

# THE GRATATAN MASSACRE

By Lloyd E. McCann





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Article Summary: On August 19, 1854, Lieutenant John L Grattan led a force of infantrymen out from Fort Laramie for a half-day expedition to arrest a recalcitrant Indian. Before the sun went down the soldiers had met the Sioux and been defeated by them.

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Photographs / Images: James Bordeaux; diagram of the scene of action, Grattan Massacre

## THE GRATTAN MASSACRE

BY LLOYD E. McCANN

**A** CENTURY has passed since the Grattan Massacre signaled the beginning of the wars with the Plains Indians. On the afternoon of August 19, 1854, Lieutenant John L. Grattan led a force of infantrymen out from Fort Laramie for a half-day expedition to arrest a recalcitrant Indian. Before the sun went down he had met the Sioux and defeat together; his command was routed and annihilated, and the Lieutenant himself was dead.

Shocked and enraged, the American public demanded an explanation. Congress "investigated." But even today after a hundred years, students are still trying to put together the complicated story of the engagement. There were plenty of witnesses, but most of them had interests of their own to protect. Some talked as little as possible; others talked a great deal in an attempt to defend their own behavior in relation to the incident.

The Army charged that Indian perfidy was responsible. Senator Thomas Hart Benton denounced the Army. Flamboyant editors demanded a personal devil and offered up

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young Grattan as rash, imprudent, and probably drunk. Grattan's interpreter was an even more acceptable devil, for he was certainly drunk; he was abusive to the Indians; and he had probably lied to both the Indians and Lieutenant Grattan. The white traders in the area were alleged to be either cowards or traitors in league with the Indians. The Washington politicians were condemned as fools or spoils-men and probably both. But the troops were dead, and somebody had to be blamed for the disaster.

The simple outline of the events of this Grattan "massacre" has been told many times. It is more difficult to assess these events in the light of the personalities involved, the diplomatic and military complications of the story, and the whole pattern of relations with the Indians of the Great Plains. A prompt and realistic appraisal of the Grattan affair might have led to the adoption of policies which could have mitigated the intensity of the ensuing struggle with the Indians. But such was not to be had. Popular confusion and emotional bias prevented any level headed analysis of the facts—or of such facts as could be recognized through the embroidered accounts of the battle.

When westward travel over the Great Plains reached important proportions during the 1840's, the Federal Government adopted a series of measures designed to reduce friction between the emigrants and the Indian tribes and to establish some minimum controls over the peaceful activities of both. First, military posts were established at strategic points—that of Fort Laramie in 1849. These posts were garrisoned with regular army troops.

After the posts in a particular area were garrisoned, "councils"—actually diplomatic conferences—were held between the Indians and commissions representing the United States Government. The largest and most dramatic of this particular series was that held at Horse Creek near Fort Laramie in 1851. When the ceremony and palaver of this council was concluded, the Indians had agreed to a treaty of peace among the principal tribes of the area. They further agreed to permit emigrant travel over the "Holy

Road" up the Platte and over the mountains to the west. The Government agreed to make an annual payment to the Sioux in goods valued at \$50,000 per year for fifty years, to be delivered in the Fort Laramie area.

In another treaty provision, the Sioux unwillingly agreed to the appointment of a single chief over all of their bands—an institution in direct violation of all their tribal customs. The chief appointed was Mahto-Ay-Ahway, "Conquering Bear," one of the head men of the Brules.<sup>1</sup> He was personally charged with the enforcement of treaty provisions. This responsibility placed Conquering Bear as chief of the Brules in a difficult position. He was obligated to observe tribal customs and laws, and at the same time as "paper chief" of all of the Sioux he acted as an officer of the United States and was expected to enforce alien customs and treaty stipulations upon the distrustful if momentarily silent Indians.

Additional provisions established as treaty law the usual Plains custom for repayment for the property of Indians or whites seized and used by the other, known as the "Intercourse Law." These provisions were not drawn as explicitly in the Fort Laramie (Horse Creek) Treaty of 1851 as in later treaties, but their intent was clear. The terms of the treaty stated:

(Article 4) The aforesaid Indian nations do hereby agree and bind themselves to make restitution or satisfaction for any

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Salway states that at this time the Brules had two principal chiefs—Conquering Bear and Little Thunder. (Ricker Papers, No. 27, Nebraska State Historical Society. Interview by Judge E. S. Ricker with Frank Salway at the latter's home at Allen, South Dakota, November 3, 1906.) Frank Salway was a half-breed employed by P. Chouteau, Jr. and Company at their post below Fort Laramie at the time of the Grattan trouble. He was then twenty-six years of age. Subsequently he held various positions on the frontier and is noted as assistant Government farmer at Whitestone, South Dakota, about 1868. While Judge Ricker's interview with Salway took place more than fifty years after the Grattan skirmish, and the account must be read critically, it is none the less remarkable for both its faithfulness to facts established in the investigations following the battle and for the corroboration which it gives to the deposition of J. B. Didier (later referred to herein) and other documentary accounts not presented in the 1854-55 investigations. [Variant spellings of Salway's name exist; e.g., Ricker spells the name Salaway and Saloway.]

wrongs committed after the ratification of this treaty by any band or individual of their people on the people of the United States while lawfully residing in or passing through their respective territories.

(Article 8) It is agreed and understood that should any of the Indian nations, party to this treaty, violate any of the provisions thereof, the United States may withhold the whole or a portion of the annuities mentioned in the preceding Article from the nation so offending, until, in the opinion of the President of the United States, proper satisfaction shall have been made . . .<sup>2</sup>

The provisions of the treaty were accepted and signed by the Brule and Miniconjou bands of the Sioux and by others not involved in the Grattan affair. However, the Oglala band of the Sioux refused to sign. When the treaty reached the United States Senate, that body arbitrarily reduced the term of the treaty to ten years, and then returned it for further discussion with the Indian tribes.<sup>3</sup> Congress, nevertheless, for several years made the appropriations stipulated in the treaty, and the Oglalas regularly accepted their share of the treaty goods.

The peace which reigned on the prairies following the Horse Creek Council was an uneasy one. There was no disposition toward open warfare, but several Indians were killed in an unpleasant incident over a ferryboat at Fort Laramie,<sup>4</sup> and there were Indian raids on the horse herds of the whites.<sup>5</sup> None of these incidents seems to have been taken very seriously by either responsible white officers or by the Indians.

Meanwhile the contracts for the annuity distribution of 1854 were let regularly to Messrs. Baker and Street, and the goods were delivered to the Fort Laramie area. The Indian Agent for the Platte Agency, Major J. W. Whitfield,

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<sup>2</sup> Charles J. Kappler, *Indian Affairs, Laws, and Treaties* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), II, 594 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Letter, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Indian Agent, to A. Cuming, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, November 19, 1853, *House Executive Documents*, 1st Session, 33rd Congress, Document No. 1, Report No. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Bandel, *Frontier Life in the Army, 1854-1861*, ed. by R. P. Bieber (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1932).

<sup>5</sup> Letter, Charles Page to Bvt. Lt. Col. W. Hoffman, May 28, 1855, *Senate Executive Documents*, 1st and 2nd Sessions, 34th Congress, Document No. 91, p. 11 ff.



James Bordeaux

had not arrived, so the goods were unloaded and stored in one of the warehouses at the trading post known as the "Gratiot Houses."

The Indians began to assemble through late July and early August in expectation of the annuity issue. An estimated six hundred lodges occupied the valley for several miles east of Fort Laramie. The Oglalas (with certain Northern Cheyennes and their white traders as guests) camped in a broad bend of the valley just below the Gratiot Houses. Next stood the camp circle of the Miniconjous, and the Brule camp (including several lodges of guest Miniconjous) was farthest east. The Brule camp was just above Sarpy's Point where James Bordeaux had built a trading post and stockade.<sup>6</sup>

From the standpoint of military strategy, this annual congregation of the Sioux in the North Platte Valley was

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<sup>6</sup> This was the post of P. Chouteau, Jr. and Company, successors to the American Fur Company. After selling Fort Laramie to the Army in 1849, this company built a new trading post near the North Platte River about five miles below Fort Laramie. The company named this post Fort John, but it was known locally as the "Gratiot Houses" from the fact that J. P. B. Gratiot was the company's trader at that time.

The probable site of this post is located a few rods from the bank of the North Platte River about a quarter of a mile east of the present headgates of the Grattan Irrigation Ditch. While no buildings remain on this site, enough debris can still be found on an area of several acres to establish the location of "a" trading post. Many statements in contemporary documents refer to the post during the period between 1849 and 1867 (when some of the buildings were burned) and to its several owners, which in addition to the founders include also G. P. Beauvais, and Cuny and Coffey.

<sup>7</sup> James Bordeaux was a short, swarthy trader of French extraction. He was born in 1812, and would thus have been about forty-two years of age at the time of the Grattan fight. He was closely associated with the American Fur Company and its successors and was acting bourgeois at Fort Laramie when Parkman visited it in 1846. (See Francis Parkman, *Oregon Trail*, Chapters IX, X, XIX.) Various accounts picture him as lacking in physical courage, talkative, and clever. [Variant spellings of Bordeaux occur, with and without the final "x." James Bordeaux' daughter, Mrs. Susan Bordeaux Bettelyoun, retains the "x" in her surname]. Bordeaux was married to the sister of the Brule warrior, Swift Bear, who represented the tribe at many of the later councils. Swift Bear and other Indian relatives of Mrs. Bordeaux were camped at the Bordeaux trading post at the time of the Grattan affair. Also at the post were Bordeaux' clerk, Samuel Smith, and a half-dozen other white traders and employees of Bordeaux.



highly dangerous. It permitted the concentration of all the warmaking potential of the tribes in a position to offer opposition to the feeble garrison at Fort Laramie. And the situation increased in danger as the distribution of the annuity goods was delayed. As the Indians waited day after day their pony herds devoured the best grazing and had to be driven farther and farther to find good grass. The hunters, too, had to range farther for game for the cooking pots. The Indians were peaceful, but they were impatient and hungry. Then came the Mormon cow.

According to the first accounts of the affair, a party of Mormon emigrants was heading up the valley past the Indian camps on the afternoon of August 18, 1854. The members of the party were largely Danish immigrants who had been converted to the Mormon faith and were on their way to the settlements in Utah.<sup>8</sup> One sore-footed old cow lagged behind. When one of the immigrants started to drive her up to the wagon train, she broke away and fled into the circle of the Brule lodges. A Miniconjou named High Forehead was visiting in the Brule camp. He shot the cow, invited in his hungry friends, and in the feast-or-famine Indian way they ate the meat.<sup>9</sup>

Conquering Bear and the other Brule head men of course recognized the possible seriousness of this attack upon emigrant property, even though some of them had probably helped enjoy the feast. Conquering Bear hurried to Fort Laramie to carry out the Indian obligation to pay

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<sup>8</sup> *Deseret News*, September 28, 1854.

<sup>9</sup> This is not the only story. As the frontiersmen often told it, the party abandoned the cow along the road. High Forehead came upon the critter lying down and shot her. James Bordeaux' daughter, Mrs. Susan Bordeaux Bettelyoun, quotes her father as saying to Grattan when he came to arrest High Forehead, "Why don't you let the old cow go. It was laying there without food or water and would soon die; it was too lame to walk; its feet [*sic*] was worn through to the flesh. It was shot by some boys who wanted a piece of skin." (Bettelyoun Ms., Nebraska State Historical Society). This account varies from Bordeaux' own deposition made shortly after the battle. Mrs. Bettelyoun was born in 1857 and is, of course, only reporting the story as she had heard it. Both her account and other frontier versions serve to emphasize the pioneer feeling that the cow was in fact worthless and that the battle resulted from larcenous demands by the emigrants and the poor judgment of the military.

for the cow as provided in the Intercourse clause. The emigrants demanded a good price for the animal. Lt. Hugh B. Fleming, then in command of the post, appeared to regard the affair as a trivial matter,<sup>10</sup> but no decision was reached on how to handle it, even though Conquering Bear offered a horse in payment for the cow.<sup>11</sup>

The Indians appear to have counseled seriously about how to compose the matter during the night and early morning. Finally the trusted and respected Oglala chief, Man Afraid of His Horses, went to the fort to confer with the post commander. A visiting Crow Indian accompanied him. Man Afraid's visit was probably intended as a conciliatory gesture by the Sioux. It was unrecognized as such by the post officers who appear to have regarded him as "just another Indian"—possibly a spy. Man Afraid seems to have been a badly frightened and ineffective ambassador.

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<sup>10</sup> Lieutenant Fleming was a young officer who had been graduated from West Point Military Academy in 1852. He had served at Fort Laramie under officers well experienced in handling Indians, and in the summer of 1853 had commanded the expedition against the Miniconjous at the time of the ferry boat incident. He was otherwise inexperienced when left in command of Fort Laramie. His conduct throughout the Grattan episode does not reflect particular credit upon him. He allowed himself to be persuaded to order the arrest of an Indian for a trivial offense and in excess of his authority under existing treaties. He entrusted an unfledged second lieutenant with broad discretionary powers in the delicate task of making the arrest. He authorized a detail of twenty men, and then apparently neglected to inspect the detail to learn that thirty men were taken—some of them perhaps with inappropriate arms. After his comrades were killed in the battle, he shut himself inside the post and asked civilians to bury the dead.

<sup>11</sup> Although prices for animals fluctuated widely from time to time at frontier posts, this apparently was a generous offer. One emigrant reports, "July 13, 1851. Passed a half-breed and Sioux trading post [east of Fort Laramie] where money is made by picking up lame stock or buying it cheaply and then selling or trading again. Their price is \$4.00 to \$10.00 for cattle; and \$1.00 for a sheep if it is fat." (Dr. Thomas Flint, *Diary*, 1851-1855 [Los Angeles: Historical Society of California, 1923]). Another states, "Exorbitant prices were demanded for mules or horses. As an illustration, Mr. D. Hoover of Dalton gave a pretty good horse and seventy-five dollars for a rather indifferent mule." (George Keller, *A Trip Across the Plains* [Marshalltown, Ia.: White's Press, 1851]). James Bordeaux' claim for losses sustained following the Grattan fight quotes a price of \$40.00 for cows and \$100.00 for horses. (James Bordeaux, Claim, filed in St. Louis, Missouri, December 20, 1855. Chouteau Miscellany, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri).

Meanwhile Lieutenant Grattan was eagerly seeking permission to go after the offending Indian.<sup>12</sup> Grattan had been at Fort Laramie for about a year. He had appeared to be a rather boisterous, swash-buckling youth, anxious for a notch on his gun. He could be reasonable and generous with individual Indians, but felt that any Indian misdemeanor should be met with firmness and severity. He openly derided the caution displayed by the troops in dealing with the Indians. He had previously convinced Fleming that he was entitled to command the next field expedition, and when a detail was considered to arrest the cow-killer, Grattan supported the proposal and claimed the opportunity to command.<sup>13</sup>

Fleming finally authorized the expedition, telling Grattan, "to receive the offender, and in case of refusal to give him up, after ascertaining the disposition of the Indians, to act upon his own discretion, and to be careful not to hazard an engagement without certainty of success."<sup>14</sup>

In making up the detachment, Grattan ignored the duty roster, if in fact one was in use, and called for "volunteers for perilous service."<sup>15</sup> He accepted Sgt. William Faver, Cpl. Charles McNulty, twenty-five privates, and two musicians, who together with the interpreter, Lucien Auguste, made up the party.<sup>16</sup> He arranged for a wagon to

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<sup>12</sup> John L. Grattan was the son of Peter Grattan. He was born in Vermont and appointed to the West Point Military Academy from New Hampshire. Upon graduation in 1853 he was given a brevet commission and assigned to duty with Company G, Sixth Infantry, at Fort Laramie while awaiting an army vacancy which would make possible his commission as a regular army officer. He was twenty-four years of age when he was killed.

<sup>13</sup> Letter, Bvt. Lt. Col. William Hoffman to Col. S. Cooper, Adjutant General of the United States Army, October 11, 1855, *Senate Executive Documents*, 1st and 2nd Sessions, 34th Congress, Document No. 91, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Letter, 2nd Lt. Hugh B. Fleming to Bvt. Lt. Col. William Hoffman, November 19, 1854, *Senate Executive Documents*, 1st and 2nd Sessions, 34th Congress, Document No. 91, pp. 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> Letter, Capt. Ed. Johnson to Bvt. Lt. Col. William Hoffman, October 10, 1855, *Senate Executive Documents*, 1st and 2nd Sessions, 34th Congress, Document No. 91, pp. 2-26. Note that Captain Johnson gives a slightly different account of Fleming's orders to Grattan.

<sup>16</sup> Annual Returns of Casualties in the 6th Infantry, 1854, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

provide transportation for the unmounted troops. With the detachment he took two mounted cannon—a twelve pound mountain gun and a twelve pound howitzer.

There was a great deal of flurry and confusion in preparing for the expedition. Several observers mention the excited condition of Lieutenant Grattan. The greatest detail is furnished by Man Afraid of His Horses in his account of the battle obtained in the subsequent investigation. Man Afraid states:

I was encamped at Bissonette's at the time of the first occurrence, heard of the close proximity of the Agent, and moved down to the Ogallala camp. They and the Brule were encamped close together. When I got there they told me that a Minniconjou had killed an emigrant's cow. I went to Bordeaux's with a Crow Indian. The clerk gave a paper to the Crow to go to the fort. I [went to the] fort with the Crow. We came to the fort and the commanding officer was asleep. We sat in the store some time when he came in and the Crow gave him the paper. He then gave the Crow some provisions and gave me some also. The Officer then took out a large paper and was looking at it a long time and mentioned my name and the Interpreter who was there pointed me out to him. He then turned to me and asked why I had not told my name when I came in, for had he known me he would have given me more provisions. He told me to look for the arrival of the agent, as he was close. After he said this to me he looked at the paper the Crow had given him and while looking at it two men came in a great hurry and gave him another paper. He read it and I heard him say "Minniconjou." The interpreter asked me if I knew of a cow having been killed. At first I said No, but then recollected that a cow had been killed. I then said "Yes I have heard of a cow having been killed by a Minniconjou Indian." The officer then went out and I saw him go to the big house [Old Bedlam?]. He then came back to the store and talked very loud. I do not understand English and do not know what he said.

The young officer [Mr. Grattan] then went to the Soldier's House and the next thing I saw was a wagon go over to the Adobe Fort and next saw the soldiers draw a cannon out of the fort. I went out of the store and stood by the cannon and saw the soldiers taking a great many things out of the house. Then I saw them clean out the cannon preparing to load it. The officer then went to the store and talked very loud.

The interpreter said to me, "It is my place to do as the Captain tells me and I suppose the Sioux will want to kill me or think hard of me that they were going to get the Indian who had killed the cow." The officers then said to me, "I will give the Bear forty soldiers today." [He said] that the Bear had been chief of the Sioux for three years and had always done something foolish. I then told the

commanding officer I would go, but he said to me, "No, do not go. If you get there and tell the news, the Indian who killed the cow will run off," and to let the soldiers go first and then for me to go afterward. The two officers talked a great deal together. The wind was blowing very hard at this time. The interpreter said to me that he believed that he had to die. At this time the young officer was playfully sticking at the interpreter with his sword, telling him to make haste. The interpreter said to me, "I am ready but must have something to drink before I die." They gave him a bottle and he drank.

By this time his horse was saddled for him. The horse belonged to the storekeeper. I said to the officer, "You had better not go tonight, that there are a great many Sioux." The officer said to me, "Yes, that is good." The wagon and cannons by this time had crossed the river. I started to go to the river and the interpreter called me. The officer, interpreter, and one white man who was not a soldier and myself started together and went ahead. When we got on the hill I told the officer that there was a heap of lodges, but he said it was good as he was going to war to them. He told me if any other Indians wanted to interfere for me to tell them to stay to one side. We then got in sight of the lodges. I told him again, "Look my friend, you not see a heap of lodges?" By this time the interpreter was drunk and was talking a great deal. He said the soldiers had killed three Minniconjous last summer, and that all the Sioux were women. He was drinking all along the road. Did not see the officer drink on the road. The soldiers in the wagon were drinking out of a bottle. By this time they were in a fullness. . . . We got to Gratiot's houses and all the soldiers went in. Some whites who were in the house came out and asked me what was the matter. I said to them that they were white and for them to ask the soldiers. The soldiers came out of the house and some loaded their guns and fixed bayonets. I went into a lodge. Interpreter and the officer called me out and said that the Ogallalas had nothing to do with this business. "We are going to the Bear's camp as the Minniconjous are camped with him, and we will ask the Bear for the Indian and we will get him . . ."<sup>17</sup>

The command had left Fort Laramie between two and three o'clock in the afternoon, crossed the new bridge over

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<sup>17</sup> This narrative of Man Afraid of His Horses is in the National Archives. There is no indication on the manuscript as to who took the statement and transcribed it, who acted as interpreter, or who were the witnesses. The statement is not dated, but was accessioned in the Department of the West, February 13, 1855. It may have been made early in October, 1854, since Capt. Ed Johnson's letter of October 10 refers to Man Afraid's account of the Grattan trouble and contains some of the same information. The document must be interpreted cautiously, with due regard for the ordinary difficulties of translation and transcription, the use of figurative Indian language, Man Afraid's evident confusion of the sequence of events, and his apparent intention to tell a story favorable to himself. However, the account does corroborate important statements made by other witnesses and gives considerable additional detail.

the Laramie River, and followed the Oregon Trail up over the bluffs and down again into the North Platte Valley. At ordinary traveling rates they would have arrived at the Gratiot Houses between four and five o'clock.<sup>18</sup> Here the detachment stopped for a break. The afternoon dust-and-thunder storm to which Man Afraid refers was apparently over, since Obridge Allen left his overcoat with the post trader. Auguste, the intoxicated interpreter, seized upon the opportunity to race his horse up and down, brandishing his revolver at the Indians visiting at Gratiot's and hurling all of the standard insults at the Indians. The Sioux, he implied, didn't have enough sense to believe what they were told, "But the soldiers will give them a new set of ears."<sup>19</sup>

Although Grattan protested vigorously, Auguste paid little attention to him. The enlisted men were irritated and nervous. Frank Salway reports that one infantryman complained that, "They are drunk and we will all get killed; it is a piece of foolishness anyway."<sup>20</sup>

Before leaving the Gratiot Houses, Grattan ordered his men to load their pieces but not to cap them for firing.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The traveling speed of the artillery, as the slowest moving units, would have determined the traveling rate of the expedition. Roberts states in this connection, "Horses starting fresh and resting after their work may, on tolerable roads, perform 2 miles in half an hour; 4 miles in 1½ hours; 8 in 4, and 16 in 10 hours." (Joseph Roberts, *Handbooks of Artillery for the Service of the United States* [New York, 1860], p. 153.)

<sup>19</sup> Salway, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Statement of Obridge Allen. Allen was a professional emigrant guide of good reputation who had arrived at Fort Laramie on August 18, the day before the battle. Later he prepared Allen's *Guide Book and Map to the Gold Fields of Kansas and Nebraska, and Great Salt Lake* (Washington, 1859). Allen accompanied Grattan's expedition from Fort Laramie as far as Bordeaux' trading post, and watched the battle from the post. Subsequently he made two formal statements regarding the battle, both of which were submitted to Congress. The first (hereafter referred to as Allen, Statement I) was not dated or otherwise identified. It is printed in *House Executive Documents*, 2nd Session, 33rd Congress, Document No. 63, p. 8 ff. The second statement (referred to as Allen, Statement II) was submitted by Bvt. Lt. Col. William Hoffman (post commander at Fort Laramie succeeding Lieutenant Fleming) on November 19, 1854. Statement II is printed as *House Executive Documents*, 2nd Session, 33rd Congress, Document 65, p. 20 ff. Both of Allen's statements describe Grattan's actions at the Gratiot Houses.

Auguste seems to have obtained more whisky at Gratiot's, and Grattan took a bottle containing about a half-pint from him and destroyed it.

The Oregon Trail ascends to the upper bench of the North Platte River Valley just east of the Gratiot site. From this point it was again possible for the troops to see the encampment of the Oglalas. Grattan paused here to estimate the situation and issue orders for the conduct of the troops on the expedition.<sup>22</sup> Sgt. William Faver was designated as second in command. Grattan detailed the men for the gun crews and undertook to act as gunner for one howitzer himself. He stated the purpose of the expedition and announced his determination to take the offending Indian even if he (Grattan) died in the effort. He cautioned the men not to fire until ordered, but Allen stated that Grattan said, "When I give the order you may fire as much as you damned please." He told them he didn't believe a gun would be fired, but he "Hoped to God they would have a fight."<sup>23</sup>

As the cavalcade passed the Oglala camp, Grattan relayed an order to this band "not to leave their camp; if they did he would crack it to them."<sup>24</sup> After the troops had moved on a half mile or so the experienced Obridge Allen rode up to Grattan and pointed out that the Oglalas had begun driving in their pony herds—typical Indian preparation for battle. Grattan ignored this information, and the expedition continued on its way.

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<sup>22</sup> Allen, Statement II, refers to three incidents on the march between the Gratiot Houses and Bordeaux' trading post: (1) a reconnaissance of the military situation and issuance of battle orders "just below the [Gratiot] house . . .," (2) the order for the Oglalas not to leave their camp; and (3) Allen's observation regarding the pony herds. In Statement I, Allen refers only to the reconnaissance and conference which he then says took place about two miles below the Gratiot Houses. George M. Hyde (*Red Cloud's Folk* [Norman, Okla., 1937], p. 73) suggests that the reconnaissance may have been taken from a spur of hills on the Oregon Trail. There is a prominent bluff near which the wagon road passed east of the Gratiot post, and it is possible that Grattan may have taken his command to its summit to look over the valley. In any case the troops had both time and opportunity to make an adequate military estimate of the situation.

<sup>23</sup> Allen, Statement II.

<sup>24</sup> Allen, Statement II. See also Man Afraid's statement, *supra*. Man Afraid also reports a ridiculous incident in which Grattan and Auguste helped him catch a fresh pony to replace the tired one he was riding.

The emigrant road descended from the valley bench to the lower ground about a quarter of a mile or so from the site of Bordeaux' trading post. Here the detachment left the road and approached the cabins and corrals at Bordeaux' establishment. Grattan told Bordeaux the object of his mission and asked that Conquering Bear be sent for.

Meanwhile the assembled Indians and traders provided another good audience for Auguste, and the interpreter resumed his abuse of the Indians. He told them the Sioux were all women; he would have them all killed; he would eat their hearts before sundown. Once again he began running his horse up and down as the Indians did before a fight to give horses their "second wind," and at the same time he continued waving his pistol and giving war whoops. Bordeaux knew that such actions aroused suspicion and resentment among the Indians and could easily provoke a fight. He also knew that any fighting at all might result in an Indian attack upon all the whites in the valley. Bordeaux stated in one account that:

I told him [Grattan] that he [Auguste] would make trouble and that if he would put him in my house I would settle the difficulty in thirty minutes. He said he would stop him. He told him several times to stop, but he did not mind him.<sup>25</sup>

In a few minutes Conquering Bear arrived, accompanied by Little Thunder, Big Partisan, and Man Afraid of His Horses. Grattan told them that he had come to take High Forehead, the Indian who had killed the cow, back to the fort. Man Afraid reports, "The Bear said to me, 'You are a brave, what do you think of it?' I said to him, 'You are the chief. What do you think?'"<sup>26</sup> Conquering Bear explained to Grattan that High Forehead was a guest in his village and not subject to his authority. High Forehead re-

<sup>25</sup> James Bordeaux, like Obridge Allen, made two statements. The quotations in the present account are from the second statement dated November 19, 1854, and published in *House Executive Documents*, 2nd Session, 33rd Congress, Document No. 63, p. 24 ff. Bordeaux' other statement is undated. It is published in *House Executive Documents*, 2nd Session, 33rd Congress, Document No. 63, p. 12 ff.

<sup>26</sup> Man Afraid of His Horses, *op. cit.* This effort of Conquering Bear to "throw his rank" on Man Afraid illustrates how petty jealousies and the necessity for maintaining status influenced Indian actions throughout the discussions and the fighting afterward.



fused to submit, saying that he preferred to die where he was. New offers were made of ponies to pay for the cow, and Grattan was urged to delay action until the Indian agent should arrive. Grattan refused all of the suggestions. Finally the Lieutenant decided that some greater show of force was necessary. He ordered the command to cap their pieces and announced that he would move his troops into the Brule camp circle and go himself to High Forehead's lodge.

The traders and friendly Indians present shook their heads. Bordeaux testified that,

Grattan said that he was very determined to go to the lodge. I told him that he was going into a very bad place and that he had better prepare himself well. He said he had two revolvers with twelve shots. I told him to take them out of his holsters and be ready.<sup>27</sup>

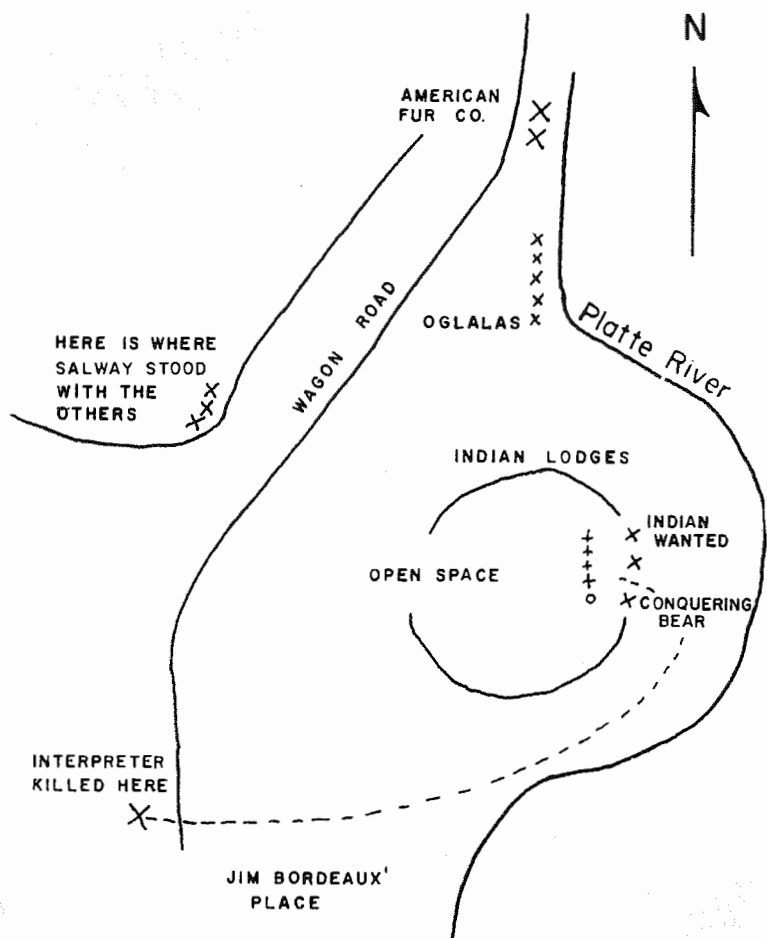
Grattan then marched the command into the Brule camp about three hundred yards distant. Conquering Bear accompanied him, mounted double behind Auguste on the latter's horse. Little Thunder, Man Afraid, and other Indians trailed along. Obridge Allen and the white traders, however, remained at Bordeaux' post .

The Brule camp circle was located on the flat land below the valley bench in the neighborhood of the dry creek which Allen describes as running through the camp.<sup>28</sup> The lodge of Conquering Bear stood on the bank of the dry creek, and two Miniconjou lodges stood to the left of it, separated by a little space. High Forehead occupied the most remote lodge. Grattan halted his command about sixty yards from the

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<sup>27</sup> Bordeaux, Statement II.

<sup>28</sup> See Frank Salway's sketch of the battle site on page 15. This sketch was not prepared until the time of Judge Ricker's interview with Salway, but it is the only sketch known to have been made by an eyewitness to the battle.



Diagram, scene of action, Grattan Massacre, adapted from a sketch made by an eye witness, Frank Salway, and recorded by Judge E. S. Ricker in 1906.

lodges, primed and aimed the howitzers in the general direction of Conquering Bear's lodge, and disposed his men in a line on either side of the two cannon.<sup>29</sup>

Then another conference was held between Grattan and Conquering Bear, Little Thunder, and other head men of the Brules. The only survivors of the conference were Indians; hence what was said is known only from the accounts of Man Afraid and other Indians. Salway and his friends were watching the proceedings from the eminence near the Oregon road, almost a half mile from the Brules.<sup>30</sup> The white men at Bordeaux' had climbed to the roofs of the buildings to watch the happenings from there. Bordeaux himself, badly frightened and convinced that trouble was imminent, was scurrying about in preparation for defense, climbing to the roof to watch the camp also, and receiving Indian messengers.

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<sup>29</sup> The action from this point must be interpreted in consideration of the terrain and the positions taken by the battle participants. It is difficult to identify these exact positions today, since cultivation and land-leveling operations incident to irrigation have reduced or obliterated those few features of the site mentioned in the contemporary accounts of the battle. The site of the cairn where the bodies of the soldiers were buried is known, and the probable site of Bordeaux' post can be established from debris still to be found in the soil and from early surveyor's notes. The principal route of the emigrant wagon road can be located, and the hill from which Salway watched the battle can be identified from his sketch. Perhaps two hundred yards west of the Bordeaux site is the rather abrupt break from the valley bench to the flood plain of the North Platte. This break extends irregularly northwest, then bends sharply west. The burial cairn was on the valley bench near the break but somewhat west of the angle formed by the break's change in direction. A dry creek containing a few water holes runs eastward along the western edge of the bench, bends in an "S," and turns toward the south just east of the Bordeaux site. Somewhere in the battle area was a spring from which Bordeaux secured his water supply. This does not appear to have been a water hole in the creek, at least according to Susan Bettelyoun's account. If the spring was in fact a water hole, it may rather have been in the low, swampy ground found today just below the bench and generally west of the Bordeaux site. The break between the flood plain and the bench is today overgrown with buck brush, wild roses, and similar low bushes. At a few points there are chokecherries and wild plum trees.

<sup>30</sup> According to Frank Salway's account, a party consisting of Salway, Charles Gareau (the Gratiot interpreter) and a number of other Gratiot employees had followed Grattan down the valley. They stopped on an eminence of ground not far from Bordeaux' post where they could watch the events at both Bordeaux' and the Brule camp where the fighting started. One member of the party had a spy glass which they used in observing the events that took place.

The talk lasted for about three-quarters of an hour. High Forehead stood at the door of his lodge and told Grattan by messenger that while he would not be arrested, he was willing to die. He complained bitterly of the way the white men had treated his friends. If Grattan thought he must take High Forehead, then he should take him by force. The Indian would fight Grattan alone until he died.<sup>31</sup> Conquering Bear and Man Afraid alternated between urging High Forehead to give up and Grattan to postpone the matter. Conquering Bear offered the Lieutenant a mule in place of the cow if the Lieutenant would only "cover up" the trouble until the Indian agent should come.<sup>32</sup> All of the Indians distrusted Auguste's translation of what was said.

While this conference proceeded, Red Cloud and other impetuous young warriors streamed down from the Oglala camp in defiance of Grattan's orders.<sup>33</sup> Their objective, they told their elders, was to watch the proceedings and restrain the Brules from provocative acts, but here and there on the valley plain they were shouting and racing their horses, just as Auguste had done earlier. The frightened Brule squaws took the children and fled from the camp toward the North Platte, leaving an unfamiliar quiet in the camp behind them.

Meanwhile a body of Indians crept quietly up the creek bed to a bend on the left flank of Grattan's line of troops and there concealed themselves in the wild roses and brush. Behind the plum and willow thickets on the remote bank of the creek, hundreds of mounted Brules gathered to don their feathered war bonnets, paint for battle, and wait.

All of this could be seen by the observers at Bordeaux' stockade and was likely known to Grattan also. The Lieu-

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<sup>31</sup> Man Afraid of His Horses, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> Capt. Ed. Johnson, *op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> Several accounts mention the actions of Oglala warriors in the Grattan fight. Red Cloud himself admitted being present at the battle "where thirty were killed . . . when Conquering Bear was assassinated by the drunken lieutenant's orders." (Ricker Papers, No. 25, Nebraska State Historical Society. Interview by Judge E. S. Ricker with Red Cloud at Pine Ridge, South Dakota, November 24, 1906).

tenant, however, could possibly have underestimated the number of Indians involved, and he may have regarded this standing-off as an indication that most of the Indians were afraid and only a few were stubborn.

After the conference had been in progress for about twenty minutes Man Afraid came to Bordeaux asking him to come and replace Auguste so that the lies and insults of the latter would not bring on a fight. "My friend, come on," Bordeaux reports him as saying, "The interpreter is going to get us into a fight and they are going to fight if you don't come."<sup>34</sup> Bordeaux mounted Allen's horse but complained that the stirrups were too long and turned back. Later, Man Afraid came to Bordeaux a second time and persuaded the trader to follow him toward the Brule camp.<sup>35</sup>

At about this time the frustrated Grattan broke off the parley and moved toward the troops, giving a command that the Indians did not understand. Conquering Bear strode toward his own lodge. Two or three shots were fired, and an Indian was hit.<sup>36</sup> Bordeaux was then near enough to hear the chiefs shout to the warriors not to fire—that perhaps this was just a shot to protect the honor of the troops and they would leave since they had wounded a good man. Bordeaux fled to his trading post.

But Grattan was now convinced of the need for a demonstration, and ordered the infantry to fire a volley.

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<sup>34</sup> Bordeaux, Statement II.

<sup>35</sup> Allen (Statement I), Bordeaux (Statement II), Johnson (Letter of October 10, 1854), and Man Afraid (*op. cit.*) all mention these frantic efforts by Man Afraid to get Bordeaux to replace Auguste as interpreter at the conference.

<sup>36</sup> Man Afraid states that the conversation became increasingly bitter as the parley continued. He reports, "The Bear said it was hard as it was a poor cow and that today the soldiers had made him ashamed that he was made chief by the whites and today you come to my village and plant your big guns . . . For all I tell you you will not hear me. I would strike you were I not a chief. But as I am chief and am made so by the whites will not do it." "I (Man Afraid) said to the Bear, you are talking very bad . . . Today you are acting the fool." Man Afraid states that he was with the soldiers when the fighting started. The Brules shot at him also but did not hit him. He indicates that there was more talking for a few minutes between the first shots and the start of the vigorous fighting.

This time Conquering Bear went down, mortally wounded. Arrows began to fly from the bowmen on the flank. Grattan then fired the mountain howitzer and afterwards the twelve pounder, but the canister charges whistled harmlessly through the conical peaks of the Brule lodges.<sup>37</sup> Then Grattan himself fell, struck by Indian arrows, unable at the last to use the twelve shots he had reserved to defend himself.

Grattan had not prepared for an Indian attack upon his position, and his terrified command scattered in panic. As the first shots were fired, Auguste fled through the Brule camp, followed by the soldier who had been holding Grattan's horse. Once through the circle of tipis, they swerved to the right to avoid the mounted Sioux horsemen gathered behind the bushes and galloped toward Bordeaux' stockade. They didn't stop there—possibly they were warned away by the traders and Indians at Bordeaux—but dashed on toward the Oregon road. Here they were met by mounted Indians who crippled their mounts and shot both men.

The soldiers began a retreat toward the wagon road leading to Fort Laramie. Pvt. John Williams with excited mules dashed for the wagon road with the limber for the larger howitzer and of course the ammunition supply for the cannon. Grattan and two others were dead at the guns. Three wounded soldiers were helped into the wagon by their comrades, and the wagon broke for the road. Another wounded soldier clung to the tailgate of the wagon for a few yards. Then he was again struck by arrows and killed. Both the wagon and the gun limber were chased by the mounted Brules. The vehicles were overtaken, and the soldiers were wiped out near the wagon road.

The remaining infantrymen started to follow the wagon, but when they were quickly outdistanced, they rallied—probably in a shallow depression near Bordeaux' spring. The uneven ground hid a badly wounded soldier

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<sup>37</sup> See the speech of Thomas Hart Benton in the House of Representatives, February 27, 1855. (Appendix to *Congressional Globe*, 2nd Session, 33rd Congress, New Series, XXXI, 334-341.)

from the view of the Indians, and he dropped into the rosebushes and crawled away into concealment.<sup>38</sup>

Few of the Indians had guns, and a rifle outranges the Indian bow. Thus the troops were able to withdraw slowly, up over the bench rim toward a rocky hill more than a half mile away where a stand might be made. The Brules harassed them continuously, but the slow fire of the soldiers kept the Indians at a distance. The troops lost a man occasionally as the mounted warriors dashed in for a shot and then back again out of range. Apparently the Indians suffered little.

Eventually the soldiers had to leave the broken ground and cross a level area where horsemen could maneuver to advantage. Here they were charged by the whooping Oglalas in a typical flank movement of cavalry. Lance, swinging tomahawk, and pony hoofs broke the formation, and the last of the soldiers were wiped out.

The furious redskins of course made the most of counting coups, firing arrows into the prostrate soldiers, and mutilating the bodies. The body of Grattan was found with twenty-four arrows through it—one arrow going completely through his head. He could be identified only by his pocket watch.

Salway and his friends apparently retired before the fighting came near their observation point, although no account tells of their withdrawal. Man Afraid rejoined a group of Oglala tribesmen who remained out of the battle. Bordeaux rushed about trying to complete his preparations for defense. These were hardly finished when the Indians charged his cabins shouting that they would kill all of the

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<sup>38</sup> Bordeaux, Allen, and Susan Bettelyoun all mention the wounded soldier. Mrs. Bettelyoun states, "He got away by running under the hill near the spring where we got our water. He hid in among the rosebushes. My uncle, Swift Bear, found the wounded man and brought him in." (Bettelyoun Ms., Nebraska State Historical Society). He was concealed until the following day when he was returned to the fort. He died August 21 without giving any account of the battle. He is identified as Pvt. John Cuddy by the Annual Returns of Fort Laramie for 1854 (in the National Archives).

whites. One man was about to shoot an Indian when the trader Reynal knocked the gun out of line.<sup>39</sup>

Threats were made to attack the installations at Fort Laramie, where the Indians knew that a number of soldiers were out on a hay detail, and only a handful of soldiers were on duty. Bordeaux, supported by Swift Bear, Man Afraid, and other friendly Indians, vigorously discouraged this. He pointed out that the Great Father would see that the soldiers had been partly at fault and would forgive the Indians for their battle with the troops, but would not forget any attack on the fort. Little Thunder, now nominally head of the Brules, and other Brule head men recognized the probable wisdom of this and were able to restrain the proposed attack. Sundown was approaching, and with it the danger of immediate attack on other objectives diminished.

As soon as the fighting started the Brule squaws began to strike the lodges, and by the time it was over some of them had already begun a helter-skelter flight across the North Platte. The next morning they withdrew to the neighborhood of Rawhide Creek eight or ten miles to the northeast where they set up a temporary camp. The Oglalas also fled across the North Platte.

During the early hours of the night the Indians continued to press Bordeaux for presents of most of the goods on his shelves. They also despoiled him of most of his beef herd and some of his horses.<sup>40</sup> The discovery of the wounded soldier produced further excitement. There was more or less commotion throughout the night.

The next morning (August 20) the Indians returned and attacked the Gratiot Houses. They seized the annuity goods which they knew they could not now claim under the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851. Parties of Indians were

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<sup>39</sup>Reynal was one of the seven men who subscribed to Bordeaux' Statement I. This was no doubt the same Antoine Reynal, a trader with the Oglalas, who was Francis Parkman's host for a time on the latter's trip in 1846. See Parkman's *Oregon Trail*, Chapters X-XII, XIV-XIX.

<sup>40</sup>Bordeaux, Claim, *loc. cit.*



ranging throughout the valley, and the villages were still excited and confused.

On the day following (August 21) the Indians again returned and demanded the goods belonging to the Chouteau traders at the Gratiot Houses. Gratiot had been absent from the post for some time, and the establishment was in charge of the regular clerk, John B. Didier. Didier gives a graphic account of the raid in his deposition supporting a claim against the Federal Government for property taken and destroyed by the Indians:

On the following day, August 21, they again returned in very large force exceeding 200, demanding goods in my charge belonging to Messrs. P. Chouteau and Company, which I refused to give them, and they became very tumultuous and bold and with their axes and tomahawks broke open the door of the fort, and, notwithstanding all the resistance it was possible for us to make with the assistance of the brother and son of the chief and the Man-Who-Hates-Women, we were overcome by their great number and were compelled to flee from the fort to preserve our lives, and thereupon the pillage of the goods of P. Chouteau and Co. commenced by the Indians. I believe we would not have been permitted to escape and that we should all have been massacred had it not been for the interference of the Bear, Red Leaf, the brother and son of the chief, and the Man-Who-Hates-Women. I and the men employed at the fort returned next day and were witnesses to a most shameful waste of property. The shelves that were piled high with goods when we left were empty, piles and piles of cloth and other goods had disappeared; flour, sugar, coffee, and many other articles were strewed over the floor and around the yard in front of the fort and entirely destroyed. On the 23rd of August, the Indians left the river and went north, and on the 24th of August I examined the goods remaining and took an inventory of them . . . " <sup>41</sup>

A similar vivid account of the events at the Gratiot Houses is given by Frank Salway who had apparently returned to the post after the battle with the troops. He states:

The men came over in an imposing procession and forced open the building containing their annuity goods and helped

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<sup>41</sup> John B. Didier, Deposition, Chouteau Miscellany, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri. Note that the "Bear" referred to was the son of Conquering Bear. Red Leaf was one of the many brothers of Conquering Bear. The "Man Who Hates Women" is probably Man Afraid of His Horses, although Man Afraid does not include any account of his own actions subsequent to the actual fighting which destroyed Grattan's command. Confusion as to the translation of Indian names was not uncommon.

themselves. Then they recrossed the river and went back to camp. But on the third morning it was seen that the Indians were not through with their operations. An Indian came early to Mr. Salway and Edward Glad and told them that the warriors would return that day and take what goods they wanted from the store belonging to the American Fur Company, and advised them all to keep away and give them no trouble. Everybody was careful to acquiesce in this warning. Along about sunrise the first of these promised visitors appeared. As they gathered before the store, Red Leaf, brother of Conquering Bear, mounted the steps (Red Leaf was the one who was taken prisoner with Red Cloud and stripped of his horses by General Crook) telling them that Conquering Bear was yet alive, and that he had always been friendly to the whites and that the American Fur Company had often befriended him, and it was his wish that they should not break the door of the Fur Company's store, but that they should leave their goods untouched. The words of Red Leaf communicating the noble desires of his dying brother fell on deaf ears. By the time he was done speaking a mob of his people pressed around him and defied all restraint; the latch gave way, the door flew open, the men jammed in and got what they wanted. They left most of the provisions and all of the whisky, the latter manifestly by oversight, as it was discovered in the middle of the floor buried by loose papers and its presence in the house being up to that time a secret withheld from the employees who now had good occasion to regale themselves. The Indians had all departed by 10 o'clock and peace reigned without jar for about 10 days.<sup>42</sup>

After this raid upon the stores of the Chouteau traders (referred to by Salway as the American Fur Company which in fact they had succeeded), the Indians left the valley. The Oglalas moved to northern Wyoming for a buffalo hunt. The Brules camped on the Niobrara River near the mouth of Snake River.<sup>43</sup> Here Conquering Bear died of his wounds some days later.

When the Brules and Oglalas left the valley the shocked white inhabitants undertook the necessary afterbattle activities. Lieutenant Fleming requested Bordeaux to clear the battlefield.<sup>44</sup> The body of Lieutenant Grattan was taken

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<sup>42</sup> Frank Salway, Interview, *loc. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> Ricker Papers, No. 16, Nebraska State Historical Society. Interview by Judge E. S. Ricker with American Horse at the J. H. Cook Ranch, Agate, Nebraska.

<sup>44</sup> Letter, Lt. Hugh B. Fleming to James Bordeaux, August 20, 1854, as quoted from the *Missouri Republican* in *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, XX (1922), 261.

to Fort Laramie,<sup>46</sup> and the enlisted men were buried in a shallow grave on the battle site. Dispatches were sent by courier to Fort Kearny (Nebraska) reporting the battle and requesting reinforcements.

Some of the traders had abandoned their posts, but at the Bordeaux and Chouteau establishments inventories were taken of remaining stocks of trade goods. About a hundred lodges of peaceful Cheyenne Indians remained in the vicinity, but there was little trade.<sup>46</sup>

Major John W. Whitfield, the long-awaited Indian Agent, arrived a few days after the battle and distributed annuity goods to the Cheyennes. He then began collecting firsthand accounts of the battle from persons who had seen the fighting or were familiar with the incidents connected with it.<sup>47</sup>

Rumors and reports of horse-stealing raids and Indian demonstrations maintained the excitement and suspense. An attack was reported on Fort Laramie on August 28.<sup>48</sup> No details are given regarding this incident, and it may have been only a brief demonstration by Indians who had received news of the death of Conquering Bear. Lieutenant Fleming, however, is reported to have been wounded in the action.<sup>49</sup>

Slowly the ordinary routines of garrison and frontier life were resumed, but the old security was gone. The burial cairn near the wagon road was a constant reminder that conflict of customs, interests, and personalities between

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<sup>46</sup> Lieutenant Grattan's body was later removed to the Post Cemetery at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for permanent interment. (Letter of Major Henry Robertus, Jr., January 8, 1954).

<sup>47</sup> Letter, Lewis B. Dougherty to Major John M. Dougherty, August 29, 1854. Kansas City, Mo., Public Library.

<sup>48</sup> Letter, John W. Whitfield to Col. A. Cuming, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, October 2, 1854, *House Executive Documents*, 2nd Session, 33rd Congress, Document No. 1, p. 304 ff.

<sup>49</sup> Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army from Its Organization*, September 29, 1789 to March 2, 1903 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), II, 401; George W. Cullen, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy* (Boston, 1891), II, 498. Note that these reports support Salway's remark previously quoted that, "... peace reigned without jar for about 10 days."

<sup>49</sup> Cullen, *op. cit.*

Indians and white men (and even within either party) were real and intense. However placid might be their relationships from day to day, these could suddenly flare into bitter, deadly violence. Unfortunately, there was too little recognition either of the strength of the contestants or of the magnitude of their differences. A generation-long vindictive struggle intervened between the annihilation of Grattan's command and the re-establishment of a firm peace on the frontier.

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