

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Bighorn Fires	Incident Date & Time: 06/25/1876 and the ensuing summer
Incident Location: Between Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, Montana and the Bighorn Mountains in Wyoming	Incident Size: Unknown
Types of resources involved: U.S. Army and plains Indian tribes of Crow, Arikara, Lakota Sioux, Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho	# of Fatalities/injuries: Not applicable
Reason this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list: ➤ Fire is historically significant	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>“The Battle of the Little Bighorn was fought along the ridges, steep bluffs, and ravines of the Little Bighorn River, in south-central Montana on June 25-26, 1876. The combatants were warriors of the Lakota Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes, battling soldiers of the 7th Regiment of the U.S. Cavalry commanded by Lieutenant Colonel George Custer, along with their Crow, and Arikara scouts. The Battle of the Little Bighorn has come to symbolize the clash of two vastly dissimilar cultures; the buffalo/horse culture of the northern plains tribes, and the highly industrial based culture of the United States. This battle was not an isolated confrontation, but part of a much larger strategic campaign designed to force the capitulation of the non-reservation Lakota and Cheyenne.” (from the NPS Little Bighorn website)</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>Studies and histories of the Battle of the Little Bighorn number in the thousands. Very few events in American history have been as discussed and argued over as this iconic event. There is a good summary on the campaign and the battle on the National Park Service website of the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. During and after the battle, there were two examples of the Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyenne lighting fires. In the opening stage of the battle on June 25, the Indians drove Major Marcus Reno’s attacking troopers into the timber and brush along the Little Bighorn River. There are a number of firsthand accounts, both Indian and U.S. Army, of attempts to light this brush and timber on fire in order to drive the cavalrymen out into the open. Wooden Leg, a Northern Cheyenne warrior remembered, <i>“Already the Lakota were creeping forward to set fire to the brush”</i> (from Lakota Noon, by Gregory Michno). There are no accounts of this fire growing enough to be successful. Reno’s troopers weren’t in the timber long before retreating in panic across the Little Bighorn and up to the heights above. There is no evidence that this fire played a role in their retreat. There are no later references to this fire, so it is unlikely that it persisted or carried any great distance.</p> <p>On the early evening of June 26, the day after Custer and his command were wiped out and Reno and Benteen were besieged, the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne realized that new columns of infantry and cavalry were approaching from the Bighorn River to the north. They abandoned their siege of Reno’s position above the river and began to break their huge encampment and retreat with their families and horse herds to the west and south towards the Bighorn Mountains. As they began this movement, they lit the grass and sage along the west side of the Little Bighorn River on fire to create walls of smoke to screen their actions. <i>“In the valley, the Indians fired the dry prairie grass. A wall of thick smoke screened the village. That evening an immense procession of horsemen, women and children on foot, travois, ponies, and dogs emerged from behind the smoke”</i> (from the NPS Little Bighorn website). Again this fire is mentioned in firsthand accounts by both soldiers and Indians. Some in the approaching army columns mistook this fire for a victorious Custer burning the captured village.</p> <p>The huge Lakota and Cheyenne victory on June 25 led to a large and determined U.S. Army response; and the fighting to kill or subdue the Indians responsible was called the Great Sioux War of 1877. This fighting spread over the Tongue and Powder River country of Montana and Wyoming. There are many accounts of both sides using fire to achieve tactical or strategic objectives. Fires were lit to drive the enemy from protected positions; to create walls of smoke to screen movements; and to burn off huge swaths of grass to deprive Indian and cavalry horses and buffalo of sustenance.</p> <p>In the historical record, there are references to a large fire, 500,000 acres, called the Bighorn Fire of 1876. While the references to this fire are vague and brief with no firsthand accounts; the use of fire as a combat tactic has been shown to be a tool either side would have, and often did, use to meet their needs. It is not unlikely that the use of fire during the ensuing summer-long campaign by the army in pursuit of the tribes moving south toward the Bighorn Mountains would have provided multiple ignition sources to allow a large fire to occur.</p>	
Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:	
<p>By June 25 in the Little Bighorn River country, spring grass growth has not fully cured. In a normal season, fires will occur at this time from lightning or people, but the fuels may not be dry enough for large, fast burning conflagrations. Temperatures were probably in the</p>	

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high 80s or low 90s on the day of the battle. A soldier in one of the approaching columns records a temperature of 91 degrees on June 25. He also reports heavy rains on the night of June 25, likely from thunderstorm activity. This temperature and the rains would have been about 30 miles north of the battlefield. No accounts mention rain at the battlefield or Indian camp on the June 25 or June 26.

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Not applicable

Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

All of the combatants on the west's high plains and prairies used fire on occasion as a tactical or strategic weapon (see Nebraska fire on the 100 Fire list for a large scale strategic example). For all of those who fought in the American West in the 19th century, fire could be used to aid attacks or retreats, to screen movements, to create confusion and to eliminate crucial grazing grounds for both horse and buffalo.

Like so many elements of the Little Bighorn battle, there is uncertainty and even mystery surrounding the role of fire on June 25, 1876 and throughout that summer. For more than a century after the battle, fire was largely excluded from the battlefield area. On August 11, 1983, a range fire burned almost the entire battlefield, revealing a number of artifacts hidden since the day of the battle. This led the National Park Service to organize three large archaeological surveys in 1984, 1985, and 1989. Many artifacts were discovered and, in many cases, the accepted history of how the battle unfolded required rethinking and new perspectives.

For wildland firefighters, these fires in 1876 are an example of the role fire can play in influencing history in ways that are completely disconnected from our suppression efforts.

Links to more information on this incident:

www.nps.gov/libi/index.htm

Books:

- *Little Bighorn Battlefield: A History and Guide to the Battle of the Little Big Horn* ~ by Robert M. Utley
- *Lakota Noon, the Indian Narrative of Custer's defeat* ~ by Gregory F. Michno
- *On Time for Disaster, The Rescue of Custer's Command* ~ by Edward J. McClermand
- *Digging Into Custer's Last Stand* ~ by Sandy Barnard

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August 2024



“Here Custer Fell” painted by Eric Von Schmidt

Note the black smoke column in upper left from fire burning in timber on the Little Bighorn River