

Custer's Gold Rush

There was no good reason for General George Armstrong Custer to ride into the Black Hills in 1874, nefarious reasons abound, however, including Washington's determination to set yet another fort out there to make sure untoward things didn't happen to that multitude of white folks on their way west.

The Black Hills, *Paha Sapa*, had always been the province of Native nations, the Sioux especially, who were awarded the region when some of them signed the Ft. Laramie Treaty. Don't miss the irony: Sioux nations were "awarded" the Black Hills even though they were already there. That was big of the rest of us, wasn't it?

Truth is, the Sioux revered the place. Think of it this way—if you vacation often in the Black Hills, the place begins to conjure memories of joy and ease. Wander back sometime and you'll suffer nostalgia that's almost crippling.

The Lakota people held the place in even greater reverence because they'd determined long before that a spirit was in residence therein, an old bearded man in a mountain cave that breathed. *Paha Sapa* wasn't just a nice place to visit; it was divine.

To Custer, the only thing divine in them thar' hills was gold. Hence, the visit of his 7th Cavalry.

The powers-that-be knew it would be difficult for 1000 cavalry to ride up into the Hills from the south, by way of the lands of Red Cloud and Spotted Tail, so they directed Custer to sneak the 7th in from the north, from Fort Abraham Lincoln.

The idea was not to fight, even though Custer bragged to a newsman that he could "whip all the Indians in the northwest." The mission was to find a place to build a fort. Sure.

Three newspaper reporters and President Grant's son Fred were along for the ride, as were two "practical miners" whose way was paid by Custer himself. They were the real reason Custer arrived at French Creek one day in August, 1874.

Once the 7th Cavalry stopped to let them look, it took the two "practical miners" five days to find gold because there wasn't a whole lot, certainly not enough to make them fat cats.

No matter. In no time, Custer sent a cable back east, people heard the word *gold* and hopped the next train west. "Gold fever" people called it, a prairie fire like none other over the Great Plains.

Gold Fever—chapter two. The 1848 California Gold Rush was—and remains—the largest mass movement of population in American history. Seriously, 300,000 people swarmed west even though there were no roads and no fast food.

Custer's find, 25 years later, didn't create the madness at Sutter's Mill in California; but where people believe there are fortunes to be made, fortune-seekers will seek. Once again, the sheer mass changed the course of American history because white folks determined the Black Hills

were a darn sight too valuable to be left in the hands of the heathen Sioux. Another treaty bit the dust.

No one moving west in the hysteria people called “gold fever” ever considered the story of a man named D. C. Jenkins. The thousands who sought fortunes could see little more than a shiny nugget sifted from a pan of wet sand, and themselves thereafter in the court of King Midas.

Mr. D. C. Jenkins came back east, almost penniless, and homesteaded in Nebraska, having left behind the gold fields and the optimism he'd once savored, nary even a gold tooth flashing from a smile.

Get this. Mr. D. C. Jenkins walked all the way from Pike's Peak to Nebraska, lugging everything he owned in his wheelbarrow. He pushed that thing a couple hundred miles to Jefferson County, Nebraska, and started in to ranching.

Imagine that. A stooped old guy pushing a wheelbarrow down a dusty path, mountains behind him in a rearview mirror.

Maybe that picture on a poster could have prompted some to think twice about gold. Maybe a video—an old cowboy pushing a wheelbarrow all the way to Nebraska.

Maybe. Then again, maybe not.