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from Killing Custer

James Welch

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James Welch

from *Killing Custer*

Chapter Three

On a late June day of 1974, my wife and I were eating lunch in the back of our Volkswagen bus at the Custer Battlefield National Monument. The sky was a cloudless pale blue and the wind which buffeted the bus from time to time was hot and dry. We had parked in the shade of a medium-sized evergreen tree, one of a grove of medium-sized evergreens planted on a strip between the parking lot and the National Cemetery with its orderly rows of gray grave markers. These stones mark the graves of veterans of many wars—including the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War and Vietnam—since the Battle of Little Bighorn. But other stones, bone-white, are scattered all over the battlefield, marking the original burial sites of the Custer dead, about fifty of them closely grouped on Last Stand Hill. Each of the simple white stones reads: U.S. SOLDIER, 7th CAVALRY, FELL HERE, JUNE 25, 1876, with the exception of the officers' stones, which are inscribed with their names. The remains of the enlisted soldiers were later collected from these locations and moved to Custer Hill, where they were buried in a large trench at the base of the obelisk. (Recently, the bones of an unknown Seventh Cavalry soldier were found buried in the bank of the Little Bighorn River. On June 23, 1991, one hundred-fifteen years later, he was re-buried in the National Cemetery with military honors, including a rifle volley from his old enemies, the Northern Cheyenne.) Interestingly, the remains of the officers were disinterred in 1877 and shipped east for reburial. Only one officer, a Lieutenant John

J. Crittenden, remains buried where he fell—at the request of his parents.

As we ate our sandwiches and drank our pop, trying to mentally and emotionally digest all that we had just seen and heard at the visitor center, we were interrupted by a large voice outside the open sliding door. “Do you know this is a national monument?” We looked up and saw an older well-fed man in the green and gray uniform of the National Park Service. He had one hand on top of his Smokey hat and the other extended as though he wanted to point at us but thought better of it. “Do you know this is a national monument?” he repeated. I said yes. “Then you know you’re not allowed to eat here.” Why not, I asked. He looked at me and I could tell he thought I must be crazy. There could be no other explanation for my question. “Because,” he said, “this is a national monument.” My wife and I understood immediately and put down our sandwiches and pop and stared shamefacedly at the floor of the bus. This caused him to soften a little. “Look around, enjoy yourselves, but after this pay a little attention to the rules.” We thanked him for pointing out our sacrilege and when he turned away to attend to other duties I gave him the finger. I was young then.

That was my first visit to the Little Bighorn battleground and, in truth, it didn’t do very much for me. Like any kid in America I had grown up with Custer’s Last Stand. I had seen the movies, notably *They Died With Their Boots On* starring Errol Flynn as Custer and Anthony Quinn as Crazy Horse. I had read about Custer’s Last Stand in history books and comic books. I can’t think of a hero who has taught kids more about dying in mock battles than General George Armstrong Custer. I had even been Custer once, standing on a small sandy hill in the backyard when

I was six or seven, suddenly clutching my chest when one of the "Indians" shot me, falling and tumbling down the hill to lie motionless while the battle raged on about me. Of course we didn't really know who Custer was—he was just one of those mythical figures like Casanova and Davey Crockett that get passed from generation to generation.

What made this particular reenactment different was that it was played out in the town of Browning on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana and the "Indians" were Indians. I, Custer, was an Indian too, a member of the Blackfeet tribe. We also played cowboys and Indians, no particular cowboys and no particular Indians, just a lot of galloping around on make-believe horses, dodging from house to tree, shooting our cap pistols from behind garbage cans. The fact that I was a "breed," part Indian and part white, did not determine which role I would play. Or maybe it did. I suppose I could play either role with validity. But nobody seemed to find it strange that a little "full-blood" kid could play a cowboy emptying his cap gun at an advancing wave of Indians.

Maybe we were influenced by the movies we saw in those days. This was in the late forties and early fifties and the Browning theater showed more than its share of cowboy and Indian movies, cowboy without Indian movies and settler/cavalry/Indian movies. It was this latter formula that interests me now because it elicited the strangest response from the audience. It should be kept in mind that virtually the entire audience for these movies was made up of Blackfeet Indians, ranging through all ages, but mostly teenagers and little kids like me. The theater would be dark and fairly quiet throughout most of the movie, as the settlers arrived in Indian country, put up their cabin and barn, turned their cattle out onto the far-as-you-could-see grasslands, hugged

each other, fought off a few curious but menacing Indians and continued to work the land in a responsible fashion—but as the Indian problem worsened, maybe a few cattle, or even a neighbor killed, the audience began to grow restless and tense. And eventually in the big showdown, the settler (or maybe a group of settlers) had to fight a gigantic mob of Indians. As their wives reloaded their guns and the children attempted to put out fires caused by flaming arrows, the men emptied their guns out windows, doors, through the roof where a menacing savage had crawled, apparently to attempt a descent down the chimney. But soon it became clear that they were fighting a lost cause. One or two of them had been killed or wounded, the ammunition was running out, the cabin was burning out of control, the wives and children were praying or singing “Nearer My God to Thee.” Suddenly one of the men, in that eerie silence that always occurred when the Indians were regrouping for the final onslaught, would say, “Did you hear that?” and the audience would tune up their ears. And sure enough, it was the faint notes of a bugle blowing “Charge” and the camera would pick up a cloud of dust, a glint of steel, an American flag, and then it would be on the face of a furiously riding Errol Flynn, John Wayne, Randolph Scott or Joel McCrae, grim and sweaty under a sweat-stained white hat with its crossed sabers, and the next shot would be of a large number of cavalry troopers, the thunder of hooves growing deafening—and the audience would cheer! Just like thousands of audiences all across America, the audience would cheer this lovely spectacle of these men in blue atop their sweat-streaked but beautiful horses, stretched flat out, bugle blaring, guidon whipping straight behind them. And why not? These guys were going to rescue the poor beleaguered families, and in the process, give these savage miscreants the beating of their lives. And that’s ex-

actly what they did.

It was only after the cheering stopped and the lights came up that one became aware again that all these faces smiling in relief were Indian faces. Of course, in those days no one noticed or no one cared. The Indians in the film had been portrayed as the very embodiment of evil, and Hollywood had staked its existence on the notion that whipping the forces of evil (Indians) made people feel good, even Indians, who would pay their money and eat their popcorn in anticipation of the happy ending and when it came it was like the sweet contentment after a good orgasm.

It took the consciousness raising in the 1970s and 80s by activists and traditionalists for many Indians to really notice the perversion of Indians rooting against Indians. And it was only during this time that Hollywood made a couple of blockbuster efforts to portray Indians sympathetically, as people. I remember watching *Little Big Man* (1970) with awe, for not only was Custer portrayed as a vainglorious fool (which he was not), but the Indians, the Sioux and Cheyennes, were human beings—they made love, had babies, had strong family and tribal ties; they worked for a living and lived well within their environment. The point of the interaction between whites and Indians was not how tragic it was that Custer and his troops rode to their deaths but how tragically the Indians, whose tribal names were invariably a version of “the human beings” or “the people,” were treated during that period. It is a well-known propaganda tactic to reduce your enemy to “animals,” rats, mangy dogs, snakes. And the United States government, the army and the media were not above using such a tactic against the Indians. And they were very successful. One of the popular phrases of the day regarding Indians was “Nits make lice,” and therefore, it was perfectly okay to kill not only fighting Indians but their wives and children as well.

They were all less than human.

Little Big Man accomplished the feat of humanizing Indians by depicting individuals living in a society, with its own special structure, mores and values. It succeeded by showing the variousness of the individuals within that society. The other major film about Indians from this consciousness-raised period was *Dances With Wolves*, a movie that on the surface seemed much like *Little Big Man* in that it portrayed a Plains society of American Indians, its day-to-day life, its ceremonies, its concerns. But the main group of Indians in the film, the Sioux, were too homogenized, too nice. One would think that the Sioux were a peace-loving group of people who only fought when their enemies, in this case the Pawnees and the whites, pushed them to the brink. The fact is that the Sioux were the most numerous and powerful tribe on the northern plains who thought nothing of removing other Indians from their traditional territories by force. Black Hawk, a Lakota warrior, explained it: "These lands once belonged to the Kiowas and the Crows, but we whipped those nations out of them, and in this we did what the white men do when they want the lands of Indians." He might have mentioned many other tribes—Pawnees, Arikaras, Mandans, Hidatsas, Iowas, Omahas and others—who were whipped out of their lands by the Sioux. The Sioux did not forge alliances with other tribes, the exception being the Cheyennes, and sometimes the Arapahos.

But the main problem of *Dances With Wolves* is the homogeneity, the interchangeableness of the Indian characters. Graham Green is fine as Kicking Bird and Rodney A. Grant does a good job as the rebellious Wind In His Hair, but the other Indians were so much background in their buckskins and robes, in their clean camp, even in dramatic scenes such as the feast after the buffalo

hunt. Too much camera time is spent loving Kevin Costner's face. It is also worth pointing out that Costner's character, Lieutenant Dunbar, falls in love with the only other white—a captive woman with wildly teased hair and a thick tongue—in Indian country. It almost seems that Costner kept a shrewd eye out for what America would want (and wouldn't want) in an Indian movie. That Costner did create a few temporary jobs for a few Sioux Indians should be recognized. That *Dances With Wolves* created a lot of false hopes that more movies would be made in Indian country should also be recognized. In the flush of the Academy Awards triumph, in which *Dances With Wolves* won every important Oscar available, Costner and screen writer Michael Blake professed their immense love for Indians and virtually predicted a steady stream of feature films about Indians because of their success. It hasn't happened.

In truth, I didn't know much about the participants in the Battle of the Little Bighorn that day in 1974 when my wife and I were caught red-handed eating lunch at the battlefield site. I had certainly heard of Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and Custer, and names like Rain In The Face, Gall, Reno and Benteen seemed familiar, probably from my movie-going youth, but I didn't really know much about the Sioux, the Cheyennes, the Crows and the soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry. Furthermore, I didn't know *why* the battle occurred. I knew that it had to do with whites moving west—the infamous Westward Expansion—to claim the lands that the Indians occupied. I knew that the soldiers had been sent to the frontier to protect the whites, to tame the Indians. But I didn't know about the financial collapse of America in 1873, the desperation of the railroad tycoons to move settlers and material west on their new trains, the discovery of gold in the Black Hills

in 1874. I didn't know that the Indian "problem" on the plains began in the 1860s and that Red Cloud, the Sioux chief, had successfully (for the moment in historical time) closed the Bozeman Trail and negotiated a decent (largely ignored) treaty with the whites at Fort Laramie in 1868.

All I really knew in 1974 was that a large battle had occurred and that the Indians were triumphant. They had whipped the United States Army.

So why was a white man in a military-style uniform telling me I couldn't eat lunch here? Shouldn't this have been an Indian monument dedicated to all those brave souls who fought off an enemy attack and in the process protected their wives and children and old ones from great harm? Shouldn't an Indian be able to feast in peace and savor one of the few victories by Indians over whites?

Custer Battlefield National Monument. Some say it is the only national monument in America named for the loser. It is the only one named after a person. It's easy in this case to put two and two together. But where is the monument recognizing the bravery of the Indians who fought and died there? Wait a minute. Things have changed. In June of 1991 Congress voted to rename the battlefield the Little Bighorn National Battlefield Monument. And as soon as the political bickering in Congress ends and a design is picked, there will be a permanent monument recognizing the Indians. One hundred-fifteen years later, almost to the day, there will be an attempt to recognize that the Indians were human beings, not simply "hostiles," not simply strangers in their own land. It goes without saying that the name change and the erection of the Indian monument met with fierce opposition. One of Montana's two congressmen (now reduced to one due to popu-

lation readjustment), Ron Marlenee, fought tooth and nail to prevent such heresies. The Little Bighorn Battlefield Association (formerly Custer Battlefield Association) was strongly opposed. Custer buffs all over the country weighed in on the side of bigotry.

Happily, Marlenee was defeated in a runoff with Montana's other congressman, Pat Williams, in the recent general election. The Battlefield Association was now successful in influencing the congressional vote and the Custer buffs will have to learn to live with the changes.

On my first visit, the official monument, a blocky obelisk bearing the names of the fallen soldiers, and the visitor center were the most significant features on the landscape. A road led past the center, past the obelisk and on for another mile or two. Now the road has been extended the five miles or so to Reno Hill, where Major Marcus A. Reno and Captain Frederick W. Benteen and their troops were held under siege for a day and a half after Custer's soldiers were killed. From here one can look to the east to the Wolf Mountains, the Crow's Nest where Custer's scouts, Crows and Arikaras, first saw the immense encampment along the Little Bighorn. Custer couldn't see it—even with a spyglass offered by one of the scouts. Another scout told Lieutenant Varnum, Custer's chief of scouts, to "look for worms." That would be the immense horse herd grazing on the west hills above the valley. The scouts could also see smoke rising from where the lodges would have been. But the lodges themselves were hidden by stands of trees and a tall embankment. Finally they convinced Custer that there was a camp there and it was the very encampment of Sioux and Cheyennes they had ridden hundreds of miles to attack. Custer trusted these scouts and agreed that the Seventh Cavalry had finally reached their destination.

What the scouts saw from the Crow's Nest was a wide green valley marking the course of a meandering river called the Little Bighorn. The river course was flanked by cottonwoods and the valley was, or probably had been, covered with many types of native grasses and bushes. The thousands of horses had probably grazed it down to virtually nothing in the earlier days of the encampment. On either side of the river valley, green-hued hills rose up and rolled away to the skyline. Even in late June the hills in that part of the country maintain a spring color. It is only in July and August that the hills turn the golden tan that one associates with eastern Montana. So it must have been a very peaceful, lovely valley that Custer gazed down on.

Now only the hills and the cottonwoods along the river look much the same as they did to Custer and his scouts. The valley has been leveled, seeded into alfalfa, bluejoint grass, some grain, all irrigated. Ranch buildings in various states of repair are scattered throughout the valley, sheltered by cottonwoods, Russian olives, poplars and willows along the nearby irrigation ditches. Many of the ranches have small dome-shaped structures made with willow frames covered by blankets and quilts out behind the buildings—sweat lodges. This is now the Crow Reservation, a reward bestowed on the Crows for their service to the government during that period of conquest. To be fair, this *was* Crow country until the Sioux and Cheyennes beat them out of it. The Crows knew that the only way they could get their country back was by throwing in with the whites. And it has worked out for them. The Crow Reservation is one of the more prosperous reservations in Montana, while the adjoining Northern Cheyenne Reservation is one of the poorest (by most standards, both reservations—all reservations—are doing poorly in spite of government paternal-

ism). It has been a tender point with the Cheyennes and Sioux that the battlefield site, a popular attraction visited by hundreds of thousands of American and foreign tourists each year, is located on the Crow Reservation. But the Crows themselves have not found a way to take advantage of this serendipitous arrangement. There are two trading posts across Highway 212 from the entrance to the battlefield. Although both do a nice business during the tourist season, it is unclear how much of this profit goes into the Crow coffers. A very large motel complex, built not too many years ago by the Crow tribe, sprawls on the edge of Interstate 90, abandoned, vandalized and falling down.

Interstate 90, which runs the length of the Little Bighorn valley, is the most intrusive element on this historical landscape. There is a railroad track alongside it, but the track has been there for years and years and has managed to blend in by circumstance of longevity. A visitor hardly notices it, and the periodic freight trains remind one that the railroads became a part of the wild west early on. But Interstate 90 is a long double strip of bleak concrete that parallels the battlefield less than a mile away at any given point. In one place it is built over the skirmish line set up by Major Reno after his famous charge into ignominy. In other places it cuts through the outer edges of the Indians' enormous village. In one sense it makes travelers and tourists on their way from Chicago to Seattle a part of history for a few seconds.

Unlike my first visit in 1974 when visitors were few and far between, many of these tourists turn off at the suggestion of large green freeway signs, drive the half-mile east on 212 to the entrance to the monument and park either in the parking lot or along the access road, wherever they can find room. Today, motorhomes as long as battleships crowd the parking areas.

Tourists in all manner of dress, from bluejeans and cowboy boots to brightly colored and lettered shorts and t-shirts, mill around the parking lot, some going to the visitor center, others leaving, still others bypassing the visitor center to walk up to the top of Last Stand Hill where Custer and the troopers under his direct command perished under a rain of arrows over a hundred years ago. The moods of the visitors vary. Some are resolutely upbeat, caught up in the carnival atmosphere of large numbers of people, making jokes about Arrow shirts and Sitting Bull's tonsorial parlor (haircuts, two bits); others are solemn, as though this were a sacred place, sort of a Notre Dame under the Big Sky; others still are downright grim and these are the hardest to figure out. Are they grim because of what happened to Custer, or because of what happened to the Indians before and after this minor victory?

Languages you might hear around the visitor center include French, Dutch, German, Japanese, Spanish, Danish, Lakota, Salish, Navajo. Tourists come in large numbers from Europe and Japan, sometimes traveling hundreds of miles on tour buses from the nearest large cities. Indians come from all over America, many on the powwow circuit, because this site represents a moment of glory for Indian people and they can stand on hallowed ground walked on and ridden over by some of the most noble "hostiles" ever assembled in Indian country. It makes Indian people proud to point out to their sons and daughters and grandchildren that here something good happened. It suspends for an hour or two all the bad things.

Interpretive lectures are conducted every half hour or so by park rangers on the veranda of the visitor center. Often these rangers will dress up in the long johns and blue wool pants that the troopers wore on that hot (one hundred degrees) day. Often

they will show one of the 45-caliber Springfield single-shot carbines that the troopers used very ineffectually in the close range combat. They will point out the markers where Custer and his troops fell on Last Stand Hill. They will talk about Calhoun Ridge where the soldiers panicked, Medicine Tail Coulee where Custer did or did not try to ford the river to get at the village, Weir's Point four to five miles to the southeast where some officers looked this way and saw what they thought was a cloud of dust but weren't sure, the Reno-Benteen Hill beyond Weir's Point where the defeated Reno and the fresh but tardy Benteen managed to outlast the Indian sharpshooters who were picking them off one by one. And finally they will point down to the cottonwood-lined Little Bighorn and where the village was said to have stretched for three miles. Unfortunately, from the visitor center vantage point, it is difficult to imagine the village or the people in it. Tourists will interrupt occasionally to ask questions that they hope are intelligent. "Was Sitting Bull really a chief, or just a medicine man?" "Is that really Custer's jockstrap in there? Was he wearing it that fateful day?" "Was Reno really a chicken? Didn't he get court-martialed later for window-peeking?" But the canned rap goes on until finally the tourists are left to go into the visitor center, into the bookshop where *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* is not sold because it is too favorable to the Indians. They can buy approved "as told to" accounts by Indians who were there. And they can find any number of books on Custer, on military strategy, on the Indian "problem." They can buy posters, reproductions of the famous Anheuser-Busch painting of the Last Stand, maps. They can go downstairs and watch a twenty-minute movie which essentially reiterates what the park ranger told them on the veranda. And finally they can wander into the museum wing where they

will see buckskin outfits worn by Plains Indians (as well as a white buckskin suit similar to one worn by General Custer), military uniforms, weapons from both sides, old photographs of the period, some of the battlefield, and finally Custer's jockstrap.

The road that winds from the squat cinderblock visitor center to the Reno-Bentzen siege site is interesting in that you are driving slowly over plains country that would normally be missed by the tourist in a hurry. Here you see the tough grasses, the sagebrush and the almost startling clumps of yucca along the roadside. From Custer Ridge you see the ravines, that look almost gentle from the valley floor, but now are as deep and ominous as they were on that June day in 1876. If it weren't for the other cars and motorhomes crawling along the paved road, you could almost imagine yourself riding a horse, along with the other troopers, and wishing you were back home in North Dakota, New York, or Ireland, or Germany, where many of the soldiers came from. All around, scattered in clumps, are the white stones where the soldiers fell. One marker, different from the others, is right along the roadside between Custer and Calhoun Ridges. It is easy to miss because it is so near and your eyes are accustomed to looking into the distance. But it is the only marker that shows the location where an Indian was killed, a Southern Cheyenne leader named *Lame White Man*. Another marker is so far in the distance that you might miss it too. But if you look far to the east from Calhoun Ridge you will see it, all by itself, near a barbed wire boundary fence. There is a story attached to it, a story not too old. It concerns a park ranger, an Indian man, who pointed out the marker to a group of tourists, "See that stone way over there? They say that one of the soldiers almost got away. He was running hell-bent for leather when an Indian rode him down and killed him. If he'd have just got over that barbed wire fence, he'd have

made it." It is said the ranger was later fired.

As you wind down from Calhoun Ridge, you see off to your right Greasy Grass Ridge. Here the Indians pinned the soldiers down with long-range shooting, while hundreds of other Indians were crawling through the long grasses, sage and yucca near Deep Ravine to get near enough to the soldiers on Last Stand Hill to leap up and surprise them, a tactic that worked perfectly. It is worth mentioning because the Plains Indians do not get enough credit for such strategic moves on the battlefield.

Eventually the road descends to a point near the river where Medicine Tail Coulee, a dry coulee most of the year except for spring runoff and violent rainstorms, empties into the Little Bighorn. It is here that some historians hypothesize that Custer and his troops attempted to ford the river to get into the encampment. Others say that only two out of the five companies came down to look for a ford—or to draw fire to divert the Indians from Reno's troops who were engaged in a deadly struggle at the other end of the camp. Indian accounts mention soldiers here. Lame White Man had been taking a sweat bath and only had time to wrap a blanket around himself and gather his rifle and moccasins. It is clear enough that no whites crossed the river. They were driven back by a rapidly organizing force of Cheyennes and Sioux.

In June of 1992, a group of Indians, led by Russell Means and other activists, held a Sun Dance on this spot, a kind of counter-demonstration to the anniversary of the battle. Because it was also the 500th anniversary of Columbus' journey to the New World, the Sun Dance took on added significance to the Indians. To add even more significance, or controversy, the Indians blocked the road to the Reno-Benteen siege site for four days, the time it takes to complete the traditional Sun Dance. The road at the Medicine

Tail Coulee is on Crow Reservation land and is privately owned.

Any other time of year this activity would not have created such a stir with the Monument personnel, but the anniversary of the battle brings in hordes of tourists, especially Custer buffs who use the occasion to pay homage to their fallen hero. (A short time later, the buffs held their own demonstration of a sort. They set up a card table near the obelisk, just outside an iron picket fence that holds the stone markers of those killed on Custer Hill, and placed a white table cloth and a pitcher of water and paper cups on it. A large bearded man in brown slacks, white shirt near to bursting and suspenders, presided over the ceremony. Then the buffs, one at a time took a paper cup of water and poured it over the fence, to give the parched spirits of the soldiers one last drink.) To block the road to the other important sites renders a trip incomplete, and therefore unsatisfactory, for serious visitors. The blocking of the road was especially troubling to Barbara Booher, the Superintendent of the Little Bighorn National Battlefield and an Indian woman of Cherokee/Ute descent. Her appointment to the position created a firestorm of protest from politicians and others who believed the monument was to whites and only for whites. Her appointment was praised by as many people, both Indian and white, as a long overdue recognition that Indian people had as much to do with that piece of ground as the soldiers—in fact, her presence might help to balance the equation. She weathered that controversy by determination and diplomacy and she has weathered many controversies since, none of her own making. She has described the superintendency of the monument, her first position at that level of responsibility, as “boot camp.”

So the closing of the road by the sun dancers was only the lat-

est in a series of confrontations. The year before, again during the anniversary, a group of Indians marched to the beat of a drum from the visitor center to Custer Hill. There they made speeches, feasted and round-danced very peacefully. Barbara Booher joined the dancing. She must have felt greatly relieved because the rumor was going around that Russell Means was determined to show up with two hundred mounted warriors to "take over" the battlefield. The ever-controversial Means, incidentally, has stated that only two hundred warriors were involved in the Custer fight. The numbers were inflated because whites at the time could not believe that Indians could win a fair fight. Perhaps it was the presence of several patrol cars from the Crow Reservation, the county sheriff's department, the park service and the highway patrol and a bunch of cops walking around with walkie-talkies that deterred the present-day warriors. Whatever the cause, a crisis was averted.

And now the closing of the road by the activists was certain to create a pressure-cooker situation again, and again Barbara Booher stepped up to deal with it. She talked to Means and the other leaders and made the determination (surely with the aid of her superiors in the National Park Service) that the Indians could close the road to hold their four-day Sun Dance since both the road at Medicine Tail Coulee and the ceremony were on Crow land. The visitors could learn about the Reno-Benteen site from exhibits and literature and interpretive programs at the visitor center. Undoubtedly this decision did not sit well with many of the tourists, but it was the fair one and was accepted as such.

In her three years as superintendent, Booher has had to walk the fine line on several occasions. But she is a strong, calm woman not given to caving in to pressure. In many ways, in these changing times when many of the old western myths are being reas-

sessed, she is the perfect person for the job.

From the low point where the mouth of Medicine Tail Coulee empties into the Little Bighorn, you begin an ascent up a ridge just west of the coulee. This ridge reaches its apex at a notched hill called Weir's Peak. It was at this high point that Captain Thomas B. Weir, and later Captain Frederick Benteen, and others looked across to the Custer fight. Weir and his subordinates determined that a fight was in progress but they didn't know it was just about finished until the Indians looked back and saw the soldiers and began to gallop toward them. Weir and three companies dug in to form a skirmish line, but Benteen, declaring that "this is a hell of a place to fight Indians," and his company took off, riding at a fast clip back to Reno Hill. Weir and the other companies soon followed him, having determined on their own that the high hill was not the most strategic place to fight a large number of circling Indians. In fact, had they stayed the circumstances would have been identical to Custer's. Reno himself was heading at a rather reluctant pace toward Weir's Peak when Benteen met him and told him that Reno Hill would be the best spot to make a breastworks and stand off the Indians. Reno quickly agreed. And that's where Reno and Benteen and their companies underwent a day and a half siege. Had not Generals Terry and Gibbons and their troops arrived from the west it is quite probable that the soldiers on Reno would have been wiped out too.

Reno Hill is the last stop on the road across the battlefield. It is a little more than a mile southeast of Weir's Peak. One can still see evidence of breastworks, small semicircular depressions in the earth that make an arc from north to east to south. In the middle of this arc, horses and pack mules were picketed and a doctor and his assistants tended to the wounded. To the west is the steep

descent down to the Little Bighorn River. It is up this bluff that the remainder of Reno's 140-man battalion climbed in their flight from the Indians in the valley after their ill-fated charge of the village of ten thousand people, two thousand warriors. Reno lost roughly one third of his men in the valley fight. Several others were wounded.

During the siege, lack of water became the main concern of the troopers. A few volunteers made the descent down to the Little Bighorn to fill canteens, some made it back. Others were picked off by Indians on the ridges around them. Those that did make it back were given medals of honor in recognition of their extraordinary achievement. But the sniping continued throughout the evening and all of the next day. The Indians mainly took up positions on a long ridge northeast of Reno Hill. This ridge later became known, appropriately enough, as Sharpshooters Ridge. Several soldiers were shot, as well as horses and pack animals. But Reno Hill offered a defensible position as long as water and ammunition would last. Toward the end of the second day, the Indians got word from scouts that other longknives were coming from the west. That night they packed up their village and fled south to the Bighorn Mountains. The Battle of the Little Bighorn was over.

From Reno Hill you have a clear view, to the east, of the Wolf Mountains, over which both the Indians and later the cavalry crossed to get to the fatal site. If you look through a small hole bored into a pole you see the exact location of the Crow's Nest, where Custer's scouts first saw the signs of a large village. You can also see, halfway between the Crow's Nest and Reno Hill, the location of the famous "lone tepee" on Reno Creek where one of Crazy Horse's warriors died from his wounds and was buried with

his possessions after the Indians' attack on General Crook's southern column on the Rosebud, effectively putting Crook out of the Indian wars for an extremely crucial period of time—and more importantly, out of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Had he triumphed and continued north, and the timing was right (which it might well have been), the battle might have had a very different outcome.

To the south from Reno Hill you see the Little Bighorn River valley and farther on, the snowy Bighorn Mountains where the Sioux and Cheyennes split up into separate bands. Most of the reservation Indians went back to the Great Sioux Reservation in the Dakotas; the other "free" Indians scattered to pursue the buffalo—and to get as far away from the Little Bighorn as possible. The Indians all knew that the battle had been a great triumph; they also knew that it would bring many more soldiers determined to make them pay for their victory.

So that is the route of the road through the battlefield. It is a good route for it takes you over the terrain where most of the fighting occurred, the only exception being Reno's valley fight, the location of which can be clearly seen from the hill. Unfortunately it takes you backward in time and event so you do a near reversal of the battle as it unfolded. But the battle was more complex than that. It was essentially two battles, the first being Reno's valley charge and retreat to Reno Hill, the second being Custer's movements from Medicine Tail Coulee to its mouth, up Calhoun Ridge, across to Custer Ridge, and finally Custer Hill, with a short stopover in Deep Ravine.

There is considerable overlap in the two movements of the Seventh Cavalry. Things are going on at the same time. Although Reno engaged the Indians first, his troops from Weir's Peak

watched the demise of Custer and his five companies, then had to deal with the Indians who had killed Custer. Even then, they were not certain that Custer had been killed. That night of the 25th of June there was much grumbling as they lay under siege, dug in against the cold and the sniper fire, many of them asking, "Where's Custer?"

It wasn't until the morning of the 27th when Generals Terry and Gibbons led their command to the battlefield and the deserted village that Reno and Benteen learned the news. Custer and the entirety of his battalion had been killed and the Indians were gone.

So this is the battlefield, which is described in most literature on the subject as "bleak" or "barren," as in the "bleak hillside," the "barren landscape." Having grown up in country similar to this in northern Montana, I find it anything but bleak or barren. In fact, the Little Bighorn valley reminds me a lot of the Milk River valley on the Fort Belknap Reservation where my family had our ranch. And we considered that valley a beautiful place to raise families, to run cattle, to grow alfalfa and bluejoint, to ride double on a big white horse.

Perhaps it's a matter of perspective. The whole tour is designed to show the battle from the white point of view. In describing the battlefield, I have placed the reader in Custer's shoes, in Reno and Benteen's shoes. This is the perspective that the tourist gets. The road follows the various positions of the Seventh Cavalry. The manifold literature is told from these positions. The tourist is encouraged to look down from these rolling hills, these ridges, and imagine what it must have been like for these soldiers to be completely overwhelmed by half-naked, yipping savages.

If by chance you cross the river and drive a road paralleling the

river on the reservation side, you get a much different perspective of the battlefield. In fact, you might even forget that you're here because a battle occurred on those hills beyond the river. In most places, you can't even see the hills because of towering cutbanks that block your view. What you see on this side is flat, green valley floor, a slow-moving, small river and cottonwood trees and wild rosebushes. If it's a hot June day, you might walk down to the river and sit in the shade of the cottonwoods and listen to the faint swirl of the water (I don't suggest you try this without permission because the land is privately owned). Stay there for twenty minutes, an hour. Imagine that it's a large camping site and families and friends are picnicking, working on crafts, putting up foodstuffs, conversing, maybe gambling. Imagine that it's an immense campground filled with ten thousand people and that relatives have to walk or ride two or three miles to visit other relatives—if they can find them (as one Lakota elder put it: "It took them maybe four days to find their relatives someplace among different bands"). Imagine children playing in the water or kicking a ball made of rags and skin or riding their ponies through the camp. Imagine young men flirting with young women; boys having a contest to see who's the best archer; girls playing games with sticks and hoops, or playing make-believe with dolls; mothers cutting meat into thin flat strips to hang on the drying rack or going out to look for berries; husbands cleaning their muskets—the lucky few their new repeating rifles—or making a new bowstring by rubbing and twisting wet rawhide through the eye sockets of a buffalo skull. Then imagine old ones, the keepers of the stories, as they visit with one another, recounting war honors or joking or teasing a young one who is too full of himself.

All the while it is a cloudless hot day, but down by the river, under the cottonwoods, there is a breeze and it is cool, even peaceful.

Then you hear a shout from far off. It is faint at first, hardly distinguishable from the general camp hubbub, but soon it begins to echo as more people shout. And finally you make out the words: "Soldiers are here! Soldiers are here!" And you see an old man standing in front of his lodge, crying "Young men, go out and fight them! You have only one life!"

But you are sitting on the bank of a slightly off-color river and what you really hear are magpies and an occasional meadowlark, or a cow calling her calf to remind you that you are here, now, nearly in the twenty-first century, a long time from that day that the alarm was raised among the lodges of that camp.

It is a different perspective. And as you look up at those cliffs across the river you can almost imagine the terror that visited the peaceful village. You can almost imagine that you are here.