



CHIEF PLENTY COUPS STATE PARK

# Chief Plenty Coups State Park commemorates the great Apsáalooke warrior and his legacy of harmony and goodwill

## A PLACE OF PEACE



By Bert Gildart

**I**N THE MOON OF THE RIPENING WILD plums and chokecherries, a time in September designated by the Apsáalooke people (literally, “children of the big-beaked bird”) to honor Chief Plenty Coups, my wife, Janie, and I joined hundreds of other visitors at Chief Plenty Coups State Park, located on the Crow Indian Reservation south of Billings. Many of us were there that day as volunteers for the Day of Honor, an annual event to celebrate one of the nation’s most venerated Indian leaders. Having arrived a few days before the celebration, Janie and I explored the park, set in the valley of Pryor (Arrow) Creek. Despite being close to the town of Pryor, the park setting was quiet and tranquil. Dusty, dry rimrock cliffs rose up in the north, but the irrigated lawns in the park were green, and tall cottonwoods lined the creek.

As the two of us walked, we were soon drawn to a clear spring that flowed from the base of a large cottonwood tree, the branches of which were laced with hundreds of brightly colored ribbons. There an Apsáalooke historian, Elias Goes Ahead, told us that the objects were prayer flags and that, if we desired, we too could make an offering. We hesitated, feeling self-conscious at this

**CHIEF OF CHIEFS** One of Plenty Coups’s greatest honors came in 1921, when the U.S. War Department chose him to represent all Indian tribes at a ceremony in Arlington National Cemetery creating a memorial to the Unknown Soldier.

sacred Apsáalooke site, sort of like Lutherans visiting Mecca. I think Goes Ahead noticed our discomfort, for he reassured us that here all people could be at ease to pray, contemplate, or just enjoy the peaceful surroundings. Though Plenty Coups had once been a ferocious warrior, Goes Ahead said, “later he mellowed and wanted this park to be a comfortable, non-threatening place for Indians and whites. So do as you like. Here you can be part of our culture. If nothing else, pray for peace, and leave an offering.”

Later we did just that, making an offering when no one else was around. We felt free to do so because the quiet, pastoral setting of Chief Plenty Coups State Park creates a hospitable atmosphere of tolerance. After reading about the great chief and visiting with then-park manager Rich Furber (who retired in 2003), we learned why the site is so important, to Indians and whites alike. We learned how a young warrior became a great chief. And how that chief came to represent all that could be good between Indians and whites, despite a long history of mistrust and injustice. We learned that Plenty Coups (*Aleek-chea-ahoosh*, meaning “many achievements”) was a man of war—and then a man of peace—whose vision has helped bridge a gap between two cultures.

“This park,” Furber told us, “expands on that story.”

Chief Plenty Coups is regarded as one of history’s great Indian leaders. A remarkable warrior who often risked his life to gain honor, avenge death, and defend his people,

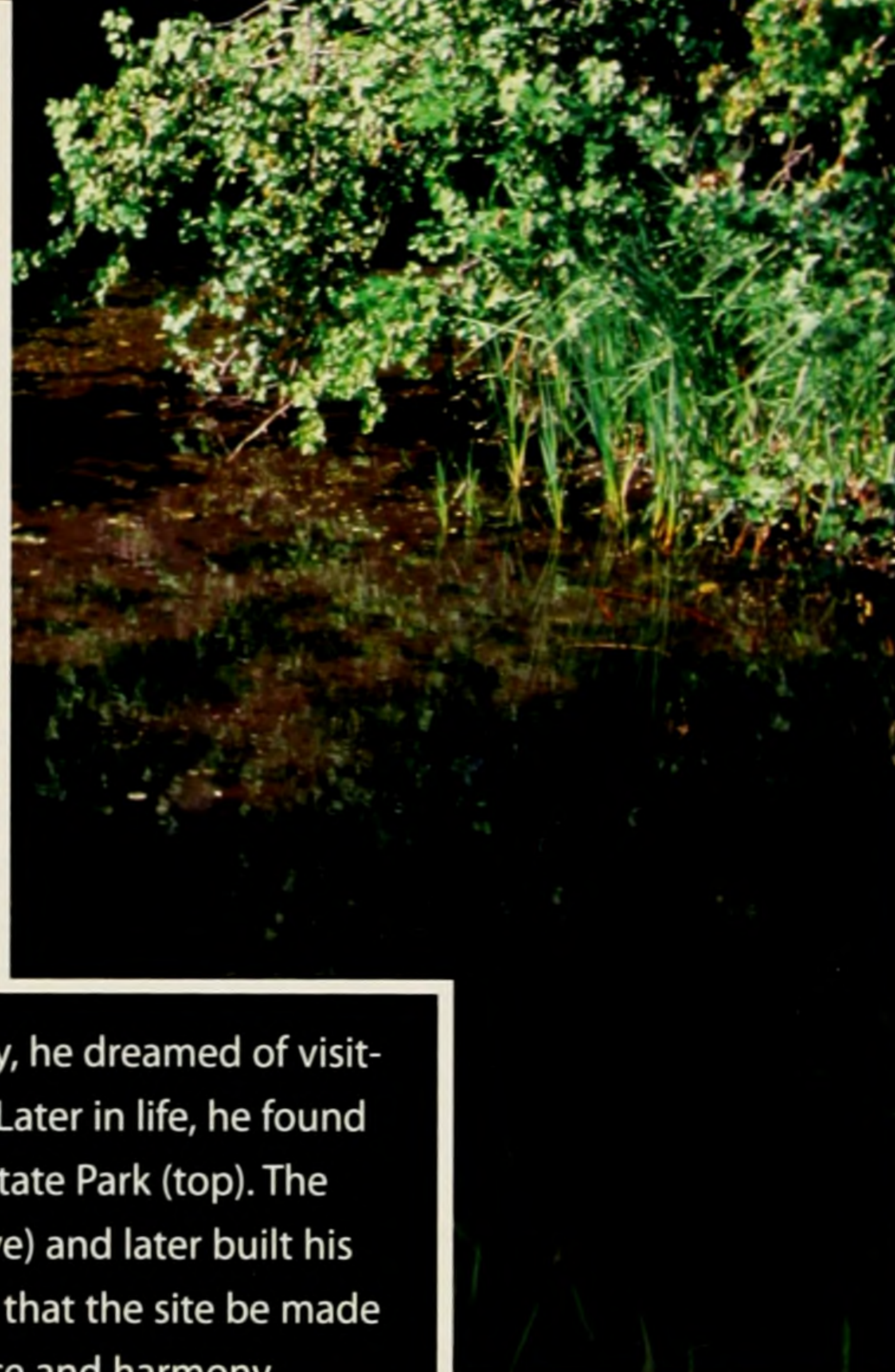
“I want to leave my property so that the Indian and white man can enjoy it after I am gone. It is to be a memorial not to me, but to the Crow nation....”

—CHIEF PLENTY COUPS, 1927

he later become a renowned diplomat noted for wisdom, eloquence, and compassion.

In 1928, Plenty Coups related his life story to the author Frank B. Linderman. He told his biographer that, as a boy, he had a vision that greatly changed his life and helped save the Crow tribe. After fasting for days, he dreamed of being at a spring surrounded by cottonwoods, where he saw an old man sitting in front of a strange square structure, his face shaded by one of the trees. During that vision he also saw all the land’s buffalo disappear and cattle appear in their place. And he saw a forest destroyed by a storm leaving but one tree, holding the lodge of a chickadee.

Elders who helped him interpret the dream said it meant whites would take over the land once ruled by the Apsáalooke. They said the tree symbolized wisdom, for the chickadee had selected its lodge in a place that would endure storms. The vision



**DREAM WATER** When Plenty Coups was a boy, he dreamed of visiting a spring surrounded by tall cottonwoods. Later in life, he found that site at what is today Chief Plenty Coups State Park (top). The chief often visited the spring afterwards (above) and later built his house there (below). Before he died, he asked that the site be made into a park where people could gather in peace and harmony.

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GARY LEPPART



PHIL FARNES

reinforced for the elders a course they and other Apsáalooke had begun years earlier, one of befriending whites as allies against the other Indian tribes. It was a course Plenty Coups would travel extensively during his later years.

Though Plenty Coups dreamed at an early age of relations with whites, his life as a young man revolved mainly around dealings with other Indians. He took part in many raiding parties, in which he captured horses and otherwise “counted coups” against his enemies, sharpening his skills to become a great warrior. On seven occasions he was the first in his war party to strike the enemy, he captured weapons five times, he led successful war parties on ten occasions, and he was particularly noted for capturing tethered horses, one of the acts of bravery required to become an Apsáalooke chief.

At age 28, in recognition for bravery and leadership, he was made a chief. For years afterward, he successfully led his band in battle against the Dakota, Arapahoe, and Cheyenne, who coveted the fertile Crow country hunting grounds.

Though Plenty Coups’s accomplishments were many, perhaps his most significant contribution was to his people when they were being forced into reservation life. The 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty had reduced the Crow country by nearly 80 percent of what had been guaranteed by the U.S. government just a few decades earlier. And in 1880, some members of Congress tried to remove the Apsáalooke people completely from their lands to facilitate gold mining and the rapidly expanding Northern Pacific Railroad. During six trips to Washington, D.C., as a Crow tribe representative, Plenty Coups successfully negotiated with the U.S. government, railroad companies, and other powerful interests. Meanwhile, he solidified his fractured tribe, uniting them in the common cause to stave off growing pressure for white settlement on the reservation.

So revered was Plenty Coups among the Apsáalooke people that when he died they voted to designate him as their last traditional tribal chief.

Indians weren’t the only ones who recognized his greatness. During his many visits

*Writer and photographer Bert Gildart lives in Bigfork.*

to the nation's capital, Plenty Coups had earned the respect and admiration of federal officials. His greatest honor there came in 1921, when he was chosen by the War Department to represent all Indian tribes at a ceremony in Arlington National Cemetery creating a memorial to the Unknown Soldier.

Despite such honors, Plenty Coups had mixed feelings about whites. Though many were his friends, many others had deceived his people. But he continued to recall the message of his vision, that only by working with the whites and embracing their ways could the Apsáalooke survive.

"Education is your most powerful weapon," the chief is reported to have told his followers. "With education, you are the white man's equal; without education, you are his victim."

Yet he also advised his people to retain their own culture, continue to speak the Apsáalooke language, honor their ancestors, and participate in traditional songs, dances, and other rituals.

Plenty Coups's hope that the Apsáalooke would adopt the best of both cultures came true. Apsáalooke culture today is very much alive on the reservation. According to Furber, who has been adopted by an Apsáalooke family and has participated in sweat lodge ceremonies, the Indian ways flourish in part because the Crow tribe's reservation is on land they used in historic times. What's more, the tribe has nurtured its culture by maintaining its language and the strong tradition of oral history.

At the same time, many Apsáalooke have followed Plenty Coups's advice to earn advanced academic degrees. According to Furber, if someone in a Crow Reservation crowd were to ask if there were a doctor in the house, "a half-dozen Ph.D.s might raise their hands."

The park commemorating the life of this remarkable man was established in 1965 following several legal transfers. The land was originally donated by Plenty Coups himself. As a young chief, he had visited Mount Vernon and decided his future home should be an Apsáalooke version of George Washington's famous estate, a solemn place to be revered by future generations. When Plenty Coups gave up his nomadic ways in

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**DAY OF HONOR** At a ceremony honoring Plenty Coups, his great grand-nephew, Elias Goes Ahead, speaks of the chief's legacy of peace and goodwill. Plenty Coups, who died in 1932 after a lifetime of diplomacy between Apsáalooke and whites, is buried at the state park (bottom).

1884, he became one of the first Apsáalooke to own and settle on a farm, which was deeded to him through the federal Indian Allotment Act. On this 320-acre tract, located a half mile east of Pryor, he opened a general store, built a home, and tilled the earth until his death in 1932 at age 84. At that time, as requested by Plenty Coups and his wife, Strikes the Iron, 195 acres of his land was turned over to Bighorn County to be made into a public park.

It was ironic, Janie and I thought as we strolled the grounds, that this man should want to return land to those who had taken so much from his people.

It took decades for the donated land to become the park Plenty Coups envisioned. Management passed from the county to the Billings Kiwanis Club, which erected a monument dedicated to the chief and a fence to prevent livestock from grazing on his grave site. The State Highway Commission then assumed control of Plenty Coups's cherished land, including his store and two-story log home, which it passed on to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

In 1973, the department built a modest interpretive center. The next major improvements came in 1999, when the legislature—urged by a local parks support group called Friends of Plenty Coups—allocated to FWP \$500,000 that was desperately needed for improvements. The department then hired award-winning designers John and Nancy Hanna to create new interpretive exhibits. To manage the park, FWP enlisted Furber, a retired but still energetic Montana game warden captain. Over the next two years Furber, FWP regional parks manager Doug Habermann, and the Hannas met with vari-



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### CULTURAL TREASURES

The park's newly refurbished visitor center, which opened in 2003, is the only Apsáalooke museum in the United States. The facility also features information on Chief Plenty Coups's life and legacy and the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Below: Susan Stewart Medicine Horse creates a tapestry depicting how the Crow tribe migrated from Minnesota to Montana during the 1800s.



ous members of the Crow community and asked them to help the department decide what a visitor center should look like and how to interpret the park and its artifacts for visitors.

“One elder, Joe Medicine Crow, convinced us the new center needed to depict a door facing east, because all traditional Apsáalooke lodge doors face the rising sun,” says Habermann. “And many Apsáalooke people told us we needed to broaden the story told at the center beyond Plenty Coups to include other great Apsáalooke leaders and the entire Crow nation.”

When the park's new visitor center opened in August 2003, visitors found much-expanded interpretive displays, not only in the center but also in the chief's home and store. Outside the center sits a prominent bust of the chief, showing a scar on his chin (one of the few wounds he ever sustained despite decades of battle). Inside are interactive Apsáalooke cultural and historical displays, where kids and adults can paint an Indian “pony,” touch Indian artifacts, and take the “Chickadee Challenge” to test what they have learned.

“One important reflection of Apsáalooke culture is the use of spoken interpretation through the ‘sound sticks,’” says Habermann. These are portable MP3 players that allow visitors to roam the park while listening to recordings of Apsáalooke elders talk about their history and the significance of Plenty Coups and his homestead.

In addition to Plenty Coups's preserved home and store, nestled beneath stately cottonwood trees in the valley of Pryor Creek, the park preserves the famous spring Plenty Coups saw in his vision, including the tall cottonwood tree he saw shading the face of an old man, who elders had told him was actually Plenty Coups himself.

Perhaps one of the most significant functions of the visitor center, which is the only museum of Apsáalooke culture in the United States, is to store items sacred to the Apsáalooke people, including several dozen medicine bundles. One of those is Plenty Coups's war bundle, which contains the legs of his spiritual guide, the chickadee. Before battle, Plenty Coups would remove the legs and tie them in his hair for spiritual protection and guidance. The park has been working with tribal members to develop guide-



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lines for the respectful handling of these and other items following guidelines from the 1990 Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act.

The next morning, as Janie and I continued to explore the park, we met many people preparing for the annual Day of Honor, which features the reenactment of a famous battle, a craft fair, speeches by Apsáalooke elders, and a bison feast. Out on the lawn, Apsáalooke elder Oliver Costa showed us how he was setting up a tepee in the traditional manner. Inside the visitor center, Susan Stewart Medicine Horse had hung two deer-hide tapestries she had made. She explained that one depicted the Crow Migration, the tribe's journey during the 1800s from its origins in what is now Minnesota through Canada and Utah and then into Montana. The other showed the Apsáalooke version of the world's creation. In Plenty Coups's two-story house, Crow tribe member Howard Boggess was preparing to provide one-on-one interpretation for the hundreds of visitors who would be stopping by the structure later that day.

As the afternoon waned, young Apsáalooke men from the local high school dressed as warriors began assembling on the fields once farmed by Plenty Coups. They had come to reenact the famous Arrow Creek Battle of 1861, in which vast numbers of enemy warriors attempted to drive the Apsáalooke from the region. Soon, the reenactors were chanting loudly and galloping bareback toward the enemy riders. At

first, the Apsáalooke retreated, which represented the overwhelming odds. Then a "mystic" rider emerged. According to Apsáalooke legend, he had been immune to arrows and bullets during the battle. We watched as the young Apsáalooke riders, heartened by the appearance of the invincible horseman, turned their mounts and surged forward. Thrusting out their sticks, they then touched the enemy warriors (another form of counting coups) in a gesture that symbolized their victory in the battle.

The Apsáalooke have faced many challenges since the bison disappeared in the late 1800s. Yet their historic culture has survived, and many have adapted to the new one thrust upon them. Chief Plenty Coups State Park, designated as a National Historic Landmark in 2001, celebrates the legacy of these adaptable people and one of their most brilliant leaders. Plenty Coups was a farsighted chief who, during his life and afterwards, helped bring together two cultures sharing a common land.

Dr. Philip Beaumont is an Apsáalooke elder who was present in 1928 when Chief Plenty Coups donated his property as a park. At that ceremony, Beaumont says, all white people sat on one side and Indians on the other. But these days, Indians, whites, and people of other cultures mingle comfortably in a setting that encourages quiet reflection on the past while healing wounds made by decades of cultural conflict and mistrust.

"Now," says Beaumont, "there is peace and harmony." 🐾

**RIDING INTO HISTORY** Young Apsáalooke horsemen reenact the Arrow Creek Battle during the annual celebration honoring Chief Plenty Coups. Members of the Crow tribe also take part in dances, singing, and storytelling during the popular event, held in early September.



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## PLENTY COUPS STATE PARK

**Dates and Hours:** Open every day May 1 through September 30, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. The visitor center is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**Location:** 32 miles south of Billings on County Road 418 to Pryor, then follow the signs for 1 mile west.

**Day of Honor:** Held the first Saturday in September (September 4 this year).

**Crow Lifeways:** Presentations on traditional Apsáalooke culture. Saturdays in late summer (July 31 and August 7, 14, and 28 this year).

**Park information:** (406) 252-1289, or on the Internet at [fwp.state.mt.us/parks](http://fwp.state.mt.us/parks).