



Fort Abraham Lincoln in Mandan, North Dakota – the start of the Custer Trail

The Custer Trail

The Custer Trail roughly follows the route of Old Highway Ten between Mandan and Dickinson, and continues westward to the Little Bighorn River southeast of what is now Hardin, Montana. The trail starts at Fort Abraham Lincoln where the 7th Cavalry Regiment, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, made its way west across Dakota Territory as part of an army force aiming to locate and subdue remaining Plains Indians who had refused to relocate to reservations. Tensions between the Indians and the U.S. Government were at a peak, and the Indian Wars were ongoing, threatening the settling of the west and the prospecting of gold.

Twelve companies of troops numbering about 650 men and a group of Indian scouts left Fort Abraham Lincoln in Mandan in the early morning of May 17, 1876. The marching column headed to the west included cavalry, officers, officers' servants and cooks, foot soldiers, Indian scouts, a wagon train of 150 wagons carrying equipment and supplies run by civilian teamsters, a herd of cattle for

fresh meat along the trail, and extra horses and mules. In all there were approximately 1,200 men and 1,700 animals. The column was two miles long, with Custer at the lead.

The trek across the Plains was long and arduous, and ended with the Battle of the Little Bighorn at the Little Bighorn River in south central Montana. There the 7th Cavalry met the largest group of Plains Indians ever encountered. This gathering was the summer council of Lakota and Cheyenne Indians who had congregated for a variety of reasons. It was customary for the tribes to gather in large numbers each spring to celebrate their annual sun dance ceremony, which had taken place two weeks earlier. The area was also excellent hunting ground with plenty of water in the region of the Powder, Rosebud, Bighorn and Yellowstone Rivers.

Estimates vary as to the number of Indians at the enormous camp along the Little Bighorn River, but historians believe there were 8,000-10,000. Of these, perhaps 1,500-1,800 were chiefs and warriors. The battle was fought on the June 25 & 26, 1876, with the 7th Cavalry attacking the encampment and the Indians, under the leadership of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, retaliating.

The battle was a disaster for the 7th Cavalry. In all, 263 soldiers and attached personnel were killed. The famous site of Custer's Last Stand was along the bluffs and steep ravines of the Little Bighorn River where the Indian camp was located. Custer and all of the men under his direct command were killed.



**George Armstrong
Custer**

**Lieutenant Colonel of
the U.S. 7th Cavalry**

For more complete information about the Battle of the Little Bighorn, visit the National Park Service Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument website at <http://www.nps.gov/libi/learn/historyculture/battle-of-the-little-bighorn.htm>.