

# **Native American Medallion Portraits from the Battle of Little Bighorn**

## **by Bill Hyder**

The Battle of the Little Bighorn, often referred to as Custer's Last Stand, left an indelible mark on the American psyche. A series of battles with different Native American tribes and bands over several years culminated in the defeat of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the U.S. Cavalry on June 25, 1876. A coalition of Native American tribes; primarily the Lakota Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho; confronted Custer's troops before he could execute a surprise attack on the Native American encampments. Having divided his regiment into four units, his unit engaged native warriors that outnumbered his men by a factor of ten to one. Within a few hours, Custer and his men were annihilated. The impact of the defeat on the public perception of American Indians has been profound and multifaceted.

The battle significantly altered the American public's image of Native Americans. Initially, it amplified the stereotype of Native Americans as fierce and savage warriors, capable of overwhelming even the most disciplined military forces. This perspective was perpetuated by sensationalist media reports and dime novels of the time that sought to depict the battle as a heroic last stand by Custer against a barbaric foe. Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show with re-enactments of the battle toured the country and Europe over the next thirty years, popularizing the image of the savage Indian bedecked in eagle feather war bonnets. The so-called war bonnets were in fact spiritual regalia earned through acts of courage, honor, political, and spiritual leadership. They were rarely worn into battle and their popular use in American culture is an offense to Native Americans. Nevertheless, the Indian in war bonnet became an enduring image to this day.

In 1991, the focus of the Custer Battlefield National Monument changed when it was renamed the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. The change reflects a shift towards understanding the battle from the viewpoint of the Native American tribes, recognizing their struggle for survival and resistance against encroachment on their lands. Despite the promise of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie (the second such treaty) that established the Great Sioux Reservation; including ownership of the sacred Black Hills, the promise to abandon military forts, and promise to encourage a transition to farming to help assimilate the tribes into the white man's way of life; Sitting Bull and many Native Americans refused to abandon their traditional way of life that largely depended on following and hunting buffalo. War broke out again in 1876 when the government annexed land guaranteed by the treaty to open the Black Hills to white settlers and gold miners.

The Native American forces at the Battle of the Little Bighorn were primarily composed of Lakota Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors. They were led by notable leaders such as Sitting Bull, who had a spiritual vision predicting the victory, and Crazy Horse, a war chief who played a crucial role in the battle's execution. The coalition formed in resistance to the U.S. government's attempts to confine them to reservations and seize their ancestral lands, particularly after the discovery of gold in the Black Hills. The government response to the natives 1876 victory was to invade the native lands with overwhelming forces to defeat the hostiles. The lands guaranteed to the Native Americans were taken without compensation. The Oglala Sioux prevailed before the Supreme Court in 1980 ordering the government to pay more than \$100 million, a sum that has grown to over \$1 billion as the tribe rejects payment, demanding instead the return of their stolen land.

Otto F. Becker's chromolithograph based on the painting, Custer's Last Fight, by Cassilly Adams was reproduced by the Anheuser Busch brewery between 1892 and 1920 in over a million copies to display in saloons, barber shops, restaurants, and private homes. The image is acknowledged to have several historical inaccuracies and has become less popular as the full story emerged with time, although it is still being marketed and sold.



Custer's Last Stand chromolithograph by Otto F. Becker distributed by Anheuser Bush.  
 [Image from the National Museum of American History under a Creative Commons license.]

Custer himself appears on a few modern medals. Perhaps the best somewhat contemporary portrait appeared on a Whitehead and Hoag hanging badge issued for the 1907 reunion of surviving members of Custer's Civil War commands.



Whitehead & Hoag badge element for the 1907 reunion of surviving members of Custer's Civil War commands. 38.5mm, Brass



American artist Edward Sawyer sought out and convinced seven Native American survivors of the Battle of the Little Bighorn to sit for him in 1912. His medals are a record of actual participants in the battle unencumbered by the stereotypical imagery of the savage Indian of the time. It was thirty-five years following the battle and most of the participants familiar to the American public had already passed, so Sawyer's efforts were the last chance to capture sculpted images of living participants.

Sawyer began his trip to Montana to find subjects in the spring of 1912 at Crow Agency, the location of the Crow tribal government and federal government offices. Sawyer wrote that he "was very much excited about going there, as it was the scene of Custer's fight." Sawyer worked among the survivors of the defining battles that led to the subjugation of the Plains buffalo hunters within a year of their great victory. His coup was in securing Curley to sit for him. Curley enlisted in the U.S. Army as a Crow scout in the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry under General George Custer just two months before the ill-fated battle. Curley was alongside Custer as the battle began before being ordered away where he observed the battle from a nearby hillside. Three other Crow scouts had been ordered away earlier leaving Curley as the sole survivor of the regiment to personally observe the battle.

Curley was the first to report the defeat to the army supply boat Far West at the confluence of the Bighorn and Little Bighorn Rivers. His story became embellished in the press over time which he never denied, but it led to charges that he was a liar and a fraud. One biographer report that he could not read and spoke only a little English. He likely never understood that he should deny errors in the popular and sensationalized press.



Curley  
Photographed by David F. Barry, ca. 1876.  
U.S. National Archives.



Sawyer's 1912 sculpted bust of Curley.  
Galvano produced by the Medallic Art Co., 1913. Copper-plated, 70mm.

Although the Cheyenne and Crow were enemies and on opposite sides in the Little Bighorn and later battles over the next year, their reservations adjoined one another. Sawyer arranged for three Cheyenne elderly men, veterans of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, to pose for him. Esh-Sha-A-Nish-Is, also known as Ishaynishus (or Two Moons), led a large Cheyenne camp of fifty lodges. They were attacked on Powder River in the spring of 1876 by troops led by Colonel McKenzie. Breaking camp, they joined a Sioux band led by Crazy Horse. Sitting Bull's camp was close by. Joining the larger Sioux forces, they eventually re-engaged the U.S. Cavalry and were victorious in what became known as Custer's Last Stand. Two Moon's warriors were defeated in the Battle of Wolf Mountain in 1877. Following his surrender, Two Moons was appointed Chief of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, and he became an army scout. Two Moons later performed in the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Wild West Show, and James Fraser identified him as one of the three portraits used to create the obverse of the 1913 Buffalo nickel.





Esh-Sha-A-Nish-Is or Two Moons, Copper-Plated, 70mm  
[Photograph The Art Institute of Chicago]



Sawyer with Cheyenne Chief Two Moons.  
[Photograph *Southern Workman*]



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Fraser's Buffalo Nickel.  
[Photograph Heritage Auctions]

Another elderly Cheyenne agreed to sit for Sawyer. Native versus Anglo names were often confused in a 1913 listing of Sawyer's Native American portraits. Sawyer refers to Ho-Tua-Hwo-Ko-Mas as White Bull in his essay and Comparette's list uses the name Buffalo Hump as the translation of the Cheyenne name. White Bull does appear as a participant in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and some credited him with killing Custer. White Bull disputed the claim. The problem arises that the White Bull referenced was a famous warrior, nephew of Sitting Bull, and an Oglala Sioux, not Cheyenne.

Early Cheyenne census records do not include the Cheyenne name of those counted until 1890, but a White Bull was also a prominent Cheyenne medicine man who aligned with Sitting Bull in the Sun Dance ceremonies. In the 1893 census, White Bull is recorded with the name Ho-to-woko-mast. He was 60 years old meaning he would have been 80 when he sat for Sawyer, and he does appear in the 1912 census. After fighting in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, he became a scout for the U.S. Army in 1877 and fought against the Sioux. His son was one of the "suicide boys," young warriors who took an oath to die and died in the Battle of the Little Bighorn.



Cheyenne Warrior White Bull  
[Photograph: Montana State Library]



Ho-Tua-Hwo-Ko-Mas, Copper-Plated 70mm  
[Photograph Art Institute of Chicago]

In the 1891 census, Buffalo Hump is recorded with the name Ho-to-wa-wa and he 42 years old, the appropriate age to have been a participant in the battle. He should not be confused with an older Comanche War Chief, Buffalo Hump, who died in Oklahoma around 1867. White Bull as Sawyer identified him is the correct identification of the man portrayed.

The third to sit for Sawyer, Ma-Ki-Na-Ko, was identified as Big Bear and Old Bear. Old Bear does appear in the Tongue River Agency census records. His name as recorded in the census is Ma-ahti-nach-co. He is the proper age to be the Old Bear who was among the Council of 44 Cheyenne chiefs who met in 1874 and fought in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The Cheyenne White Bull's account of the battle identifies Old Bear as having fired the shot that probably killed Custer. There was some confusion among the eyewitness warriors between General Custer and his brother Thomas Custer who wore similar outfits into battle. Soldiers reportedly dragged General Custer's body away from where he fell contributing to the confusion. One warrior said so many bullets were flying that anyone of them could have killed him.



Ma-Ki-Na-Ko, Copper-Plated, 70mm  
[Photograph Art Institute of Chicago]

Sawyer finished his studies modeling Cheyenne and progressed to Oglala Sioux elders who participated in the attack on Custer's troops. Although the conflicts in the Black Hills are generally known as the Great Sioux War of 1876, Liberty and Wood argue that the Cheyenne were the primary fighting force even though greatly outnumbered by the Sioux warriors. Nevertheless, the Sioux warriors would be the capstone to Sawyer's effort to collect Native American portraits of those who participated in the 1876 battle. The Sioux had become the face of the Native side of the war, likely because of the fame of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. Sawyer was somewhat thwarted by agents hiring Indians for a Wild West show. The men who did sit for him were among the last of the older fierce warriors who led their people against the U.S. attempts to force them off their buffalo hunting grounds to make way for gold miners and other white settlers. They followed Sitting Bull to Canada and back to their traditional lands in the U.S. before being forced to accept reservation life to avoid starvation.

Hunpe-Ka or Picket Pen had traveled to Europe with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show performing under the name of Red Cow. He met and mingled with English royalty but later found himself penniless after joining a competing show under Mexican Joe. With just enough money to travel from



Paris to London, he found sympathetic Americans who funded his passage back to America. The *Canton Farmers Leader* on June 2, 1903, reported that the Oglala Sioux sub-chief Picket Pin had 22 children with three wives. That number afforded him 3,500 acres under the government allotment plan.



Sawyer's 1912 sculpted bust of Hunpe Ka.  
Galvano produced by the Medallie Art Co., 1913. Copper-plated, 70mm.

Chief Sota was the son of Old Chief Smoke, a prominent head of the Oglala who died in 1864. Old Chief Smoke was honored as a great warrior. Sota means smoke, so the image is likely a descendent of Old Chief Smoke. His son Soloman Smoke II was one of his eight sons who held the status of Chief. He was a nephew of Sitting Bull, and his brothers White Bull, American Horse, Red Cloud, and others were prominent Lakota leaders. They were aligned with Crazy Horse, although Red Cloud led his band to transition to reservation life in 1871 prior to the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The Red Cloud Agency eventually became the Pine Ridge Reservation. Chief



Solomon Smoke II fled to Canada with Sitting Bull after the Battle of the Little Bighorn with some of his brothers. Solomon was the only brother to use the Smoke name.



Sawyer's 1912 sculpted bust of Chief Sota.  
Galvano produced by the Medallion Art Co., 1913. Copper-plated, 70mm.

Long Dog or Sunka Hanska was a sub chief under Sitting Bull and fought alongside him to defend access to their hunting grounds. He reportedly carried the charm of a ghost to make him invincible and a heroic success in battle, although he was severely wounded in the Little Bighorn battle. Following Sitting Bull's surrender in 1881, Long Dog was one of the traveling companions to negotiate with the government and represent Sioux interests. He died November 6, 1915, and was noted as implicitly trusted by both civil and military authorities. He is buried at Wounded Knee.





Long Dog photographed by D.F. Barry ca. 1880s.  
[Photograph Denver Public Library Special Collections.]



Sawyer's 1912 sculpted bust of Sunka-Hanska.  
Galvano produced by the Medallion Art Co., 1913. Copper-plated, 127mm.



America idealized the Noble Savages through pulp fiction and Wild West Shows in the years prior to 1912. The romantic vision held Native Americans as revered symbols of a noble past while relegating them to the periphery of contemporary society. Sawyer captured the noble countenance and wisdom of these elders while ignoring the realities of the struggles, resilience, and resistance of their communities against colonization and displacement. His portraits capture a sanitized view of the native at a time when the nation was coming to terms with social tensions as the public was reconciling its frontier history with its modern identity. It would be another eighty years before the Custer Battlefield National Monument was renamed, acknowledging that it represented a history of more than the army soldiers who followed Custer into battle. It is a monument to the brave warriors making their stand to defend their way of life.

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