MYSTERY OF SITTING BULL

His was a tempestuous soul, burning with inner fires. Some say this medicine man was a West Point graduate

By ERIC THANE

that he had killed some twenty-seven persons. On one of his first war forays he had taken three women and a man of the Crow tribe and killed one of the women with a lance.

A small number of his other victims were women. He did not differentiate between the sexes in this respect. But he never underestimated the power of a woman in his political aspirations.

He inherited from Jumping Bull, his father, his leadership of elements of the Sioux tribe. He was not as strong a chief by heredity as, for instance, Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, Gall and Rain-in-the-Face, all of whom were superior men. Sitting Bull was not superior. He was, it has been stated, "Lazy and vicious and never told the truth when a lie would serve better."

But he was smart; and he had inherited the rank of medicine man, or priest. This gave him unusually easy access to women, and over them he developed tremendous influence which in turn was reflected by their men. He professed an implacable hatred for the whites; it was a popular cause, and he worked it for all it was worth. To emphasize his contempt he would never speak a word of English, or admit that he understood it. He even objected to having it spoken in his presence.

His fame grew as the result of his raids on neighboring tribes as well as on white men. Indeed, by 1866 his reputation was such that when Fort Buford in the Dakotas was attacked an officer killed his wife in panic to save her from torture. As it turned out, the Indians never even gained entrance to the fort.

Such was the Dakota dread of Sitting Bull. But it was a purely local reputation. Eastern newspapers had not begun to build up this Indian with the "broad face and prominent hooked nose . . . fierce, half-bloodshot eyes . . . (a man) an inch or two over medium height, broadly built, bow-legged, limping slightly . . ." The limp was due to a wound received on a youthful foray against the Crows.

In 1876 the Sioux rose in arms against harsh treatment by reservation agents. Military leaders and frontiersmen met to consider the campaign. What to call this war? There were suggestions that it be named Chief Gall's war, Crazy Horse's war, and so on. Then someone suggested "Sitting Bull's war." The name caught on. Buffalo Bill Cody, sitting in the council, opined that this made Bull "seem to be a great man."

The resulting publicity would have gladdened Bull's heart if he had seen the newspapers. After the Custer massacre he was possibly the best known Indian in the United States.

But from the standpoint of the Sioux, the Custer battle was fatal. They realized they were defeated—had never, indeed, stood a chance. Against Sitting Bull's exhortation of "fight to the last man," they fled to Canada. Here several thousand settled near Fort Walsh where a single Mountie appeared to keep order.

In spite of protests that "themdaminjuns" were not wanted south of the border, a U. S. commission late in 1876 attempted to negotiate with Sitting Bull for return of the band to the United States. This commission apparently was pro-Indian. Its report describes Sitting Bull's appearance: ". . . his features, like Goethe's, made music to the senses."

Themdamninjuns refused to return as a group. But the terrain around Fort Walsh was bleak and not conducive to easy living, or any kind of living. So after a couple of years individual groups chose to return to the reservations in the Dakotas. Sitting Bull, for want of a popular cause, found his influence on the wane. At last he consented to return with some 150 of his people.

His return, the government decided, would be via the riverboat General Sherman. Sitting Bull trudged forward with his band, watched by several thousand red men who were to make the trek later.

Suddenly he accosted the captain, one Stowe, drew his knife and offered it. He began a harangue as only he knew how to do. He threw himself on the ground, screaming, and besought the captain to torture him, to take his life, but to spare his people.

In the days before the Custer battle his words would have aroused the Sioux. Now they yawned. Some of them broke into laughter. Soldiers forced Sitting Bull onto the steamer with the butt ends of muskets.

The Great White Father in Washington was forgiving, and presently Bull settled near the Standing Rock reservation in Dakota which straddles the South Dakota-North Dakota line. But the rural life was not for him. He went east during the middle '80's to join Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show. Spectators hissed Bull. Cody called him "an inveterate beggar." But the Sioux did have a following; his autograph first went for 25 cents, later jumped in price to $1 and once a Boston belle paid him $5 for a kiss.

Sitting Bull toured the principal cities of the east. In Philadelphia in 1884 he went on exhibit in the hall of the Young Men's Christian Association. Philadelphia newspapers pictured him as a murderer, but people paid to see him.

Nevertheless, Bull was not as successful as he possibly had hoped, and presently he returned to a home near Standing Rock reservation.

Illustration by H. RAY BAKER

Things had gone from bad to worse for the Sioux. Efforts to shape them into the white man's pattern were unsuccessful. Starvation raged, even the "fifth quarter," as the red men called the viscera of animals, was lean. Sitting Bull brooded. And then opportunity came again.

All over the west in the fall of 1890, there was heard the rumor of the coming of a messiah who would liberate the Indians, bring the dead to life and drive the white man into the sea. Sitting Bull saw his chance. He spread talk about the messiah. Possibly he saw himself as the saviour.

The messiah craze swept the reservations, expressing itself in frenzied "ghost dances." Sitting Bull stalked among the dancers, chanting, "I will raise the dead when the time comes!"

Eventually military and Indian service authorities decided that he must be confined. One bitterly cold predawn, Indian police headed by Lieut. Bull Head, and cavalry carrying Gatling guns headed for the medicine man's camp. Bull Head and his police pounded on the door of the old warrior's shack. The camp awoke when the police came; men, women and children crowded around, watching. There are two versions about what happened next.

The first is that Sitting Bull was aroused, and with a policeman on either side, he was hustled out and hoisted upon a horse. Speechless for a time, he now began one of his harangues, calling upon the people to rescue him. The crowd stirred uneasily. Suddenly there was a shot, probably from some irresponsible warrior. More firing broke out. Sitting Bull fell mortally wounded by a Winchester slug fired by one of his own people. Bull Head also was hit.

The other story is that Sitting Bull was shot by Bull Head when the old chief opened the door of his shack. Sitting Bull, falling, drew his revolver and got Bull Head in the thigh. One of the Indian police lifted the old man's scalp then, and battered in his face with a plank while others stripped him for souvenirs, including a letter from a Mrs. Weldon of New York warning him to flee as "the government" was about to have him killed.

Whatever the manner of Sitting Bull's end, hell broke loose in the camp. The cavalry arrived, set up the Gatling guns, and mowed down men, women and children and even their own men caught in cross-fire. Bull Head died a few days later at Fort Yates. His wife had walked eighty miles through a blizzard without pause to fall fainting into a room during his last moments. He was buried with military honors.

The battle at Sitting Bull's camp ended quickly. A blizzard whistled in and the dead froze on the battlefield. The red messiah lay among them.