

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 3: "A Cheyenne Odyssey"

Soldier Accounts of the Coming of Red Cloud's War

In these two accounts—one a letter written in 1866 and the other a reminiscence years later—U.S. army soldiers describe the escalating tensions between whites and Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe Indians that soon would erupt into Red Cloud's War (1866-68). The U.S. army had recently built forts to protect white settlers along the Bozeman Trail, a path used to reach mines in Western Montana. Army officials were sent to Fort Laramie in Summer 1866 to persuade Indian leaders to sign a treaty but met with unexpected resistance from Indians who were angry that whites had trespassed onto their land without asking permission first.

Letter from Hervey Johnson to his sister:

Fort Laramie [Dakota Territory]
June 14th 1866

Sister Abi:

As this is probably the last chance I shall have to mail a letter I thought I would improve it by writing a letter home. The new Major of the 18th Infantry arrived and took command of Fort Laramie yesterday. We moved out of the post this morning, and are camped about a mile below on the [Platte] river....The Indian treaty has not met since it adjourned. A messenger who was sent out to bring in the Cheyennes, came back with his head and face all bruised up having barely escaped with his life. It seems that the old men and most of the Chiefs are in favor of peace, but the young men are in favor of war, this is why the messenger was handled so roughly. An old Chief who was with the messenger told him when they attacked him to shoot as many as he could and then run, I dont think he retaliated at all. The general opinion is that there be war again this summer. All I ask is for them to keep civil till we get to Kearney, I wont feel safe this side of there.

Hervey

Reminiscence of William Murphy, an enlisted soldier in the 18th Infantry:

Our expedition reached Fort Laramie on June 13, in time for Colonel Carrington to participate in the council being held with Red Cloud , Man-Afraid-of-His-Horses, [sic] and other Indian chiefs to secure the Indian's consent to the construction of a road and the erection of promised forts, the Indians protesting vigorously against this.

Red Cloud made a dramatic and effective speech. He claimed that the Peace Commissioners were treating the assembled chiefs as children; that they were pretending to negotiate for a



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country which they had already taken by Conquest. He accused the Government of bad faith in all its transactions with Indian tribes.

In his harangue to the Indians he told them that the white men had crowded the Indians back year by year and forced them to live in a small country north of the Platte and now their last hunting ground, the home of their people, was to be taken from them. This meant that they and their women and children were to starve, and for his part he preferred to die fighting than by starvation.

Red Cloud promised that if the combined tribes would defend their homes they would be able to drive the soldiers out of the country. He said it might be a long war, but as they were defending their last hunting grounds they must in the end be successful.

The powwow continued for some time, until finally the hostile Sioux under Red Cloud withdrew, refusing to have any further counsel or accept any presents.

Source: William Unrau, ed. *Tending the Talking Wire: A Buck Soldier's View of Indian Country, 1863-1866*. William Murphy shared his experiences with Frances Carrington, who wrote a memoir about her life as an army officer's wife stationed on the Plains. Cited in James Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (University of Nebraska Press, 1936).