

Editor's Note: George Bent, born in 1843, was the son of Owl Woman, who as Keeper of the Sacred Arrows was perhaps the most important person among the Southern Cheyenne. His father, William Bent, was one of the founders and proprietors of Bent's Fort, the trading post on the Arkansas River in what's now southeastern Colorado. George Bent was raised near the fort, sent to school in Missouri and served for about a year early in the Civil War with Confederate forces in Missouri, Arkansas and Mississippi. He may have deserted, was captured and sent to a Union prison in St. Louis from which, thanks to family connections, he was quickly released. He immediately returned to the Plains and began living the Indian life with his cousins. He was with the Southern Cheyenne in a peaceful village on Sand Creek when it was attacked late in 1864 by ill-trained Colorado volunteer troops and about 150 Cheyenne and Arapaho children, men and women were killed.

The following winter and spring, driven by rage at this event, the Cheyenne, Arapaho and Lakota of the southern plains moved north, raiding and making war as they went, to join with their northern cousins in the Powder River Basin of what are now northeast Wyoming and southeast Montana. In July 1865 these tribes came together—Bent here says there were 3,000 warriors—to attack the U.S. Army post at Platte Bridge Station on the North Platte River, where Casper, Wyo., is located today.

After 1900, George Bent began speaking and corresponding with the white historian George Hyde, who eventually made a book out of Bent's accounts. This excerpt from that book describes, from the Cheyenne point of view, the attack on Platte Bridge and the events leading up to it. (Footnotes are carried over from Bent's account as it appears in Hyde, A Life of George Bent, Written from his Letters; full citation given at the end of the account .)

We moved camp from day to day, advancing slowly [south] up the Powder. Everyone was busy preparing for war; all the charms worn in battle were being repaired, new eagle feathers were put in the war bonnets and on the shields, war shirts were put into perfect condition, etc. It was believed that if a man went into battle without his charms, war bonnet, etc., in perfect condition, he would be sure to get killed. All this repair work had to be done with the aid of the medicine men, who knew the proper ceremonies, and these men had to be given feasts and presents by the warriors who asked their assistance. At last we reached the Crazy Woman's Fork of Powder River, the point from which our grand war party was to set out; and here we encamped for several days while the final preparations were being made.

We were camped with the lodges set in a great circle, and the day before we started there was a grand war parade. That day all of the soldier societies held dances and everyone was painted and dressed in full war rig. Even the war ponies were painted and had their tails tied up and ornamented with eagle feathers. The warriors formed up outside the circle, each society in a separate band, the bravest men in front, two abreast, but in the rear rank there were four men

abreast. The societies of each tribe formed in separate bands. The Crazy Dogs being accounted the bravest, were in front of all others, while the Dog Soldiers brought up the rear. When all were ready, we rode into the village and around the great circle of lodges, each band singing its own war songs. The old men, women, and children stood in front of the lodges, also singing. That night we danced until nearly morning and at daylight we marched. The ponies had been herded inside the circle of lodges during the night, and in the morning each warrior caught his best pony and mounted. We made a short march and halted early, to give everyone time to come up.

This march to Platte Bridge was conducted just as the expeditions of olden times were. The Crazy Dogs still acted as police; they led the march and kept order in the column. About two hundred women came with us, the rest remaining at the village. In our camp each soldier band camped by itself in a separate group. In the morning the men of each band formed up in the column. Each society had its appointed place in the column. The chiefs went to the head of the column, to lead the march, and behind them was a party of Crazy Dogs, acting as advance guard. The chiefs of all the four tribes rode ahead, bearing the war pipes. When we came to water these chiefs halted and sat down; then the column broke up and everyone drank, watered their ponies, and sat down to rest and smoke. In the evening, at the end of the march, the chiefs selected the camping place.

Old Platte Bridge was at the place where the city of Casper, Wyoming, now stands; indeed, this city is named after one of the officers killed in the fight we now had with the troops. When we drew near the bridge, the pipe bearers (as the chiefs were called) selected a party of scouts and sent them forward to see how things were at the bridge. Meantime our column went into camp on the head of a small stream which flows into the Platte from the north (now called Casper Creek, I believe). Toward evening the scouts returned and the pipe bearers sent three criers through the camp (three old men, one Cheyenne, one Arapaho, and one Sioux) to announce the news the scouts had brought in. There were fully three thousand warriors in this camp, the biggest war party that I ever saw, and perfectly organized. The criers also announced that no singing would be permitted that night and that anyone who started a war song would be severely "soldiered" by the Crazy Dogs, who still acted as police.

At dawn the next day (July 25) ten more scouts were selected and sent out toward the bridge. They moved down the creek on which we were encamped. We then formed the column. The Crazy Dogs got in front of us and on both flanks, and the Dog Soldiers in our rear. They crowded us up into one big mass and held us so, to prevent anyone from slipping away. The pipe bearers formed up in a long line ahead of the column. I remember seeing in that line [Sioux leaders] Red Cloud and Old-Man-Afraid-of-His-Horses with their scalp shirts on. We then started, the soldiers ordering us to walk our ponies, for if we moved faster a great cloud of dust would have arisen and might have warned the troops of our approach.

Old Platte Bridge spanned the North Platte just west of Casper Creek, the little stream on whose head our camp was located. This bridge had been built in 1859 and was much used by the

emigrants, freighters, and the stage coaches in earlier years, but in 1865 the stage company no longer used this route and the bridge was mainly of service to the emigrants and the military [wagon] trains. At the south end of the bridge was the military post, a stockade, the abandoned stage station, and the office of the Overland Telegraph Company. The road came up the south bank of the river, crossed at the bridge, and went up on the north bank toward the Sweetwater. At this point the Platte Valley was very wide, with high bluffs closing it in on the north and south.

When we had advanced some miles, we halted behind a hill which formed a part of the line of high bluffs on the north side of the valley. Now medicine making began, and everyone was told to get ready for a fight. Every man who had a war bonnet, shield, or other sacred object had to go through certain ceremonies. A man with a war bonnet would take it out of its bag and hold it up, first to the south, then to the west, to the north, and to the east, and then put it on his head. A shield was taken from its case and held in the right hand. It was then dipped toward the ground and shaken four times, held up toward the sun and shaken four times, and then placed on the left arm, where it was carried in battle.

While these ceremonies were being gone through with, some men who had field glasses were permitted to go up on the hilltop to see what the scouts were doing. These scouts had been instructed to attempt to draw the troops into the hills, where we could surround them. The scouts were now seen approaching the northern end of the bridge, and soon a body of troops was discovered coming across the bridge with cannon. The scouts began to retire toward the bluffs, drawing the soldiers after them. On the hilltop were the chiefs, Red Cloud, Old-Man-Afraid, Roman Nose, and some others.¹ Roman Nose now called out to the mass of warriors behind the hill that soldiers were crossing the bridge. The warriors, jammed into a dense mass and held where they were by the Crazy Dogs and Dog Soldiers, waited impatiently. Soon the distant boom of a cannon was heard, followed by the plup! plup! of rifles, and the dense mass of warriors surged forward. The Crazy Dogs attempted to beat them back with their quirts and war clubs, but the men were now too excited to pay any heed to the soldiers. They broke through the line of Crazy Dogs and rushed up to the top of the hills where Roman Nose and the other leaders were standing. Everyone was talking at once and the excitement was intense. From the hilltop we could see our ten scouts retreating toward us, followed at some distance by a troop of cavalry with some cannon, and infantry formed up on each side of the guns. The chiefs induced the

¹ These statements of Bent's about the "chiefs" who led this grand war party, are very enlightening; I have never believed Red Cloud was a real chief at this date, but a leader of the warriors. The Sioux at Red Cloud Agency in 1874 stated emphatically that R.C. had been put in his position of head chief by the whites. They said to the commission that Old-Man-Afraid was the man they most looked up to—he was formerly their "brave man." Now Old-Man-Afraid, says Bent, was with Red C. among the "chiefs" who led this party in 1865, and he now says Roman Nose was also one of these chiefs. Bent insisted always that Roman Nose was not a chief at all, but only a "brave man" and war leader. So these "chiefs" who led the party at Platte Bridge were not real chiefs, who were peace officials, but were leaders of the warriors.—G.H.

This analysis is supported in Hyde's later researches, as given in *Red Cloud's Folk* (1937), 139-40.—S.L.

warriors to keep down behind the hilltop so as not to show themselves on the skyline, and here we waited, watching the scene in the valley below. The scouts kept circling in front of the troops, slowly retiring toward the hills where we lay, but the soldiers appeared to be suspicious and were advancing with extreme caution. As they came near to the hills they moved more and more slowly, and at last they halted and would come no nearer. The scouts tried all manner of tricks, but it was useless, and about noon they gave it up and rode into the hills to join us. Everyone was greatly disappointed, but the leaders said that we would try again the following day.

The Crazy Dogs and Dog Soldiers now set to work and forced the warriors to form into a dense column again. They then marched us back up the creek and to camp. That was a bad night. We were all discouraged and the soldiers would not permit any singing or even much talking. Toward day another party of scouts was sent out, my younger brother Charlie accompanying them. After dawn we all formed up again but this time we were divided into three parties. One body of warriors went down the creek, while another party, which I was with, moved farther west and hid behind the hills about due north of the bridge. These two parties were rather small ones. The third party was our main body, and it moved up behind the bluffs to the northwest of the bridge and west of the party which I was with. This day we were not held behind the hills by the Crazy Dogs but were permitted to go up to the hilltops.

I think it was about nine in the morning when we saw a body of cavalry march across the bridge and turn west along the road which ran between the river and the line of bluffs behind which we were concealed. When these troops appeared the warriors crowded up to the hilltops and sat there on their war ponies watching. I have always thought it strange that the troops did not see us and retreat back across the river at once, but they continued their advance without showing any signs of alarm. They passed the hills on which the party I was with stood watching them and moved on up the road. We were now nearer to the bridge than the troops were, and some of the warriors wished to make a charge, but the leaders urged them to wait. Moving slowly up the road, the cavalry presently came opposite the high hills behind which our main body lay; and then all at once we saw a couple of thousand mounted warriors swarm over the tops of the hills and sweep down into the valley.

We heard the distant yells and shots and saw the soldiers halt and break ranks. The Indians were half a mile or more away yet, but the troops were instantly thrown into confusion, and in another moment they had turned and were galloping back along the road, every man for himself. Our leaders now let us go and we rushed over the bluffs and down into the valley, to cut the soldiers off from the bridge, while at the same moment the third party, hiding behind the hills east of us, also charged out and raced for the bridge. The hills and valley were now alive with warriors, charging on the troops from the northwest, from the north, and from the northeast. As our party began its charge, I saw a company of infantry rush out of the stockade and start across the bridge on the run, and at the same time a cannon was brought out and swung into position; both infantry and artillery then opened fire on us in an attempt to cover the retreat of the galloping cavalry, but the men fired in such a hurry that they did us no injury. In fact, we were most of us still far out of

range of rifle fire.

The troopers had only covered about half of the distance back to the bridge when our party ran into them, striking them on the left flank. Several hundred warriors on swift ponies were right at their heels and they had no time to stop and face us. As we rushed in among them, the air was thick with dust and powder smoke; you could not see a dozen yards and the shots and yells deafened the ears. As we went into the troops, I saw an officer [Lieutenant Caspar Collins] on a big bay horse rush past me through the dense clouds of dust and smoke. His horse was running away with him and broke right through the Indians. The Lieutenant had an arrow sticking in his forehead and his face was streaming with blood. He must have fallen soon after he passed me, for he dropped right in the midst of the warriors, one of whom caught his horse. I saw soldiers falling on every side. A few broke through and reached the infantry at the bridge; the infantry then ran back across the bridge and the cannon opened fire again. I do not think that more than four or five of the troopers succeeding in escaping. The road for a mile or more was dotted with dead bodies, and at the point where our party struck the troops the bodies of the men and the dead horses lay in groups.

Part of the warriors now attempted to rush the bridge, but the cannon was posted to sweep this clear and no one could get across here. The river was very high, but eight or ten warriors swam their ponies across below the bridge and made for a ranch which stood by the roadside. There were some cavalymen at this ranch, but when they saw the Indians attacking Lieutenant Collins' men, they left the ranch and marched up the road toward the stockade at the bridge end. This little party of warriors, after swimming the river, charged the cavalry and drove them up the road and into the stockade. High-Back-Wolf, a very brave Northern Cheyenne, rode up to an officer and struck at him. The officer had a saber in one hand and a pistol in the other. He fired the pistol in High-Back-Wolf's face and the warrior fell off his pony dead. But the Indians think the officer's ball missed him and that he was struck by a rifle shot from the stockade.

The soldiers kept firing on us with their cannon. The whole valley on our side of the river was swarming with warriors, but they did not like the big guns and most of them retired behind the hills again. Here they were sitting on their ponies, excitedly discussing the fight, when all at once some men who were on the bluffs called out that Indians down in the valley were signaling that more soldiers were coming down the road from the west. [This was the small wagon train under command of Sgt. Custard, approaching from the west.] The warriors at once rode over the hills again and down into the valley. We rode at top speed, everyone eager to get into the fight. About five miles up the valley we came upon the fight. Many Indians were already on the ground and had the soldiers surrounded in a little hollow near the river bank. As far back along the road as you could see, the valley was alive with warriors. The troopers had dug rifle pits around the corralled wagons and had also piled up their mess chests, bedding, etc. under the wagons. Some men were in the pits, others behind the barricade under the wagons, and a few sharpshooters were in the wagons, firing through holes cut in the canvas tops. Just as we came up, the Indians made a charge and ran off all the mules belonging to the train. (The soldiers had no horses. They

were dismounted cavalymen and were going east in the wagons.)

This fresh body of troops had come down the road from some post farther west. They did not know that a fight was in progress, but were simply on the march, going east under orders. They had a wagon train with them. They did not know that any Indians were about until they reached a point about five miles west of Platte Bridge, at which point the road crossed a hill. When they came to the top of this hill they had a view of the valley as far as the bridge, and here they saw that the valley was full of Indians and that a fight was going on. Soon after they were themselves discovered, and the Indians began to gather in their front. The troops then retreated back across the hill and to a bare sandy hollow on the river bank, where they corralled the wagons and prepared for a fight.

These men held out against a huge force of Indians for about half an hour. At first there were no leaders on the ground and the Indian attack was not well organized. The little bare basin in which the wagons were corraled was surrounded by hillocks of sand. The warriors crawled up behind these knolls and fired on the wagons from all sides, but the soldiers, especially the good shots in the wagon beds, kept up a heavy fire and prevented the Indians from closing in. One teamster got down to the river bank, and buckling his revolver around his head by the belt he swam the river and reached the bushes on the other bank safely. Only a few of the Indians saw him or he would have been killed in the water. Presently Roman Nose's brother got into the water and swam after the white man. Reaching the bushes, the teamster then got away. He was the only man to escape.

The Indians were now nearly all dismounted, firing from behind the hillocks; but presently the leaders came up—Roman Nose, Bear Tongue, Twins, and some other brave men. They called out for everyone to get ready for a charge. "We are going to empty the soldiers' guns," they said. These men all had war bonnets and shields. They rode out and began to circle around wagons, riding very fast. The soldiers under the wagons fired many shots at them, and those in the wagons fired a few, but the warriors were not touched, for they all had very strong charms. Presently these riders gave the signal and the Indians all charged straight for the wagons, most of them preferring to go on foot. It was all over in a minute. I ran down from where I had been watching, and when I reached the wagons the Indians were still shooting at the men under the wagons. Three men had been killed in the wagons. A fourth was thrown out and shot on the ground. The Indians, following their usual custom, took no prisoners. I counted twenty-two [soldier] bodies. Eight warriors were killed here and many more were wounded. There was nothing in the wagons but the bedding and mess chests. I never saw a printed account of this fight except for one newspaper version which alleged that the soldiers were unarmed and were massacred by the Indians, who tied some of the men to the wagon wheels and burned them alive. This is all nonsense. The Plains Indians never tortured prisoners, they never took men prisoners but shot them at once, during the fighting. As to the soldiers being without arms, they were very well armed and put up a hard fight. They stood off a thousand warriors for at least half an hour. Lieutenant Collins and his men, on the other hand, were killed in a few minutes and with

practically no loss to the Indians.²

After this second fight we all rode back to camp, everyone talking and greatly excited. It was now nearly evening and we had been fighting all day. In the morning we broke up into small war parties and these went out in different directions to raid the roads. More of the Indians, however, returned at once to the village on Powder River, taking no part in the little raids that followed. I went back to the village with the main body.

Source:

Hyde, George E. *A Life of George Bent, Written from his Letters*. Edited by Savoie Lottinville. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968, pp. 213-222.

² George Bent's eye-witness account of the Battle of Platte Bridge, as here given, has never before been published, although historians have often cited his many letters, detailing events, to George E. Hyde. In general, the white casualties are more extensive in Bent's account than in the accounts left by white survivors, some of which were drawn upon by Hyde, *Spotted Tail's Folk*, 106; *Red Cloud's Folk*, 123-26 (in which Hyde speaks of Bent's accuracy as sustained by official accounts; Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 228-29; Berthrong, *Southern Cheyennes*, 248-49; Agnes Wright Spring, *Caspar Collins*, 82-94; and J. W. Vaughn, *The Battle of Platte Bridge*, which is the most recent, extended account of these events.—S.L.