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Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer



WOODEN LEG

A WARRIOR WHO FOUGHT CUSTER

INTERPRETED BY

THOMAS B. MARQUIS



Synopsis

“All around, the Indians began jumping up, running forward, dodging down, jumping up again, down again, all the time going toward the soldiers.” The story of Custer’s last battle is rarely told from the Native American perspective, despite the fact that there were no white survivors. Stories about the Battle of Little Bighorn are therefore often more myth than truth. In 1922, Thomas B. Marquis decided to uncover the true story of Custer’s Last Stand by speaking to someone who had actually fought against him. For hour after hour Marquis spoke to Wooden Leg and pieced together the narrative of the battle. Yet, Marquis’s studies cover much more than the final demise of Custer. Through his interviews with Wooden Leg, who was a young man at the time of Little Bighorn, he was able to uncover fascinating details about the everyday life of Cheyenne Indians and their practices. Their hunting practices, their conflicts with the Crows, how they were given names, their religion, their marriage customs, and other details of their way of life are all covered. As the relations between American soldiers and Native Americans grew more tense Wooden Leg and his Cheyenne people were drawn into conflict. Wooden Leg provides a fascinating account of how the Native American tribes were drawn together in a loose alliance to repel the oppression to which they had been subjected. Though the Native Americans won the battle, they certainly did not win the war. Wooden Leg’s account of the years after Little Bighorn demonstrates how many Native Americans struggled with life on the reservations and how they longed to be on the plains once again. Wooden Leg’s memoirs interpreted by Thomas B. Marquis give a fascinating insight into Native American life in the late-nineteenth century.

“[A] deeply interesting story.” • The New York Times

After entering a reservation Wooden Leg worked as a scout, messenger and sentry. He was part of the 1913 delegation sent to Washington to speak about the Cheyenne tribe. Later he became a judge on the reservation and died in 1940.

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Customer Reviews

A well written narrative of the lives of the Cheyenne Indians and the battle with General Custer. The actual battle does not occupy too much of the book and was of no more significance at the time to the Native American tribes who were involved in the battle than any other skirmish with the soldiers of the US government. The story is told without hatred or bitterness. Even more interesting is the description of the trials of everyday life among these people. This includes such things as dealing with the harshness of the elements and the actions of warring tribes. Life was anything but peaceful for the Northern Cheyennes but, at the same time, their respect and love of nature demonstrates the inner peace they found. This book is an eye opener to the reader who is curious about the lives and trials of the Native American especially at a time when the "white man's " borders were encroaching on the lands they called home.

The view of the Battle of the Big Horn as told by a Cheyenne warrior. I enjoyed it so much I suggested it to my friends. I was amazed at his remarks on how many of Custer's soldiers killed themselves in the battle. He admitted to the Indians cutting up the bodies of the dead enemy after the battle. He also said they couldn't find a long hair colonel. This is reported by Custer's wife who said he had quit wearing his hair long before he battle.

Interested in a Native American's take on Custer's last mistake? This warrior gives his account, actually in sign language, to a physician friend in 1930 Montana. No white man survived. Many, according to this witness, killed one another or even themselves, to avoid capture and very likely horrible torture. His is a story not of victory, but of defeat, for him and his people. Interestingly, he

does state that although things became better over time, he still longed for the "old days". But then don't we all. He explains Cheyenne customs so that we can understand how his people reacted to Custer and his stupid attack on them. I use the term "stupid" based on my Military History course in ROTC at UConn and the comments of my instructor, a captain in the army. Custer it seems violated fundamental rules governing military strategy, and he and his men paid the price. This book provides a great read, even though you know the outcome.

This is not a literary work, but a man's story, in his own words. Even though Wooden Leg told the story using sign language, his natural syntax filters through, making the story real. Reading the words, one can almost hear his voice. I found myself liking and admiring Wooden Leg as I learned how he thought, fought and lived in a time of great upheaval for his people. His story of the battle at Little Bighorn captures the dust, confusion, chaos and the "fog of war" very well. Worth a read.

Finally a story of the famous battle of the Little Big Horn from the Indians that fought there. A must read for any history buff. Now I can say I feel I know the true reason for this battle. Like many Americans we are taught Custer was a hero and the Indians were the bad guys. I never believed that. There had to be another side to the story. Well this is it. I also feel this book should be read at least once by any high school student majoring in American history. We talk about racism in American. Here is a good example of how actual history and pick-n-choose history fail both Native Americans and White Americans. Custer is not the hero we're taught and the Native Americans were trying to keep their way of life and protect their families. Any American would do the same.

I was hoping to learn about the Battle of Little Bighorn from a different perspective from that told from the vantage point of the 7th Cavalry. This book did that and much more. Wooden Leg (no, he didn't have a prosthesis) describes the culture of the Northern Cheyenne (he added the letter 's' to describe a group of his people; the spell checker is not aware of that distinction) from the perspective of a young man in battle and from the perspective of a man who had lived many years in the culture of his people. You will learn much about the life and customs of American Indians (they were never called Native Americans), not just a famous Battle set in 1876. I will read it again.

While the time period is fascinating, and the first-person perspective of Wooden Leg is intriguing, the book suffers from a less than vibrant translation of the reminiscences of the subject. Although the story is well worth reading, the Custer connection is brief and non-specific. The subject himself

was unaware who the soldiers were, or what significance the battle might have, as it happened. Only later did he realize George Custer was the target of their attack. There is little insight to the events of the day, or that time. Merely a first-person account of a complex event that grew to have historical significance. The more satisfying aspects of Wooden Leg (the book) is Wooden Leg's (the individual) descriptions of day-to-day life on the plains.

Wooden Leg's story is much more than just the Custer story. It is a very special, eye opening, insight of what it was to be a Native American before outside influences all the way to life in the twentieth century reservation. We are allowed inside the culture of everyday life and what it meant to be an Indian warrior. We should all have been honored to know a man of this quality but are extremely fortunate that his life and the ways of his people were so brilliantly documented for us to learn. A must read for all history buffs and those who wish to expand their understanding. It was an honor to learn.

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