

Sitting Bull: Sioux Tribal Leader

As a child, Sitting Bull (c. 1831 – 1890) was thought to be one of the slowest in his tribe to learn. However, when he reached his teenage years he began to show the qualities that would make him a leader of the entire Sioux nation.



Sitting Bull was 14 years old, and it was time to demonstrate what he could do. All his life people had called him by the name Slow. He talked, walked, and learned slowly. But he was tired of the name.

Now he got to tag along with some Sioux warriors going on a raid against their enemies, the Crow. He put on war paint and grabbed a long coup (KOO) stick, which was used to hit enemy warriors. The Sioux considered it a greater achievement to hit an enemy and get away than to kill him.

No one really believed the boy would ever get to count a coup, since he was so slow. However, Slow suddenly charged a Crow warrior and knocked the weapons out of his hands. Yelling with joy, he proclaimed his first coup.

Now he would be called *Tatanka Iyotake*, a name that pictured a strong bull bison sitting on its haunches watching over the herd. It meant he could not be scared off by anything. It was a name of great honor. White people would later translate the name as Sitting Bull. His father told him that in a religious vision he had learned the name would be of special importance to his family and the entire tribe.

Many white people saw the Sioux as cruel and heartless. Sitting Bull simply wanted whites to stay off Sioux land. When settlers began crossing the Great Plains, Sitting Bull and the other Sioux did their best to discourage them. Even when he took white hostages, however, those who knew Sitting Bull insisted he was kind.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

He was uniformly gentle, and kind to his wife and children and courteous in his [interactions] with others. During my stay with them food was scarce more than once, and both

Sitting Bull and his wife often suffered with hunger to supply me with food. They both have a very warm place in my heart.

FANNY KELLY, a former hostage of Sitting Bull, quoted in *Daughters of Dakota II: Stories from the Attic*

Whenever he killed a buffalo, Sitting Bull would thank the animal for giving its life to help the Sioux people. They would use every part of the animal: hides for clothes, blankets, and tepees; tendons for threads; flesh for food; and whittled bones for needles. It would take up to 30 hides to make just one tepee.

However, the white settlers who were moving onto the plains did not respect the buffalo or the Sioux. As United States boundaries moved farther west, Native Americans were under attack. By the 1860s, soldiers on the Great Plains were trying to drive the Sioux off land they had held for centuries.

In 1863 and again in 1865, Sitting Bull led the Sioux in battle against United States soldiers. As a man of peace, however, he wanted to find another way to solve conflicts. Representatives of the government offered to sign peace treaties. However, such treaties meant the Sioux got less and the whites more. In 1868, the government insisted that the Sioux move to a reservation in the Dakotas. Sitting Bull refused to sign the new treaty.

The 1868 treaty was supposed to bring peace, but tensions remained and erupted in more fighting a few years later. This time the conflict arose over the Black Hills of the Dakotas. The government had promised that “No white person or persons shall be permitted to settle upon or occupy” or even “to pass through” these hills. However, the hills were rumored to contain gold. In 1874 Colonel

George A. Custer led an army expedition to check on the rumors and confirmed that there was gold, “from the grass roots down.” Prospectors swarmed into the area.

The Sioux protested against the trespassers. Instead of protecting the Sioux’s rights, the government tried to buy the hills. Sitting Bull refused. “I do not want to sell any land. Not even this much,” he said, holding a pinch of dust.

Sitting Bull gathered Sioux and Cheyenne warriors along the Little Bighorn River in present-day Montana. They were joined by Crazy Horse, another Sioux chief, and his forces. The United States Army was ordered to round up the warriors and move them to reservations. The Seventh Cavalry, led by Custer, was ordered to scout the Native American encampment.

Custer wanted the glory of leading a major victory. He divided his regiment and attacked the Native Americans on June 25, 1876. He had seriously underestimated their strength, however. With about 250 soldiers, Custer faced a Sioux and Cheyenne force of thousands. Custer and his entire command lost their lives. News of the army’s defeat shocked the nation.

Thousands of Indians on the Plains were killed in the months that followed, as the army launched a full-scale war against Native Americans. Sitting Bull and his people fled north into Canada to avoid becoming prisoners of war on a reservation. However, they were unused to the bitterly cold climate. In 1881, he led his hungry people back into the United States.

For two years, Sitting Bull sat in prison. Then, in 1885, Buffalo Bill Cody sought permission from the government to “hire” Sitting Bull as a carnival attraction. People around the world flocked to Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show to see Sitting Bull, the man who had defeated Custer. Sitting Bull sent all the money he earned to the Sioux to help feed starving children.

In 1889, Sitting Bull was back on the reservation. He was tired of the white peoples’ cities. His people were starving. In their despair the Sioux turned in 1890 to Wovoka, a prophet. Wovoka claimed that the Sioux could regain

their former greatness if they performed a ritual known as the Ghost Dance.

The Ghost Dance was a way for the Sioux to express their culture that was being destroyed. As the ritual spread, reservation officials became alarmed and decided to ban the dance. Believing that their chief, Sitting Bull, was the leader of the movement, police went to his camp to arrest him. During a scuffle, they shot Sitting Bull.

Several hundred Lakota Sioux fled in fear after Sitting Bull’s death. They gathered at a creek called Wounded Knee in southwestern South Dakota. On December 29, 1890, the army went there to collect the Sioux’s weapons. No one knows how the fighting started, but when a pistol shot rang out, the army responded with fire. More than 200 Sioux and 25 soldiers were killed.

Wounded Knee marked the end of armed conflict between whites and Native Americans. The Native Americans had lost their long struggle.

Review Questions

1. What reasons did the Sioux have for calling Sitting Bull “Slow”?
2. Why did the U.S. government try to buy the land in the Dakotas back from the Sioux?
3. How did Sitting Bull raise money to help Sioux children?

Critical Thinking

4. Why was Sitting Bull suspicious of whites?
5. When Sitting Bull took Fanny Kelly prisoner, what did his actions prove?
6. Based on his life, what are other names for Sitting Bull that might capture his essence better than “Slow”?