of the soldiers, or by suicide. If allowed to stay they would be among our strongest, best and bravest allies.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, his superiors agreed. Seeing the potential utility of enrolling more Cheyenne scouts in their recurring hostilities with the Sioux, federal officials allowed the Northern Cheyenne to stay at Fort Keogh as prisoners of war.<sup>15</sup> For their part, the Northern Cheyenne understood what was required of them to remain in Montana. Numbering close to 400 with the unification of Two Moons' and Little Wolf's bands, these Indians needed to demonstrate loyalty to the United States and a fervent desire to pursue a settled agricultural existence.

As to the first demand, Little Wolf himself enlisted as a "sergeant" in the federal army's continued campaign along the Canadian border against Sitting Bull's restless Sioux. In addition to his military service, Little Wolf further strengthened his relationship with Lieutenant Clark, as the two spent long hours together collaborating on a book on Indian sign language. The chief's desire to remain at peace was so strong that when news came that several of his former warriors had killed a soldier, Little Wolf himself called for justice. Noting that local laws called for swift punishment, Little Wolf exclaimed, "[H]ang them or imprison them for life. I never want to see their faces again. They knew I had made peace with you and they killed your soldiers."<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the chief did not intend to upset the tenuous relation between his people and the federal military.

In addition to cultivating relationships, the Northern Cheyenne also began cultivating land and cattle around Fort Keogh. In his 1879 annual report, Colonel Nelson Miles, founder and commander of Fort Keogh, was so pleased by Northern Cheyenne efforts to raise cattle and crops that he felt compelled "to invite especial attention to the Indians that remain[ed] at Fort Keogh," explaining how the Northern Cheyenne managed to support themselves "without annuities or appropri-

tions of Congress" and bragged that "the funds realized from the sale of ponies surrendered by [the Northern Cheyenne] have given them a good herd of domestic cattle, and by their own industry they have cultivated an extensive field, and will this season raise an abundance of vegetables, sufficient to last them during the winter and until next summer."<sup>17</sup>

Months later, testifying to the Senate select committee investigating the Northern Cheyenne removal to and flight from Indian Territory, Miles explained that the Indian cattle herd had been divided between the Cheyenne families and branded accordingly, and that individual sections of land surrounding Fort Keogh had been allotted to Indian families for cultivation.<sup>18</sup> According to Private George Yoakam, the "farmer boy from Illinois" charged with monitoring the Northern Cheyenne's agricultural efforts, the tribe had cultivated thirty-eight acres by the end of 1879.<sup>19</sup> These Northern Cheyenne actions had earned Miles's trust and, in his eyes, the right to remain in their homeland.

Ironically, the relative prosperity of the Northern Cheyenne at Fort Keogh generated a new set of concerns for the tribe. Technically still considered prisoners of war, a label that allowed Colonel Miles to keep them at the fort rather than transferred to their assigned reservations elsewhere, their presence and prosperity at Keogh put a strain on local resources. Miles compounded this problem in late 1879 when he personally lobbied for the transfer to Fort Keogh of Dull Knife and the remaining survivors from the Northern Cheyenne's flight from Indian Territory.<sup>20</sup> Though the reunification of Lone Wolf and Dull Knife's people must have generated much joy, land was becoming scarce, and it was clear that the area's resources could not support the growing Indian population. Thus, beginning in the spring of 1880, Miles resorted to allowing groups of Cheyenne to leave the fort to hunt for game near the Tongue River, a broken country of timber and grassland crossed by multiple creeks and rivers that supported ample wildlife. Convinced of the Northern Cheyenne's loyalty, Miles saw these intermit-

tent hunting parties as the perfect outlet to Fort Keogh's overcrowding problem.

What began as temporary hunting excursions, however, began to take on a permanent nature after Little Wolf's murder of Starving Elk in December 1880. Ashamed and disgraced by his actions, Little Wolf moved his large family away from the fort to settle in the area of Rosebud Creek, south of Keogh and west of the Tongue River. Many Northern Cheyenne soon followed to take advantage of that country's relatively abundant resources, and Miles's initial, tacit approval of this informal method for alleviating Fort Keogh's overcrowding eventually morphed into an official endorsement. In the spring of 1882, the Fort Keogh commander appointed Captain E. P. Ewers, leader of the fort's Indian scouts, to oversee the settlement of Two Moons' and Dull Knife's bands along the same area as Little Wolf's camp near Rosebud Creek. Ewers, in turn, settled yet another Northern Cheyenne group on the Tongue River under the watch of George Yoakam, the Illinois private who had directed Indian farming at Fort Keogh.<sup>21</sup> Adapting to the practical necessities of life along the western frontier, the Cheyenne and the federal military forged a pragmatic solution that placed these Indians back in their ancestral home and outside the immediate purview of the soldiers at Fort Keogh.

Reporting on the settlements later that fall, Ewers could barely conceal his pride. The Cheyenne had constructed numerous framed cabins and spaced them to allow each family to claim the full homestead allotment of 160 acres. Their cattle herd had grown to 170 head, and while the amount of ground under cultivation disappointed Ewers, he excused this setback due to the summer's drought, concluding, "I believe that all of these Indians will do better next year, as they are very anxious to live like white men and remain in this country."<sup>22</sup> Ewers's immediate superior, Lieutenant Colonel Whistler, also seemed pleased with the Indians' progress. Passing Ewers's report on to his superiors and requesting more farming equipment from the Indian Office, Whistler

noted, "[T]hese Indians have been self-sustaining for the past three years and are gradually becoming more civilized—many beginning to speak English."<sup>23</sup> While civilian Indian officials in Washington never sanctioned these settlements—and in fact, Colonel Miles had no legal authority to settle Indians off military or Indian reservations—the pragmatic solution was producing successful early returns.

It would be a mistake, however, to view the Northern Cheyenne's willingness to settle, farm, and ranch as an acquiescence to adopt wholeheartedly the subsistence patterns, social organization, and cultural values of a conquering foe. In fact, the Northern Cheyenne only incorporated certain aspects of the Euro-American "social-cultural-subsistence package" into their lifeways, limiting their adaptation to those economic practices that afforded the greatest control over their own lives. This selective incorporation provided the Northern Cheyenne with multiple options for obtaining the material base necessary for self-sufficiency and allowed them to forgo federal rations for the first five years of their return to Montana.<sup>24</sup> Acknowledging the success of these economic adaptations, Captain Ewers remarked that the Northern Cheyenne "fed and clothed themselves, bought their wagons and harness [*sic*], built and furnished their houses, [all] with money received from the sale of buffalo robes, produce and ponies and what was earned by work and scouting."<sup>25</sup> As Ewers's mention of buffalo robes makes clear, however, while farming, ranching, and settled wage work contributed to Northern Cheyenne subsistence, the Cheyenne did not completely relinquish more traditional subsistence practices, such as hunting, to supplement their diet and income. Moreover, the economic self-sufficiency garnered by this mixed economy afforded the Northern Cheyenne the freedom to continue social practices and cultural ceremonies that sustained their distinctive community, most importantly the frequent sojourns across the Plains that were crucial to maintaining kinship ties. As Christina Berndt explains,

By adopting some of the institutions of the nation-state such as homesteading, they had secured land in the heart of the homeland, freedom to hunt and continue ceremonies, and the ability to maintain their own social life and kin ties with family far away. They also managed to live outside the constant surveillance of the United States government. Homesteading by the Northern Cheyenne surely looked to the government as if these Plains peoples had given up their tribal life, when in fact they had used an institution the federal government provided to maintain tribal life by maintaining land, mobility and kin ties.<sup>26</sup>

Again, the pragmatic solution constructed within altered circumstances in the Northern Plains brought important benefits to both the federal government and the Northern Cheyenne. While neither side completely understood the other's perception of this arrangement, each group's needs were being met in a peaceful manner.

#### A LAND NOT THEIR OWN: WHITE CONFLICT AND FEDERAL INTERVENTION

This mutually beneficial arrangement between the federal military and the Northern Cheyenne did not, however, satisfy all parties in the region. As it turns out, the Northern Cheyenne were reclaiming the Tongue River and Rosebud Creek valleys at the same time that powerful ranching interests set their sights on these areas. In 1881, the Northern Pacific Railroad extended its western terminus to Miles City, the town founded in 1877 to serve the needs of Fort Keogh and named after its commander. With the arrival of the railroad, local residents worked to make their town the premier point of embarkation for eastbound Montana and Wyoming cattle. City officials constructed extensive stockyards and boosters advertised the region's lush grasses and ample water supplies. As one writer for the local *Yellowstone Journal* summed it up, "Everything in consideration . . . there is no country near us

that presents so many inducements to settlers as the Tongue River valley."<sup>27</sup>

Ranchers in the region took heed, and by the summer of 1882 they were driving large herds up the Tongue River Valley toward Miles City, right through the nascent Northern Cheyenne communities. These cattle drives were part and parcel of the heyday of the open range in the Northern Plains. By virtue of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, which recognized several tribes' exclusive rights to northeastern Wyoming and eastern Montana, vast spaces of this region had been (ostensibly) closed to white ranching. The 1870s Indian wars, however, reshuffled the regional map, creating a potential bonanza for ranchers well positioned to take advantage of this recently opened land. This incentive, combined with the incessant western push of the railroads, created a huge boom in large-scale ranching in Montana and Wyoming during the early 1880s. Between 1880 and 1883, for instance, eastern Montana witnessed the complete depletion of its buffalo herd and its replacement with over 600,000 head of cattle. In 1883 alone, over twenty cattle companies with more than 12 million dollars in capital registered to conduct ranching operations in Wyoming.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, the plans laid for this region were no small design. The presence of approximately 700 Cheyenne along the region's primary cattle thoroughfare was not just an annoying nuisance. It constituted a major obstacle that had to be eliminated.

In the fall of 1882, area ranchers took the first step to remove these human impediments. Led by rancher Jesse Haston, they bypassed federal authorities at Fort Keogh, whom they perceived as sympathetic to the Indians, and wrote directly to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Hiram Price, complaining of lost cattle. Haston claimed more than 50,000 head of cattle grazed in the vicinity south of Miles City, that there was no game available for hunting, and yet somehow the area supported 700 Cheyenne. The only logical conclusion, he pressed, was that Indians were killing white-owned cattle.<sup>29</sup> The Wyoming Stock Growers Association lodged similar, and perhaps coordinated, complaints



to their territorial delegation around the same time.<sup>30</sup> The solution offered by both parties was the outright removal of the Indians from the Tongue River Valley.

These efforts to convince federal officials to remove the Northern Cheyenne in favor of more pressing economic concerns triggered a tense, twenty-year debate about the proper use of the region's resources. When George Yoakam responded with a fiery retort defending the Cheyenne and claiming the ranchers' allegations amounted to nothing more than "a scheme invented by a few stockmen to rob these innocent Indians," Commissioner Price sent a special agent to investigate the competing claims.<sup>31</sup> Reporting back in the spring of 1883, special agent George Milburn confirmed Yoakam's defense, stating that the Indians "are certainly peaceable, and my cattle depredation investigation failed to elicit from the cattle men who made complaint against these Indians any positive evidence of malicious depredation anywhere." Moreover, Milburn concluded that sufficient game still existed to partially support the Indian settlements, evidenced by oral reports as well as the presence of thousands of buffalo hides and animal skins found among the Indians and at various trading posts in the region.<sup>32</sup>

Milburn's report stopped short, however, of offering universal praise. He noted large discrepancies between the good health of the Northern Cheyenne settlements on Rosebud Creek—which included Little Wolf's, Dull Knife's, and Two Moons' bands—and the desperate conditions facing the Tongue River settlements overseen by Private Yoakam, which were located directly in the path of the cattle drives. Though Milburn blamed these discrepancies on Yoakam's poor leadership, claiming the private to be a "monomaniac on Indian rights" and an instigator of Indian-white conflict, he could barely cloak his larger intentions.<sup>33</sup> Arguing the area's inherent value as rangeland and noting the availability of farmland west of the Tongue River valley, Milburn concluded that the first order of business must be the removal of all Indians without proper homestead claims in the Tongue River area to

a reservation where they could farm peaceably, away from white threats.<sup>34</sup> Of course, the fact that George Milburn soon left military service to spearhead local ranchers' efforts to effect this removal sheds much light on his motivations for suggesting the policy.<sup>35</sup>

Despite Milburn's suspect motivations, the federal agent was attuned to the potential for racial conflict in the area. Soon after his report was filed, violence erupted between ranchers and several Northern Cheyenne, resulting in the shooting of two Indians and the burning of a white-owned ranch. While later investigations revealed non-Indians provoked these altercations, local reports focused on Northern Cheyenne actions and the government's imprudent decision to settle wild Indians in land suited best for white ranching. Influenced by these misleading accounts, the incidents served to galvanize a significant portion of the local population against the Indians' presence and produced a petition for their removal, submitted to Commissioner Price in the summer of 1884.

Ordered to investigate the claims included in this petition, the new Indian inspector M. R. Barr once again found most allegations baseless. Perhaps more importantly, Barr was able to disaggregate the local white population into groups supporting Indian removal, those opposed, and those simply indifferent to the Northern Cheyenne's presence. His report explained that large-scale ranching interests drove opposition to the Northern Cheyenne in order to maintain the open range, noting "[the cattlemen] are at all times actively involved in molding public sentiment in favor of that interest." Barr concluded that other area whites who did not share these economic interests, including homesteading farmers and merchants who traded with the Northern Cheyenne, generally accepted the Indians' presence and saw them as deserving neighbors.<sup>36</sup>

Even noting these important distinctions, Barr still believed that removal of the Northern Cheyenne to more fertile areas was the best solution for peace in the area, but Indian resolve to remain in the region made this plan implausible. As Two Moons explained to

Barr, the Indians knew that ranchers falsely accused them of killing cattle and had hoped to provoke open conflict in order to effect their removal. Nonetheless, Two Moons reminded the inspector that his people remained peaceful, were attempting to farm and ranch, and thus deserved to stay. As the chief pointed out, "We came here to make our permanent homes and it is our best interest to behave ourselves well. If we were roving about we could then take our chances, but not now when we are permanently settled."<sup>37</sup> It was a logical argument.

Faced with conflicting and intransigent interests, Barr ultimately recommended a small reservation centered around Little Wolf's original settlement on Rosebud Creek, where the land was more suitable to farming and farther removed from white cattle operations in the Tongue River Valley. Other federal officials soon supported this seemingly pragmatic compromise and ultimately convinced Commissioner Price that this small reserve represented the best of several imperfect options.<sup>38</sup> On November 26, 1884, President Chester Arthur accepted Commissioner Price's recommendation and issued an executive order creating the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. Less than ten years after the Battle of Little Bighorn and the removal of Northern Cheyenne from southeastern Montana, the tribe gained official recognition of their right to exist within their ancestral homeland.

#### A RESERVATION OF THEIR OWN: CONTINUED WHITE CONFLICT AND RESERVATION EXTENSION

While the importance of the official establishment of a Northern Cheyenne reservation should not be discounted, this act did little to resolve many of the Indians' immediately pressing concerns. The majority still eked out a meager existence in a difficult country that was becoming increasingly occupied by those whose interests ran counter to their own. In theory, the creation of the reservation promised to relax some of these constricting pressures, but in practice the Northern Cheyenne

continued to struggle with an unfamiliar subsistence model, hampered by a limited land base. Moreover, multiple external factors worked against the development of a self-sustaining reservation. The first of these was partially a function of the official act establishing the reservation, as this action served notice to all Northern Cheyenne that a formal sanctuary had been created in their ancestral homeland, and thus inferred their right to return. Before long, military officials faced a flood of Northern Cheyenne hoping to resettle, which increased pressures on the tiny reservation's already stressed resources.<sup>39</sup>

Unfortunately for the Northern Cheyenne, more Indians were arriving at the newly created reservation at the same time that material conditions on the tiny reserve were deteriorating. The Northern Cheyenne's first permanent Indian agent, R. L. Upshaw, arrived in 1886 just in time to report on the "driest summer known in this region for the past ten years." These conditions undoubtedly contributed to the massive wildfires that devastated the reservation that year, destroying what was left of those crops not already decimated by the arrival of the "potato-bug."<sup>40</sup> The brutal 1886–87 winter then followed, which Upshaw described as "one of the most severe experienced in this country for years" and noted the Indians were lucky to lose only 10 percent of their small cattle herd.<sup>41</sup> This combination of unfortunate climatic events led the new agent to conclude solemnly, "The agricultural products will make no appreciable addition to the food supply, and these Indians, having no poultry, no hogs, sheep, or cattle, and the game having been swept beyond their reach, are left entirely dependent on the charity of the Government for every particle of good that they consume."<sup>42</sup> The resourceful tribe that federal officials had so proudly upheld for their self-sufficiency just a few years earlier had been reduced by a disastrous set of circumstances to dependent government wards (See Fig. 1).

To make matters worse, the Northern Cheyenne's dependence on government largesse increased at the same time federal officials were reducing their financial commitment to

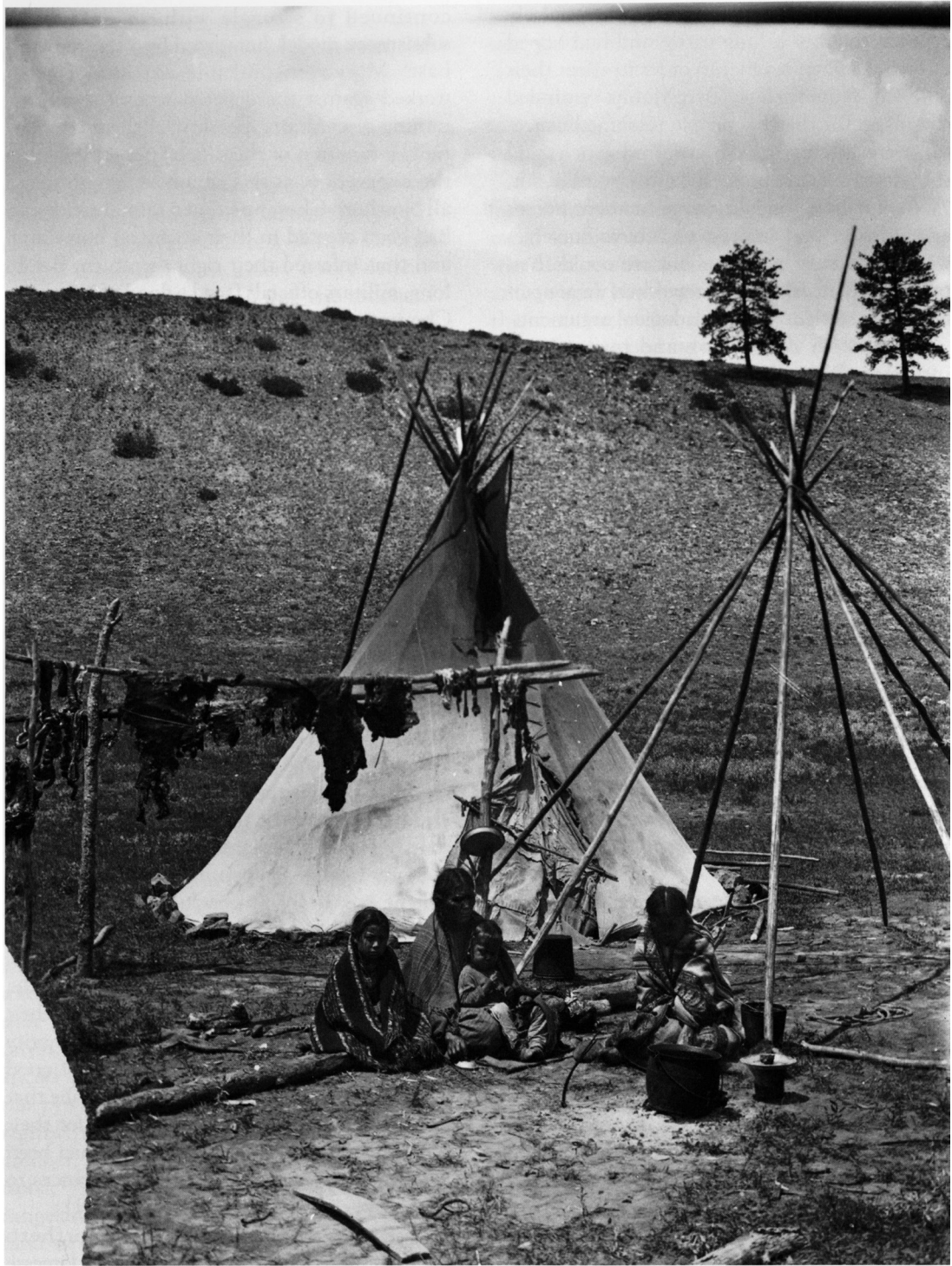


FIG. 1. "Cheyenne Chief Two Moons' Lodge," L.A. Huffman, c. 1886. Courtesy of Montana Historical Society Research Center, Archives.

them. In fact, while President Arthur created an official Northern Cheyenne Reservation in 1884, Congress included no provisions in the federal budget for its maintenance. Instead, the only appropriation made for the Northern Cheyenne came by virtue of previous treaty agreements, and these funds were committed to those Cheyenne remaining on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming Territory. Even when Congress passed last-minute measures to divert emergency provisions to the Montana Northern Cheyenne and later enacted legislation to redistribute treaty funds between all Northern Cheyenne groups on a pro rata basis, the overall expenditures budgeted for the tribe still decreased during the mid-1880s. The situation became so dire that by 1885 the new Commissioner of Indian Affairs, J. D. C. Atkins, wrote to President Cleveland specifically requesting additional funds for the Northern Cheyenne in order "to meet the pressing emergency and to avoid distress, suffering and death among these Indians from starvation and exposure to the winter weather."<sup>43</sup> Atkins's words echoed those of his predecessor, Hiram Price, who complained the previous year that the paltry sum Congress intended to split between the Northern Cheyenne groups was insufficient: "I have no doubt," Price complained, "that when the [budgeted funds] for food and clothing is divided between those in Wyoming and on the Tongue River, neither of these bands will have sufficient to prevent starvation or depredation."<sup>44</sup> Events would soon confirm these ominous warnings.

The final and perhaps most crucial factor working against the Northern Cheyenne's ability to develop a sustainable and peaceful existence along Rosebud Creek was the continued presence of whites on the reservation. By the time of the reservation's 1884 establishment, many white settlers had already staked homestead claims in the area around Rosebud Creek.<sup>45</sup> These legal claims provided ground for area ranchers to argue against the reservation's establishment, claiming administration would be too cumbersome and the potential for conflict too high.<sup>46</sup> Whether white ranch-

ers were truly concerned about administrative difficulties is debatable, but what is not is the fact that these early settlers occupied much of the reservation's best land. Special agent Bannister, who arrived on the reservation in early 1885 to investigate the suitability of the recently established boundaries, confirmed that "[a]ll the best agricultural land upon the Reservation was taken up by white men before the Reservation was created." Bannister deemed this situation so dire that he recommended the president rescind the executive order establishing the reserve, not because he opposed a reservation for the Cheyenne, but because he believed the remaining land could not sustain the Indian population.<sup>47</sup>

Bannister's recommendation, however, went unheeded, setting the stage for yet more tension between the Northern Cheyenne and white ranchers. While successful white settlers cultivated land and grazed cattle and sheep, the Northern Cheyenne experienced depleting rations and mounting hunger. The commanding officer at nearby Fort Custer confirmed the dangerous potential for conflict in the fall of 1886, explaining, "The country surrounding the Tongue River Agency is all filled up with herds of cattle and sheep and in [the Northern Cheyenne's] starving condition the temptation to kill beeves and sheep is strong."<sup>48</sup> Other military officials echoed the warning, including a Major Snyder who reported from Fort Keogh that "with large herds of fat, sleek cattle of white men grazing on almost every hill of the Tongue River Reservation, as trespassers, and Indian women and children crying for food, but one result will follow: some of the cattle will go to supply the wants of the Indians."<sup>49</sup> Two Moons himself even traveled to Fort Keogh in November 1886 to complain of the destruction caused by the whites' vast herds. He explained that cattlemen on the reservation drove their stock through the Indians' small but vital gardens, forcing the tribe to kill the remainder of their own cattle to keep from starving (See Fig. 2). "So long as cattlemen are allowed to range cattle on the reservation," the chief warned, "there will be trouble."<sup>50</sup>





FIG. 2. "Beef Issues, Northern Cheyenne," Christian Barthelmess, c. 1889. Courtesy of Denver Public Library, Digital Collections.

Off the reserve, the potential for conflict was no better. The original reservation boundaries excluded those Northern Cheyenne settlements along the Tongue River because, among other reasons, federal agents determined that this major cattle thoroughfare constituted a poor spot for an Indian reservation devoted to land cultivation. As federal officials discovered the inadequacy of the original reserve for supplying the needs of an increasing Northern Cheyenne population, they encouraged the Tongue River Indians to file homestead claims under the 1875 Indian Homestead Law, which many did.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, because the region had not yet been formally surveyed, this approach brought its own set of problems. Well-intentioned officials like George Yoakam assisted Indians in filing homestead claims, but the result was confusing and overlapping land claims, providing yet another source for potential conflict with whites.

Sensing the precarious situation created by these competing claims, the Secretary of Interior ordered the region's first comprehensive survey in the summer of 1886 and requested that the General Land Office prohibit white homestead entries until the survey was completed and Indian homesteads properly allocated.<sup>52</sup> Suspicious white ranchers interpreted this land freeze as a de facto reservation extension, and began colluding with the local land agent to frustrate federal intentions by continuing to file land claims. Because the reservation boundaries in this unsurveyed region were unclear, many of these new white claims impinged on the reservation itself, adding further fire to the country's strained relations. Local whites even submitted a petition to President Benjamin Harrison demanding the reservation be thrown open to public homesteading, claiming "the experiment . . . of sandwiching whites and Indians together has

long since proved abortive, and should . . . be ended without further delay.”<sup>53</sup> Tensions ran so high that in the spring of 1890 the federal army established Camp Merritt on the reservation itself to ensure the peace.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the federal government’s best efforts, this fragile order would not hold. Less than a month after Camp Merritt’s establishment, local officials discovered the slain body of a white rancher next to a rotting cattle carcass. Immediately, rumors circulated that Indians had killed the rancher after he stumbled upon their illegal slaying of white-owned cattle. The *Yellowstone Journal*, the unequivocal mouthpiece of ranching interests, whipped the countryside into a frenzy, reporting that half-starved Indians were “armed to the teeth and bounteously supplied with ammunition,” and warning that “[i]f the government does not move in this matter it is not improbable that the stockmen and cowboys will.”<sup>55</sup> Indian agent James Cooper confirmed that “[r]umors of a cowboy invasion were rampant, as was also the report that the Cheyenne had gone on the war path. Both Indians and whites were equally alarmed lest one or the other would precipitate a fight.”<sup>56</sup> Tensions increased further at the end of the summer when those Cheyenne arrested for the rancher’s murder were released for a lack of evidence. That same week, another body was found murdered on the reservation. This time, the victim was a fifteen-year-old boy, and again, accusations flew that Indians had silenced the young man after he stumbled upon the butchering of white-owned cattle. Reporting on both the release of the suspected killers and the news of yet another death, the *Yellowstone Journal* surmised:

The [release of the suspects] was not unexpected, but the knowledge that justice was probably to fail awakened in the minds of the settlers who live among these murdering savages the self-reliant American feelings that if the law couldn’t protect them they could and would protect themselves, and that the killing of another white

would be the signal for the inauguration of a bloody war of retaliation.<sup>57</sup>

Before white ranchers could dole out vigilante justice, however, the Northern Cheyenne punished their own. In what the local press described dramatically as “blood atonement,” the Cheyenne Indian police led a contingent of soldiers to arrest the boy’s killers, two young Cheyenne named Head Chief and Young Mule.<sup>58</sup> After a short parlay between Cheyenne leaders and the confessed killers, Two Moons reported that the perpetrators steadfastly affirmed “they will not be taken alive and if we failed in our barter for them their message to the agent was ‘select the place for meeting and we will come to die in your sight.’”<sup>59</sup> With the fury of local whites at a fever pitch, there was little hope for a bargain. Federal troops, accompanied by twenty deputized Cheyenne, organized quickly to make the arrest. Holding firm to their promise, however, the two young Cheyenne met the arresting force in full war paint, charged through the assembled lines firing their weapons, and were eventually struck down by a combined volley of bullets. Though remarkable for its theatrics, this particular conflict between Northern Cheyenne and whites in the Tongue River valley ended like many others, with the death of two more Indians.

In reporting on these greatly celebrated deaths, local whites continued to imbue the Cheyenne with romantic images of savagery that reconfirmed their beliefs that Indians were incapable of sharing their landscape. While a few accounts mentioned in passing the valuable assistance of the Indian police or noted the fact that the majority of the “tribe seem[ed] anxious to have the murderers arrested and punished,” most reports focused on the dead Indians’ gallant yet irrational suicidal charge.<sup>60</sup> The *Yellowstone Journal* gushed, “[T]here has been few more romantic episodes in Indian annals than the killing of the two Cheyenne murderers” and that “the audacity displayed in this desperate attack upon two troops of

cavalry was probably never surpassed in the records of Indian bravery.”<sup>61</sup> The same paper also reminded its readers that “all [the dead Indians] wanted was a chance to fight and if possible kill some more white men before they were killed.”<sup>62</sup> Likewise, the *Billings Gazette* emphasized the scary precedent of defiance this episode reflected, commenting that “[the Indians’] object in doing so now seems to be to provoke a fight.”<sup>63</sup> Editorial claims such as these effectively accomplished two tasks: they permanently located Indian behavior in a past time of nomadic savagery and warned that such immutable characteristics would produce more bloodshed. Combined, these dual messages left readers with little flexibility in conceiving of ways to resolve the ongoing problems between the impoverished Northern Cheyenne and ambitious white ranchers. Again, the only solution appeared to be the complete removal of Indians from the region.

In the midst of this fresh round of violence, Congress commissioned a special committee to investigate conditions in the Tongue River valley and propose those alternative solutions that white ranchers seemed incapable of producing. Led by General Nelson Miles, the Northern Cheyenne’s old protector in the region, this “Northern Cheyenne Commission” blamed the recent incidents on deplorable reservation conditions that forced the Indians to hunt white-owned cattle for survival. Far from offering a holistic solution to the subsistence problems of the Northern Cheyenne or squelching white desires for additional ranchland, however, Miles focused on Northern Cheyenne dissatisfaction with the slow pace of tribal reunification, especially the federal government’s refusal to reunite those Northern Cheyenne still located at the Sioux’s Pine Ridge Agency with those on the reservation. Preoccupied by this concern, the Commission recommended only the immediate removal of all Pine Ridge Cheyenne to Fort Keogh, where they could be observed until some later date when they were deemed fit to be located on the reservation.<sup>64</sup>

This shortsighted and limited plan pleased no one in the region. The proposed increase in

Indian population to the region incensed white settlers, while the denial of full reunification on the reservation also upset the Northern Cheyenne. The new Northern Cheyenne agent, John Tully, communicated that Miles’s report so “unsettled the Indians and shook their faith in the Great Father in Washington” that Tully was forced to take it upon himself to offer yet another solution. The agent argued that in order to meet the government’s express goals of consolidating all Northern Cheyenne on one reservation and allocating to each family the 160 acres necessary to pursue settled ranching or agriculture, “it will be absolutely necessary to extend the boundary lines” east to the Tongue River.<sup>65</sup> For the first time, a federal agent proposed the specific reservation boundaries that would later become law. Punctuated by his suggestion to fence the boundaries of the new reservation “hog tight and cattle strong,” Tully also articulated the spatial logic of segregating the Northern Cheyenne from local whites so as to manage their progression into civilization.<sup>66</sup>

As opposed to previous pleas from Northern Cheyenne allies, Tully’s novel solution of expanding the reservation boundaries and removing troublesome whites soon found ardent support from those within the federal bureaucracy with the power to effect this result. In 1892, Congress established the Sioux Commission, similar to Miles’s Northern Cheyenne Commission, to report on conditions and propose solutions for several Sioux reservations in the wake of the Ghost Dance movement. Since the Northern Cheyenne retained treaty rights to the Pine Ridge Reservation, the Commission was forced to weigh-in on the Northern Cheyenne situation, and the Commission ultimately made the case for a reservation extension even more emphatically than Tully. First dismissing any claims of mass Indian depredations as unfounded and based solely on the actions of a few desperate Indians, the Sioux Commission took advantage of the recently completed reservation survey to provide details on the extent of white trespassers, as well as bona fide homesteaders.

Finding the removal of these elements much more acceptable than the “palpable injustice” of yet another Northern Cheyenne transfer, the Sioux Commission concluded,

If treated with impartial justice, the Cheyennes are tractable and will readily respond to civilizing influences. They have raised crops in goodly portions. They are now cutting hay in large quantities [See Figs. 3–6]. They are faithful in service and desire to be law-abiding. Whatever friction exists between them and neighboring white settlers will be readily removed if the laws now existing are fully and impartially enforced against trespassers, irrespective of race.<sup>67</sup>

Both the Secretary of Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs readily endorsed the Sioux Commission’s report, and Commissioner Morgan quickly submitted to Congress a proposed bill to effect its recommendations.<sup>68</sup> Finally, the Northern Cheyenne had secured important allies in influential positions within the federal bureaucracy.

Government bureaucracy being what it is, the ultimate extension of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation to the boundaries defined by Tully and the Sioux Commission would not come until 1900. By then, several more Cheyenne and white settlers would be killed in the conflict over the region’s finite



FIG. 4.



FIG. 5.



FIG. 3.



FIG. 6.

FIGS. 3–6. *Ranching and agriculture on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, Thomas Bailey Marquis, c. 1920s. Courtesy of Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Great Plains People Collection.



resources.<sup>69</sup> Still, James McLaughlin, the special agent dispatched to execute the buyout of bona fide white homesteaders and the removal of other trespassers, could not help but commend the Northern Cheyenne on their restraint. In typical backhanded fashion, McLaughlin noted,

The anomalous conditions that have existed upon the Northern Cheyenne Reservation have been very unsatisfactory, in consequence of which white settlers have suffered financial loss and advancement of the Indians greatly retarded, and it is only to be wondered at that the Northern Cheyennes, who are among the least civilized of any of the Indian tribes, conducted themselves so peaceably during the past fourteen years on that reservation.<sup>70</sup>

McLaughlin's report noted the "great deal of friction between whites and Indians" caused by these "anomalous conditions," but its focus remained on providing a detailed plan and budget to rectify the situation, complete with inventories of white-owned property and preliminary purchase agreements. Presented to Congress and the president in November 1898, President McKinley issued an executive order enlarging the reservation to its present boundaries on March 19, 1900.<sup>71</sup> This time, Congress and the president acted in unison, and the Indian Appropriations Act of 1900 included funds for the reservation's extension.<sup>72</sup> With the last of the white settlers removed from the reservation in 1904—a full twenty years after the original grant of a reserve—the Northern Cheyenne had finally secured a place of their own.

#### CONCLUSION

There is little typical about the Northern Cheyenne's reclamation of a small portion of their traditional homeland. What seems certain is that on the heels of the most celebrated Indian victory of the nineteenth century, federal efforts to defeat this tribe resulted in

the scattering of various Northern Cheyenne bands across the West and Midwest. From this fragmented situation, one Northern Cheyenne group struggled against innumerable odds to return to Montana, where they worked tirelessly to establish a home to which others could also return. In an era when the overwhelming majority of Native Americans were losing their land base, the fact that the Northern Cheyenne were able to not only secure a reservation where there was none, but also expand its acreage by the turn of the century demonstrates the exceptional nature of their account.

To stop there would be to deliver a remarkable story of Indian agency that many western narratives often neglect. Even those histories that recognize the incredible resilience of this tribe, however, tend to focus on their combative exploits and fail to capture other, more crucial factors that produced the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. Far beyond raw determination and martial expertise, the Northern Cheyenne displayed a remarkable ability to adapt to changing conditions in the Northern Plains and adopt those customs most likely to provide material security and local sovereignty. Foremost among these was a willingness to engage in settled agricultural and ranching, which the Northern Cheyenne believed would bring them subsistence, control over their own lives, and a cooperative relationship with the federal government. Early efforts upon their return to Montana seemed to validate this strategy, as the group cultivated land, raised cattle, and were even rewarded with an official reservation. Far from the heroic yet irrational savages of popular myth, the Northern Cheyenne understood how their 1877 defeat and dispersal altered power dynamics in the Northern Plains and took pragmatic steps to adapt their lifestyles to reclaim some sovereignty.

In some ways, however, the Northern Cheyenne fell victim to their own early successes. With the establishment of the reservation, other Cheyenne groups around the country sought to join their brethren's attempt at settled living in the Tongue River and Rosebud Creek valleys. This influx of population strained area resources

while federal officials struggled to efficiently and fairly reallocate diminishing provisions. Those incoming Cheyenne were forced to settle in less desirable areas not already occupied, and their productivity suffered accordingly. Combined with disastrous weather conditions during the first few years of the reservation, life back at home was not as imagined, but instead became a desperate business of survival.

Of course, the Northern Cheyenne were not simply free to pursue any mode of subsistence to survive these terrible conditions. Federal officials and local whites intent on aiding the Northern Cheyenne carried preconceived notions of how the Indians must subsist in order to evolve into yeoman American farmers. Conceiving of the reservation as an incubator for this process, Anglo allies worked hard to constrain the Northern Cheyenne within this idealized agricultural landscape and were slow to discover the inadequacy of the assigned land base.

Moreover, though this broken country of sheltered valleys and ample water supplies had previously provided sufficient resources, a powerful new element limited Indian access. After the 1877 surrender of Sioux and Northern Cheyenne forces, white settlers flooded into the region seeking to take advantage of the same benevolent environments the Northern Cheyenne valued. Beyond simply adding more competitors for the region's resources, these newcomers envisioned the surrounding landscape as ideal ranching country best exploited by large-scale, white-owned operations, not nomadic savages incapable of "progressing" into settled agriculturalists. Because this landscape vision left no room for Indian cultivators, white ranchers worked to undermine Northern Cheyenne subsistence efforts and consistently argued the Indian presence was a threat to the region's peace and prosperity. When desperate conditions moved individual Northern Cheyenne to commit "depredations," these acts served only to validate ranchers' claims that Indians were incapable of civilized living. Recast as savages once again, violence amongst the races seemed justified.

Fortunately for the Northern Cheyenne, the federal government had seen enough violence on the Northern Plains. Exhausted by years of war with various tribes, the government took a different tack in the 1890s by appointing several commissions to investigate Indian conditions and to propose peaceful, if not always entirely equitable, solutions. The Northern Cheyenne were beneficiaries of this new approach and worked hard to demonstrate the tribe's recent history of cooperation, their willingness to engage in "civilized" agricultural pursuits, and the terrible conditions present on the reservation. Faced with this set of facts, federal officials chose a new path, intervening to remove troublesome whites and extend the boundaries of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. Though this extension was certainly the product of Indian agency, it is important to be specific about the particular form this agency took. Moving beyond the romantic tales of Indian violence that often obscure more than they reveal, the Northern Cheyenne's pragmatic adoption of non-Indian subsistence practices secured and later enlarged their reservation.

## NOTES

1. Peter J. Powell, *Sweet Medicine: The Continuing Role of the Sacred Arrows, the Sun Dance, and the Sacred Buffalo Hat in Northern Cheyenne History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 1:4, 43.

2. Gary L. Roberts, "The Shame of Little Wolf," *Montana: Magazine of Western History* 27 (Summer 1978): 44. Little Wolf's killing of Starving Elk is also found in K. N. Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Cheyenne Way: Conflict and Case Law in Primitive Jurisprudence* (Buffalo: William S. Hein, 2002), 83–84; and Verne Dusenberry, "The Northern Cheyenne: All They Have Asked Is to Live in Montana," *Montana: Magazine of Western History* 5 (Winter 1955): 30–31.

3. Federal officials initially detained Little Wolf for his actions, but after a short stint in Fort Keogh's guardhouse—imposed more for Little Wolf's protection than punishment—the military released the chief to a self-imposed exile on Muddy Creek, a tributary of Rosebud Creek located ninety miles south of the fort. Orlan Svingen, *The Northern Cheyenne Reservation, 1877–1900* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1993), 31; Dusenberry, "The Northern

Cheyenne," 30–31; Roberts, "The Shame of Little Wolf," 44–46; and Robert Pringle, "The Northern Cheyenne Indians in the Reservation Period" (master's thesis, Harvard University, n.d.), 9–10.

4. Chester Arthur, Executive Order, November 26, 1884, in Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975), 1:860.

5. "New Western" historians have been writing against this dominant narrative of violence for several decades, complicating simple tales of conquest with more nuanced explanations that explore the role of subsistence decisions, sovereignty acts, and cultural adaptation in Indian-white relations. See, for example, Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); David Rich Lewis, *Neither Wolf nor Dog* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Frederick E. Hoxie, *Parading through History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). This work follows in that mold, expanding the approach to a Northern Cheyenne tribe that continues to be shrouded in romantic tales of violence. Piercing this veil reveals how the Cheyenne's changing material and political conditions required pragmatic approaches to relations with non-Indians, including adopting different subsistence patterns. Indian groups made decisions based on those options offering the best possibility for survival and control over their daily lives.

6. The classic tome documenting the various nineteenth-century battles of the Northern Cheyenne remains George Bird Grinnell's *The Fighting Cheyennes* (New York: Scribner's, 1915), 383–411. Beyond Grinnell's seminal work, many other accounts emphasize the warlike nature of this supposed "fiercest of all Northern Plains tribes." Edgar Beecher Bronson, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* (New York: McClure, 1908); Homer W. Wheeler, *Buffalo Days, Forty Years in the Old West: The Personal Narrative of a Cattleman, Indian Fighter and Army Officer* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925); E. A. Brininstool, *Dull Knife: A Cheyenne Napoleon* (Hollywood: E. A. Brininstool, 1935); John Gregory Bourke, *On the Border with Crook* (Columbus: Long's College Book Co., 1950); Dusenberry, "The Northern Cheyenne," 28–30; John H. Monnet, *Tell Them We Are Going Home: The Odyssey of the Northern Cheyennes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 80–87; and Stan Hoig, *Perilous Pursuit: The U.S. Cavalry and the Northern Cheyenne* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002). In contrast to these studies focused on Cheyenne violence, Orlan Svingen's *The Northern Cheyenne Reservation* details the

important accommodations the tribe and federal officials made to secure a relatively peaceful coexistence in the Northern Plains after 1877. Svingen's self-described "administrative history" of the reservation, however, fails to probe deeply into the motivations and expectations driving such accommodations, nor does it fully develop the importance of Cheyenne agriculture to securing federal allies and maintaining indigenous sovereignty.

7. This work employs Kevin Bruyneel's definition of sovereignty, defined as "the ability of a group of people to make their own decisions and control their own lives in relation to the space where they reside and/or that they envision as their own." This definition is, of course, broader than the limited notion of sovereignty often equated with state sovereignty. As Bruyneel explains, "the concept of state sovereignty exists in a mutually constitutive relationship with the international state system. In tandem, this conceptual system reflects and imposes a hegemonic way of seeing and knowing the political world, and this is a world where marginalized groups such as indigenous people are presumptively unwelcome, where they seem mute politically when it comes to claims about people, power, and space." Kevin Bruyneel, *The Third Space of Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 23.

8. John Tully to Thomas Morgan, July 22, 1891, Ann Black Collection, Box "Letters 1893–1896," Press Book "Comm'r, Oct. 16, 1990 to June 14, 1892," Buffalo Bill Historical Center.

9. Kevin Bruyneel's work also greatly influences my analysis of the spatial and temporal boundaries whites placed upon the Northern Cheyenne. In *The Third Space of Sovereignty*, Bruyneel demonstrates how Euro-American legal institutions and cultural constructions continuously limited American Indians both to a place outside the American polity (spatial boundary) and to a time before the emergence of a modern American state (temporal boundary). However, while careful to note these limitations, Bruyneel also finds ambiguity in the application of these principles, stemming largely from the multifaceted nature of the American people and its state. The lack of uniformity in views and policies toward American Indians produced what Bruyneel calls "colonial ambivalence," and created a space within which American Indians could operate to exercise some sovereignty and extract benefits from the federal government. It is here, in this "third space of sovereignty," where American Indians are neither wholly within nor outside the American state, that Bruyneel finds Indian agency and the explanation for the continued resiliency of American Indian groups today. *Third Space of Sovereignty*, 1–25. In many ways, the Northern Cheyenne also operated in this

third space of sovereignty, exploiting the imperfect nature of the spatial and temporal boundaries whites imposed on them in order to establish a reservation and maintain some control over their daily lives.

10. Again, George Bird Grinnell provides the primary account of the Northern Cheyenne's flight from Indian Territory back to Montana. Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 383–411. Beyond Grinnell's work, which includes first-person accounts of the episode, several other books relay the events as remembered by the participants. Bronson, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman*, 139–97; Brininstool, *Dull Knife*; Thomas Marquis, trans., *Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957), 321; and John Stands in Timber and Margot Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 232–37. Other secondary works dedicate substantial focus to the flight: Hoig, *Perilous Pursuit*; Monnet, *Tell Them We Are Going Home*; Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 19–24; Tom Weist, *A History of the Cheyenne People* (Billings: Montana Council for Indian Education, 1977), 80–87; and Dusenberry, "The Northern Cheyenne," 28–30.

11. Christina Gish Berndt, "Kinship as Strategic Political Action: The Northern Cheyenne Response to the Imposition of the Nation-State" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2008), 257–59.

12. David Rich Lewis provides a very helpful and concise analysis of the perceived civilizing effects of settled agriculture on American Indians. *Neither Wolf nor Dog*, 7–21.

13. W. P. Clark, April 2, 1879, *Annual Reports of the War Department, 1822–1907* (Washington, DC, 1983), M997, Microfiche Roll #33, 55–58.

14. W. P. Clark to Adjutant General, Department of Dakota, April 6, 1879, Little Wolf Papers, Special File, Military Division of the Missouri, Records of U.S. Army Commands, National Archives I, Washington, DC, Record Group 393 (quoted in Roberts, "The Shame of Little Wolf," 41–42).

15. Roberts, "The Shame of Little Wolf," 42.

16. *Ibid.*, 42–43. The Northern Cheyenne defendants were turned over to local authorities at Miles City. In what was reported to be the first formal trial held in eastern Montana, the Indians were convicted and sentenced to death. All three felons committed suicide before local officials could carry out the sentence.

17. N. A. Miles, September 1879, *Annual Reports of the War Department, 1822–1907* (Washington, DC, 1983), M997, Microfiche Roll #33, 74.

18. U.S. Senate, Select Committee on the Removal of the Northern Cheyenne, *Report*, 46th Cong., 2nd sess., 1880, S. Rep. 708, xiii–xiv.

19. *Ibid.*, xiv; Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 29.

20. Weist, *History of the Cheyenne People*, 87; Roberts, "The Shame of Little Wolf," 42–43. At some point during Dull Knife and Little Wolf's escape from Indian Territory, the group splintered, with Little Wolf leading approximately 120 Northern Cheyenne north toward the Yellowstone River while Dull Knife's group headed west to surrender at Fort Robinson before winter set in. After spending several weeks lobbying for a permanent settlement among the Sioux, Dull Knife's group attempted yet another outbreak when federal officials insisted on their return to Indian Territory. This time, however, the federal military responded with lethal force, killing approximately sixty Cheyenne. Of the seventy-eight Indians later apprehended, twenty were returned south to be tried for their crimes, while the remaining fifty-eight were escorted to the Sioux's Pine Ridge Reservation. The Fort Robinson massacre remains one of the most tragic events in Northern Cheyenne history and features prominently in the tribe's long memory.

21. Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 31. This group of Tongue River Cheyenne constituted a portion of Little Chief's band that returned from Indian Territory to the Pine Ridge Agency in 1881. See *infra* note 39. Upon their arrival at Pine Ridge, this small contingent split off from Little Chief and traveled to Fort Keogh hoping to settle with their fellow Northern Cheyenne. Rather than forcibly remove this group back to Pine Ridge, authorities at Keogh allowed them to stay. From the sheer volume of correspondence, it appears Yoakam then engaged in a one-man crusade to help these Indians establish homesteads in this region. See, for example, George Yoakam to President Arthur, August 18, 1882 (three letters on same date); Hiram Price to George Yoakam, September 9, 1882 (two letters on same date); George Yoakam to Pine Ridge Indian Agent, October 9, 1882; George Yoakam to CIA, October 20, 1882; Hiram Price to George Yoakam, November 8, 1882; George Yoakam to CIA, November 9, 1882; George Yoakam to President Arthur, December 25, 1882, all found in National Archives I (NA), Washington, DC, Record Group (RG) 75, Special Case File 137.

22. E. P. Ewers to J. N. G. Whistler, forwarded on October 3, 1882, NA, RG 75, File 137.

23. J. N. G. Whistler to Assistant Adjutant General, Department of Dakota, October 3, 1882, NA, RG 75, File 137.

24. Berndt, "Kinship as Strategic Political Action," 252.

25. E. P. Ewers to General Nelson A. Miles, October 29, 1890, Elmo Scott Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago (quoted in Berndt, "Kinship as Strategic Political Action," 251–52).

26. *Ibid.*, 252. As discussed below in note 51 and accompanying text, several Northern Cheyenne

filed homestead claims under the 1875 Indian Homesteading Act, and Berndt's discussion relates to these specific families. Nevertheless, the same argument can be applied to other Cheyenne families that engaged in settled agriculture without formally filing for a homestead. By meeting white expectations for subsistence practices, the Cheyenne freed themselves to pursue other practices more culturally important to maintaining their Cheyenne identity.

27. Weist, *History of the Cheyenne People*, 103. The booster quote comes from the *Yellowstone Journal* (Miles City, Montana Territory), March 10, 1880 (quoted in Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 30).

28. K. Ross Toole, *The Rape of the Great Plains* (Boston: Atlantic, Brown, 1976), 72–73; Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretative History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 320.

29. Hiram Price to George Yoakam, December 11, 1882, NA, RG 75, File 137.

30. Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 36.

31. George Yoakam to Hiram Price, December 21, 1882, 10, NA, RG 75, File 137.

32. George Milburn to Hiram Price, March 16, 1883, 10, 14–16, NA, RG 75, File 137.

33. *Ibid.*, 9–10. In comparing the two settlements, Milburn explained, "The condition of the Indians in these localities . . . is such as, in the case of those on the Rosebud, to excite some admiration for what our Indians can do, when given even meager opportunity coupled with wise counsel; and is such in the case of the Tongue River Cheyennes . . . as to show how helpless they are when misguided. And these latter Indians have been misguided by Mr. Geo. Yoakam."

34. *Ibid.*, 13. Almost apologetically, Milburn noted that while "the white man certainly is fencing up and trying to otherwise hold about as much land as he possibly can, still there is plenty of good land to be taken by the Indians without danger of bloodshed." The availability of such land combined with the fact that the cattlemen "insist upon and persist in driving cattle through the settlement" led Milburn to conclude that the most utilitarian use of the land required removal of the Northern Cheyenne, not whites.

35. In fact, Milburn continued to press for removal even while still employed by the military, going so far as to openly criticize Commissioner Price's decision to establish the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 43–44. After military service, he submitted numerous petitions for Indian removal and became editor of the rancher-controlled *Yellowstone Journal*. D. C. Atkins to E. D. Bannister, June 11, 1885, NA, RG 75, File 137, 8 (summarizes Milburn's petition to revoke

the reservation); Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 57 (Milburn as *Yellowstone Journal* editor).

36. Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 40–41.

37. M. R. Barr to CIA, August 2, 1884, Records of the Secretary of Interior, NA II, College Park, MD, RG 48 (quoted in Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 43).

38. The most pertinent endorsement of Barr's plan came from Captain Ewers, the agent in charge of Indian scouts at Fort Keogh. E. P. Ewers to CIA, August 18, 1884, NA, RG 75, File 137. Of course, George Yoakam was also an enthusiastic supporter of any plan to reserve land for the Northern Cheyenne. See, for example, George Yoakam to Hiram Price, May 18, 1883, July 9, 1884, and December 11, 1884; and George Yoakam to President Chester Arthur, December 9, 1884, NA, RG 75, File 137.

39. The most prominent Cheyenne group returning north was led by Little Chief, the band leader that surrendered originally with Two Moons at Fort Keogh during the spring of 1877, but whose people were removed to Indian Territory and became the last group to return to Montana. For a helpful summary of the numerous correspondence concerning this final removal of the Northern Cheyenne, see *Letter from the Secretary of the Interior*, 52nd Cong., 1st sess., 1892, S. Ex. Doc. 58, serial 2900, 166–69 (hereafter "Sioux Commission Report"); see also Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 90–95; and Dusenberry, "The Northern Cheyenne," 37–38.

40. R. L. Upshaw to CIA, August 24, 1886, in *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 1886, 185.

41. R. L. Upshaw to CIA, August 24, 1887, in *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 1887, 149.

42. R. L. Upshaw to CIA, August 24, 1886, in *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 1886, 185.

43. J. D. C. Atkins to President Cleveland, December 9, 1885, in *Message from the President of the United States*, 49th Cong., 1st sess., 1885, H. Ex. Doc. 17, serial 2387, 3.

44. Hiram Price to Secretary of the Interior, July 5, 1884, in *Letter from the Secretary of the Interior*, 48th Cong., 1st sess., 1884, S. Ex. Doc. 208, serial 2341, 2. As to the overall insufficiency of funds provided for the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, see *Message from the President of the United States*, 49th Cong., 1st sess., 1886, S. Ex. Doc. 212, serial 2341.

45. In fact, the executive order establishing the reserve specifically recognized and protected these rights. Chester Arthur, Executive Order, November 26, 1884, in Kappler, *Indian Affairs*, 1:860.

46. Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 50–53, and D. C. Atkins to E. D. Bannister, June 11, 1885, NA, RG 75, File 137, 8.
47. E. D. Bannister to D. C. Atkins, July 16, 1885, NA, RG 75, File 137, 8.
48. Sioux Commission Report, 163.
49. *Ibid.*, 165.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Act of March 3, 1875, ch. 131, 18 Stat. 402 (1875). This law authorized Indians to file home-  
stead claims on public land similar to any other  
citizen, provided they renounced their tribal affilia-  
tion and pay all legal fees and commissions. For the  
government's policy of encouraging Indian home-  
stead claims, see J. D. C. Atkins, *Annual Report of  
the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 1886, xlviii.
52. W. A. J. Sparks, Commissioner of General  
Land Office, to L. Q. C. Lamar, Secretary of the  
Interior, July 17, 1886, NA, RG 75, File 137; Svingen,  
*Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 59–65.
53. *Message from the President of the United States*,  
51st Cong., 1st sess., 1890, S. Ex. Doc. 121, serial  
2686, 13–15.
54. Francis Paul Prucha, *A Guide to Military Posts  
of the United States, 1789–1895* (Milwaukee: North  
American Press, 1964), 91.
55. *Yellowstone Journal*, June 7, 1890.
56. James A. Cooper to CIA, August 20, 1890, in  
*Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*,  
1890, 51st Cong., 2nd sess., 1890, H. Doc. 1, serial  
2841, 135.
57. *Yellowstone Journal*, September 15, 1890.
58. *Billings (Montana) Gazette*, September 18,  
1890.
59. Quoted in Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne  
Reservation*, 86.
60. *Billings Gazette*, September 18, 1890.
61. *Yellowstone Journal*, September 27, 1890.
62. *Yellowstone Journal*, September 20, 1890.
63. *Billings Gazette*, September 18, 1890.
64. Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*,  
88–89.
65. John Tully to CIA, August 18, 1891, in  
*Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*,  
1891, 52nd Cong., 1st sess., 1891, H. Doc. 1, serial  
2934, 285.
66. John Tully to Thomas Morgan, July 22, 1891,  
Ann Black Collection, Box "Letters 1893–1896,"  
Press Book "Comm'r, Oct. 16, 1990 to June 14,  
1892," Buffalo Bill Historical Center.
67. Sioux Commission Report, 7–10.
68. T. J. Morgan, CIA, to John Noble, Secretary of  
the Interior, February 6, 1892, in Sioux Commission  
Report, 178–84. This Sioux Commission report  
also contained numerous correspondences from  
army officers familiar with the Northern Cheyenne  
endorsing the plan to unite these Indians and  
enlarge their reservation by removing troublesome  
whites. *Ibid.*, 172–78.
69. The most famous of these incidents was the  
1897 killing of a sheepherder named John Hoover.  
Orlan Svingen argues that the subsequent con-  
viction of two innocent Cheyenne attracted the  
attention of national reform groups and influenced  
Congress's decision to extend the reservation.  
Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 113–26;  
Svingen, "The Case of Spotted Hawk and Little  
Whirlwind: An American Indian Dreyfus Affair,"  
*Western Historical Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (July 1984):  
281–97.
70. *Letter from the Secretary of the Interior,  
Proposed Removal of the Northern Cheyenne Indians*,  
55th Cong., 3rd sess., 1899, H. Doc. 153, serial 3807,  
5.
71. Kappler, *Indian Affairs*, 860–61.
72. Svingen, *Northern Cheyenne Reservation*, 145.