

# A BRAVE SOLDIER & HONEST GENTLEMAN

LT. JAMES E. H. FOSTER IN THE WEST, 1873–1881

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# *Contents*

List of Illustrations	<i>ix</i>
Introduction and Acknowledgements	<i>1</i>
1. Growing up in Pittsburgh	<i>7</i>
2. Commission in the Regular Army	<i>23</i>
3. First Posting—Fort McPherson, Nebraska	<i>35</i>
4. The 1875 Jenney Expedition	<i>72</i>
5. The Great Sioux War	<i>113</i>
6. Wyoming Duty	<i>153</i>
7. “The Vigor of Youth Passed By”	<i>179</i>
Bibliography	<i>189</i>
Index	<i>193</i>

## CHAPTER 4

### *The 1875 Jenney Expedition*

In the early spring of 1875 preparations were underway for a major exploration of the Black Hills in Dakota Territory. Foster returned from leave in time to play a key role in a significant event of western history. As a result, his service on the expedition enhanced his growing reputation as an efficient and capable army officer.

To whites entering the West, the Black Hills had always been a region said to be of importance to the Plains Indian, but also rumored to contain untold mineral wealth. During the years prior to the Civil War, two army explorations neared the Hills—but did not explore its interior. The first was in 1857 when a party led by topographical engineer Lt. Gouverneur K. Warren approached the Hills from the south. Near Inyan Kara Mountain, he was warned by a large band of angered Lakotas not to enter the Hills. Heeding their warnings, Warren retreated south, and then turned through the southern hills and along the eastern side north to the Belle Fourche River. He then departed for Fort Randall on the Missouri River.<sup>1</sup>

Two years later, a small expedition under the command of Capt. William F. Raynolds explored the region from Fort Pierre into the Yellowstone country. Moving westward from the Missouri River, Raynolds merely skirted the Hills on the north side. Still, the interior remained largely unknown to the army—that is until the summer of 1874. That summer a major expedition into the Black Hills was led by Lt. Col. George A. Custer, Seventh U. S. Cavalry. Custer's large expeditionary force left from Fort Abraham Lincoln on the Missouri River in present-day North Dakota, supplied for sixty days in the field. Because of the long distance traveling to and returning

from the Hills, Custer was only able to spend three weeks exploring and mapping its interior. But, he reported the discovery of gold.<sup>2</sup>

With the subsequent public clamor to allow entry into the Hills (as part of the Treaty of 1868 the Black Hills was on the Great Sioux Reservation and whites were prohibited from going there), the government examined the possibility of negotiations with the Indians about its purchase. If there was to be a cession of the Hills to the whites, Secretary of State Columbus Delano authorized the formation of a geological surveying party to provide a more thorough examination of the region to determine its mineral potential.<sup>3</sup>

On March 26, Edward P. Smith, commissioner of Indian affairs, appointed Walter P. Jenney, of the Columbia School of Mines in New York City, to survey the Hills “for the purpose of ascertaining the extent and value of the gold deposits there.” The desired end result was to establish a fair value for purchase. Professor Jenney was assisted by Henry Newton, assistant expedition geologist, and astronomer Capt. Horace P. Tuttle. The expedition engineering and topographical officer was Dr. Valentine T. McGillicuddy, late of the Lake and Northern Boundary Surveys. The geological survey party was aided by a small corps of assistants, miners, and laborers. Later the expedition was joined by official photographer Albert E. Guerin of St. Louis.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Black Hills were actually in Dakota Territory, and under the jurisdiction of the Department of Dakota, escort troops for the expedition and logistical support came from the Department of the Platte. With troops stationed much nearer the Hills and a major railroad route running through the Platte which would aid supply, department commander Brig. Gen. George Crook quickly selected Lt. Col. Richard I. Dodge as his commander in the field. Dodge, then on garrison duty with his regiment at Omaha Barracks, was an excellent choice for command. An 1858 graduate of West Point, he was a seasoned soldier, with administrative competence and the ability to lead. He also was an avid outdoorsman.<sup>5</sup>

The army command had no idea of what the attitude of Plains tribesmen might be toward a second penetration of their sacred Black Hills; as Crook’s aide-de-camp 2nd Lt. John G. Bourke put it, “. . . prudence commands vigilance and thorough preparedness.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, a large military force was marshaled at Fort Laramie to protect the expedition. The mounted portion consisted of two companies of the Second and four of the Third Cavalry regiments, totaling 363 men and 376 horses. Two companies of the Ninth Infantry provided nearly one hundred men for supply train escorts and guards. To provide additional firepower, the troops took along a twelve-pounder Howitzer and a Gatling gun, both manned by infantrymen. Seventy-one

wagons, four ambulances, and four hundred mules plus the requisite number of civilian teamsters and packers, were furnished for transportation needs. Finally, three herders to drive 134 head of beef cattle, and one butcher for beef slaughter, handled the livestock necessary for daily ration issue.<sup>7</sup>

During April and May of 1875 men and supplies for the expedition were readied at Fort Laramie. On March 30, Company I was assigned to the expedition, and was ordered to change station from Fort McPherson to Fort Laramie. Foster evidently had heard of the upcoming expedition while at St. Augustine. Dr. Delany approved his early departure from his sick leave to join his troop.<sup>8</sup>

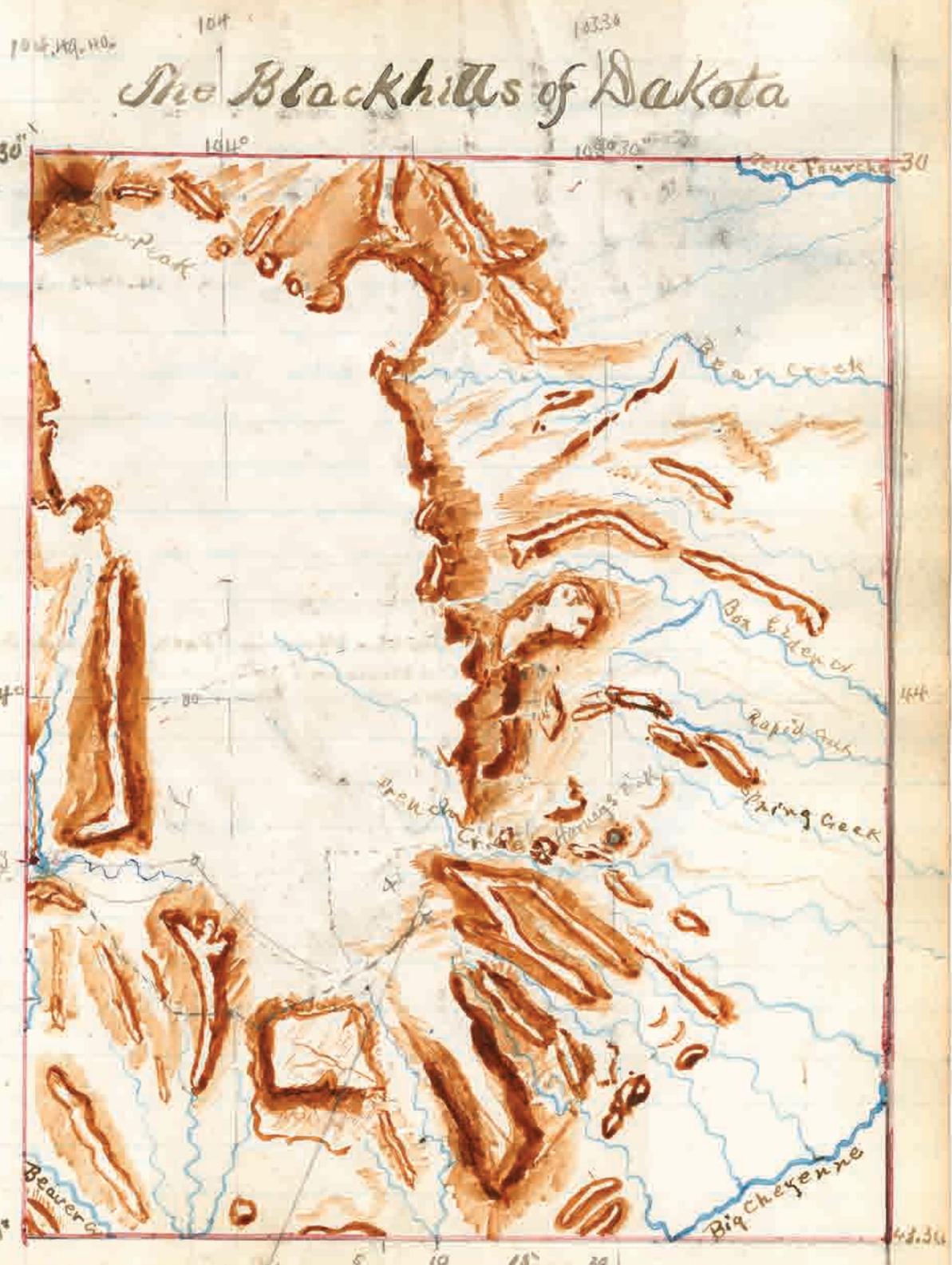
Foster returned to Fort McPherson on April 29. Four days later Lieutenants King and Foster, with forty-five men and sixty-three horses, rode to McPherson Station to board a westbound Union Pacific train for Fort D. A. Russell at Cheyenne. Three days later Company I marched overland the near-ninety miles to Fort Laramie, where it joined other units assigned to protect the Jenney expedition. While in camp, the cavalry companies and quartermaster teamsters groomed and rubbed down long lines of horses and mules, while infantry soldiers were exercised in company drill. Tons of commissary and quartermaster supplies were checked and packed for wagon transport.<sup>9</sup>

Whenever the army sent troops into a new region, officers were required to map the routes taken and record itineraries of the march. Information on road difficulties, campsites, and the availability of water, wood, and grass, were recorded for future reference. Lieutenant Bourke was assigned Engineer Officer, to map routes to and through the Black Hills for military purposes. Many officers, including Colonel Dodge, felt that military maps would be more practical than the more intricate, artistic maps that were created by cartographers of the Geological Survey. For the duration of the expedition, Dodge's engineer officers worked in full cooperation with Dr. McGillicuddy, surveying and mapping a very rugged region.<sup>10</sup>

On May 24, Dodge issued orders for the arrangement of the column on the march. The cavalry companies were rotated daily through positions in the troop column. The leading company served as 'pioneer troops,' preparing the way for wagons to cross draws and creek bottoms. Immediately behind the leading company, the pioneer wagon contained axes, shovels, spades, nails, rope, and other items necessary to temporarily improve the road. As the column advanced across the Wyoming plains and through the Black Hills, the pioneer companies were continually occupied building temporary bridging, cutting down edges of draws and ravines, and constructing corduroy roads.<sup>11</sup>

**FIG. 4.1.** An overall map of the Black Hills, showing much of the interior blank, which Foster drew in his journal to record his travels while on the expedition. He copied an 1874 map of Nebraska and Wyoming prepared by the department engineer prior to the Custer expedition. On it Foster located Camp Jenney and the new route he helped pioneer to Camp Harney.

# The Blackhills of Dakota



Camp Agency  
 43.34  
 104.11

5 10 15 20  
 104 103.34  
 30

Next came the headquarters and scientific wagons, followed by the cavalry force, company wagons, and supply wagons, the latter guarded by the infantry. At the end of the column was the beef herd, followed up by the rear guard. The lead company one day served as the rear guard the next, as the other companies rotated through the marching order. Each day the column broke camp early, about six o'clock, and went into camp early, usually before two or three in the afternoon.<sup>12</sup>

During the early weeks of the expedition, Lt. Foster was involved mainly with regular troop duty on the march and in camp. Soldiers and animals were inspected, company areas were laid out and maintained, guards placed, and other duties that normally fell to junior subalterns. But, Foster was also interested in recording his part in the expedition. He regularly drew sketch maps and recorded itineraries of each day's march. He also wrote down short observations on the landscape and incidents of the march. At 6:00 a.m. on May 25, the Jenney Expedition broke camp on the North Platte River, and made its way north to the Black Hills. Foster's notes and maps on the march to the Hills form the next section of his journal:

### Black Hills Expedition

MAY 25<sup>th</sup> 1875

Broke Camp at 6. am. Marching due magnetic north

In 17+ miles struck summit of Sand Bluffs

Buttes on left of road of no great height

Road very sandy all day.

Much Cactus

crossed Branch of Rawhide Creek (Nopal Cucius)

Camped on Rawhide Creek

"C" Troop 2d Cav advance guard

Thunderstorm this Pm for 2 hours

The cactus was identified by Bourke as the nopal or "tuna cactus," which grew in great tracts in the region. Both Bourke and Dodge described how it could be used to clean and settle alkaline water<sup>13</sup>

MAY 26<sup>th</sup> 1875

Marched at 6.am. Dug patch for wagons to cross Rawhide.

Banks steep. Creek 10 ft wide by 1 ft deep. Marched

N.W. 2 miles through canon deep with loose white Sand.

couldn't get through and returned. Camping on

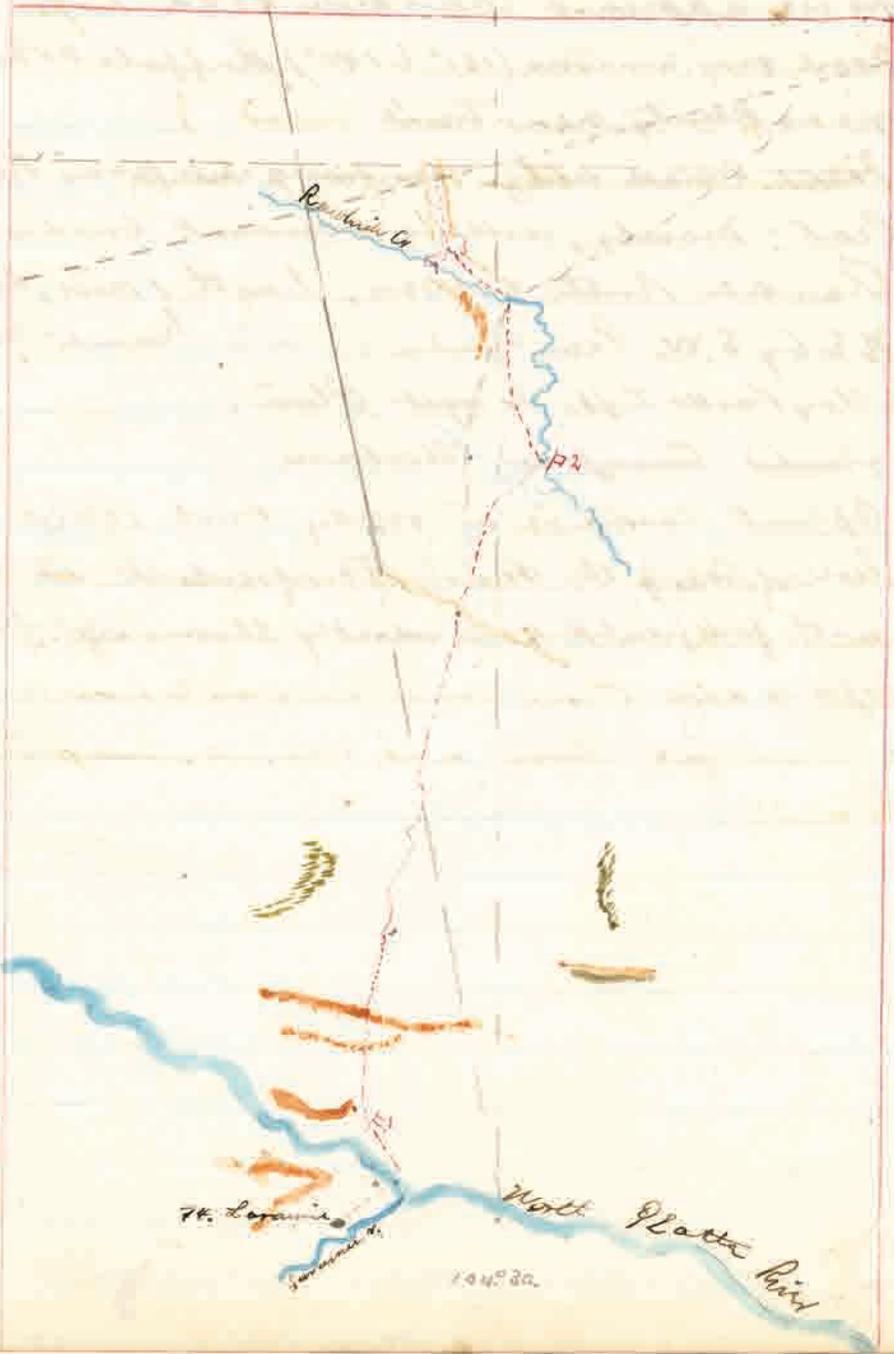
Rawhide.

FIG. 4.2



May 25<sup>th</sup> + 26<sup>th</sup> 1875

Trails.



1/2° 30'  
Sandy canon. marked  
up and back.  
El. 57.75

El. 50.25

El. 53.60

Sand Pine

Poplar  
Sagebrush

Low bluffs

El. 47.50

6.25

144° 30'

Dodge had hired Joe Merivale, a longtime resident of the Fort Laramie vicinity as expedition guide. He had served the army before, and was said to be knowledgeable about the route to the Black Hills. On the second day out, Joe led the troops up a wrong fork of the Rawhide. Consequently the expedition only made seven and one-half miles that day. After that misadventure, Dodge wrote in his journal, “My faith in Merivale is gone, & I must myself play guide.”<sup>14</sup> After that day he performed no further service as guide, but was retained as an interpreter.

MAY 27<sup>th</sup> 1875

Ther. 49 Broke camp at 5.30. Sky lowering  
Cold NW wind. Passed confluence of a little  
Spring bank with boggy banks  
Country rolling & sandy. Becoming more Elevated  
as we approach Rawhide Peak

705 am Trail very sinuous (120 to 140) Buffalo & Bunch  
grass plenty near trail

8.am Passed small arroyo running out from Rawhide  
Peak; Marshy, willows & currant bushes  
Rawhide Butte alt 6200, length 1 mile, running  
N E by S.W. Pine lumber. Soil Granite Gravel

11.30 am Clay Knolls Left. To right Plains.

210 reached Camp on Niobrara  
Opposite Camp is a rocky Knob 196 ft above  
level of Camp the summit of which is covered  
with fortifications evidently thrown up (of loose stone)  
years ago.

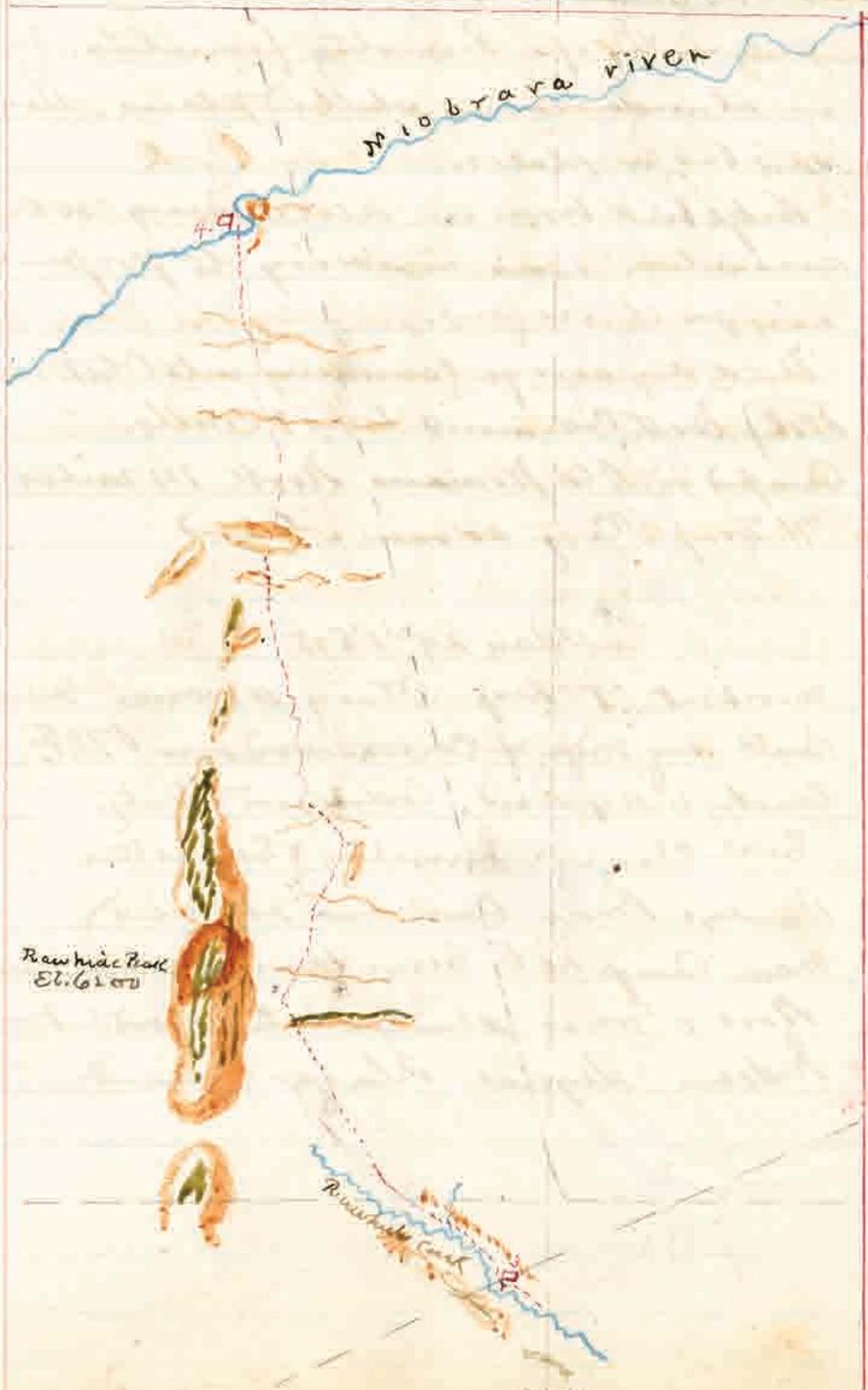
Dodge recorded it had been very cold all day and towards evening it got worse. Reveille call for the expedition was at 4 a.m. That morning Bourke reported the whole camp turned out “uniformly equipped” in army overcoats and “frozen noses.” The next morning it was even colder.<sup>15</sup>

Of “Fortification Butte,” Bourke wrote in his diary:

In front of camp was a butte (196 ft high) of granite . . . Persons who climbed to the summit told me of some Indian fortifications there found; from their descriptions, these structures of rude piles of stone not over 3 feet high, probably served once as rifle pits or trenches to defend the Crow Indians, originally possessors of this region, against the Dacotahs or Sioux, the present occupants. The summit has no

FIG. 4.3

May 27 1875



Purification Pond 5496  
El. 5300

El. 5400  
Rauhiac Pass Knot  
Clear Knots  
5375  
5300

5350

El. 5450

El. 5350

Amoyan. Little trees

4230 N  
El. 5400

El. 5175

positive evidence to sustain it, and neither the fortifications nor the conjuncture were deserving of further attention.<sup>16</sup>

MAY 28<sup>th</sup> 1875

Last night quite cold. Heavy frost 31 5.am

Broke camp 5.30.am

7.28am. Day changed to warm & cloudless

815 Country of a limestone formation. Scrub Pine in abundance in sheltered places. Road rocky and bad in places.

High back bone in descending which excavation was necessary to prepare a way for the wagons.

1020 Struck dry arroyo (running into Old Womans Fork) with cottonwood trees & brush.

1235 Camped on Old Womans Fork 14 miles  
H Troop 3d Cavy advance guard

As the expedition moved north, they reached the top of the high land above the drainage of Old Woman's Creek, the western margins of the vaulted Pine Ridge. From here they had their first view of the still-distant Black Hills. The descent down into the valley was an arduous task. Colonel Dodge admitted in his diary that "The route was most difficult and it required no little Engineering skill to get down," but then added, "My pioneering and [1st Lt. John F.] Trout's wagon management finally got us down without accident or delay."<sup>17</sup>

MAY 29<sup>th</sup> 1875

610 Moved out. "I" Troop 3d Cavy advance guard  
Built strong bridge of cottonwood over O.W.F.

730 Country well grassed. Cottonwood Plenty.  
Soil clayey. Limestone & Sandstone

205 Bunkey Bridge built but now used

235 Made Camp No. 6 Severe thunder storm and wind  
Wood & grass plenty. Water good but muddy  
Indian signal flags found

This was a rough day for Foster's company serving on pioneer duty. Progress was slow with great labor: two stretches of corduroy, one brush bridge built, and a good log bridge (the bunkey bridge) were built. Because the

FIG. 4.4

May 28<sup>d</sup> + 29<sup>d</sup> 1875

101

