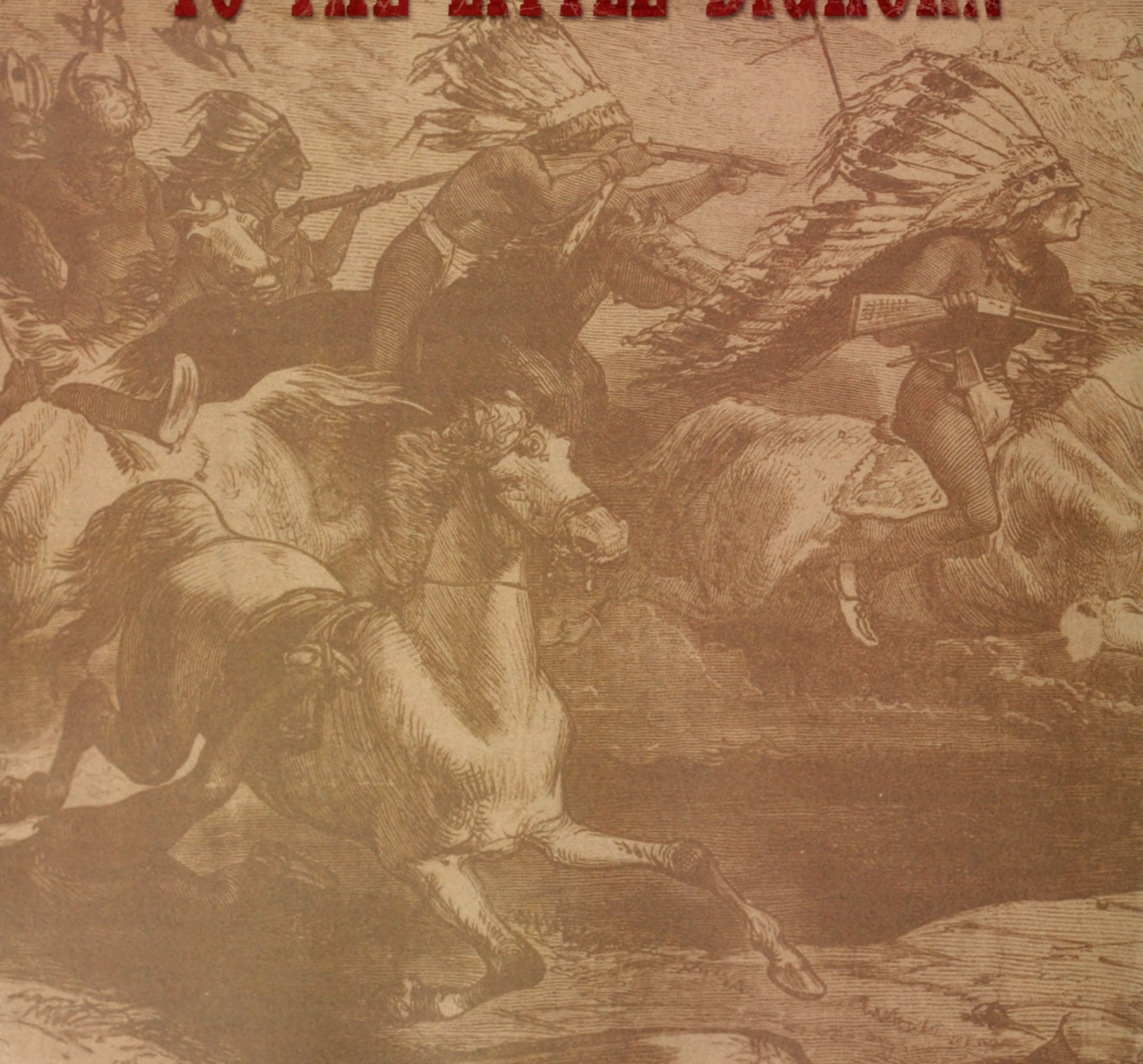


A BIG PRELUDE ★ TO THE LITTLE BIGHORN



THE SIOUX CHARGING COLONEL ROYALL'S DETACHMENT OF CAVALRY, ILLUSTRATION BY CHARLES ST. G. STANLEY, IN FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER, AUGUST 12, 1876. DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY, WESTERN HISTORY COLLECTION



ROSEBUD BATTLEFIELD STATE PARK preserves the pivotal battle grounds where, on June 17, 1876, the balance of power between the Army and the Indians shifted, leading to Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer's legendary defeat. **By NEIL MANGUM**



GRAVE ERROR A marker overlooks the site where General Crook made the biggest misjudgment of his storied Army career.



JOHN LAMBING

THE PATH TO CROOK'S Hill follows an abandoned ranch road choked by swaying prairie grasses floating in the early morning dew. At the summit of this historic landmark in Rosebud Battlefield State Park, a visitor is rewarded with sweeping views of rock-strewn ridges, the snowcapped peaks of the Bighorn Mountains, and undulating prairie colored with splashes of wildflowers. The quiet and serenity of the site, however, belie its violent history. For here, 128 years ago, was fought one of the most intense battles ever waged between Native Americans, desperately trying to retain their lands and culture, and the soldiers of the U.S. Army, enforcing an edict from Washington, D.C.

Rosebud Battlefield is not a park of picnic tables and playgrounds. Few structures disturb the nearly pristine landscape. There is no visitor center, only a former ranch house that serves as a ranger's quarters. A cluster of interpretive panels at the park's entrance is the only indicator that this pastoral setting was once a battlefield. The site looks remarkably similar today to how it did more than a century ago, when Brigadier General George Crook's command was met in battle by Sioux and Cheyenne warriors. The battle fought here in mid-summer 1876 is considered by many historians as one of the most important Indian War battles of the American West. Still studied by military strategists, the confrontation was a strategic win for the Indians that led, a short time later, to an even greater victory at the Little Bighorn.

★ FORCE THEM TO SUBMIT

On the morning of June 17, 1876, more than 1,300 soldiers, miners, and Crow and Shoshone Indian scouts, led by Brigadier General George Crook, paused along Rosebud Creek. The north-flowing tributary of the Yellowstone River flows from the Wolf Mountains in what is now southeastern Montana. Having arrived the previous morning from present-day Sheridan, Wyoming, Crook's men lined up for nearly a

mile along both sides of the sluggish, 30-foot-wide stream. Crook's mission was to find the Sioux and Cheyenne village he firmly believed was nearby, destroy it, and force the tribes to submit to reservation confinement.

The Indians had no intention of reporting to the reservations. Under the spiritual guidance of Chief Sitting Bull and war leaders Crazy Horse and Spotted Wolf, the Indians were steadfast in their determination to resist encroachment on their historic hunting grounds. The Treaty of 1868 acknowledged that the Indians owned roughly 125,000 square miles of land in today's western South Dakota, eastern Wyoming, and southeastern Montana. And the U.S. government had promised protection "against the commission of all depredations by people of the United States."

But peace remained fleeting. The discovery of gold in the Black Hills flooded the region with miners and settlers who disregarded Indian rights. The government first tried to evict the miners and then purchase the Black Hills from the Indians, but both efforts failed. Finally, it issued an edict to the Indians living in the unceded lands to accept reservation life by the end of January 1876 or "face military action." When Sitting Bull and other Sioux and Cheyenne ignored the ultimatum, it became the Army's responsibility to enforce the decree.

In spring of 1876, the Army ordered columns of soldiers from three different directions to trap the Indians. General Crook, considered the Army's greatest Indian fighter, led the third and largest contingent from Fort Fetterman, Wyoming Territory.



Brigadier General Crook, considered the U.S. Army's greatest Indian fighter, was assigned to lead a column as part of a three-pronged force aimed at driving Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and their followers back onto the reservations. But the Indians held firm. At Rosebud Creek, General Crook's force of 1,300 soldiers, miners, and Crow and Shoshone scouts fought roughly 1,000 Cheyenne and Sioux in a six-hour-long battle still studied by war strategists today.

KEVIN BROOKE

Crook's column departed Fort Fetterman on May 29. On June 14 the column was joined by 276 Crow and Shoshone, bitter enemies of the Sioux and Cheyenne. The Crow, among them Chief Plenty Coups, informed Crook that Sitting Bull's village was nearby, on Rosebud Creek. They were wrong. Sitting Bull and his followers were no longer on the Rosebud, having moved westward to a tributary of the Little Bighorn River, roughly 60 miles from Crook. The camp's estimated 7,000 people, including 1,500 to 2,000 warriors, made it one of the largest concentrations of Indians ever to assemble on the northern Plains.

Acting on the Crow and Shoshone Indian scouts' advice, Crook marched on June 16 to the headwaters of the Rosebud. That day, Crow scouts far ahead of the column sparred and exchanged insults with a small party of Cheyenne. The Cheyenne returned to their main camp and alerted Sitting Bull and the councilmen that soldiers were coming. The Indian leaders decided to send warriors to intercept the bluecoats before

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Rosebud Battlefield State Park (left and above) is the site of a historic 1876 battle filled with heroic acts. One of the most famous was the rescue of Limpy, a Cheyenne warrior (below right). As the Cheyenne and Sioux chased Colonel Royall's troops, a soldier shot Limpy's horse from beneath him. With bullets whizzing past, the warrior got to a rocky outcropping, climbed atop a large boulder, then leapt onto the passing horse ridden by Young Two Moon (nephew of the great Cheyenne warrior Two Moon). The two then galloped off to safety.



JEFF ERICKSON
GENERAL CROOK AND LIMPY COURTESY OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT

they could endanger the village. An estimated 1,000 men under the guidance of Crazy Horse departed for the Rosebud.

The next morning, Crook advanced 5 miles along Rosebud Creek. The men unsaddled their horses and began to boil coffee and rest while their Crow and Shoshone scouts probed northward. Barely one-half hour elapsed before rifle fire from the north interrupted the stillness. Galloping down from the hills to the camp rode the scouts, closely pursued by Crazy Horse's warriors. The scouts halted along the bluffs above the creek and fought the Sioux and Cheyenne for a critical 20 minutes, giving the startled Crook time to recover from the surprise attack.

The general knew at once his position in the creek bottom was vulnerable. Quickly forming his cavalry and infantry, he decided to push the warriors off the high ground. He sent Captain Anson Mills and his battalion of the 3rd Cavalry straight at the Sioux and Cheyenne, driving them back. The historic battle had begun.

WHERE THE GIRL ★ SAVED HER BROTHER

In a gap at the eastern end of a ridge, the fighting intensified as the retreating Indians turned and charged the soldiers. That ridge gap was the site of a heroic act still legendary among the Cheyenne. The advancing soldiers killed the horse ridden by a Cheyenne chief known as Comes-In-Sight. Too far away to assist, Crazy Horse and his followers could only watch helplessly as the soldiers advanced toward their fallen comrade. Suddenly an Indian rider charged down into the gap, mindless of the bullets throwing up clouds of dirt around the horse's hooves. Zigzagging to avoid being shot, the rider reached Comes-In-Sight and beckoned him to leap aboard and ride to safety. The rescuer turned out to be the warrior's sister, Buffalo Calf Road Woman. To this day, the Cheyenne proudly refer to the Rosebud fight as the battle Where the Girl Saved Her Brother.

Buffalo Calf Road Woman wasn't the

only skilled rider that day. Mills, describing the fighting at the gap, later wrote: "The Indians proved then and there that they were the best cavalry on earth. In charging up towards us, they exposed little of their persons, hanging on with one arm around the neck and one leg over the horse, firing and lancing from underneath the horses' necks, so that there was no part on the Indian at which we would aim."

Once Crook retook the high ground, he established his command post on the long ridge known today as Crook's Hill. Roughly one-third of a mile to the west, the warriors positioned themselves on a rise now known as Conical Hill. For the next several hours, the battle ebbed and flowed as Indians and soldiers advanced and then retreated back to their strongholds. Midway between the soldiers and the warriors, on a rocky outcropping, were 60 miners who had joined Crook's column for "sport." Their sharpshooting skills helped blunt any major Indian foray toward Crook's Hill.

While Crook and Mills were holding the

Indians off, Colonel William B. Royall was struggling to rejoin his commander. Roughly a mile to the west of where Crook's main forces were fighting Crazy Horse and most of his warriors, Royall's 225 men were defending a ridge, huddled under a protective slope besieged by more than 400 Indians. When Crook sent orders for Royall to rejoin the command, the colonel abandoned the ridge but soon was pinned along another ridge by the pursuing warriors. After an hour of fighting, Royall retreated again, and again was forced to

make a stand, this time at Kollmar Creek, below Crook's position.

During Royall's retreat from his second to third position came another famous act of bravery. While chasing the soldiers, a disabled Cheyenne named Limpy had his horse shot from beneath him. Unable to run, the Indian posed an easy target, and the soldiers unleashed a fusillade of carbine rounds in his direction. Seeing Limpy's plight, Young Two Moon (nephew of the great Cheyenne warrior Two Moon) ran the gauntlet of lead to rescue his fellow tribes-

man. Limpy reached a rocky outcropping, climbed a boulder, then leapt onto the rear of Young Two Moon's passing steed, which carried the two warriors to safety.

Frustrated by the Indians' guerrilla-style tactics, Crook decided to force the issue. Still convinced that a village lay on the Rosebud, he sent Mills and half the cavalry with instructions to proceed down the Rosebud, find the camp, and hold it until Crook could follow with the rest of the command. Believing the exodus of Mills's cavalymen indicated a retreat, the Indians intensified their attack on the beleaguered Royall in some of the fiercest fighting of the battle. Five soldiers were killed there and at least ten were wounded. Finally Crook sent two companies of infantry down to provide cover for Royall and his men, who retreated up the hill to the general's fortification.

Sensing further disaster, Crook reluctantly dispatched a messenger to Mills, now searching the Rosebud valley for the phantom village, urging him to return immediately. The captain and his men returned by swinging in behind Conical Hill, forcing the Indians to retire from the site, thus ending the battle.

Though tired and hungry, Crazy Horse and his warriors were proud of their effort. They had taken the fight to Crook, stopped the bluecoats in their tracks, and earned many war honors. More importantly, Sitting Bull's village remained unharmed.

Despite the ferocity of the six-hour battle among roughly 2,500 combatants, General Crook reported only 10 men killed and 21 wounded. Cheyenne and Sioux losses were estimated to be slightly higher, though still relatively light considering the magnitude of the conflict.

Crook claimed victory based on the argument that he held the ground. But military strategists later judged the claim an empty boast. Though tactically the battle was a draw, it turned out to be a strategic victory for the Indians. Crook's was the largest of the three prongs sent by the Army to force the Indians back to the reservations, and the Rosebud Battle knocked him out of the campaign. After withdrawing to his supply base on Goose Creek, Wyoming Territory, Crook and his men rested for six weeks. By the time they recovered, they were too late

WHERE THE GIRL SAVED HER BROTHER



SOURCE: Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association

While camped at Rosebud Creek, General Crook mistakenly believed he was near Sitting Bull's village, which was actually 60 miles away. On June 16, having heard of the Army's approach, Sitting Bull sent 1,000 warriors under the leadership of Crazy Horse to intercept the bluecoats. The next morning, Crazy Horse's warriors descended on Crook's camp (1). The general first sent a battalion under Captain Anson Mills charging into the warriors on a ridge (2). At a gap (3) in the ridge, Buffalo Calf Road Woman saved her brother, Comes-In-Sight, in an act of heroism still celebrated by the Cheyenne. The Army set up its command post at Crook's Hill (4). Several hundred yards to the west, the Indians positioned themselves on Conical Hill (5), from which they made assaults on Crook's position. Colonel Royall's hapless effort to reunite with Crook began at a ridge (6) far to the west, which he abandoned only to be pinned by Indians along another ridge (7). Near this point was where the Cheyenne Limpy had his horse shot from under him (8) but was able to leap onto the horse ridden by a brave warrior who came to his rescue. A short while later, Royall retreated to his third position (9), at Kollmar Creek below Crook's Hill, and Crook sent Mills down Rosebud Creek (10) to find Sitting Bull's village, which he still did not know was far to the west. The battle ended only when Crook sent for Mills to return and the captain came in behind the Indians at Conical Hill, forcing the warriors to retire from the site.



KEVIN BROOKE

A granite obelisk marks Crook's Hill, where the general fended off Sioux and Cheyenne warriors for several hours. "The Indians proved then and there that they were the best cavalry on earth," wrote one captain.

to help prevent the Army's greatest defeat in the Indian Wars.

The success at Rosebud had strengthened the resolve of the Cheyenne and Sioux. It bolstered their determination to fight for freedom and convinced them they could, in sufficient numbers, fight the soldiers and win. That attitude prevailed eight days after Rosebud when the warriors achieved their largest triumph ever—the stunning annihilation of Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer's immediate command at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. 🐾

★ IF YOU GO

Open: All year.

Location: Roughly 90 miles southeast of Billings, near the Tongue River Reservoir. Public access to the park is off Bighorn County Route 314 via a privately owned road that parallels Rosebud Creek.

Amenities: This is a primitive park containing only a toilet, site map, and several concrete pyramidal markers denoting key sites on the battlefield.

Features: Homestead-era site, historic battlefield site, buffalo jump dating back to 3000 B.C., petroglyphs (in sandstone walls below the jump), tipi rings, eagle-catching pits, and rock cairns. Northern Cheyenne from nearby Lame Deer view Rosebud as sacred ground and hold ceremonies at the site honoring the warriors and the soldiers who fought and died there.

During the hunting season, the park is open to antelope, deer, and upland game bird hunting. Ranchers lease parts of the park to graze cattle. The required rest-rotation grazing maintains native plant species and wildlife habitat diversity.



ROSEBUD BATTLEFIELD STATE PARK



KEVIN BROOKE



GARY LEPPART

Ancient petroglyphs and a 5,000-year-old historic buffalo jump near the battlefield site could be threatened by coal bed methane development.

A New Battle Ahead?

When Rosebud Battlefield was established as a Montana state park in 1978, it fulfilled a 40-year-long dream of rancher Elmer E. "Slim" Kobold to protect this significant site.

Today, that dream could be threatened by the prospect of coal bed methane development.

Kobold, originally from Oklahoma, homesteaded the historic battlefield and surrounding hills, bluffs, and grasslands in 1911. Over the years, he became fascinated with his property's rich history and worked to preserve and protect the significant battlefield and Indian artifacts.

In addition to battle sites, rock cairns, petrified stumps, and tipi rings, the area contains a buffalo jump. Located near the park's entrance, the jump's use dates to 3000 B.C. Archaeologists believe it had one of the highest densities of prehistoric cultural habitation of any buffalo jump in Montana.

The park has other values. For decades, U.S. military scholars have visited Rosebud to study the battle strategy used by both sides. And Native Americans, particularly the Northern Cheyenne, revere the area, performing ceremonies and making offerings to their forebears.

Kobold understood that these and other values made the battlefield worth protecting. When mining companies found a rich coal seam under Kobold's property in the early 1970s, he began an intense letter-writing campaign and teamed up with FWP to get Rosebud



NORTHERN PLAINS RESOURCE COUNCIL

In this aerial photo, coal bed methane development in Wyoming covers the landscape in roads, pipelines, and wastewater reservoirs.

Battlefield designated in the National Register of Historic Places. A few years later, with constant urging by the tough old cowboy, the Montana legislature agreed to preserve the site, appropriating money from the Coal Tax Fund to acquire a large portion of the battlefield.

Now a new type of development threatens to disrupt the historic site. Because FWP only owns the surface rights of the property, the battlefield could be developed for coal bed methane by private interests who own or lease mineral rights. Trucks, generators, compressor stations, pipelines, roads, noise, waste-

water, and dust could envelop the historic battlefield.

Recently, FWP has been working to protect the historic battlefield and archaeological sites by meeting with various organizations such as the National Park Service, the Montana Preservation Alliance, and the mineral rights lessee.

—Bob Peterson, Manager, Rosebud Battlefield State Park