

A Personal Look at Curley's Life After the Battle of the Little Big Horn

By Mardell Hogan Plainfeather

About four years ago, a young girl came up to the front desk in the Visitor Center of Custer Battlefield National Monument and purchased as much merchandise related to Curley, the Crow scout, as possible. Upon inquiry about her avid interest in Curley, she said with a sigh that she practically worshipped him and had come all the way from the east just to visit this site. After discovering Curley was buried in the national cemetery, she spent the entire day sitting by his gravesite.

This was but one of many unusual requests, questions, and remarks we receive concerning battle participants. But as I watched the young girl go toward the cemetery that day, I remember thinking about Curley and his life, not so much his involvement as a scout for Custer but his marriage, his descendants, his home, his old age, and what kind of effect his historic fame had on his life. It would be an interesting project, I thought, to interview his descendants and to find out non-battle related facts about Curley. It was unfortunate that George Old Elk, Curley's grandson, was now deceased. He would have been a direct link to information on Curley since he was raised by him since infancy. But, it was fortunate that I could rely on some of his great grandchildren, especially Dan Old Elk, and Evelyn Old Elk, George's widow. They were not apathetic to their family history and would be helpful, I was sure. I wanted to look at Curley with an open mind, the stories of his "survival" would have little to do with it, but perhaps focus on his life as it was affected by those very stories.

For Crow warriors, as among all Plains tribes, anonymity among their people was not desired. Rather, it was the goal of each warrior to make his name a well known name, one that evoked memories of brave deeds and courage. When the Montana column, U.S. Army, requested volunteers from the Crow for the 1876 Campaign, they were ready and anxious to fight their old enemies, the Sioux, once again. Six of the volunteers were eventually assigned to Lt. Col.



Sporting a pompadour and bedecked in his finest habiliments, Curley cuts a fine image of the American Indian in this 1880's view by noted photographer Frank J. Haynes.

With quiet disdain, he returned to his people to walk the white man's road. He remained a warrior at heart to the end of his life. Courtesy Custer Battlefield National Monument.

George A. Custer's 7th Cavalry and if fame among their people was their objective, the scouts would get it in abundance. It would also generate some resentment among the scouts in future years. Nevertheless, the recognition that came to the six Crow scouts was not limited to their own people. Their involvement in the Battle of the Little Big Horn catapulted

them into notoriety among whites as well. Among the six scouts, the one sought out by most interviewers was Curley, the youngest in the group and the one who would become the most notorious because of his alleged survival of the Last Stand fight and the outrageous stories attributed to him.

Curley was born on the Little

Rosebud around 1853-1856.¹ Although of no relevance, a quick research into the exact locality of his birthplace led nowhere. The Little Rosebud may refer to an area in Stillwater County near present-day Red Lodge, Montana, close to the area of the first reservation agency. It may connote the Rosebud Mountains or creek located near present-day Lame Deer and Forsyth, Montana. Since his birthdate is circa early 1850's, it is highly probable it is the latter because Curley was a River Crow² and the River Crow frequented the hunting grounds closer to the Musselshell, Missouri, and Yellowstone rivers all still within Crow territorial boundaries in the 1850's. Curley belonged to the Whistling Waters clan of the tribe. All Crow bands roamed throughout their territory and traveled beyond to visit their occasional allies, the Nez Perce Indians, to the northwest. During one of their visits, young Curley was picked out by Chief Joseph's family as a "replacement" for a relative who had died. His handsome looks closely resembled that person and according to custom, Curley was adopted and accepted as a member of Joseph's family. He spent time among the Nez Perce tribe with Joseph and spoke the Nez Perce tongue as fluently as he did the Crow.³



Photographer D.F. Barry captured Curley's youthful image in these four settings. Photographs are c.1883. Courtesy Custer Battlefield National Monument.



This is probably the earliest view of Curley, taken between 1881-1883 before the iron fence was erected around the monument. Courtesy Custer Battlefield National Monument.

But in the spring of 1876, Curley was in the village of Chief Sits-In-The-Middle-Of-The-Land (AKA Blackfoot) near present-day Absarokee, Montana, the first Crow agency. This village was a Mountain Crow village but by this time, the geological division of the River Crow and the Mountain Crow bands had been discontinued because of the drastic reduction of Crow lands, a factor which was probably influential on the mindset of Sits-In-The-Middle-Of-The-Land.⁴ Known for his friendliness to the Army, the leader of the Crow was visibly "cool" to Colonel Gibbon's request for scouts to help fight the Sioux. Sits-In-The-Middle-Of-The-Land had voiced his displeasure over the treaty negotiations of 1868 and 1873. However, since it was

not up to a leader whether or not the young men could join up, 25 of them volunteered, Curley among them. According to interviews with Curley's grandsons, Curley enlisted with White Swan, a man whom he referred to as "Biike," meaning "my elder brother." He was young and somewhat wreckless as young men will be, and so was under the stern tutelage of the elder Crow warrior. The relationship between the two men was a close bond but it could not be determined whether or not the "brotherhood" was by blood or by clan. In Crow culture one is no stronger a bind than the other. During the battle White Swan would remain with Reno and was, in fact, the only Crow to be wounded in the fight. Curley accompanied Mitch



Boyer, the half-breed Sioux guide who had lived with and married into the Crow tribe. This very ordinary decision to go with Boyer would become a major turning point in his

young life. From the time the disastrous news of the battle reached the steamer, *Far West*, until the day he died, Curley would be the most sought after, misquoted, maligned, and misunderstood Indian of his time and perhaps even in history because of it.

The main reason for many of Curley's future problems can be attributed to misinterpretation and translation problems. The interpretation of the English language into any Indian language is probably one of the most difficult tasks to try and undertake. Indian words are descriptive and flowery, while the English language could be termed "mathematical." Most English words have several meanings and one word's connotations may be as many as two to ten. An English word used to translate one Indian phrase may turn the complete meaning around, depending on the person trying to interpret the words. One wrong accent or syllable and the entire meaning could be terribly misconstrued. And that's not to mention the different ways even an

Indian interpreter expressed himself! Even in this day and age when American Indians are fluent in both English and their native tongues, it is still nearly impossible to secure the proper English translation to describe an Indian expression. It is easy to imagine how difficult it was for guides or interpreters who spoke one or the other language well and were only slightly knowledgeable about the other.

Curley's interviews with writers and interviewers about the battlefield were countless. He was interviewed by such notable researchers as Colonel W. A. Graham and Walter M. Camp, and his accounts interpreted by different people each time. At one point, Curley's story was interpreted by Russell White Bear whose interpretation was typed and edited by Angela Buell, Colonel Graham's assistant, and further elaborated upon by Colonel Graham himself!⁵ Curley told Camp, however, that "I have always told the same story but there have been different interpreters,"⁶ and Walter Camp himself says that during

Lt. Charles Roe's interview of Curley, his interpreter, Thomas LaForge, probably made up a good deal of it.⁷

His stories, as they were interpreted, were an open invitation for any crackpot newspaper writer to embellish upon outrageously, make fun of, or to critically misjudge and misquote. Even discriminate writers would question the validity of his statements. They seldom took into consideration the pervasive language barrier. Curley, however, was only human. He enjoyed the attention and the few dollars he occasionally made from interviews. Not only the constant requests of the battle story beleaguered Curley, he was escorted to the east coast several times to pose for photographs and portraits. He participated in rodeo parades and even saw his image on numerous post cards and check blanks of the Crow State Bank, Crow Agency, Montana, which closed its doors in the 1930's.⁸ As he grew older, however, he became annoyed with the repetitiousness of the story and misinterpretations of what happened to him on

the day of the battle.

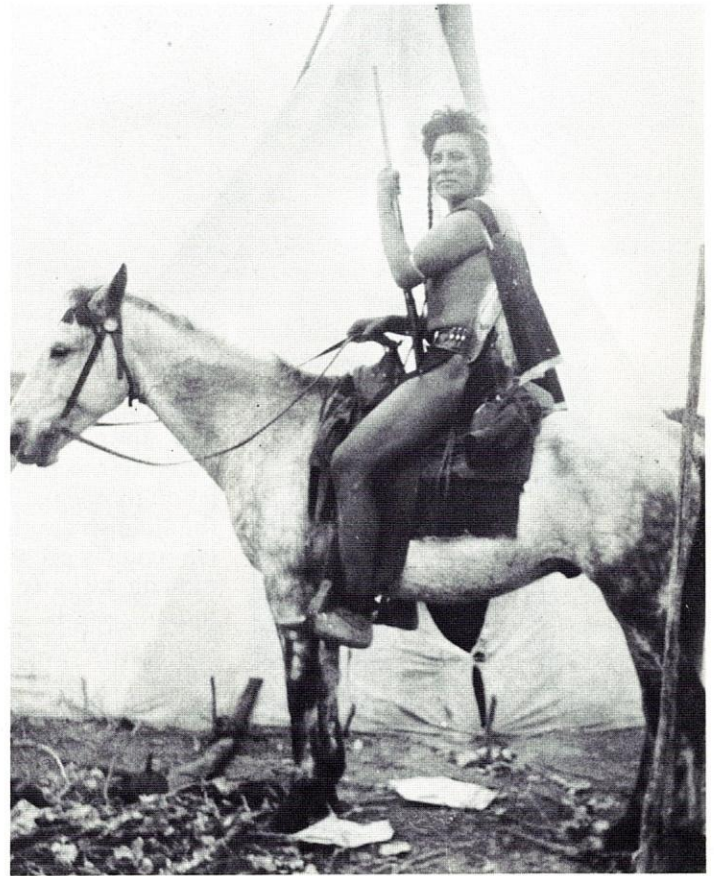
The origins of at least one story attributed to Curley could probably be traced to a Mr. James Coleman. Curley himself did say he put a blanket on and rode away but it was Mr. Coleman who **added** that Curley had crawled for two miles wrapped in a Sioux blanket. Mr. Coleman was a whiskey peddler whose interpreter was George Morgan, a white man married to a Crow.⁹ The words of a whiskey peddler, whose very trade should speak for itself, had thus been used by writers as if they emanated from Curley's own mouth. Even the fact Curley had a blanket that day has been ridiculed. Some writers criticize it would border on the absurd for anyone to possess a blanket considering the thermometer registered near 100 degrees at the Little Big Horn. It was **not** unusual for Curley, or a Sioux, to have a blanket. In fact, Plains Indian people relied upon blankets for a variety of reasons and always had one on hand, no matter what the temperature was, especially in traveling. Blankets were used for

saddle padding, for sudden rainstorms, for chilly summer nights, and for signaling the village as they returned home. During the Battle of the Little Big Horn, the Sioux waved blankets to frighten the horses of Custer's men.

On one of Curley's trips east he visited a zoo where he sadly observed a caged bear. Curley shared a few words with the bruin which he told his wife, Takes-A-Shield, about. The story and the prayer which he said with the bear are still remembered by his descendants today. "You and I are the same, my brother," said Curley to the bear, "you are one of the ones-without-fires (animals) and I am a human but we both have been imprisoned (in reference to the reservation life) and are shown off as curiosities. You must pray for me and I will pray for you." The bear reacted strangely and came close to the people around his cage, and observers thought the bear cried.¹⁰ The prayer itself clearly reveals how Curley now felt about all the foofaraw about his involvement in the battle.



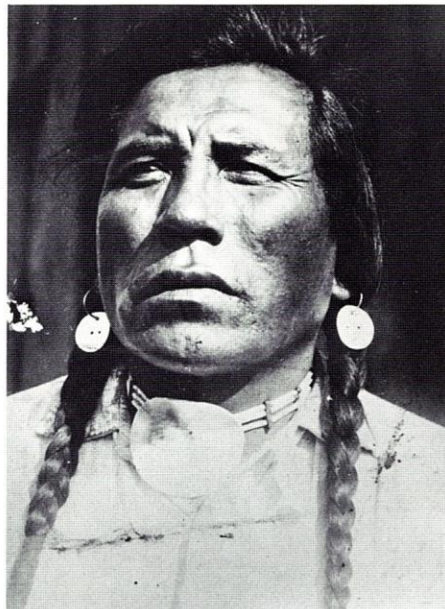
Photographer Fred Miller was a fixture on the Crow reservation at the turn of the century. Here he captures on camera Curley, wife, Takes-A-Shield, and their daughter, Dora. Photograph c.1898. Courtesy Custer Battlefield National Monument.



Even after the age of 40, Curley projects a youthful warrior figure. Photo by Fred Miller. Courtesy Custer Battlefield National Monument.

Curley eventually became annoyed at traveling so much because of his ignorance of the English language. Life had dealt him a crippling blow, too, when his only child, a daughter, Dora, died in young adulthood. Curley would never completely overcome the tragedy. But, there was consolation in his grandson, George Old Elk, named after the General himself,¹¹ whom Curley and Takes-A-Shield would raise. His daughter had married Dominic Old Elk and Dominic had remarried leaving his son with Curley. By the time George was old enough to ride with him over the battlefield, Curley was getting older and was a "grumpy old man," according to his great-grandsons. Irritated at the wild interpretations of his accounts and the growing resentment from the fellow scouts who served with the 7th Cavalry, Curley finally exploded to one of the interviewers, "why don't you believe my words and why do you keep trying to make me say what you want me to say?"¹² By now, Curley was cognizant that writers were not looking for facts but for a good story to sell magazines or newspapers and as one of his interviewers aptly put it, "romantic writers seized upon Curley as a subject suited to their fanciful literary purposes."¹³ And the scouts themselves often accused one another of telling lies and never formed a tight camaraderie derived from a mutual war experience. Hard feelings fractured the relationship between Whiteman-Runs-Him, Hairy Moccasin, Goes Ahead, and Curley. They would carry the animosities to their graves. Most tribal members became embroiled in the controversy. If the battle had not been so controversial and famous, the scouts would have returned home and enjoyed perpetual fame as warriors among their people for they had returned from a great battle outnumbered by the Sioux alive, but it was not so for Curley, nor for Whiteman-Runs-Him, nor Hairy Moccasin, Goes Ahead, White Swan, and Half-Yellowface. The interviews and the stories circulated damaged their reputations beyond repair.

Dr. Thomas B. Marquis who spent much time interviewing the Northern Cheyenne and the Crow Indians in the 1920's and 30's, was one of the few who realized the impact writers such as himself had on the lives of the scouts. Marquis stated that "No-



Curley about 1900. Courtesy Custer Battlefield National Monument.



The commercialization of Curley erupted in the early 1900's. His picture was placed on a postcard and sold to tourists. Courtesy Custer Battlefield National Monument.

body with Custer escaped alive after the fighting began. The false stories of Curley having done so were fabrications by writers, not genuine claims by Curley himself. Through his 47 years of subsequent life he often denied them--or, perhaps he



Curley's pensive mood is recorded in this 1907 photograph by Richard Throssel. Courtesy of Custer Battlefield National Monument.

quit denying them when people refused to accept his denials.¹⁴ It's true that some of his stories contained some inconsistencies and there were a few variations, but, once again, there were too many interpreters and the problems associated with languages too complex.

Curley died in his early 70's on May 22, 1923. He lived long enough to witness further reduction in the size of Crow country. The Crow tribe's struggles with a dominant society overpowering theirs affected all their lives in many different ways, the most drastic probably being the Dawes Act which was designed to break up traditional tribal culture and communal use of Crow lands. The Act was passed in 1887. Each head of household was allotted 160 acres of land and farming was emphasized. An allotment of land in the Little Big Horn valley, below the Last Stand Hill was assigned, ironically, to one of Curley's parents, Strikes-Beside-the-Water.¹⁵ The allotment was eventually passed down to Curley who built a home on the Little Big Horn where he and Takes-A-Shield raised their grandson. The cabin was dismantled in recent years and rebuilt at Old Town in Cody, Wyoming. Their grandson George married Evelyn Birdinground. From their union would come nine sons and two daughters.

Curley would have enjoyed knowing his grandson and his children continued living in the area and that his great-grandchildren and great-

great-grandchildren still live near where he lived. Several of Curley's descendants worked in one position or another at Custer Battlefield throughout the years. George Curley Old Elk, himself a veteran of World War II, died on November 27, 1985, and is buried with Curley.

Curley may have been the object of the young eastern lady's fantasy derived from old western movies. At one time or another, we have all been guilty of this about some long-gone

historic figure. What we tend to forget is that these people were only human with weaknesses and perhaps even dreams of their own which may or may not have materialized. Historic events linked with their names had great impact on their lives for good or for bad. Curley's survival stories became outrageously misinterpreted and he was haunted by them. He said that he left Custer's command near where Calhoun Ridge is today and that he left

the battle because Mitch Boyer told him to. He did no great thing, he insisted, he was not the only survivor of Custer's Last Stand. He lived a long life, proud that he had served with the United States Army, raised a fine grandson and gave him a good home, but he will never be remembered for anything else but surviving the Last Stand fight, something which he denied with his last breath. ■



Two survivors of the Little Big Horn, Curley and Sgt. Daniel Kanipe, stand in front of the Custer Memorial in 1908. Courtesy of Custer Battlefield National Monument.



Curley and his horse, 1913, by historian E. A. Brininstool. Custer Battlefield National Monument.



Noted Western historian Earl A. Brininstool and Curley strike a contrasting appearance in front of Curley's cabin in 1913. Courtesy of Custer Battlefield National Monument.



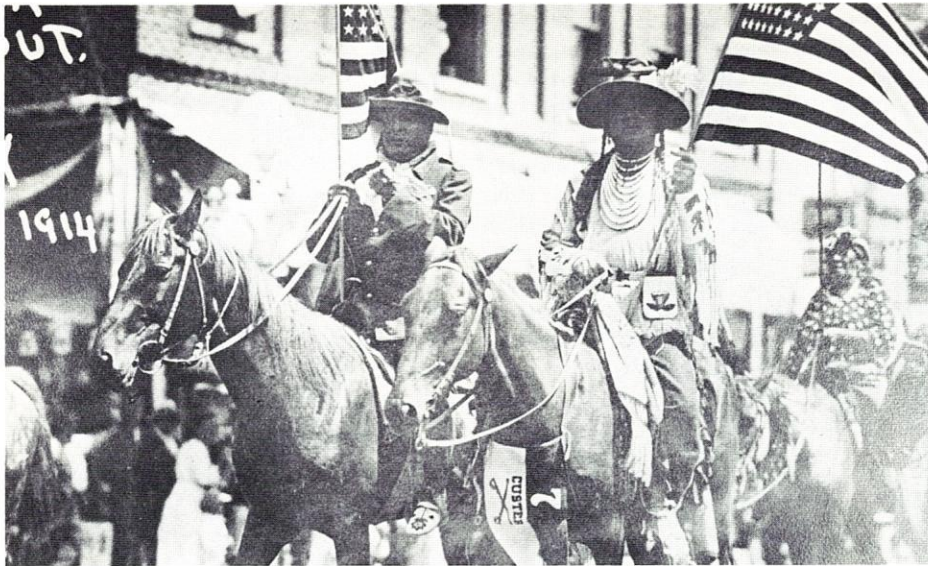
Curley poses in front of his cabin, formerly the Crow Agency jail. Taken from a postcard now in the possession of the Old Elk family.



Three amigos they were not. Rather, Curley, White-Man-Runs-Him, and Hairy Moccasin were the cruel perpetrators and victims of scathing verbal attacks upon each other. Photograph taken in 1921 on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the battle. Courtesy Custer Battlefield National Monument.



Crow scouts for Custer stand in silence around the wooden marker for Custer. Taken in 1913, death would claim three of them by 1923. White-Man-Runs-Him, standing left would be the last of the Crow scouts dying in 1929. Of the four only Hairy Moccasin, second from left, would not be interred in Custer Battlefield National Cemetery. Curley is second from right, Goes Ahead, far right. Courtesy Custer Battlefield National Monument.



Little Big Horn made Curley an instant celebrity. He was continually invited to participate in promotional ventures. Here he rides in the Miles City parade. An ardent admirer of George Custer, his grandson was named after the colorful lieutenant colonel. Even Curley's horse is adorned with a Seventh Cavalry pennant. Photograph courtesy of Dan Old Elk.



Resplendent in a long trailing warbonnet, Curley sits stiff-like for the camera. The picture was taken in 1921 during the 45th anniversary of the battle. Courtesy Custer Battlefield National Monument.



The last known photograph of Curley, it was taken shortly before his death May 22, 1923. Courtesy Custer Battlefield National Monument.

Footnotes

1. Hammer, Kenneth, ed., *Custer in '76, Walter Camp's Notes on the Custer Fight*, p. 155.

2. Personal communication with Dan Old Elk, January 3, 1988.

3. Personal communication with Clayton Old Elk, January 3, 1988.

4. Bernardis, Tim, *Social Studies Teacher's Guide, Crow History*, p. 50-52.

5. Graham, W.A., Col., *The Custer Myth*, p. 18.

6. *Custer in '76*, p. 170.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

8. Personal communication with Dan Old Elk, December 28, 1987. (A check blank is in Dan's possession which, unfortunately, could not be located. Mr. Harold Stanton, Hardin, MT, confirms this. Stanton could only provide us with a deposit slip from the old bank.)

9. *The Custer Myth*, p. 7-9.

10. Personal communication with Mrs. George (Evelyn) Old Elk, December 28, 1987.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Marquis, Thomas B., *Memoirs of a White Crow Indian*, p. 250.

14. Marquis, Thomas B., *Custer On The Little Bighorn*, p. 121.

15. United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs Crow Reservation platbook of allotments, Titles & Records, Crow Agency, MT. (Evelyn Old Elk could not remember if Strikes-Beside-the-Water was Curley's father or mother.)