



The Day the Soldiers Fell: The Battle of the Greasy Grass

The battle commonly called the Little Bighorn is also remembered as the **Battle of the Greasy Grass**. Popular histories long presented it as “Custer’s Last Stand”—a tragedy centered upon George Armstrong Custer and the destruction of five companies of the Seventh Cavalry. Viewed from the Lakota and Cheyenne side, it was the defense of a village filled with families, lodges, horses, food, and children against a military attack.

The defenders did not operate under a single supreme commander. **Sitting Bull** provided spiritual and political leadership, while **Crazy Horse, Gall, Lame White Man, Two Moon, Crow King, White Bull**, and other leaders organized warriors as the fighting developed. Their victory emerged from collective action rather than a centrally directed plan. This chronicle follows that Native perspective without inventing dialogue or claiming certainty where eyewitness accounts differ.

1868–1874: Treaty, Homeland, and Gold

The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 established the Great Sioux Reservation, including the Black Hills, and recognized extensive country outside the reservation as hunting territory. Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse did not sign. They and their followers continued to hunt, travel, and live independently, rejecting confinement within the reservation system.

In 1874, Custer led a military expedition into the treaty-protected Black Hills. Confirmation of gold brought an influx of miners whom the United States ultimately failed to remove. Instead, the government attempted to purchase the hills. Lakota leaders refused: the Black Hills were not merely valuable acreage but a sacred homeland.

For Sitting Bull, the contradiction was plain. The United States had recognized Lakota rights, permitted its citizens to violate them, and now proposed to purchase land those citizens were already occupying.

Winter 1875–1876: The Ultimatum

In December 1875, federal officials ordered Lakota living outside the reservations to report to government agencies by January 31, 1876, or be classified as “hostile.” Many families were dispersed in remote winter camps. Traveling with children, possessions, and horse herds in severe weather was impractical; abandoning their independence was unacceptable.

Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse rejected the demand. They were not invading American settlements but living in country they regarded as their own. Nevertheless, the government transferred responsibility to the War Department. General Philip Sheridan organized a campaign to locate the independent Lakota and Cheyenne bands and compel their submission.

Spring 1876: A Gathering of Peoples

During the spring, Lakota, Cheyenne, and a small number of Arapaho families gathered in the Powder, Rosebud, and Bighorn country. Some had lived outside the agencies for years. Others left the reservations because of hunger, poor administration, inadequate supplies, or a desire to join the summer ceremonies and buffalo hunt.

Sitting Bull helped draw these communities together. His authority rested on his reputation as a Hunkpapa leader, holy man, diplomat, and determined defender of independence—not on an ability to command every band. Crazy Horse possessed a different authority. The Oglala war leader was admired for courage, generosity, and leadership by example. By early summer, the gathering had become one of the largest Native encampments ever assembled on the northern Plains.

Early June: Sitting Bull’s Vision

During a Sun Dance near Deer Medicine Rocks, Sitting Bull underwent ritual sacrifice and prolonged dancing. He experienced a vision of soldiers falling upside down into his people’s camp and interpreted it as a promise of victory.

The vision offered spiritual assurance, not a tactical plan. It strengthened confidence that the people could withstand the forces approaching them. In accounts of the vision, Sitting Bull also warned against greed and the temptation to take the defeated soldiers’ possessions.

June 17: Crazy Horse Stops Crook

General George Crook commanded one of the U.S. columns approaching the gathering. On June 17, Lakota and Cheyenne warriors, including forces led by Crazy Horse and Two Moon, confronted him along Rosebud Creek. The fighting lasted approximately six hours. The

Cheyenne remembered it as the **Battle Where the Girl Saved Her Brother**, honoring Buffalo Calf Road Woman's rescue of Comes in Sight.

Crook retained the battlefield but withdrew to his base instead of continuing north. His column would not participate at the Little Bighorn eight days later. From the defenders' perspective, the Rosebud was a strategic success: one substantial military force had been prevented from reaching their families.

June 18–24: The Village at the Greasy Grass

The gathering moved into the Little Bighorn Valley, establishing lodge circles along the river's western bank. Estimates vary, but the village may have contained approximately 7,000 to 8,000 people, including 1,500 to 1,800 warriors. This was not simply an army camp. It was a community containing elders, children, household possessions, food supplies, and enormous horse herds.

The people knew soldiers were in the region, but no council appears to have devised a detailed plan for confronting Custer. Many felt secure because of their numbers. The Oglala warrior Low Dog later recalled that he had not expected anyone to attack so large a gathering. Their confidence would soon be tested.

Dawn, June 25: Custer Approaches

Custer's Crow and Arikara scouts located the village and recognized its extraordinary size. Those scouts had their own reasons for serving the Army, including their nations' longstanding conflicts with the Lakota. Their presence is a reminder that neither side represented all Native peoples.

Custer initially considered delaying his attack but feared the village would disperse after discovering his approach. He advanced with roughly 600 soldiers, dividing the regiment into detachments: three companies under Major Marcus Reno, three under Captain Frederick Benteen, five under his own command, and a company guarding the pack train. Benteen went south and west on reconnaissance while Custer and Reno approached the river.

The division left the regiment's parts unable to support one another quickly. More importantly, Custer committed them before fully understanding the strength of the village.

Afternoon, June 25: Reno Attacks

Reno crossed the river south of the encampment and advanced toward the Hunkpapa lodges. For those inside the village, the battle began as an attack upon their homes. Women gathered children and moved them away from the gunfire while men hurried to catch horses and find weapons.

Gall, a prominent Hunkpapa leader, lost two wives and three children during the assault, according to accounts of his life. His family's deaths gave the defense a devastating personal

urgency. Sitting Bull's precise movements are less certain. Accounts place him encouraging resistance and helping protect or move noncombatants; he was not directing battlefield maneuvers as an American general would.

Warriors converged upon Reno from across the village. Using timber, uneven ground, and mounted movement, they threatened his flank and halted his advance. Reno dismounted his men into a skirmish line, then withdrew into riverside timber as the pressure increased.

Reno's Retreat: The First Assault Fails

Reno ordered another withdrawal, this time across the river and up the eastern bluffs. The movement became disorganized. Lakota and Cheyenne warriors pursued the soldiers through the timber and water, firing at close range and pulling men from their horses. Some later compared the pursuit to a buffalo hunt.

The survivors reached the bluffs and joined Benteen's returning companies. The immediate threat to the southern village had been broken, freeing many defenders to confront another body of soldiers moving along the ridges downstream.

Custer Above the Village

While Reno fought in the valley, Custer moved north along the eastern bluffs. He may have intended to attack from another direction, prevent escape, or threaten noncombatants. His precise intentions remain uncertain. Near Medicine Tail Coulee, soldiers approached the river, where defenders opposed them. The troops subsequently moved back toward the ridges.

By then, Custer's five companies were isolated from Reno, Benteen, and the ammunition-laden pack train. Warriors who had stopped Reno began crossing the river and converging upon this second threat. The attack on the village was becoming a battle for the survival of Custer's command.

Crazy Horse, Gall, and the Converging Defense

Crazy Horse's exact route remains disputed. Eyewitnesses saw different portions of a battle obscured by dust, smoke, ridges, and ravines; many accounts were recorded years later through interpreters. Several describe him moving north with mounted warriors and turning against Custer's flank or rear. His importance lay in mobility, personal example, and the confidence his presence inspired.

Gall also brought warriors against Custer. Cheyenne fighters associated with Lame White Man and Two Moon joined the attack, while Crow King, White Bull, Low Dog, Wooden Leg, Bobtail Horse, and many others fought in separate groups. No leader controlled every movement. Their initiatives reinforced one another as the soldiers' positions came under pressure from multiple directions.

The Collapse on Battle Ridge

Custer's companies attempted to establish defensive positions along the high ground now called Battle Ridge. Lakota and Cheyenne fighters approached through ravines and folds in the terrain, firing from cover or advancing on horseback and on foot. Some carried repeating rifles; others used different firearms or bows. Captured weapons and ammunition further strengthened the attack.

Resistance near Calhoun Hill appears to have been particularly determined. As positions failed, soldiers became separated or crowded together, and survivors moved toward the northern end of the ridge. Archaeology and Native testimony suggest a sequence of collapsing positions rather than the prolonged, orderly last stand portrayed in later paintings.

Near the hill where the Custer monument now stands, a final concentration of soldiers was overwhelmed. Others attempted to escape toward the river or nearby ravines and were intercepted. Custer and the soldiers remaining with his immediate command were killed. The final destruction was probably rapid, although its exact duration and sequence remain debated.

June 25–26: Holding Reno and Benteen

After Custer's command collapsed, warriors returned toward Reno and Benteen's position. The soldiers dug shallow defensive pits and used available cover, including dead horses. Fire from surrounding ridges and ravines continued through the evening and into June 26.

The defenders did not sacrifice large numbers in a mass assault on the entrenched troops. Their overriding responsibility remained the village. Families tended the wounded and mourned the dead while warriors watched for additional soldiers. Estimates of Native deaths vary, commonly ranging from about sixty to one hundred. The victory had protected the community, but it had not spared it grief.

June 26: The People Leave

Scouts reported another army force approaching from the north: the combined command of Alfred Terry and John Gibbon. The village had no reason to remain on a battlefield. Its purpose was survival, not possession of a ridge.

On the afternoon of June 26, the people moved south with their lodges, families, and horses. Reno and Benteen remained on the bluffs. Terry and Gibbon arrived the following day, relieved the survivors, and found Custer's destroyed command.

Why the Defenders Won

Custer's defeat resulted from Native military effectiveness as well as American misjudgment. He attacked a village larger than he understood and divided his regiment into detachments that could

not readily support one another. Reno's assault alerted the community, and his retreat released warriors to move against Custer.

The defenders possessed superior numbers, intimate knowledge of the terrain, effective weapons, and a compelling immediate purpose: their families were behind them. Their decentralized organization allowed experienced leaders to exploit opportunities without waiting for a single commander's orders. Crazy Horse and his allies had also helped prevent Crook's column from reaching the area by confronting it at the Rosebud.

The victory therefore belonged not simply to Sitting Bull or Crazy Horse but to the allied communities and the many leaders whose names disappeared from the familiar Custer-centered account.

Victory Without Security

News of the defeat reached the United States during its centennial celebrations and provoked demands for retaliation. Congress moved against Lakota treaty rights, and the Army intensified operations. Winter campaigns attacked villages and destroyed food, lodges, and horses, making continued independence increasingly difficult.

The immense gathering at the Little Bighorn could not remain together indefinitely. Its people and horse herds required food and grazing over a wide area. Once the bands separated, soldiers could pursue them more effectively.

Crazy Horse resisted through the winter before bringing his hungry and exhausted followers into Fort Robinson in May 1877. Four months later, he was mortally wounded by a bayonet while soldiers attempted to confine him. Sitting Bull sought refuge in Canada but returned under the pressure of hunger in 1881. In 1890, he was killed during an attempted arrest by U.S.-directed Indian police at Standing Rock.

Remembering the Greasy Grass

For much of American history, Custer occupied the center of the story and Native people appeared primarily as the force that destroyed him. From the Lakota and Cheyenne perspective, the center was the village: children carried away from gunfire, men racing to defend their homes, warriors crossing the river, and independent communities acting together against a common threat.

Sitting Bull helped sustain the gathering's spiritual and political unity. Crazy Horse supplied inspirational battlefield leadership. Gall, Two Moon, Lame White Man, Crow King, White Bull, and many others turned a sudden attack into a decisive defense. They had not gathered to create Custer's last stand. Custer brought his soldiers to their village.

Their victory could not stop American expansion. It demonstrated, however, that the conquest of the northern Plains was neither peaceful nor uncontested—and that those defending their families and independence understood what was at stake.

Sources: [National Park Service battle account](#), [battle chronology](#), and biographical accounts of [Gall](#) and [White Bull](#).