

## They Came for the Gold and Stayed for the Grass

Bob Lee

**A**n island in a sea of grass. That's how historians describe the Black Hills of South Dakota where the Society for Range Management will hold its 1997 annual meeting next February. That's because the incongruous mountain range rises like an island out of the sea of grass that surrounds it for hundreds of miles in all directions. They have also been described as "an oasis in a dreary desert." That's because of their isolation, sparkling streams, pine-forested slopes, and park-like meadows rising mirage-like from the stark prairielands enveloping them.

Known as "The Land of Infinite Variety," South Dakota is divided into three distinct physiographic regions. The Missouri River bisects the state from north to south in the central sector. The land there is an extension of the farmlands of Minnesota and Iowa. West of the river is the vast "short grass" country where bluegrama, buffalograss, and western wheatgrass support an enduring livestock industry. This region is also characterized by desolate Badlands, the legacy of millions of years of erosion from wind and water. Then there's the Black Hills, whose forests and grassy meadows offer a sharp contrast to the moonscape of the nearby Badlands.

South Dakota, part of the Louisiana Purchase, was included in Minnesota and Nebraska Territories until 1861 when Dakota Territory was created. Lewis and Clark traversed the region while boating up the Missouri on their celebrated trek to the Pacific Ocean in 1804–06. When the separate states of North and South Dakota were created in 1889, the southern sector was left with about 46 million acres—43 million of it still rangeland. The state forms a near rectangle about 225 miles north to south and roughly 460 miles east to west. It encompasses a surface area of 77,047 square miles.

**The Black Hills, an oblong area** of about 4,500 square miles along the west-central border of South Dakota and eastern Wyoming, were formed about 40 million years ago. They were born in a massive eruption of the earth's bowels. The violent upheaval created a mountain range from the rocky bed of an inland sea that covered the region eons ago. The Cheyenne River grips the range between its north and south branches as it courses eastward out of Wyoming. While apart from them, the Black Hills are generally considered to be the eastern ramparts of the taller Rocky Mountains.



Settlers took up homesteads on the vast West River grasslands after the Great Sioux Reservation was violated by the Custer Expedition to the Black Hills in 1874.

In truth, however, the Hills are also mountains. They were the "Black Mountains" to the early Indians of the vicinity, undoubtedly because of their dark appearance when viewed from a distance. It was the white man, coming much later, who reduced them to hills. The corruption may have resulted from comparing them with the loftier Rocky Mountains to the West. The whites were intimately acquainted with the towering snow-capped Rockies long before they discovered the lonely Black Hills. But there's no higher point east of the Rockies to the Atlantic Ocean than 7,240 foot-high Harney Peak in the granitic center of the Black Hills.

There is archaeological evidence of human inhabitation of the fringes of the Black Hills in prehistoric times. One site near Bear Butte, a towering landmark situated a few miles east of their outer rim, dates back 4,000 years. The first white men known to have pierced this long-hidden mountain range were the Verendrye brothers, noted French-Canadian explorers, who came to the region in 1742 while searching for a mysterious "Sea of the West." They found sub-bands of the Crow, Cheyenne, and Kiowa tribes scattered about the "Mountain of the Horse Indians," which may have been Bear Butte.

**More than half a century passed** after the Verendrye visit before the white man again ventured to the Black Hills. There are sketchy reports of whites reaching or passing near them in the first half of the 19th century. Wilson Price Hunt led a party of Astorians to Oregon by way of the Black Hills in 1811. That intrepid adventurer, Jedediah Smith, was mauled by a grizzly bear while passing through the southern portion of the Black Hills in 1823. By the 1830s fur traders were passing along the Cheyenne waterways from the Missouri River to the Yellowstone. An American Fur Company outpost at the mouth of Rapid Creek, on the eastern fringe of the Hills, is known to have blown up in 1832. A candle falling into a keg of gun powder caused the explosion and killed the white trader.

It was more than a full century after the Verendrye visit that the first evidence was uncovered of white men in the Black Hills as gold prospectors. In 1887, at the base of Lookout Mountain near the present day town of Spearfish, a small sandstone slab was found that told a cryptic tale. Crudely carved on one side of it was this message: "Came to these Hills in 1833 Seven of us Al ded (dead) but me Ezra Kind Killed by Ind. beyond the high hills Got our gold June 1834."



The same side listed the names of the seven. With the exception of an "Indian Crow," they were apparently all white men. On the reverse side of the stone was carved this poignant information: "Got all the gold we could carry out ponys all got by the Indians I have lost my gun and nothing to eat and Indians hunting me."

The author of these frantic lines probably was later



*Custer Expedition 1874 near Custer, S.D. in the Black Hills.*

"got" by the Indian pursuers too. Who were these unfortunate adventurers and where did they originate? Frank Thomson, the late Spearfish author and historian, spent most of this 93-year lifetime trying to find out. Through prodigious research, he succeeded in tracing most of them. Like many others, before and after them, these tragic figures had "gone West" from the eastern settlement and "were never heard from again."

**Members of the ill-fated Kind party**, as they are known to Black Hills historians, may have been the first gold-seekers to invade the mysterious region. But they were far from the last, nor were they the last to suffer the consequences of the lust for gold in the jealously guarded Indian country. Oddly, despite their idyllic environment, the Indians did not live in the Black Hills for prolonged periods. The Sioux, who had expelled the earlier tribes living in the region, lorded over the territory when the white men began coveting it. They were a nomadic people who roamed the Great Plains in constant search for the immense buffalo herds that sustained them. But the Black Hills were sacred to them and they made frequent pilgrimages there. Perhaps the country reminded the Sioux of their former woodland culture in the forested lands of Minnesota and Wisconsin where they had lived prior to migrating west of the Missouri River in about 1775-76.

In any event, game was plentiful in the Black Hills and the Sioux cherished them as their "Meat Pack." In addition, the level, wooded bottom lands cradled by tree-clad bluffs or ridges made ideal winter camping grounds. Here, too, the Sioux sought refuge from the relentless forces of the white man's civilization crowding in on them. In 1873, the Army proposed building a fort there even though it knew practically nothing about the region. But, the 1868 treaty with the Sioux consummated at Fort Laramie, Wyoming Territory, foreclosed that possibility.

The Laramie Treaty called for the abandonment of mili-



*A century after Custer's Expedition.*

tary posts in the Indian country rather than the establishment of additional posts. Red Cloud, war chief of the fierce Oglala Sioux, had led costly raids against the Bozeman Trail forts in Wyoming and Montana Territories. He vowed his people would not stop the fighting until the string of forts abreast of the trail were abandoned. He won his point along with an agreement that all roads leading through Indian country to the Montana gold fields would be closed.

Further, the treaty set aside all of the vast country west of the Missouri River in Dakota Territory, including the coveted Black Hills, for "the absolute and undisturbed use and occupation of the Sioux Nation." It also committed the government to preventing white encroachment on the region, with troops if necessary. The historic treaty effectively slammed the door on white expansion into the Indian country. It also dashed the hope of the white people of Dakota for settlement of the Black Hills—for a few years anyway.

**Just six years after the Laramie Treaty** had been signed by the warring parties, ending years of bitter conflicts between the Sioux and the Army, the now famous Custer Expedition to the Black Hills of 1874 was ordered into the field. The expedition, commanded by the flamboyant hero of Civil War fame, George A. Custer, was described as the best equipped on the Northern Plains up to that time. In addition to the Seventh Cavalry, the pride of the country's frontier regiments, the command included scientists, practical miners, a corps of newspapermen, and happily for history, a photographer. All told, the expedition familiarized about 1,000 men—and one woman, a colored cook hired by the teamsters—with the enigmatic Black Hills. The entourage also included 110 wagons, mules to pull them, horses to carry the soldiers, and a beef herd to feed the command.

Ostensibly, the purpose of the expedition was to thoroughly explore the interior of the Black Hills and to select a suitable site for a future military post. The expedition marched out from Fort Abraham Lincoln on the west bank of the Missouri River near present-day Bismarck, N.D., on July 2, 1874. It returned there on August 30 after covering 1,205 miles on the round trip. Custer and his troopers found much of interest in the Black Hills, including the pristine beauty of the region leading to them.

"We marched over beautiful country," Custer wrote in a field report on July 15. "The grazing was excellent and abundant... The pasturage could not be finer... As an evidence of the character of the country we have marched since leaving Fort Lincoln on an average of 17 miles a day, one day making 32 miles; yet our mules and beef cattle have constantly improved in condition; the beef herd

depending solely upon the excellent grazing we have passed over."

**The expedition entered the Black Hills** from the west after crossing a veritable grazing paradise where it found "grass knee-deep and exceedingly luxuriant." It established camp on French Creek where the town of Custer, "Mother City of the Black Hills" was later sited. It was here on August 2, 1874, that Custer wrote the historic dispatch that reported "gold has been found in several places." The discovery marked the end of the Sioux proprietorship of their beloved Black Hills, despite the promises contained in the Laramie Treaty.

Entering the Belle Fourche Valley north of the Black Hills enroute back to Fort Lincoln, Custer described it as a "superior country covered with the best of grazing." He later reported "men going to the Black Hills to engage in agricultural or stock raising pursuits need not fear disappointment. In no portion of the United States, not excepting the bluegrass country of Kentucky, have I seen grazing superior to that found in this hitherto unknown region." He also recommended that "the title of the Indian (to the Black Hills country) should be extinguished as soon as practicable." Strangely, however, Custer failed to even mention a possible site in the region for a future military post in his verbose dispatches.

News of Custer's sensational gold find electrified the nation and brought renewed demands for opening the Black Hills to white settlement. The government attempted to negotiate with the Sioux for sale or lease of the gold fields, but the Indians refused to sell their sacred lands. So the government withdrew the Army patrols that were trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to keep gold-crazed prospectors out of the Black Hills. The rush of whites into the region in clear violation of the Laramie Treaty brought attacks on the illegal settlers by the natu-







*Brevet Major General George A. Custer Expedition to Black Hills (1874), at Ft. Lincoln, Bismarck, Dakota Territory, as it left there.*

rally resentful Indians. So the army was sent out to protect the invaders, an ironic twist from its previous mission of keeping the whites out of the region.

However, Custer and the Seventh Cavalry were to pay a high price for exposing the sacred land of the Sioux to the white invaders two years later on the Little Big Horn in Montana. Custer and much of his command were annihilated there by the Sioux and their Cheyenne allies on June 25, 1876. While that historic battle took place in Montana, the illegal opening of the Black Hills to white settlement was what the fight was all about. The Indians had fled the Great Sioux Reservation set aside for them by the Laramie Treaty after their cherished Black Hills had been violated, the Army pursued them into Montana and there suffered a stunning defeat. The unexpected Indian victory marked the high water mark of Sioux supremacy of the Great Plains.

**The presence of gold in the Black Hills** reported by Custer was confirmed by a scientific expedition sent there in the summer of 1875. It was headed by Professor Walter Jenney, a trained geologist, whose mission was to make a thorough topographical and geological survey of the area. "I have found gold in paying quantities in gravel bars on both Spring and Rapid Creeks and from 20 to 30 miles northeast of Harney Peak," Prof. Jenney reported. "The deposits are the richest yet found in the Hills and are very favorably situated."

Jenney was obviously as impressed as Custer with the lush grazing in the Hills areas as his reports were equally as enthusiastic about it. "It constitutes the great future wealth of this region and its value can hardly be over-estimated," the professor wrote. "There's gold enough to thoroughly settle and develop the country and after the placers

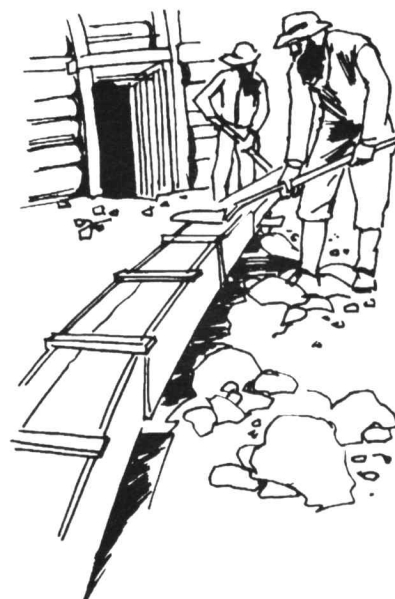
are ended, stock raising will be the great business of the inhabitants who have a world of wealth in the splendid grazing of this region...No matter how valuable the mines may be, the great future wealth of the Black Hills will be its grasslands, farms and timber..."

The expedition's scout, California Joe Milner, put it another way: "There's gold from the grass roots down," he declared, "but there's more gold from the grass roots up."

These observations were prophetic. When the gold boom ended after a few short but wildly exciting years, the initial settlers scattered onto the virgin grasslands enveloping the Black Hills and took to farming and stock raising. Some of their descendants can still be found operating these pioneer farms and ranches. But before this agricultural legacy was created the Sioux claim to the Black Hills had to be extinguished. How it was done shaped a sorry chapter in the history of Indian-white relations.

**Following Custer's defeat and death** at the Little Big Horn, Congress acted swiftly in retaliation. On August 15, 1876, less than two months after the shocking Indian victory in Montana, Congress wrote a harsh amendment into the Sioux appropriations bill. It provided that no further funds would be spent on rations for the Indians as promised in the Laramie Treaty unless the Sioux gave up their cherished Black Hills. An "agreement" was drafted giving up the Black Hills to the whites and the Sioux chiefs were given the option of signing it or seeing their people starve. Most of them signed.

However, the agreement ignored a key provision of the Laramie Treaty which stipulated how further cession of Indian land could be achieved. It provided that no additional Indian lands would be ceded to the white man without the consent of three-fourths of the adult males of the affected tribes. While many of the chiefs had reluctantly signed the Black Hills Agreement, the number of signers did not come close to the requirement set forth in the 1868 treaty. But the country, outraged and humiliated by the destruction of Custer's command, was in no mood to observe technicalities. It looked the other way as white settlement of the



Black Hills took place anyway and the Sioux were relegated to greatly reduced reservations outside of the gold region.

At first, the Black Hills gold boom was concentrated in the southern Hills where the initial discoveries had taken place. It shifted to the central Hills as the frenzied prospectors spread out from the discovery sites. Every report of fresh strikes, fancied or factual, sent the eager miners scurrying in new directions. When a major strike was made among the dead wood of Whitewood Creek in the northern Hills, the center of mining activity shifted there-and the wild and woolly mining camp of Deadwood was born. It was there that Wild Bill Hickok ignominiously met his untimely death in 1876 and Calamity Jane became the real life heroine of countless western dime novels.

**Up the gulch a couple of miles** from this storied mining center the Manuel brothers discovered the "Mother Lode" that was to become the fabulously productive Homestake Mining Company. It still ranks today as the largest and richest gold mine on the North American continent, and it's still producing!

With white settlement of the Black Hills a reality, despite the clouded title, the region soon lured an assorted array of characters whose chief goal was to mine the miners instead of the ore itself. It also provided a profitable market for a wide assortment of products essential to developing communities, including beef. The historic trail drives of Texas Longhorns to the northern grasslands that occurred after the Civil War had bypassed western Dakota because of the existence of the Great Sioux Reservation there, but with seizure of the region from the Indians completed, cattle were moved into it in immense numbers.

Paul Friggens, whose father had homesteaded a ranch in picturesque St. Onge Valley after obtaining a stake by working in the mines, tells about it in his 1983 book, *Gold and Grass: The Black Hills Story*. Friggens writes:

the Black Hills and adjacent land offered some of the finest livestock grazing on earth; and here on these seemingly illimitable grasslands was free open range and a world of wealth waiting to lure cattle barons and settlers alike. With discovery of this bonanza, the hell-for-leather American cowboy was soon driving his bawling herds of Longhorns a thousand miles up the Texas Trail to graze this sea of grass; and with this impetus and demand, farming and ranching in the Black Hills region began.

The predictions of Custer, Prof. Jenney, and California Joe had come true!

**South Dakota, today** a state of just over 700,000 population, is one of the most agricultural states in the nation. Its gross farm marketings in 1993 amounted to \$3.8 billion, almost 60 percent of it from livestock sales. Its principal cities are Sioux Falls (pop. 99,405) in the southeastern corner of the state and Rapid City, now the metropolis of the Black Hills (pop. 54,523), where the SRM annual meeting will take place.

Its principal attractions are the Missouri River reservoirs, the fabled Badlands, and the scenic Black Hills where the world-famous Shrine of Democracy at Mount Rushmore and the Crazy Horse Mountain Memorial near Custer are

located. Tourism is now the state's second largest industry. Except for the Homestake Mining Company at Lead, mining operations are no longer a major factor in this state's economy. Ellsworth Air Force Base, an important Strategic Air Command bomber and missile complex, is located nine miles east of Rapid City.

There are nine Indian reservations in the state, most of them in western South Dakota, all of which was once the Great Sioux Reservation. The Indian population represents about 7.3 percent of the state's total number of residents. On June 30, 1980, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the United States had illegally seized the 7.3 million-acre Black Hills from the Sioux Nation. It awarded the Indians \$17.5 million, the estimated value of the region at the time of the seizure, plus \$105 million in interest at five percent as compensation for the confiscated lands.

Despite abject poverty on the reservations, caused principally by lack of job opportunities there, the Sioux have so far refused to accept the huge money award. They insist, as most of their ancestors did in past years, that their beloved "Paha Sapa," as the Black Hills are known to them, are not for sale. They want the land returned!

It is in this setting that the Society of Range Management will be meeting in Rapid City next February.

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Author is retired newspaperman, past president and past director of South Dakota State Historical Society; a member of Western Writers of America; founder Black Hills Corral of the Westerners; author-editor, *Gold, Gals, Guns, Guts*; *Last Grass Frontier*; *The South Dakota Stockgrowers Heritage*; *Tragedy Ends an Empire, Dakota Panorama*; *Fort Meade and the Black Hills*; and playwright of *The Court Martial of Major Marcus A. Reno*. Received the 1992 South Dakota Hall of Fame Writer of the Year award.

Editor's Note: This is an updated version of the paper "They Came for Gold and Stayed for Grass" which was published in the October 1984 issue of *Rangelands*.

