

Come Up Red

The Custer Battlefield Museum Strikes Gold

Article & Interview by Hayley Brazier, 2010 Intern, Custer Battlefield Museum

For Come Up Red, a Crow Indian born in the 19th century, his one-hundred years of cattle herding, homesteading, and Indian battles are not forgotten thanks to the memory of one man. Grant Bull Tail, the grandson of Come Up Red, is keeping the tradition of oral history alive in order to share the life story of an otherwise mysterious man.



Come Up Red, c. 1900 in Fred E. Miller: Photographer of the Crows

Come Up Red's name was first revealed to the Custer Battlefield Museum in Garryowen, Montana, when a new display featuring the photography of Fred E. Miller was being assembled. Miller worked as

a clerk for the Indian Service in Crow Agency, Montana at the turn of the 20th century, where he befriended members of the Crow Indian tribe and captured their images in photographs.

One photograph, however, offered more mystery than fact. Come Up Red's photograph appears in the book *Fred E. Miller: Photographer of the Crows*, assembled by Nancy Fields O'Connor. In Miller's photograph, Come Up Red is captured glancing intelligently into the distance, prompting interns at the Custer Battlefield Museum to inquire more about this man, his times, and his experience as a Crow Indian. However, the year of his birth (1863) and the year of his death (1947) appeared to be the only recorded information about him. Research on the Internet and through books and articles failed to reveal more about this man's historical background.

Determined to learn more, the Custer Battlefield Museum's director, Christopher Kortlander, turned to Garryowen's postmistress, Linda Covers Up, who quickly referred Kortlander to her relative, Grant Bull Tail. As it turns out, Mr. Bull Tail encompasses a historical outlet that the Custer Battlefield Museum had not yet tried: oral history.

"Yes, by adoption he's my great-grandfather on my mother's side but then he also adopted my mother, so I call him grandfather," Mr. Bull Tail began in an interview with the Custer Battlefield Museum. Mr. Bull Tail is a Crow Elder who resides in Crow Agency, Montana and participates in groups such as the Center Pole Foundation.



In some of Miller's photographs, his subjects wore a particular Crow jacket made of deer hide, embellished with a traditional Crow flower beading. This jacket, now on display at the Custer Battlefield Museum, was worn by at least five men, including Chief Old Dog, Chief Crooked Arm, Fire Bear, and Come Up Red. Here, Grant Bull Tail glances at the photo of his grandfather, Come Up Red, and the Crow beaded jacket.

Mr. Bull Tail was partially raised by Come Up Red, before his grandfather's death in 1947, and he learned the oral history of Come Up Red from the man himself.

"When I was about two or three years old he was pretty much blind...[s]o I used to lead him around the house, lead him to his sweat lodge, and I was always with him and he always told me stories. I grew up liking the old-time stories so he told me a lot about them and a lot about himself."

Come Up Red was born in the Wind River Valley, near the Shoshone River in the mid-nineteenth century. During this time, Mr. Bull Tail explained, there were five bands of Crows: The Southern River Crows, the Northern River Crows, the Black Lodge, the Many Lodges, and the Southern Band. Come Up Red belonged to the Southern Band, known to others as peace-loving people, a sentiment that would stay with Come Up Red his entire life.

Come Up Red moved with his family to the Big Horn Valley in the 1880s. Just before, Fort Custer was established between the Little Bighorn and Bighorn Rivers in 1877, and operated until the “Indian troubles” were deemed under control. Come Up Red joined the military at Fort Custer in the 1880s, but first, according to Mr. Bull Tail, changed his birth date from 1847 to 1863.

“[T]hey built Fort Custer and they were hiring Indian troops, so, that was the only way they could get money at that time so a lot of people lied about their age.” After reducing his age by sixteen years and officially recording his birth date as 1863, Come Up Red was young enough to join the military. Interestingly, Mr. Bull Tail’s oral history changed what was thought to be Come Up Red’s correct age of a mere eighty-four years to a life span of one-hundred years (1847-1947).

Come Up Red remained with the military approximately three years. Although he never faced battle while enlisted, Come Up Red still encountered warfare during his lifetime. In the early 1860s, Come Up Red purportedly traveled with a man called Chief Red Bear, who took a group of seventy-five men to study and participate in the white man’s Civil War in the east. The group found themselves participating in the Battle of the Chickamauga, in September of 1863. Come Up Red and the other Crows were disturbed when the stream by which they were standing turned red with blood as the battle’s casualty count reached over 34,000. Astonished by the carnage, the Crows thereon called the Civil War, “The Blood Gushing.”

Another event in which Come Up Red found himself was one that ultimately sealed his disdain for warfare. One evening in Nebraska, Come Up Red heard the torturous screams of two Sioux Indians after they were wounded in a fight between the Sioux and the Crow. The two Sioux suffered throughout the night, until both eventually died the next morning. Haunted by the screams of the dying Sioux, combined with his experience in the Civil War, Come Up Red thereafter stayed close to his roots as a Southern Band Crow, who warned against the detriments of fighting and war.

Come Up Red spent a few years working as a Cowboy for a Mormon man called The One Who Wore the Black Hat. As a cowboy, Come Up Red would herd cattle yearly to Fort Laramie and Dodge City. In the rowdy town of Dodge City, Come Up Red had his first experiences with the wild west, cowboys, and alcohol.

Mr. Bull Tail remembered, “[W]hen they got to Dodge City the man who was in charge, he told them there was some bad people that live here that you could play cards and drink but if somebody tries to kill you, you kill them first, and he gave them all pistols. So all the Indians got drunk and shot up the place and soon it became the Indian bar.”

After his experiences in Dodge City, Come Up Red refused to drink any alcohol, but peach brandy, as that was the only alcohol that true cowboys drank. As a result of his new experiences in gambling and drinking, Come Up Red learned his first bit of English in Dodge City.

After six years of cattle herding, Come Up Red had an experience that would stay with him the rest of his life. Near present day Joliet, Montana, a hunting party severely wounded a large bull that, despite many gunshot wounds to his body, maintained his vigor and would not die. An elder Crow advocated the bull be left alone in respect of his special endurance. As the bull was allowed to retreat across the river, Come Up Red decided to follow him, knowing the dying bull was angry and would want a fight.



The last known photograph of Come Up Red before his death in 1947, taken in Crow Agency, Montana. Photo courtesy of Grant Bull Tail.

As Come Up Red searched for the animal, the angry bull held a surprise charge and struck Come Up Red and his unsuspecting horse. The charge overwhelmed the already fading bull, and he died next to Come Up Red, who lay pinned under his horse. The bull, upon his death, passed his powers to the man beside him. From that point forward, Come Up Red had the power, or medicine, of the bull. Thereafter, Come Up Red never killed another buffalo.

In addition to receiving his powers, Come Up Red was given another gift that would assist him the rest of his life.

As the story goes, years before Come Up Red's lifetime, some Spaniards had been exploring the area around the Pryor Valley. Fatefully, the Spaniards found themselves surrounded by a group of interested Indians and, in fear of losing their gold, they hid their stash. The Spaniards were unable to ever retrieve it, leaving it secretly hidden for years before anyone discovered it.

Bear Comes From Below, Come Up Red's father, found this hidden gold while wondering in the Valley. The exact location of the hidden gold remains a secret to this day. Bear Comes From Below kept the piece of gold in his possession, until his death, when Come Up Red inherited it. From that inheritance, Come Up Red was able to lead a financially secure life.

“[T]hat is how he built all of these houses here,” Mr. Bull Tail elaborated, “He had a friend named John Putman in Hardin. He used to give him a little bit of this gold, and he would sell it whenever he needed money, and he would give him the money.”

However, Come Up Red's wealth from his gold inheritance did not guarantee that he was easily able to marry. Because he avoided war, he lacked war honors, which at that time, was a traditional Crow prerequisite for marriage. Eventually, however, he was able to marry around the age of forty to a woman named Spotted Otter. The two homesteaded near Rockvale, Montana. The couple never had children of their own, but because of the large piece gold, they were financially able to raise numerous children. This included the adoption of Mr. Bull Tail's grandfather, Tom Stewart, and his mother, Alice Stewart. Many other children, mainly orphaned by flu epidemics, found a home with Come Up Red and his wife.

Come Up Red lived on the Crow Reservation the rest of his life and spent his time raising children, breeding Appaloosa horses, farming, and lending his singing voice for various celebrations, for which he was well noted.

Spotted Otter died at the age of ninety-two in a flu epidemic; the year was 1932. Come Up Red never remarried, but maintained eighty acres of land, which he sold before his death. From his years as a child, Mr. Bull Tail remembers Come Up Red as, “one of those people that you know never grow up, never grow old. He was physically active until about [his] late 90’s.”

In 1946, when Mr. Bull Tail and his family moved back to the area of Clark’s Fork, Come Up Red told his family, “[H]e thought because we were moving back towards that way that he would die. He said ‘I’m moving back to my birthplace, so I might die,’ and so he did.” Come Up Red caught pneumonia and died three weeks after Thanksgiving. He was laid to rest with the remaining piece of gold.



Hayley Brazier, intern at Custer Battlefield Museum, interviews Grant Bull Tail.

“So he was involved in a lot of things. Whatever happened he was there,” Mr. Bull Tail remembers, laughing to himself. “He was not a chief or anything like that, but he was there.”

Come Up Red had at least four occupations over his lifetime, each experience compiled to make his life reminiscent of a Little Big Man or Forrest Gump story. All the while, Come Up Red maintained an outlook of peace; a mentality that allowed him to be sympathetic to anyone less fortunate than he, be it a child, a Sioux enemy, or a buffalo. Come Up Red died in 1946, after he had experienced an entire century of life.

For Grant Bull Tail, sharing Crow history is just as his grandfather would have wished. “I think that is what he wanted me to do. He wanted me to learn about our history, so I could pass it on,” Mr. Bull Tail commented. “[H]e was a very good storyteller...So, I learned a lot of things about him, about what happened.” Mr. Bull Tail shares his knowledge of Crow history with organizations, such as the Wyoming Historical Society and the Little Bighorn College Library.

According to the official Crow Tribe website, there are an estimated 11,000 registered members of the Crow Tribe today. The Crow reservation, located in south central Montana, is home to approximately 7,900 Crows. The Crow Tribe claims a high percentage of people who can speak the native language, a figure around eighty-five percent. This percentage, however, is dropping as the younger generations have begun to use English as their primary language.

For many current-day Crow Indians, there is a balance between protecting Crow history and sharing it with the outside, interested world. “See, the problem with our people is that they don’t want to share their history with greater society. They don’t want to share anything with them, like our religion and our culture,” Mr. Bull Tail observed.

Maintaining such privacy has caused outside society to have a misrepresentation of Crow history and Crow culture. “They think it is only for us. But we are also losing it at the same time. A lot of our people are not practicing it,” Mr. Bull Tail added.

For his part, Mr. Bull Tail will follow in his grandfather’s footsteps and continue to share the stories of days passed: of buffalo hunts, of great Crow men and women, of battles, and of the Crow Way of Life. “[T]hat is why I am trying to share it with the greater society, so they can understand how we lived and what we were like.”