

Crazy Horse (Tâšúnke Witkó): The Warrior-Servant

The European method of recording history is very different from that of most or even all of the Indigenous peoples of what are now the nations of the United States and Canada. The culture of Western Civilization began with oral history (the earliest and arguably greatest historical account was that of the Iliad and the Odyssey), but these were then recorded as written languages were developed. Oral histories—accounts that were often spoken and repeated by people assigned this task—are delightful ways of sharing historical events. They can be spoken or sung, may include emotional interjections to give the information more meaning, and turn history from what may seem to some like the dry page into performance art. Think how different it would be, for example, if everyone wished people celebrating their birthdays by flatly reciting the “Happy Birthday” song. Consider the last time you heard an eerie tale by a campfire. Wasn’t it better recited rather than just read off the page?

But oral history also has its disadvantages. Even if people memorize it, the story can change and evolve over time. And there is very little way of knowing how much the story we have today is the same as or different than the original. Having history written down on paper also makes it much more accessible to others. Perhaps the greatest advantage of written history versus oral history is its fragility. While important books were sometimes lost thousands of years ago when major cataclysms (wars, natural disasters, fires, etc.) struck, scrolls and books can be spread around a city, country, or nation, which safeguards them from loss. But even for the best oral histories, there were often only a few people who could recite them. If they died unexpectedly or before sharing their wisdom with the next generation of storytellers, the history could be irretrievably lost. Each and every generation had to take great pains and make great investments of work, memory, and time in order to maintain the history. One single break in time—over hundreds or even thousands of years, and the story—the history would be lost forever.

61 Old Chief Crazy Horse.



A Leader in the Sioux Indian Wars, Black Hills, S. D.

South Dakota State Historical Society Archives

To a certain degree that is the situation we find ourselves in as to Crazy Horse, the great warrior of the Lakota people. One of his biographers, Larry McMurtry, states: "We have more verifiable facts about another young warrior, Alexander, called the Great, who lived more than two thousand years earlier than Crazy Horse and whose career is also richly encrusted with legend, than we do about the strange man of the Oglalas." *Thašúnke Witkó* preferred to distance himself from people of European origin, and his fellow Lakota people experienced many disruptions during the 19th and 20th centuries. Not knowing him well, very little was written about him. His own people, the Lakota, knew some—though he was not gregarious (socially involved) even with them—but shared what they knew only by spoken word. Many who knew him failed to or were unable to

share their experiences of Crazy Horse with others. Thus, we know very little about him.

We, for example, don't know his birthday. He may have been born in 1840, but possibly 1841. Encouraging Bear, who was a *Wichasha wakan* (medicine man) among the Oglala, reported that Crazy Horse was born the same year as a large horse-capturing raid from the Shoshone. Most accounts have his arrival in the world occurring near Bear Butte, a sacred site for the Oglala in South Dakota. His father was Crazy Horse and his mother Rattle Blanket Woman. Their family was, as stated earlier, of the Oglala Band of the Lakota.

Beyond that, easily the most well-known characteristic of *Thašúnke Witkó* was that he was an amazing warrior. The Oglala people, like most of the Plains Indian peoples, had a strong warrior culture. This doesn't mean they were methodical killers who enjoyed the destruction of others in or outside of battle, but rather that they found honor in risking their lives in military action and raids against those other tribes that were their traditional enemies.

They found honor in raiding the villages of other bands to steal or secure horses, food stuffs, and even captives. They rejoiced in prevailing over others, in risking their lives in such endeavors. This didn't necessarily mean—and, in fact, rarely meant—killing others so much as “counting coup.” Counting coup was the practice of racing quickly to the physical person of an enemy and touching him with a hand, bow, or tool (stick) made specifically for that purpose. It could mean riding up a defensive wall and touching it and returning unharmed. (Most of the Plains Indians were competent and many exceptional equestrians, mastering the horse introduced earlier by European armies and colonists.) Counting coup was sometimes so intimidating to an enemy, as well as embarrassing, that it resulted in surrender.

By all accounts there was no braver Indian warrior than Crazy Horse. And the costs of such bravery were much higher against American soldiers than against their traditional tribal enemies, for these soldiers had cannons, guns that could fire many bullets in short periods of time, and thorough military training. These armies also lacked a burden that the Lakota could not avoid, their families, their wives, children, and elderly. American soldiers had only themselves to defend; the Indians must not only attack but also defend their defenseless.

Most of the Indian leaders on the Great Plains traveled to Washington, D.C., under the safe passage of the United States Army. When they did so, they relented in their military efforts as they simply worked to secure the best peace they could.

Not *Thašúnke Witkó*. He knew that the people crossing into what was known as the Dakota Territory would not be satisfied with just traveling through. He knew that his people needed great swaths of land necessary to support their traditional lifestyle. And he knew that the coming settlers would not be satisfied until they had most, if not all, of it. The Oglala people arguably had more success against the American armies than any other Native peoples. They crushed an American army during the Fetterman Fight and the Battle of the Rosebud. Their victory over Custer's regiment at the Little Bighorn was so complete and so devastating that more books have been written about it than any other American battle, bar none. (When Crazy Horse seized the high ground at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, he sealed Custer's fate.) And Crazy Horse fought at all of them. In fact, he was a champion, a person that others in the battle on his side looked to for courage, confidence, and motivation. *Thašúnke Witkó* was often the difference between victory and defeat. As he dashed heedlessly into the American lines, as he charged whole groups of soldiers alone

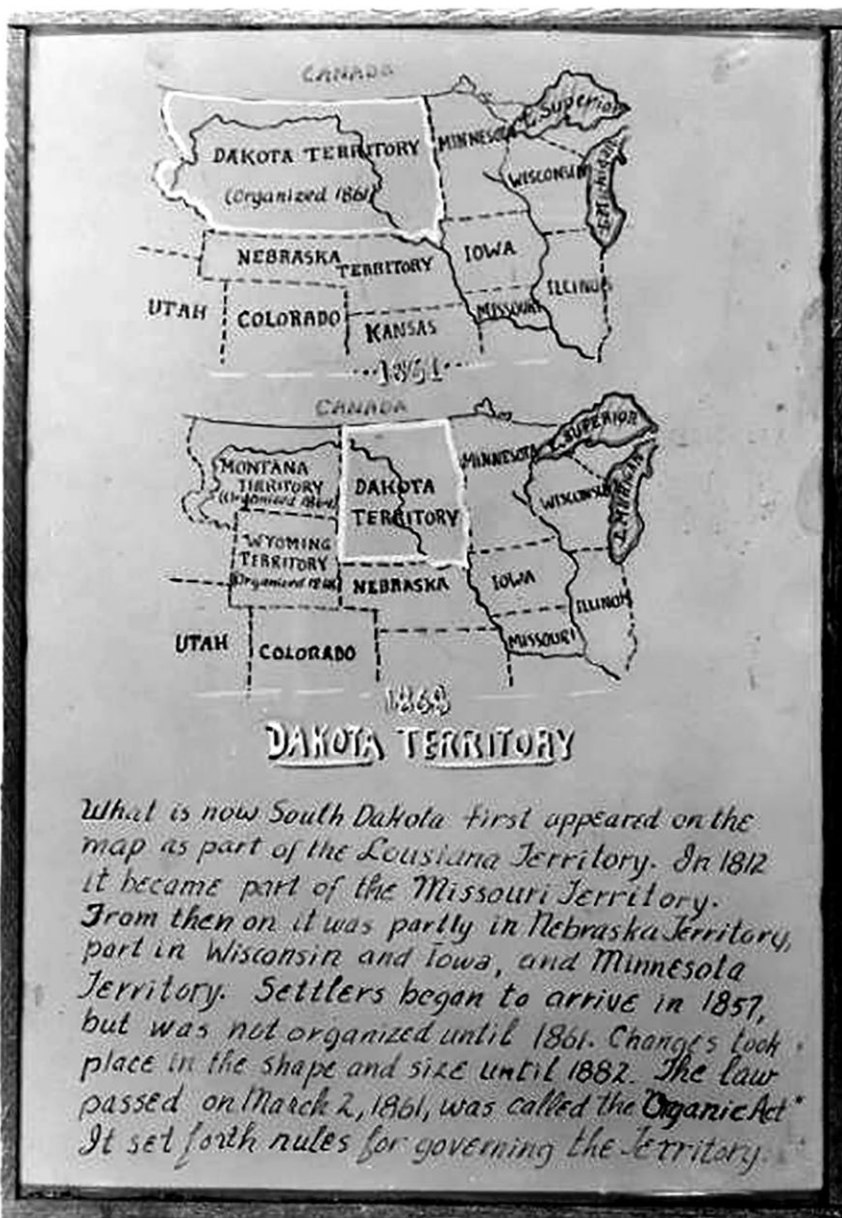
on a horse, as he showed his comrades the way to behave in battle, he became the spirit of victory for them.

And his people recognized this. Though Crazy Horse was not a person from a "great family" among the Lakota, he was named one of three "shirt wearers" among them. These were young men chosen by the chiefs who were to show their countrymen, and especially their fellow warriors, the proper behavior of a Lakota warrior.

But eventually, even this stalwart warrior of the Lakota relented and brought his people into Fort

Robinson, an American military enclosure. Why?

Because he had received a message in a dream as a young man that he was to be a man of altruism, one who took nothing for himself and constantly kept an eye on the needs of those who depended upon him. The summer of 1876 had arguably been a glorious one for Crazy Horse and the warriors he led into battle. But the winter that followed was a hard one, even by South Dakota standards. The mercury fell into subzero temperatures for days and even weeks on end. Food supplies ran short, in part because the bison were being hunted by the newcomers, in some cases for the express purpose of denying



food and skins and tools to the Native peoples. Game was scarce, clothing ragged, fuel almost non-existent, and ammunition for guns scarce. Meanwhile, the American soldiers were posted in strongly defended forts, supplied by rail with plenty of food and fuel, warm clothing, and an endless stream of ammunition and armaments.

We can only guess at Tȥašúnke Witkó's mindset at their harsh reality. But it seems likely that every bone in his body strained to find a safe haven for himself and his best warriors so they could fight another day. Or perhaps escape into Canada where his enemies could not tread. Or wage a guerilla war of attrition, making the Plains painful for new settlers and perhaps not worth the cost.

But Crazy Horse could not forget his dream. He could not forget the hundreds of old men, women, children, and infirm. He could not escape to fight another day as they perished among the cold and hunger. And so this mighty warrior, this man who longed to defend his people and their lands to his last breath, this soldier who inspired all those around him, marched to Fort Robinson with 900 people in tow and, in doing so, saved their lives. The Oglala warrior knew his obligation was to protect and serve those less capable than himself.

And that is why the world's second largest sculpture, emerging from Thunderhead Mountain in the Black Hills, is of Crazy Horse, Tȥašúnke Witkó.



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Want to learn more?

You can visit that sculpture the next time you find yourself in the Black Hills. You can't really fully appreciate the magnitude of the undertaking without seeing it in person. The visitor's center can also tell you a lot more about the life of this Oglala warrior and the immense task of bringing this memorial to his life a reality.