



After the buffalo days : documents on the Crow Indians from the 1880s to the 1920s  
by Charles Crane Bradley

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF SCIENCE in Education  
Montana State University  
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Abstract:

The period in the history of the Crow Indians of Montana between the 1880's and the 1920's for a long time concerned historians less than the period ending with the Custer Battle. In this thesis I have attempted to present the important events as based on documentary evidence. Most of the documents referred to in this thesis were the letters received by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs filed in the National Archives at Washington, D.C. Reference was also made to Congressional Hearings in the Interior Department library and to Chief Plenty Coups Letter File and Note Book in the Plenty Coups Memorial.

After reading between 1500 and 2000 letters concerning the Crow Reservation I concluded the basic mistake the Indian Office made was training the Crows to become farmers, herders, irrigators, carpenters, and blacksmiths. The Office of Indian Affairs never foresaw the day when a few educated Crows would attempt to manage the Reservation.

Thus, when the political authority on the Reservation disintegrated, members of the Crow Business Committee were ill prepared for administrative work.

The important issues concerning the Crow Reservation from the point of view of the Government included leasing Tribal lands, granting right of ways to railroads, authorizing irrigation construction, and establishing schools. Leasing Crow land to stockmen drew much excitement and considerable brain work from the Indian Office.

Leases, however, concerned the Crow Tribe less than the ceding of the western and northern portions of the Reservation. The railroads cutting through the Reservation brought economic advancement to the surrounding white people, but the Crows became dubious toward them.

The Crow Irrigation 'Survey was significant in that it was the first large scale employment of Crow Indians. Schools on the Crow Reservation were regarded by the Indian Office as indications of material progress and progress toward white man's culture. World War I involved the Crow Indians in the world situation. In short, the period from the 1880's to the 1920's was the period of a major transition in Crow culture and also a forgotten portion in the life of Chief Plenty Coos.

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Charles C. Bradley, Jr.

June 27, 1972.

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Date

6 August 1970

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FROM THE 1880'S TO THE 1920'S.

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

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in

Education

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Without the guidance of Dr. Barney Old Coyote, my research would never have produced the results it has thus far. Dr. Old Coyote was largely responsible for catching my interest in the documents on the Crow Tribe. He then put me in touch with Government historians Robert M. Utley and Donald Rickey, both of whom deserve thanks. It was at the suggestion of these three men that I decided to go to the National Archives.

At the National Archives in Washington, D.C. I was sent to the Social and Economics section where Robert Kuasnika very kindly got me started. Richard Crawford, Milton Ream, John Canter, and Mrs. Anderson deserve credit for pulling all the documents for me.

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## ABSTRACT

The period in the history of the Crow Indians of Montana between the 1880's and the 1920's for a long time concerned historians less than the period ending with the Custer Battle. In this thesis I have attempted to present the important events as based on documentary evidence. Most of the documents referred to in this thesis were the letters received by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs filed in the National Archives at Washington, D.C. Reference was also made to Congressional Hearings in the Interior Department library and to Chief Plenty Coups Letter File and Note Book in the Plenty Coups Memorial.

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The important issues concerning the Crow Reservation from the point of view of the Government included leasing Tribal lands, granting right of ways to railroads, authorizing irrigation construction, and establishing schools. Leasing Crow land to stockmen drew much excitement and considerable brain work from the Indian Office. Leases, however, concerned the Crow Tribe less than the ceding of the western and northern portions of the Reservation. The railroads cutting through the Reservation brought economic advancement to the surrounding white people, but the Crows became dubious toward them. The Crow Irrigation Survey was significant in that it was the first large scale employment of Crow Indians. Schools on the Crow Reservation were regarded by the Indian Office as indications of material progress and progress toward white man's culture. World War I involved the Crow Indians in the world situation. In short, the period from the 1880's to the 1920's was the period of a major transition in Crow culture and also a forgotten portion in the life of Chief Plenty Coos.

## THE CLOSING OF THE OLDEN DAYS: AN INTRODUCTION

In 1930 Frank B. Linderman tried to collect by sign-language the biography of a famous Crow chief. Linderman used the French spelling, but by 1905 the Chief signed his name Plenty Coos. The story ended shortly after the Custer Battle of 1876.

"Those were happy days," he said softly. "Our bodies were strong and our minds healthy because there was always something for both to do. When the buffalo went away we became a changed people. . . . Idleness that was never with us in buffalo days has stolen much from both our minds and bodies. . . . The buffalo was not only our food but our clothing and shelter. . . . The buffalo was everything to us." (1)

The disappearance of the buffalo seemed to mean for Plenty Coos the disappearance of the Crow culture instead of a change in that culture.

Peter Nabokov edited the biography of Chief Two Leggins. Again the story concluded shortly after the Custer Battle. Two Leggins said:

Nothing happened after that. We just lived. There were no more war parties, no capturing of horses from the Piegans and the Sioux, no buffalo to hunt. There is nothing more to tell. (2)

But ironically after the Custer Battle the lives of both Plenty Coos and Two Leggins were not even half lived. What did happen as the century turned?

At the time I started collecting historical material on the Crow Indians, very little had been written about events after the buffalo days or after the Custer Battle. Furthermore, Linderman's book was non-historical, while Nabokov's was confusing. Robert H. Lowie's book,

The Crow Indians, was of no use in history, and Mark H. Brown's history, Plainsmen of the Yellowstone, involved the Crow Indians but did not center on them. The only written Crow interpretation was Joe Medicine Crow's thesis: "The Effects of European Culture Contacts Upon the Economic, Social and Religious Life of the Crow Indians."

I would probably have never known where the bulk of documents concerning the Crow Indians lay if it had not been for Dr. Barney Old Coyote. One day he checked out some volumes for me. They were congressional hearings on the political problems which faced the Crows in the early part of the twentieth century. I hooked together a chronology based on these hearings plus the sources listed above. At this point, Barney Old Coyote talked to his mother, Mae Childs, and Joe Medicine Crow. All agreed that the turn of the century was the shortest part of the chronology. With helpful hints from Don Rickey and Robert Utley, both Governmental historians, Barney Old Coyote and I decided the exploration should begin in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

At the National Archives I had a choice of about five areas of documents on the Crows. I elected to go to the Social and Economic section where the friendly personnel pulled for me nearly every letter received in the Office of Indian Affairs between the 1880's and the 1920's. The filing system changed in 1907; this was the reason for dividing this thesis into two phases. The chapters were patterned for flexible reading.

Any Crow Indian who reads this thesis should be angry. I sought

for the Indian side to the events, but the documentary evidence defended the Government side. The only thing I uncovered was the day and sometimes the hour in which these events occurred. These dates would become more valuable when the Crows disclosed their oral traditions. Then we would have a truly "Crow" history.

The history of the Crow Indians up to the 1880's was essentially linear. Few major events occurred. During the 1880's several programs were started; thus the history fell naturally into a few topics.

The events of the nineteenth century provided the setting of the 1880's. The first treaty between the U.S. Government and the Crow Indians was signed in 1825. General Atkinson and Agent O'Fallon practically forced the Crows to sign. Chief Long Hair, representing the Mountain Crows, finally agreed to sign. The Treaty merely protected white fur trappers.

In the 1830's and 1840's the Government did not concern itself with Indians. The Indians fled from white men. The enemy was smallpox. The worst epidemic broke out in 1837; by 1840 the Crows saw bad years.

Following the epidemics the Tribe regained strength to resume war path activities. On the 17th of May, 1851, a council was held at Fort Laramie. Tom Fitzpatrick, Jim Bridger, and Robert Campbell represented the Government. Although many tribes were invited, only the Crow signed. Chief Big Shadow and Sits-on-Edge-of-Fortification represented the Crows. The Crows were asked to protect white travelers; in return the Government granted the Crows nearly 39,000,000 acres and

annuities amounting to \$50,000 per year for ten years.(3) The original treaty called for annuities to be given the Crows forever, but the Senate changed the clause in 1852.

During the Civil War the Sioux raided travelers in and near Crow territory. After the Civil War the U.S. Army turned against the Indians. Generals Sherman and Sheridan held another council at Fort Laramie. On the 7th of May, 1868, eleven Crow chiefs signed a second treaty at the Fort. The Government sought to protect the Bozeman Trail which went through Indian hunting grounds and into Crow territory. Sioux and Cheyennes raided the Crows and Shoshonis for protecting white travelers, but still Crow territory remained safe grounds for white men. In the Treaty of 1868 Crow territory was reduced to a little over 8,000,000 acres, but the land was to be reserved from all disturbances. Only by a majority of the Crow males could more land be ceded. The Government promised to build an agency, to help the Crows select land allotments, to educate the Crow children. It promised to give each Crow supplies depending upon whether the Indian worked or not. The Government also promised to send a doctor and other skilled men to the Reservation. The Treaty was signed by Pretty Bull, Wolf Bow, Mountain Tail, Black Foot, White Horse, Poor Elk, Shot in the Jaw, White Forehead, Pounded Meat, Bird in the Neck, and The Swan.(4)

In that year, 1868, most of the large tribes obtained their reservations. The Sioux, Navajos, Kiowas, Comanches, Apaches, and Shoshonis got theirs. The Cheyennes of the north did not get a

reservation. But in the early 1800's the Cheyennes, Sioux, and Arapahoes formed an alliance against other tribes. This alliance became a common enemy for both the Crows and Shoshonis; thus in 1869 the Crows and Shoshonis formed an alliance.

In the 1870's Congress discontinued recognizing treaties with Indian tribes. The Indians were no longer regarded as foreign nations; they were wards of the Government. President Ulysses S. Grant applied his Peace Policy to the Indian reservations in 1872. This Policy, which lasted until his death in 1885, attempted to regulate missionary activity on the reservations. During the Grant Peace Policy, however, the Indian wars came to a climax. The embittered Sioux alliance raided the Crow Reservation. Then in 1876 the River Crows were ordered to leave Indian territory north of the Missouri River. They went south to join the Mountain Crows on the Crow Reservation. They were attacked along the way, and when they arrived at the Agency near Absarokee, there were not enough rations. That year the Crows and Shoshonis sided with General George Crook and the U.S. Army in the Battle of Rosebud against Crazy Horse's Sioux and Two Moon's Cheyennes. The Cheyennes called them women, but in both the Battle of Rosebud and in Custer's Last Stand, or the Battle of the Little Big Horn, the Crows played a decisive role as scouts and as warriors. Some of the best Crow scouts assisted the Army in wrapping up the Sioux and Cheyennes after the Custer Battle.

The Cheyennes were sent to the Southern Cheyenne Reservation in Oklahoma. Sitting Bull and his Sioux went into Canada. In 1877 Chief

Plenty Coos and other Crows helped General Nelson Miles track down Chief Joseph's Nez Perces. In 1878 the Northern Cheyennes returned to Crow territory, and the U.S. Army attacked them early the next year. Gradually the Sioux gave up. In 1880 Spotted Eagle and Rain-in-the-Face surrendered to General Miles at Fort Keogh. In the following year Sitting Bull surrendered at Fort Bufford. Eventually the Northern Cheyennes were given a reservation at Tongue River Agency.

The Crows signed another treaty on the 12th of June, 1880, ceding the land west of the Boulder River. It was ratified as an Act on April 11, 1882. The Government offered to pay \$30,000 per year for twenty-five years for the cost of running the Crow Reservation. The Government also promised to make allotments to each Indian. The Crows permitted cattlemen to drive their herds across the Reservation.

Finally, the Act of 1882 ratified the Reservation Treaty of 1868. (5)

In 1883 a selected Senate investigating committee was sent westward to "examine" Crow grievances. There were conflicting purposes for the use of the land.

The General Manager of the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, H. Haupt, wrote from St. Paul, Minnesota to the Hon. H. L. Dawes, Chairman of the Senate Committee. Haupt said the Crow Indian territory along the Railroad could not be cultivated without irrigation, but he thought with irrigation the country "could be made exceedingly productive and lead to rapid settlement." (6)

It has been, I think clearly demonstrated that the Indian, in his present condition, is incapable of providing for himself the necessaries of life, and must either starve or be dependent upon the Government for supplies. The Government must necessarily support the Indian tribes until they can be taught to support themselves. (6)

The best way to teach the Indians how to farm was to hire whites to live among them.

There are many poor men in Massachusetts and other New England States who would be glad of the opportunity to locate for themselves homes and farms, and who are also influenced by a desire to render themselves useful in performing some missionary work. (6)

In November the Senate Committee collected testimonies at the Old Agency. Bernard Bravo interpreted the comments of Iron Bull, Two Belly, Plenty Coos, Bull Nose, Takes Wrinkle, and Thin Belly. Iron Bull was the first chief to speak: "We want the Great Father to give us cattle, and we want cows that will have young ones, and we will put them at the foot of the mountains and all along the creeks, and by the springs." (7) He did not want the Agency moved to the Little Horn River even though the eastern part of the Reservation was better suited for grazing. Two Belly expected the Government to send rations to the Indians even after they learned how to farm and raise cattle. (8)

Plenty Coos spoke next and asked the Committee if they were ignorant of the fact that the Crows had already paid for the cattle the Government should give them.

By the CHAIRMAN:

Question. How did you pay for them - Answer. We sold the Boulder country and all the timber on the creeks to pay for the cattle. I don't see any pay for all this land and for the timber, but I don't ask all the time where it is.

Q. Tell us all about it. - A. There are a great many things we have never gotten pay for, but we don't ask every day where the pay is. I think the Great Father is trying to steal the agency and carry it into the lower country. (9)

The Chairman, Dawes, said the Government wanted to pay the Crows for the land, but the problem was that the Government did not know the best way to spend the money. Plenty Coos said the money should be used to buy cattle.

All the Indians that live on the prairie and wear the breech-clout are fools, but none of the Crows are fools yet.

Q. What is the reason the Crows are not fools? - A. The reason they are not fools is because they like to live in this country, and want to go to herding cattle.

.....  
Q. Do you want to go to farming like a white man, and take care of yourself like a white man? - A. We want houses and farms along the creeks, and if the Great Father will give us cattle we will raise them, and will kill a calf once in a while and eat it with potatoes.

Q. If the Great Father gives you farms and cattle, will you want rations too? - A. Yes.

Q. Do you want the Great Father to do more for you than he does for the white man? He doesn't give both to the white man. - A. We would like to have rations all the same, because we don't know anything about farming yet.

.....  
\* Q. Would you like to live and dress just like a white man, or be like an Indian and dress like an Indian? - A. I would like to have clothes like the white man, to put on when I go to work. We are not fools. The white men killed some of my relatives in the lower country, and I have said nothing about it, but I was not asleep; and they took my horses from me in the day time, too.

Q. Who did this? - A. The white men did it over on the other side of the Little Horn in open day.

Q. The white men punish their people when they steal horses. Do Indians punish Indians when they steal the white man's horses? - A. If Indians go and steal horses we follow them and kill them, but we point our guns away from the white man when he steals horses. (9)

Bull Nose thought the Committee was trying to find faults with the Indians. But the Chairman assured him they were not. So Bull Nose said:





















































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































