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Article Summary: Chaplain Alpha Wright wrote a series of letters for his hometown newspaper describing conflicts between Plains Indians and the US Army. This 1870 letter describes a soldier who was going duck hunting when he was shot by an Indian identified as Crazy Horse.

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Photographs / Images: Anton Schonborn's 1870 view of Fort Laramie

AN EARLY REFERENCE TO CRAZY HORSE

By R. Eli Paul

Introduction

Documentary references to Crazy Horse are rare before 1876, when he burst upon the national scene, and they are usually as enigmatic as the great man himself. Piecing together his early movements across the Lakota landscape has challenged historians; any new information which adds to our knowledge warrants attention.

Alpha Wright, the post chaplain for Fort Laramie, Wyoming Territory, provided one such early reference to Crazy Horse, six years before the Great Sioux War of 1876. It can be found in the *Nebraska Herald*, a Plattsmouth newspaper of May 5, 1870, and accompanies at least sixteen other letters Wright wrote to his adopted hometown between 1869 and 1872. Many of the letters describe conflicts between the Plains Indians and the U.S. Army, as the one to follow clearly attests.¹

Chaplain Wright had experienced a long career in the ministry by 1870. Born in 1813 in Vermont, he attended a New York seminary and was ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church. His work sent him to the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, and finally to Missouri, where in 1862 he settled briefly in St. Joseph. A strong supporter of the Union cause, Wright joined the Twenty-fifth Missouri Volunteer Infantry in 1863 as a chaplain. He was mustered out of service on December 11, 1865, and was immediately commissioned in the regular army as a chaplain for Fort Laramie. Frontier service engaged Wright for the next seven years, no mean feat for a man of his advanced

age. He won promotion to post chaplain in 1867, was transferred to Fort D.A. Russell near Cheyenne in 1870, and ministered there for two years. Remaining in the Department of the Platte, Wright's next transfer sent him to Fort Omaha, where he served until his retirement on October 3, 1879. Wright returned to Plattsmouth, where his family had maintained a home since 1865, switched denominations, and preached in Bellevue's Presbyterian church. He died on November 30, 1888, at the age of seventy-five, and was buried at Plattsmouth's Oak Hill cemetery.²

Though Wright's reliability as a correspondent cannot be easily assessed, he included one detail that lends credibility to his mention of Crazy Horse by name. He noted that the mixed-bloods who accompanied the army detachment, persons who surely possessed knowledge of the area's Lakota leaders, had verified this important identification.

In addition to the episode described in his letter, the spring and summer of 1870 proved to be pleasantly eventful for Alpha Wright. Just weeks after publication of this letter, Wright obtained an eagerly sought transfer to Fort D.A. Russell, a post on the Union Pacific Railroad considered a far less rigorous duty station than Fort Laramie. Crazy Horse's life took a particularly nasty turn at approximately the same time. No Water, an Oglala rival, shot Crazy Horse in the face and nearly killed him.³

The Letter⁴

Our Wyoming Letter. A Day of Excitement at Fort Laramie. The Indians on the War-Path. One Man Shot and an Attack Upon the Garrison Momentarily Expected. (From our own Correspondent.)

Fort Laramie, Wyoming Territory,
[Tuesday] April 19th, 1870.

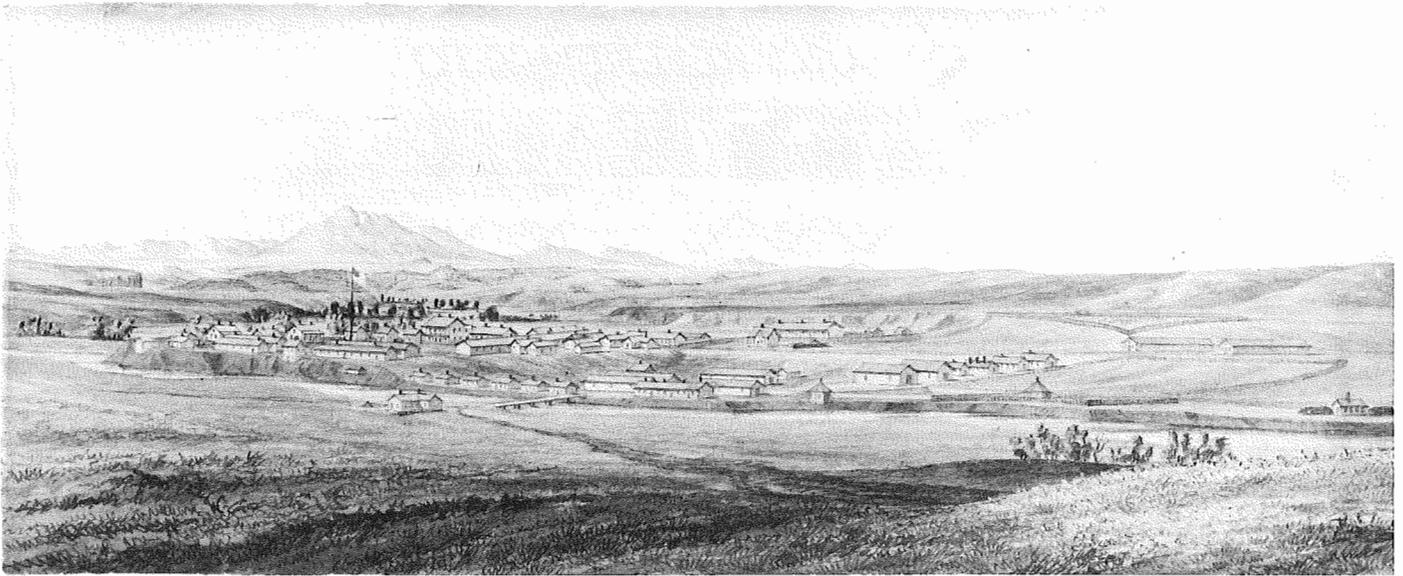
Editor of Plattsmouth Herald,
Plattsmouth, Neb.

This has been a day of excitement at the Garrison beyond anything I have ever known. Coming up from the Garden about 11 o'clock a.m., I saw a gathering of officers and ladies in front of Gen. [Col. Franklin F.] Flint's quarters, looking intently north toward the Bluffs, overlooking the Post and the Platte river. I soon learned the cause of the unwonted interest. Several Indians were in full view, and several shots were heard; soon a man by the name of [George] Harris came in on horseback, hatless and wounded. He and two other men had started but a few minutes before to go over to the Platte river to hunt for ducks. His two companions were in a wagon, and to reach the river by that conveyance, had to take a circuitous route to get through the hills.

Harris being mounted took a nearer route, and when about half a mile from the garrison, as he entered a ravine, an Indian, on a fleet pony, suddenly confronted him and though he [the Indian] rode past him swiftly, not being able to check his pony, shot him just above the ankle [sic] joint, inflicting a wound that will cause him to loose [sic] his limb. But for the speed at which the Indian was riding he [Harris] would doubtless have been killed, for their aim was deadly. The Indian was an Ogallala Chief, by the name of "Crazy Horse," a great warrior, belonging to a village now on Raw Hide creek, comprising about 200 warriors, who are now on the war path.

Our mounted detachment was soon in pursuit, but the Indians being on such

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Anton Schonborn, a little known government artist and draftsman, drew several of the forts within the Department of the Platte. His 1870 view of Fort Laramie, a watercolor and wash on paper, coincides with the time of Alpha Wright's letter. Unfortunately no well-documented photograph exists of either Wright or Crazy Horse. Courtesy of Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

high ground could see every movement of the garrison, and as soon as the detachment mounted the Indians were off with the speed of the wind and crossed the Platte. The mounted men of the garrison only have mules, and they are inferior to horses for speed and stand no chance of overtaking a war party of cunning savages.⁵

Col. [William G.] Bullock, the Post Trader, with a citizen by the name of [Benjamin B.] Mills, were out at the time some four or five miles, and for a few moments great apprehension was felt for their safety, as firing was heard in the direction they went. The firing, however, was by the Indians at the wagon containing the two companions of Harris. The distance, however, was so great that they escaped harm and soon returned, concluding not to hunt ducks with Indians in such close proximity. Mr. Bullock and Mills having been sent for by our expert horsemen soon returned at a speed that raised the price of their stock considerably.

Several half breeds accompanied the detachment and came so near to them [the Indians] as to be able to identify them fully. Field glasses were in great requisition for a while, and the monotony of the garrison for the day has been greatly disturbed.

While I am writing, a strong force is being posted on the hills overlooking the

post, picketed in full view where they will remain through the night. I think we may be attacked at any time, and some will not sleep as soundly to-night as usual. We are looking anxiously for some cavalry, for a "mule brigade" is not competent for such emergencies, however brave the men may be. The Indians know how weak we are, and they will harass us until our expected reinforcements arrive.

Harris has been wounded twice before since I have known him. He is a brave man and with half a chance would make some of the attacking cowards bite the dust. More anon.

A. Wright
Post Chaplain, U.S.A.

P.S. The ladies of the garrison were as cool as veteran warriors.

Notes

My thanks go to Joseph C. Porter, Fort Worth, Tex., for his insightful comments on this letter. Also, I wish to acknowledge the research efforts of Kingsley Bray, New Moston, Manchester, United Kingdom, who has turned up another 1870 mention of Crazy Horse by name in the records of the Upper Platte Indian Agency.

¹ The other Alpha Wright letters to the *Plattsmouth Herald* can be found in the following issues: Nov. 25, Dec. 30, 1869; Apr. 21, May 5, Aug. 25, Sept. 1, Oct. 13, Dec. 8, 1870; Mar. 9, Apr. 6, May 4, June 8, June 29, 1871; Jan. 4, 11, 25, 1872. Wright also wrote a letter to the *St. Louis Democrat*, Mar. 21, 1866, which

gave details on the death of Chief Spotted Tail's daughter at Fort Laramie.

² Biographical information for Alpha Wright comes from the *Plattsmouth Weekly Herald*, Dec. 6, 1888; A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882), 508; *Portrait and Biographical Album of Otoe and Cass Counties, Nebraska* (Chicago: Chapman Brothers, 1889), 1293-95; and Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army* (Washington: GPO, 1903), 1061.

³ The newsworthiness of Oglala leader Red Cloud's first trip to Washington to meet the president in May 1870 far surpassed minor shootings on the frontier. Ely S. Parker, the commissioner of Indian affairs, best summed up the minimal concern that events, such as those Wright chronicled, generated back East. "[The Sioux] have up to this time as a body remained as quiet as could be expected under the circumstances, a few murders and depredations only being charged against some of the lawless and ungovernable among them." E. S. Parker, Oct. 31, 1870, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs (1870)* (Washington: GPO, 1870), 4.

⁴ Alpha Wright's letter is presented in its entirety with only minor changes in punctuation. First names have been added to identify those persons mentioned only by their surnames.

⁵ The garrison of Fort Laramie consisted of four companies of the Fourth Infantry, hardly a crack cavalry unit. Post return of Fort Laramie, April, 1870, "Returns from U.S. Military Posts, 1800-1916," *Microfilm Publication No. 617* (Washington: National Archives, 1965).