THE BOZEMAN TRAIL -
ROAD TO THE LITTLE BIGHORN

by Michael J. Koury, President, Order of the Indian Wars

From a presentation given at the Little Bighorn Symposium in Hardin, Montana, in 2002

On a lonely, wind-swept ridge, marked by a single obelisk, some 40 men died around their lieutenant colonel. Other men died in small groups nearby. Destroyed by a coalition of Cheyenne and Sioux, this was the worst disaster suffered by the U.S. Army at the hands of the Plains Indians to date. Recriminations followed. His commanding officer claimed the headstrong glory-seeker violated specific orders and his reckless action brought on this disaster. The following court of inquiry cleared the defendant, but damned with faint praise. Generals Sherman and Grant were involved. Within a year, a newly built fort was named for the dead lieutenant colonel--Brevet Lt. Colonel William Judd Fetterman. He died there, near Fort Phil Kearny, on Massacre Hill, on the Bozeman Trail.

The Fetterman "Massacre" has come to dominate the story of the Bozeman Trail, as Custer's Last Stand has the Sioux War of 1876. Both were single, major and almost unprecedented actions. Neither was exemplary of the wars they have come to represent. Both sites have the strange power to infuse the visitor with an overpowering presence. The sites exhibit many similarities. Both are isolated, barren and cover a great deal of space. It is hard to stand by either monument without a great empathy for the actors in the two events.

The Cheyenne have a saying: "At the Little Big Horn, the Cheyenne did the fighting, the Sioux got the credit, and the Crows got the land." The truth is, that portions of Montana already was Crow land. In fact, virtually the entire Bozeman Trail ran through Crow lands, with the single exception of a small section from Livingston to Bozeman, Montana. The aggressive and much more numerous Sioux, aided by their Cheyenne allies, had driven the Crows from the heart of their own reservation. The Crows would not forget. It was not for love of their white brothers that the Crows sided with the whites--it was for survival. In the final analysis, the Crows realized their very existence depended upon the good will of the whites.

Much like the misnomer "The Sioux War of 1876"--a war with the Cheyenne as full participants, though unacknowledged--the Bozeman Trail is misnamed. John Bozeman pioneered less than a third of the route that would gain him such fame, but little fortune. Barely 500 miles long and lasting a scant five years, 1864-1868, this was the last emigrant trail, as well as the road to the final great Indian War--the so-called Sioux War of 1876. The Bozeman Trail was, indeed, the road to Little Big Horn.

Beginning in 1863, with the United States embroiled in a bitter, divisive and costly civil war, the trail came out of a desire for a shorter route to the newly discovered oil fields of Montana. John Bozeman, with partner (now all but forgotten) John Jacobs, thought there was money to be made by showing gold seekers a faster path to the promised land. That this faster path led through the final hunting grounds of the largest, most war-like of all Indian tribes, was not dwelt upon. It would not be long

before the immigrants would make that discovery. In fact, the first wagon train Bozeman and Jacobs led out--from Deer Creek Station (now the town of Glenrock, Wyoming)--decided the turn back after 140 miles. This decision was prompted by the appearance of a large body of Cheyenne and Sioux warriors demanding that the train return the way they had come. No harm would come to them should they do so, claimed the warriors. Only death awaited those who proceeded. Finding no help from the small military contingent at Deer Creek Station, the group decided to return to the tried and proven long route. Bozeman and nine others went on horseback to Bozeman. It would be 1864 before a wagon train would make the journey.

In 1864, John Bozeman operated out of Richard's Bridge (in the present town of Evansville, Wyoming) and convinced a wagon train to try the new route. Actually, Bozeman's wagon train was the second train to pull out, following a train led by Alan Hurlbut. Hurlbut stopped to prospect along the way. Bozeman passed by and thus became the first person to bring a wagon train into the gold fields over the route that would bear his name. But for a bit of prospecting, it could have been the "Hurlbut Trail." Bozeman arrived in Virginia City, Montana, in August 1864. Four trains comprised of nearly 1,500 people and 450 wagons would traverse the Bozeman Trail that year. Only one of the trains met Indian resistance, but the Sioux and Cheyenne were given notice, and it was something they would not ignore.

In 1865, the demeanor of the Bozeman Trail changed from an emigrant trail to the gold fields to that of a a military road. The ostensible reason for this military activity was to protect travelers on this new route.

The entire West was in the throws of conflict with various Indian tribes in 1864. Conditions in the valley of the Platte were acute. Governor Evans of Colorado Territory claimed Denver to be in a state of siege, and in danger of facing famine brought on by Indian hostility. Ben Holiday, owner of the Overland Stage Company, sent a telegram to the secretary of war stating that his coaches could move only with strong military escort. [1] His losses were mounting as hostiles destroyed state stops and plundered his stock. Holiday's demand for a seasoned Indian fighter resulted in the appointment of General Patrick E. Connor charged with restoring order to the line. Conner had already proven to be an energetic officer, with some notable successes. Connor requested 20,000 troops and claimed he would put an end, once and for all, to Indian hostility. He was given command of 2,000 troops While his original request might have been excessive, events proved that 2,000 would not be enough.

Connor felt the answer to the problem was to attack the Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapahoe at their base, deep in the Powder River country. Such action would also protect this new immigrant trail--the Bozeman Trail. Actually, the plan of operation had been suggested by the experienced commander of the 11th Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, Colonel William O. Collins. The secretary of the army had asked opinions of army officers as to how best to protect the advancing Union Pacific Railroad. Collins answered, "the permanent cure for the hostilities of the Northern Indians is to go into the heart of their

buffalo country and hold forts until the trouble is over. A hasty expedition, however successful, is only a temporary lesson, whereas the presence of troops in force in the country where the Indians are compelled to live and subsist would soon oblige them to sue for peace." [2].

Conner launched a three-pronged attack into the very heart of the Indians' stronghold. Comprising over 2000 men, well armed with breech loading carbines, supported by over 340 wagons with several pieces of artillery, Connor moved out with confidence. Of the three columns, Connor's column was undoubtedly the best. His guides were Jim Bridger and Mitch Boyer. He had Frank North and 95 Pawnee scouts plus more than 80 Omaha and Winnebago scouts. [3]

The three columns set out independently, but only the column under direct command of General Connor had any measure of success. He established a fort (which he named Fort Connor) at a strategic crossing of the Powder River, not far from present day Kaycee, Wyoming. From this base, by a forced march, his command surprised a village of Arapahoe near the present town of Ranchester, Wyoming, and engaged in a fierce fight. Connor drove the Indians from their village, captured their horses and destroyed all their possessions. Unable to continue pursuit because of the condition of his horses, Connor began his return to Fort Connor. Though harassed by warriors on the retreat, Connor had delivered a telling blow, deep in the previously safe haven of the hostiles.

The other two columns had fought several defensive actions, lost nearly all of their livestock, including horses, and nearly starved. The condition of their mounts rendered offensive actions impossible. The warriors harassed and threatened continuously. Only the judicious use of artillery kept them safe.

Consolidating his forces at Fort Connor, Connor was prepared to energetically press the campaign. As so often happened to the army, politics changed plans. Connor was ordered back to Utah. The grateful citizens of Denver threw him a party, but this under-rated officer would not be a player again. Perhaps if Conner had been given command of the next act of this play, the result might have been different. General Grant summed up the abrupt change with this succinct statement:

"[T]he authorities in Washington were determined to stop all campaigns against the Indians. They had been made to believe by the Interior Department that all they had to do was withdraw the troops and the Indians would come in and make peace...". [4]

There were clear lessons to be learned from the Connor Powder River Expedition. An energetic, hard working leader could engage and defeat the Indians in their country. Two thousand men clearly were not enough to do the job. The effectiveness of both breech loading weapons and artillery had been demonstrated. The value of excellent guides like Jim Bridger and Mitch Boyer were critical to the mission. Once again, Indian auxiliaries proved invaluable. Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned was the vital role played by logistics. General Connor's men failed to press the Arapahoe after taking the village because of the condition of the army's mounts. Connor's other two columns had

been brought to the brink of starvation, and had lost virtually all of its livestock due to inadequate supplies of both food and forage. These two columns spent so much energy just trying to keep themselves and their stock alive that they had little energy left to fight Indians. Adequate provisions for both men and animals were a basic requirement before you could chase Indians. Or at least before you could catch them! Perhaps the most telling lesson was that the Powder River Expedition was costing a million dollars a month!

Although the government had decided on peace, it had also decided that the Bozeman Trail was necessary for the settlements in Montana. To ensure this end, forts were to be built along the Bozeman Trail. This decision was made before a single Indian had agreed to the road. In fact, the Sioux were adamantly opposed to the Bozeman Trail and left the subsequent 1866 peace conference at Fort Laramie with openly defiant attitudes. [5]

Ignoring reality, the Interior Department acted as though all parties were in perfect agreement and told the army to proceed with plans to occupy the Bozeman Trail. This enterprise, whether by delusion of by design, was destined for failure from the very beginning.

In 1865, just over the most costly war in both lives and money in its history, the United States was in no mood to begin another major conflict. Congress had decided that issue. Events already in place assured a secondary role to this relatively minor trail of importance to so few. With the Civil War raging, Washington had been able to do little but give lip service to the Monroe Doctrine when Napoleon III placed the Hapsburg Prince Maximilian on the throne of Mexico. At the war's end, Sheridan and his subordinate, George Custer, were sent with a Union army to sit on the Texas border. This action sent a strong message to France. The presence of this substantial federal force gave Louis Napoleon cause for re-evaluating France's position in Mexico. A major portion of the rapidly diminishing Union army was engaged in peacekeeping operations in the South. Reconstruction would require a substantial army presence to enforce the policies dictated by the radical Republicans over the prostrated South.

The final nail in the coffin of the Bozeman Trail was the transcontinental railroad. From its very beginning, this would be the highest priority of both the nation and its army. *Harper's Weekly* proclaimed, "No road of its length and magnitude was ever before contemplated, much less attempted…The work is now one of such national importance that the people insist upon its vigorous prosecution as positively as they insisted on the prosecution of the late war." [6]

General Grenville Dodge, now chief engineer of the Union Pacific, put the choice in even simpler terms, "We've got to clean the dam Indians out, or give up building Union Pacific Railroad. The government may take its choice.' [7] General William T. Sherman, now commander of the Military Department of the Missouri, remarked to Dodge that after the railroad had gotten across Nebraska and into Wyoming, Indians such as the Sioux and Cheyenne "must die or submit to our dictation."[8] Sherman well understood the critical importance of the railroad to the military. He wrote to Grant, army commander-in-chief, that the very size of Indian country, as vast as the entire settled United States, posed enormous problems of logistics. The completion of the railroad would solve many of them. Supplies, in sufficient quantities to mount offensive actions, could be easily moved. In an

especially telling point, he went on to proclaim that military posts would be unnecessary given the mobility provided by the railroad. In fact, Sherman wrote to Dodge "I regard this road of yours the solution of 'our Indian affairs…'"[9] It was that last point that suggests a third choice – neither give up the railroad, nor defeat the powerful Sioux/Cheyenne coalition: divert their attention. Sherman stated as much on January 5, 1867. In a letter to Grenville Dodge he wrote, "[W]e shall preserve and push that road {the Bozeman Trail] [MJK} to Virginia City and it will divert the attention of the hostile Sioux from your road."[10] And what better way to accomplish this end, then building forts in the heart of their last hunting grounds.

To carry out this task, the army sent Colonel Henry Carrington and the 18th U.S. Infantry Regiment, a total force of some 700 men. By any standards, this was an unusual choice to pacify the strongest remaining Indian force in the country. Carrington was a desk soldier with virtually no combat experience. One regiment of infantry clearly would hardly be enough to defend itself in this hostile environment, much less keep open a 500 mile road, faced with desperate and determined resistance from a foe that had already demonstrated its warlike prowess against the much larger force of cavalry led by an experienced Indian fighter, General Patrick Connor. Armed with muzzle-loading rifles, and a large percentage of recruits, this seemed to be a deliberate attempt at failure. Even the orders given Carrington foretold failure. He was to establish forts, protect travel on the trail, punish Indian transgressions, but not to bring on a full-scale Indian war! With 700 infantrymen armed with muzzle-loaders!

Acting Inspector General William B. Hazen, in his report to headquarters, Department of the Platte, noted "[I]n the entire Mountain District [the district commanded by Carrington] there is not one officer of the Old Army nor a graduate of West Point, nor one of any experience with Indians."[11] Clearly, Sherman was taking little chance that Carrington would exceed his orders.

There exists a strong possibility, given the choice of commander, troops and weapons, that the Bozeman Trail defense was little more than a diversion, relieving pressure on the building of the transcontinental railway. Direct defense of the railroad would require more resources than Sherman, or even Grant could supply. The subjugation of the hostiles, who could field as many as 3,000 to 4,000 warriors was clearly beyond possibility, even discounting the fact that Congress had mandated a peace policy. Sherman and Grant chose the third--divert their attention.

Following the script given him, Colonel Carrington proceeded down the Bozeman Trail and to a sequence of events that would involve him in a defense of his actions for the rest of his life. Marching to Fort Connor, now renamed Fort Reno, Carrington faced the first of many departures from plan. He had intended to abandon Fort Reno, but found there more supplies than he had wagons to remove. He decided instead to rebuild Fort Reno and use it as a supply base, his anchor on the south end of the trail. Arriving at Fort Reno on June 28, 1866, Carrington got his first taste of life on the Bozeman Trail. Indians ran off all the sutler's horses and mules and the detachment sent out to recover them returned

with only a lame pony, loaded with trade goods given to those "peaceful " Indians signing the treaty at Fort Laramie. This action would set the stage for Carrington's entire tenure as commander in the field. The horses, stock, weapons, foodstuff and ammunitions of both the emigrants and the soldiers would prove irresistible to the warriors. Even though at this point they were armed primarily with bow and arrow, the mobility and experience of the warriors proved more than a match for infantry armed with muzzle-loaders and mounted on rejects. From the make-shift post of Fort Reno, Carrington proceeded, guided by the fabled Jim Bridger and Mitch Boyer, to establish a second fort on the forks of Big Piney Creek, mid-way between modern Buffalo and Sheridan, Wyoming. Fort Phil Kearny, under Carrington's care and nurture, this would become one of the finest posts built in the West. The fort, established in July 1866, was 600 x 800 feet, complete with stockade eight feet high, would be proof against any force the Indians might send against it. With construction well under- way for this headquarters post, Carrington dispatched Captain N.C. Kinney with two companies to establish the third post on the Bozeman Trail, Fort C. F. Smith. Ft. Smith would become the most isolated post of the United States Army. Built on the banks of the Big Horn River, near the crossing point of the Bozeman Trail, Fort Smith would face more danger from starvation than from hostiles. Because Smith was much closer to the area of the Crows, they became frequent visitors and often acted as couriers between Forts Smith and Kearny. Those were the three forts on the Bozeman Trail in 1866. If the intention was to distract and annoy the Sioux and Cheyenne, then success was overwhelming. No longer did the Indians have to go clear to the railroad at Cheyenne to replenish horses, mules, weapons, and not incidentally, an occasional scalp. The army put all of this in the Indian's backyard. The warriors quickly took advantage of all this prosperity. Carrington's losses were light, mostly measured in horses, mules and oxen, and raids on the railroad had diminished considerably.

The Sioux and Cheyenne were so distracted by this clear threat to their hunting grounds that they had little time to harass a railroad many miles away. And while the Indians enjoyed some success--they had killed or captured some 306 oxen and cattle, 304 mules and 161 horses, while effectively closing the road to civilian traffic, General Sherman also enjoyed a measure of success(12). The railroad was proceeding smoothly with little interference from the Indians, and he had not brought on a full scale Indian war. The railroad would render the Bozeman Trail unnecessary. It would seem the plan was working. A minimal number of troops, with minimal loss were accomplishing the seemingly impossible task set before the army. The one serious problem remaining was cost. The cost of supplying those forts was extremely excessive. The payoff had to be considerable.

On December 21, 1866, one of the “costs” escalated. On that day, Brevet Lt. Colonel Fetterman took 80 men over Lodge Trail Ridge in pursuit of a few warriors. His command consisted of 49 infantry, 27 cavalry, three officers and two civilians anxious to try out their Henry repeating rifles. The warriors led Fetterman over Lodge Trail Ridge and onto what would become "Massacre Hill." Here some 1,000 to 2,000 warriors destroyed Fetterman's entire command. It would appear that Fetterman's purported boast, "With 80 men I could run through the whole Sioux Nation," was a bit off.[13] He had exactly 80 men with him. This kind of loss did not fit into the careful plans previously described.

Colonel Carrington was quick to point out that Fetterman had disobeyed specific orders in crossing over Lodge Trail Ridge. Carrington had already been scheduled for a change of command. He was to move to Platte Bridge Station, assuming command of the newly reorganized 18th infantry. The timing was very unfortunate for Carrington. Though the following court of inquiry cleared him of all charges, he would spend the rest of his life defending his actions at Fort Phil Kearny.

As usual, after the disaster, more troops were sent, both infantry and cavalry. This time more experienced officers, as well as more seasoned troops were sent. As far as experience, it would seem the army went overboard. At one time there were five brevet brigadier generals (Capt. George B. Dandy, Lt. Col. Henry We. Wessels, Col. John Eugene Smith, Maj. Benjamin F. Smith and Col. Luther P. Bradley) serving in the Mountain District---with a total number of enlisted men of less than 1,000.

In addition to experienced, professional officers, the army sent the breach loading rifles Carrington had requested so long ago. Units of the 2nd Cavalry were also sent, armed with Spencer breach loading repeating weapons. The combination of experienced officers, disciplined troops and modern weapons instilled a confidence lacking in Carrington's command. In fairness, it must be stated that those officers and men coming after Carrington enjoyed the luxury of well built quarters and the security of walled forts that Carrington's efforts had accomplished.

Still, only such force as would avert another disaster was sent. At no time were there ever more than 1,000 soldiers on the Bozeman Trail.

Flushed by their success against Fetterman, the hostile coalition make two more determined attacks near the forts. The first, by from 500 to 1.000 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors on August 1, 1867, attacked the outpost of Fort C.F. Smith.[14] "The fight, known as the Hayfield Fight, pitted some 19 soldiers against the force of warriors. This time better discipline, better weapons and defense behind a prepared position, coupled with the Plains Indians well-known proclivity to resist serious casualties, resulted in the loss of but three whites.[15] The warrior's loss was not known, but in spite of overwhelming numbers, the Indians gave up the fight.

The next day, a force of some 1,500 to 3,000 warriors attacked 26 soldiers and six civilians in an enclosure of wagon boxes a few miles from Fort Phil Kearny.(16). The Wagon Box Fight as it became known, once again demonstrated what a prepared position, discipline and moderate skill with breech-loading weapons could accomplish. The whites suffered three killed and a couple wounded. Captain Powell, in charge of the soldiers, felt a conservative estimate of Indians killed would be 60. Others placed the toll much higher. No matter the final count the number was sufficient for the warriors to break off the attack and return to their villages.

The point must be made that at no time was the army's presence on the Bozeman Trail seriously threatened. The number of troops provided, even the poorly led, inexperienced and badly equipped troops with Carrington, were enough to defend fortified positions. Five times their number, well-

equipped and well led, would probably have proven insufficient to carry out the orders given Colonel Carrington. And the army did not have five times the troops. As 1867 wore on, the transcontinental railroad passed Cheyenne, headed for Promontory Point. In a seemingly puzzling move, the army would build two more forts on the Bozeman Trail--Fort Ellis and Fort Fetterman. Fort Fetterman, built just north of present day Douglas, Wyoming, was established July 19, 1867. Since by any definition the Bozeman Trail begins at Bridger's Ferry, just south of Douglas, Fort Fetterman is clearly on the Bozeman Trail. Fort Ellis, just outside of, but before the city of Bozeman, Montana, was established on August 27, 1867. Since Fort Ellis is before the trail reaches Bozeman, it, too, is clearly on the Bozeman Trail. There were five, not three, forts on the Bozeman Trail. In 1868, the United State government abandoned the Bozeman Trail and three of its forts.

It was not Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, the Sioux, Cheyenne or the Arapahoe who forced this decision--it was money. It was always about priorities and money. While a soldier was paid $13 a month, the cost at For Phil Kearny to feed one horse was $76.25 per month and the cost to feed one mule was $64.17 per month.[17] The army's three-team wagons could haul only 2,000 pounds over surfaces like the Bozeman Trail. Feeding the motive power, the animals pulling the freight to and from the fort, consumed half of the expensive feed and spoilage was high. The major supply base for Fort Reno lay 650 miles southeast. The cost of freighting goods was $1.79 per pound, per hundred miles.[18] That meant the basic cost (6.5x$1.79) was $11.64 for each 100 pounds. And that was just to Fort Reno. It was another 190 miles to Fort C. F. Smith. The latter part of this journey would be under attack much of the time, necessitating large escorts, which further diminished the amount of foodstuffs and forage. At Fort Phil Kearny, the cost of feeding one horse per day was $2.46. A mule cost $2.07 per day. The cost of hay, mainly because of the hazards involved in obtaining it, was $128 per ton. On top of this cost was the $5 per day paid to the 40 men the civilian contractors hired for protection.[19] It can be seen that the economics of the situation made the 1868 decision to abandon the forts an easy one. Clearly the Bozeman Trail had outlived its usefulness. What a seasoned, well-led, and brave foe could not accomplish, simple economics determined. The railroad, as Sherman had prophesied, made these distant, expensive, and now pointless forts expendable.

If all this is true, then why build Fort Ellis and Fort Fetterman? The answer lay in the future. Sherman, Sheridan and Grant all knew that the day of reckoning had been merely postponed. The time would come when the Sioux and the Cheyenne would have to be defeated. Though it came some nine years later, the army was this time prepared. Fort Fetterman was but 90 miles from the rail-head at Cheyenne. Fort Ellis was situated in the fertile Gallatin Valley and was easily supplied by steamboat or by railroad to the south. When the Sioux War of 1876 became reality, George Crook formed his column at Fort Fetterman, built a large supply base on the Bozeman Trail near Fort Reno and marched up the Bozeman Trail to his fight on the Rosebud. John Gibbon would gather his Montana Column at For Ellis and proceed on the Bozeman Trail to block the hostiles from escape to the north. In the end the Bozeman Trail had indeed become the road to Little Big Horn.

Endnotes

1. Mark J. Brown, *Plainsmen of the Yellowstone* (New York, NY; G.P. Putnam Sons, 1961), p. 141
2. Robert A. Murray, *The Bozeman Trail* (Fort Collins, CO; Old Army Press, 1999), p. 21
3. Brown, p. 141
4. Brown, p. 143
5. Brown, p. 183
6. *Harper's Weekly*, Nov. 16, 1867
7. Robert G. Athearn, *William Tecumseh Sherman & the Settlement of the West* (Norman, OK; University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), p. 103
8. Grenville M. Dodge Papers, Vol. 14
9. Dodge papers
10. Athearn, p. 101
11. *Montana, the Magazine of Western History*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, Jan., 1968 p. 29
12. Robert A. Murray, *Military Posts in the Powder River Country of Wyoming 1865 – 1894* (Lincoln, NE; University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 65
13. *Annals of Wyoming* Vol., 63, No. 2, Spring 1991, p. 46
14. Jerry Keenan*, Encyclopedia of American Indian Wars 1492 -1890* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1997), p.99
15. Keenan, p. 99
16. Keenan, p. 24
17. Murray, Military Posts, p. 65
18. Murry, Military Posts, p. 65
19. Murray, Military Posts, p. 66

About the Author, Michael J. Koury

Koury, long a friend to our Fort Phil Kearny/Bozeman Trail Association, discovered that we were studying the significance of the building of the transcontinental railroad to our history, and sent us a copy of the presentation he gave to the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association over 20 years ago.

Mike and his wife, Dee, are also the owners of the Old Army Press, Fort Collins, Colorado and Mike has been a member of the CBHMA since 1967. He has authored a number of books and many video tapes on the American West, and the Old Army Press has published many books and videos concerning the Little Big Horn battle and other frontier battles. As President of the Order of the Indian Wars he publishes a newsletter for members and sponsors major symposiums around the country nationally.