

*Supplying Custer: The Powder  
River Supply Depot, 1876*

GERALD R. CLARK

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tables. \$24.95 paper.

George Armstrong Custer is a legendary and divisive figure in American military history. Bookshelves groan under numbers of articles and tomes in their thousands on the subject of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. *Supplying Custer* is not another Custer or Little Bighorn Battle study; it is, rather, a study of a mere short term supply depot. Powder River Supply Depot was established by General Alfred Terry in early June 1876 and it was only a functional depot until it was moved west on 20 July. Some forage was left, but by 6 September General Terry closed the campaign and the Powder River depot area was completely abandoned. The post only hosted General Custer and his troops of the 7th Cavalry for a couple of rest days on their way to the Little Bighorn. They departed on 15 June, while Colonel Reno's troops left the day before. Only 15–20% of troops are ever at the "point of the spear," and history, archaeology, and the public often forget the sites and the contributions of commissary, quartermaster, ordnance, and other support groups and functions. The Powder River Supply Depot offers the chance to delve into such a site, where the researcher can study the material culture and site remains from a very narrow time period (3 months) of military history.

The bulk of *Supplying Custer* is organized into 6 chapters and 11 appendixes on the material culture of the site in both artifacts and historical records. After the introduction, the chapters are (1) "Background," (2) "Exploration and Military Operations in the Lower Yellowstone and Powder River Country, 1805–1875," (3) "The 1876 Sioux War to the Beginning of White Settlement," (4) "Events of the 1876 Sioux War at the Mouth of the Powder River," (5) "Archaeology and History of the Powder River Depot," and 6) "Conclusions." The 11 appendixes cover the "Excavation Details and Formation of Features D and F," "Artifacts Associated with Beverages and Drinking," "Artifacts and Organic Materials Related to Food," "Artifacts Related to Medicine," "Artifacts Related to Tobacco Use," "Artifacts and Bone Related to Transportation," "Artifacts Associated with Firearms," "Artifacts Associated with Clothing," "Miscellaneous Artifacts and Minerals," "Dog Remains," and "The Commissary Department Provision Book." The appendixes are every bit as informative and interesting as the text portion of the book and well worth reading.

The author's first investigation of this site was to record some historic artifacts eroding from a cut bank on the Yellowstone River in 1978. The artifacts turned out to date mostly to the mid-1870s and be part of a feature, so Clark started researching the area to determine if it was associated with the campaign of 1876. The more he worked, the more interesting the subject became. The introduction, background, and conclusions

chapters detail the long, 36-year road of archaeological and historical research that was to culminate in the publication of *Supplying Custer* in 2014. Clark was able to work with so many other interested parties over the course of that time that the acknowledgments section is two full pages. That tenacity and professionalism are one of the fine examples of professional research in archaeology. This would be a great book for a beginning class on historical archaeology since it shows not only the marriage of history and archaeology but demonstrates how a small and seemingly unimportant collection of artifacts and features can blossom into interesting and informative research.

The background material in chapter 1 provides information on the archaeological excavation and analysis of the site as well as an historic context that continues through chapters 2, 3, and 4. Alongside the general history and travel routes, which are well represented on the accompanying maps, there are lots of interesting and even surprising tidbits of information. A couple of such items are found on just one page (p. 26). Many of us brought up on western movies and television shows seldom realize how large military movements could be since the producers could only afford just so many extras and re-creations. The Powder River Expedition of 1865 included two columns: Colonel Nelson Cole's column had 1,400 cavalry, mounted artillery men, and four rifled guns supported by 140 wagons. A currently popular belief is that the Native Americans never attacked a wagon train. One of the express outcomes of General Sully's command during the Powder River Campaign of 1865, however, was to punish Indian bands that raided along immigrant trails such as the Bozeman Trail. This book does not detail the nature of those

raids. They may have been mere nighttime horse raids or full scale attacks against the immigrant trains.

Chapters 2–4 present a more interesting and informative historical context for the Powder River Supply Depot. Chapter 2 summarizes early white visitors, the Reynolds Expedition of 1859–1860, the Sully Campaign of 1864, the Powder River Expedition of 1865, the Treaty of 1868, the Railroad Surveys of 1871–1873, and the Yellowstone Wagon Road and Prospecting Expedition of 1874. Chapter 3 summarizes the 1876 Sioux War and the beginnings of white settlement. Chapter 4 brings the event of the 1876 Sioux War to the local area around the mouth of the Powder River and the archaeological area under study. These summaries are unusually well done and provide a good example of how to summarize historical information to provide context for an historical archaeological site. I have read or seen several whole books covering each of these chapters' subsections. These summaries provide a better than average summary while providing interesting facts and figures to keep the reader involved.

Chapter 6 connects the archaeology of the site to the history of the site and the rest of the Campaign of 1876, mostly through the discussion of Feature D artifacts and historical documents. The text finishes with a conclusions chapter that is three pages longer than the chapter on the archaeology. It covers the entire history of the 1876 campaign including military transportation and supply, the traders and their goods, archaeology and history of the supply depot, and battlefield archaeology, and closes with "Modest Results and Promising Future." It suggests further research using large scale geomapping methods with nondestructive investigative methods that were not generally available in the early period of

this investigation and that may open up the possibility of further research and interpretation. If you are looking for a certain topic or artifact, the index is highly useful. While this was not a large site rich in features and artifacts, I disagree with the author's description of the findings as "modest." I have seen many archaeological/historical reports from

much larger and more complicated sites where the author presented much less context and interpretation of the available archaeology. This is a great piece of work and well worth the reading.

MICHAEL A. PFEIFFER  
RUSSELLVILLE, AR 72802