



# STARVATION WINTER OF THE BLACKFEET

BY HELEN B. WEST

History's burden is made up of various components: the ponderous clarifying of the past, tracing in it a recognizable pattern that will make sense to the present; the meticulous scholarship involved in bringing to light the details of that pattern; and the simpler duty of delayed justice. "The future will determine that; history will prove in the end who is right." History, in the case of the tragic Starvation Winter of the Blackfeet, has been sluggish.

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Helen Bennett West, a native of Minneapolis and a graduate of Mills College in Oakland Calif., has a consuming interest in the historical background of the country around Cut Bank where she now lives with her physician husband and three young children. While at Mills she majored in English, with emphasis on creative writing; and in 1948, the year she graduated, she won the Marjorie Fisher Winston prize for excellence in writing. Mrs. West also edited *PACIFIC*, a quarterly magazine published by the college. She was married to Robert K. West of Great Falls in 1949 while Dr. West was completing his medical education in California. They moved to Cut Bank in 1952. Three years ago Mrs. West completed a historical slide and tape documentary on the history of the prairie country. Entitled "Traces of the Past", it has been shown to schools and various organizations throughout the state.

The facts of the matter are simply and well-documented in the history books: by 1883, the buffalo were gone. The suddenness and effectiveness of the slaughter brought to an immediate head the results of this destruction which had been foreseen in a vague and general way for years; and, humanitarian programs for the Indian in that era being a scarce item, no provisions had been made for the subsistence of the Piegiens, on their northern Montana reservation, when their centuries-old way of life should come to an abrupt end. There was intense and terrible suffering during the winter of 1883-84, and one-quarter of the tribe, nearly 600 Piegiens, died of starvation.

The reasons for and justifications of this neglect are considerably more complex and reflect in interesting proportions the various elements of frontier life.

It is 75 years since the Blackfeet Indians of Montana experienced the terrible starvation winter described in the accompanying article. As this magazine goes to press, word comes that the tribe may be facing a similar winter, short of supplies and money.

Ben Swig, financial adviser to the Blackfeet and an adopted chief of the tribe, met in San Francisco late in October with tribal leaders. A write-up of their deliberations appeared recently in a San Francisco paper. The meeting followed closely upon the first snowfall of the year, a storm in October which took the lives of several hunters in the state and was the first omen of what many believe will be another hard winter for the Blackfeet.

"I'm trying to get clothes and blankets for these people," Swig said. "It gets down to 40 below up in their country, you know. And the tribe is practically broke."

Ordinarily, explained Walter S. Wetzel, chairman of the tribal council, the Indian families are supported through the long, jobless winter on income from oil leases of reservation land. Oil production has dropped the past year, though, and the emergency fund has all but evaporated.

The efforts of Swig and the tribal leaders are reminiscent of the frustrations of an earlier day, when the Blackfeet Indian Agent tried without success to ward off the disaster described in this article.

Blackfeet councilmen who attended the San Francisco meeting included, besides Wetzel, Charles Momberg, George Kipp and Robert La-Fromboise. Swig, who was made honorary Chief Red Eagle of the tribe, left for Washington the day after the meeting to "try to cut a little red tape and get shoes" for his adopted tribe. He claims that there is \$10 million worth of surplus government shoes, clothing and blankets at the General Services Administration but that the Indian Affairs Bureau says it cannot be accepted for use by the tribe.

Major John W. Young arrived to take over his duties as agent at Badger Creek on the Blackfeet reservation December 15, 1876. He left in April, 1884, an unusually long term of office in that particular post, under a storm of abuse and villification. At that time, the entire

responsibility for that dreadful winter was put on his unpopular shoulders, and it has been left there ever since.

A scapegoat is a simplifying element when feelings run high, but a final evaluation of responsibility cannot be undertaken without an examination of the various motives involved, and, more especially, the Major's own story.

Accounts of the Starvation Winter range in the literature which touches the subject all the way from accurate and conservative statement of fact: "Death from starvation actually took place at the Blackfoot agency during the years 1883 and 1884, when complete crop failure was added to the loss of the buffalo and the depleted government stores,"<sup>1</sup> to pure fiction with various gradations in between.

James Willard Schultz's *My Life As An Indian* and *Friends of My Life As An Indian* contain numerous references to that particular winter: "Came the winter of 1882-83 [sic] the dreadful 'Starvation Winter' of the Pikuni. The buffalo had disappeared, the agent for the tribe had misrepresented its condition in his annual reports to the Secretary of the Interior, and the people starved. More than five hundred died





These Piegan Indians, photographed on the Missouri River near Fort Benton in 1884, appear well fed and clothed and in good condition to face another winter. Their fellows on the Blackfeet reservation had not fared so well. The Indian burial pictured on page 2 is a stark reminder of the pall of death which spread over the tribe during the terrible winter described here. The only recourse to death is shown at the bottom of page 3—the pitifully inadequate food ration doled out by an Indian Service encumbered by red tape and a tragically ill-conceived Indian policy.

from want of food.”<sup>2</sup> “A new and kind agent, Major Allen, had taken the place of the agent who had caused the death of more than five hundred of them from want of food that he could have obtained.”<sup>3</sup>

“In his annual report of the summer, the Agent had written at great length about the heathenish rites of his people, but had said little of their needs. . . . In fact, he gave no hint of the approaching calamity.”<sup>4</sup> Toward the end of the same book, he winds up with a fictionalized account of a supposed encounter between Major Young and a government inspector who, Schultz says, has been sent by Father Prando, a Jesuit priest on the edge of the reservation, which is nothing if not dramatic.

“‘You ———— Canting old hypocrite,’ he cried, ‘What do you mean by denying that your charges are starving? Hey? What do you mean, sir?’

“‘They are not starving,’ the Agent replied. ‘I will admit that they haven’t a large ration, but they are not starving by any means. Not starving by any means, sir. But who are you, sir? What right have you, breaking in here and questioning me?’

“‘Here is my card,’ the Inspector replied, ‘and I’ll just add that I suspend you right now. Your goose is cooked.’

“The agent read the card and sank back into his chair, speechless.”<sup>5</sup>

Joseph Kinsey Howard adopts the same assumptions concerning Young’s role in that winter and brings it up both in *Strange Empire* and *Montana, High, Wide and Handsome*. Although the winter of 1881 was particularly severe, there is no record that the winter of 1883 or 1884 was worse than usual, but Howard says, “A day or two after Christmas, 1883, a luminous and glittering mist formed over the northern and eastern Rockies slope. . . . Frantically, the Pikuni-Blackfeet prayed to Aisoyimstan, the Cold Maker, not to persecute their people; pleadingly they sought of their Indian agent a few extra rations. But rations were low: the agent had reported (seeking to make a record for himself) that the Blackfeet were now

<sup>1</sup> Burlingame, Merrill G., *The Montana Frontier*, (State Publishing Co., Helena, 1942) p. 251.

<sup>2</sup> *Friends of My Life As An Indian*, (Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1923) p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> *My Life As An Indian*, (Houghton Mifflin, 1907) p. 397.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 405-06.

nearly self-supporting. The mercury dropped to 40, 50 below zero, and stayed there for sun upon sun. . . . They were deserted by their agent, who was being replaced; his successor arrived in the midst of the worst suffering and did his best. Word of their plight reached Montana towns and rescue expeditions were organized. . . . Cursing freighters fought their way over drifted trails to the reservation with wagon loads of food. . . . They found six hundred Indians—one quarter of the tribe—starved to death.”<sup>6</sup>

The story of the Starvation Winter appears again in a recent novel by Milton Lott, *The Last Hunt*. At the end of the book, Lott attempts to show the dreadful results of the extermination of the buffalo. He quotes an agent who is apparently Major Allen, appointed to succeed Young. “They [the Blackfeet] had raised a few cattle and sheep and what with this and the buffalo, the agent—the one before me—had reported them as nearly self-supporting. And then the buffalo failed, the agent left, and I came into his place.”<sup>7</sup>

The factual, concise accounts necessarily overlook the elements of human drama, the others use it inaccurately and at the expense of fact and historical impartiality. That there is the conflict which produces drama becomes evident upon an examination of Major Young’s correspondence and the newspaper accounts of the time. It appears that the latter, which are numerous and all of the same general content, are the basis of the highly colored accounts.

Following is an account from the *New York Times*, June 25, 1884, p. 5 entitled “Indians dying from starvation.” “There is little doubt that the Indians of Poplar River, Montana, are in a most deplorable condition and dying from absolute starvation. At the Blackfoot Agency also matters have not changed for the better since the advent of the new agent. The Indians are still starving and are becoming so desperate that the commander of the military detachment recently sent from Fort Shaw has



The Blackfeet were among the most noble and independent people of the plains when this portrait of Low Horn, a North Blackfoot chief, was painted at Fort McKenzie in 1833 by the Swiss painter, Carl Bodmer, when he accompanied Prince Maximilian of Wied on the memorable trip of scientific exploration to the upper Missouri River territory.

deemed it advisable to remain in the agency for the protection of the settlers in case of outbreak, which is deemed probable to occur at any moment. The settlers say they are at present in more danger from Piegiens than from the Crees or any other Northern tribes accustomed to raiding the territory. The Piegiens are dying from sheer starvation at the rate of three or four per day, and even the little children who attend the public schools are too weak from hunger to study. Major Young is held responsible for it all, and no blame seems to attach to the new agent.”

Other statements in contemporary newspapers concerning Young’s responsibility for conditions are numerous. The following is from the *Sun River Sun*, June 12, 1884: “The worst has never been told. Ex-agent John Young should have made an estimate for more than 1/8 rations. He alone is responsible for the wretchedness and starvation here.”

<sup>6</sup> *Montana, High, Wide and Handsome*, (Yale University Press, 1943), pp. 155-56. He gives substantially the same account in *Strange Empire* (Wm. Morrow, 1952), pp. 356-57, with the change that now the mercury has sunk to 60 below zero. He also mentions Fr. Prando’s role in getting word of the disaster to Ft. Shaw.

<sup>7</sup> *The Last Hunt*, (Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1954), p. 319.



These Piegan chiefs, splendidly dressed, are pictured outside the early Canadian trading post, Rocky Mountain House, in 1870. Behind them stands one of the many Catholic "Blackrobes" who ministered among them. These noble men have little in common with their brethren of Montana's Blackfeet reservation whose starvation winter of a little more than a decade later is described in this article. Photo contributed by the Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

And from the *Benton Herald* of May 26, 1883: "John Young has repeatedly reported to the commissioner of Indian affairs that his Indians were almost self-supporting, and by reason of such glowing report the department has cut down the supply of rations."

In dramatic contrast to the above are the letters of John Young himself which are to be found in the Archives of the Blackfeet Agency at the Museum of the Plains Indians in Browning, Montana. Many of the letters are faded or illegible, but enough comes through to give us a feeling of immediacy to those winter days, and to indicate what kind of a man Major Young was: stiff-necked, intractable and highly unpopular with nearly everyone who knew him; but the letters leave us no doubt as to his sincerity and the very real suffering he himself endured.

Major Young begins, as early as 1878, to foresee the end of the buffalo and to suggest that plans must be made to meet it. He writes to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., on July 26, 1878, "They (the Indians) admit that Buffalo will within a limited time fail and that its necessary to prepare for some other means of support."

From that letter on, there are periodic references to the approaching disappearance of the buffalo and the dependence

of the Piegans on increased government rations, the letters gaining in urgency as the months go by.

The agency was moved in 1880 to a lower location on Badger Creek, now referred to (since the move in 1895 of the agency to Browning) as "Old Agency." It was built, surrounded by a high stockade, near the creek, in a broad valley between the rolling grassy ridges of the foothills. Old Agency was known for years to the Indians as the Country of the Dead;<sup>8</sup> there is a slight rise to the south where the hundreds of bodies were placed, only partially buried, in the crude wooden coffins the agency carpenter was kept busy building during those spring and winter months.

Young writes to the Commissioner on April 26, 1881, that he must have more supplies, that after the unsuccessful hunts of the previous winter and since the buffalo are so far away and in such small quantities, he expects more Indians to be dependent on the agency during the next winter.

Apparently not getting the support he had hoped for, he writes the Commissioner again on July 12, 1881, requesting permission to go to Washington himself to explain fully the need for more sup-

<sup>8</sup> McClintock, Walter, *The Old North Trail*, (Macmillan and Co., London, 1910), p. 333.

plies to prevent starvation. He comments again on the diminishing game, says there is small support from the embryo farms and the young stock cows, points out that he has been at the agency nearly five years and has never before asked for leave of absence, and concludes by saying that he considers the trip of such importance that he will go at his own expense if he is not granted funds for the trip by the Commissioner.

Matters get progressively worse and by July, 1882, Young is greatly distressed by the reduction in the appropriation which Congress has made for the coming year. He writes forcefully, on July 15, to the Commissioner that this reduction will in all probability cause much loss of life. He says that considerable military force will be needed to protect government property and the cattle herd from destruction if no supplies or relief are in prospect. He urges that these supplies arrive before November, since freighting in the winter is almost impossible, and adds, with an intensity of feeling that shows the mounting pressure of the past months, "Anxiety and sleepless nights . . . I must try to avoid in the coming [winter]."

The Indians themselves apparently became resentful of the cut in appropriations, for Young writes to Col. Gibbon at Fort Shaw on July 31, 1882, that the Indians are restless and dissatisfied by the reduction of rations and requests that Col. Kent's command be moved

nearer the agency "for moral support it would afford."

Let it be remarked here that there was, in all probability, no Indian tribe in Montana more susceptible to the effect of the presence of troops; the agent remarks often that the Piegans, by reputation, with the other members of the Blackfoot Confederacy, were the fiercest and most feared of any Indians in the Territory, recalling the still recent Baker massacre of 1870, and react with the most pathetic fright to the mere appearance of a soldier, many of them running in panic for the brush.<sup>9</sup> This reaction undoubtedly explains the docility of the Piegans during subsequent months.

The unrest and dissatisfaction grows, with the agent himself being blamed for the small rations on issue day. Young comments August 15, 1882, on the change in bearing of the Indians, brought about by the presence of troops; previously they had been sullen and had even made threats of killing the agent before the summer was over.<sup>10</sup> Finally, according to a letter of Sept.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Piegan chiefs to Commissioner, Oct. 22, 1878, and letter from Agent to Commissioner, Oct. 23, 1878; Blackfeet Agency Archives, Browning, Montana.

<sup>10</sup> Information passed on by a "Mr. Burd who lives on Depouie Creek," in letter Aug. 18, 1882. See also Schultz, *My Life As An Indian*, p. 400, quoting remark of Berry (Joe Kipp, who also had a ranch on Dupuyer Creek), "We told you months ago to kill that Agent of yours. Had you done that, there would have been a great excitement where the white people live, and men would have been sent here to look into the matter. They would have learned that you were without food, and a plenty would have been sent to you."

**These Indians were pictured on the Blackfeet Reservation in the fall of 1888 before they faced another cruel winter on the plains. This fine photograph appears in the book "Sport Among the Rockies," an account of the observations of a group of New Yorkers who visited the Blackfeet under the guidance of Joe Kipp.**







11, 1882, the supplies were increased twenty-five percent; Young complains that this is still insufficient.

Young writes T. C. Power, who at that time is in Washington, and whom Young is anxious to have exert his influence for larger appropriations on Feb. 27, 1883: "My anxiety is great to know what is to be done by the Department for these tribes next year, are they to be fed and helped until they are able to help themselves, which they wish to do and entreat for help. I hope its to be so."

T. C. Power seems to be, in an examination of the letterbooks, Young's only friend and confidant. Young writes Power often on various matters, and Power, in turn, comes through with valuable help. A possible explanation, of course, is T. C. Power's role as merchant and supplier of treaty goods and annuities, with it attendant profits, but the friendship seems to be a genuine one and Power's concern over Major Young's difficulties sincere.

The letters of most of the next few months have faded beyond readability, but telegrams such as the following to the Commissioner on May 7, 1883, indicate the severity of the situation: "There will not be provisions enough next month to prevent suffering. Can anything be done?"

On May 14, he writes, presaging the action he is to take the next September, "I have passed thro much anxiety during the past two winters from the insufficient appropriation for the Indians of my charge, if another such winter is before me, I may ask to be removed, but that depends on the action of the Department."

And on Aug. 27, 1883: "Fifty steers will not be enough to prevent suffering and prevent the destruction of the stock herd." Young adds that any addition will have to come before winter; later delivery is impossible.

Meanwhile, in spite of the obvious approaching disaster, Congress has once again neglected to increase the appropriation for the following year. The consequences, to Young, are obvious. He has written the Commissioner again and receives the following instructions in a letter dated Sept. 13, 1883 from the Commissioner of Indian Affairs: "Referring to your letter . . . that the balance to be delivered will not be enough to prevent suffering and the destruction of the stock herd, you are advised of the fact that the total appropriation made by Congress for the Indians belonging to your agency has already been exhausted . . . and as it is not in the power of this Department to make any further provisions for their support . . . nothing further can be done."

Left, a group of Piegans posed at the Blackfeet Agency at Badger Creek in the fall of 1888. Third from the left is the Blackfeet chief, White Calf, whose running feud with Agent Young contributed to the suffering of the Indians in the starvation winter described here. This picture also appeared in the book "Sport Among the Rockies" published in Troy, N. Y., in 1889.



These Blackfeet, right, are pictured in Helena, about 1905, in front of the notorious Old Capitol Music Hall, located at the corner of Wall and Main streets. Warmly garbed in white men's clothing, these Indians were in town as Federal Court witnesses.

"You will comply with instructions given you in relation to division of supplies."

Major Young has unequivocally lost and is without recourse; he has taken all he can of defeat and discouragement and he does the only thing possible: on Sept. 24, 1883, he sends his resignation to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. "I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of official letter under date of Sept. 13, and marked F-L 15561/83 advising me that nothing further can be done for the support of these Indians, and directing my compliance with the instructions given in relation to division of Supplies. Those instructions shall be carefully followed. Strong hopes have lately been given to these Indians assembled in council by the *Inspector Special Agent* and the member of the Senate Commission, that more food would be sent to them. It is a grave error not to keep even an implied promise made to Indians. The division of supplies authorized will not prevent distress and loss of life and in all probability lead to outrage. My police force in such case would be useless, my employees, not being bound by any prin-

ciple of honor or duty, would leave. I could not supply their places. And it will become necessary for me to call on the military for protection of government property and the lives of my family.

"Greatly preferring that someone better fitted to meet these movements, or perhaps possessed of ability to avoid them, be appointed, I most respectfully request the acceptance of my resignation, to take effect on the arrival here of my successor.

Very respectfully,  
Your obedient servant,  
John Young  
U. S. Indian Agent."

It is in the middle of March, 1884, before his successor, Major Allen, arrives to relieve Young, and the months in between are ones of nightmare and heart-break. Letter after letter, telegram after telegram, is sent to the Commissioner in Washington, D.C., Power in Helena, and the commanding officers of Ft. Shaw.

"I am entirely out of beef and killing Stock Cattle to keep my Indians from Suffering."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Letter to T. C. Power, Helena, Oct. 9, 1883.



On Oct. 31, 1883, Young writes to the Commissioner that the flour is nearly out and no bacon, rice, coffee, Hominy, beans or oatmeal have arrived; there is no information as to where they are or when they may arrive at the agency.

"Received additional Beef. . . Have now only four weeks supply of flour. Must have more at once."<sup>12</sup>

On December 18, 1883, he writes Col. Moale at Ft. Shaw, saying that T. C. Power is taking responsibility for ordering more flour. Four hundred sacks have arrived "under a special personal arrangement with Mr. Power to meet an emergency. . . . What is in store here will be exhausted in a few weeks. And Mr. Power is anticipating the action of the Dept. and of Congress and taking all the responsibility. You may be sure his so doing has taken a weight off me and prevented much suffering amongst my Indians."

"Only one weeks half ration of flour left. No possibility of any in time except by management with military at Fort Shaw."<sup>13</sup>

On Feb. 21, 1884, Young writes a touching letter to Gen. Brooke at Ft. Shaw, telling him flour is on the way; delivery is uncertain, with the road conditions making freighting difficult, and Young asks the General to share flour from the Fort until it arrives. "The Indians are orderly and wonderfully patient all things considered, fewer offences than common amongst them this winter. They must not be allowed to starve."

So the letters go, all requests necessitating endless governmental red tape, with letters to the Department at Washington taking at best a month, every emergency order needing authorization and approval, and the forthcoming supplies in such small and trifling amounts as to be insufficient even as stop gap measures.

Major Young writes on March 3, 1884, after months of delay, that he is ex-

pecting his successor momentarily, but he must remain until then; he is needed "to keep these Indians from starvation and its consequences."

As the weeks go by and conditions become more and more depressing, he writes a bitter letter to Gen. John R. Brooke at Ft. Shaw, March 13, 1884, saying, "I have the honor to inform you that a large number of Indians belonging to this Agency have gone to the Teton or Old Agency without either informing me or obtaining permission to do so.

"I am satisfied they are not *on the warpath* as they have old men, squaws and children with them, and that they are after the carcasses of cattle that have died, been skinned by white men, and left on the prairie."

He writes to George Steell at Sun River on the same day, "Don't slack your efforts to help me keep these poor Indians from starving."

On March 18, Young's successor arrived, the actual transfer was made March 31, and Major Young left for New York the following week.

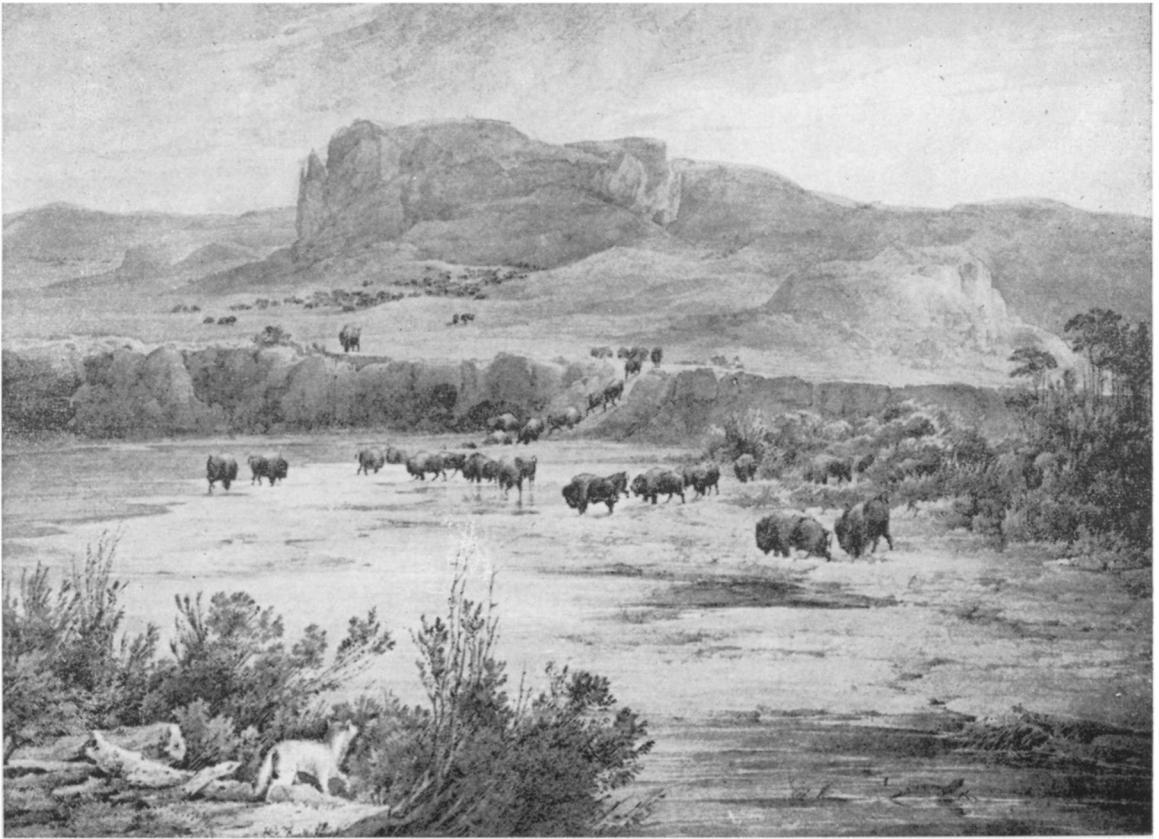
After reading these disturbing letters, it is pertinent to ask what kind of a man was Major Young? Physically, he was an old man, short, wore a beard and walked with a cane.<sup>14</sup> He had two daughters, Annie and Mrs. Ford, apparently not young, teaching at the agency school, who were graduates of "Packer Female College" of Brooklyn, N. Y.<sup>15</sup> A son, John W. Young, Jr., served part of the time as clerk at the agency. As to disposition, he was apparently stiff, blunt and unbending, formal and abstemious, a type not likely to endear himself to the Indians or to the rough element of the frontier.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with Frank Vielle at Heart Butte on the Blackfeet reservation, Nov. 7, 1955. "He was a mean old man; the Indians didn't like him," said Vielle of Young, reflecting the Indian point of view of the time. Frank Vielle was born in 1868 and is the son of Francois Vielle whose name appears often in accounts of early fur trading and freighting.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Young, Oct. 28, 1879, Blackfeet Agency Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Telegram to Commissioner, Dec. 3, 1883.

<sup>13</sup> Telegram to Commissioner, Feb. 12, 1884.



Here is the land of plenty which sustained the Plains Indians before a hopelessly misguided Indian policy sent them starving to ever-shrinking reservations. This watercolor showing buffalo herds on the Upper Missouri is the work of Carl Bodmer, who explored the area in the early 1800's with Prince Maximilian.

The Ft. Benton *River Press* of Dec. 31, 1884, contrasts the popular Allen with Young: "Indian Agent Allen has made himself quite popular with the residents in the vicinity of the agency . . . the change from the administration of that venerable old fraud, John W. Young, is so great that a comparison is out of the question." Allen had been out with the cowboys gathering cattle, and the article goes on, "Young would have let the last old squaw kick the bucket before he would have gone out on the round up or put himself to any particular trouble."

What, besides personal dislike, are the reasons for the abuse heaped upon Major Young? They are interesting and complex and fall into three general categories, the first being the most far-reaching in its effects: the familiar move on the part of the stockmen and settlers on the frontier to reduce the size of the Indian reservation.

In 1876, the boundaries of the Blackfeet reservation were moved by Execu-

tive Order from the Teton River to Birch Creek, and now, six years later, the stockmen are once again becoming covetous of the rich grass and well-watered range of the reservation, which even today contains some of the choicest range-land in the state. Martin Maginnis, the Territory's representative in Washington, in 1882 has a bill before the Congress.

The whole point of the numerous articles and editorials appearing in the Ft. Benton papers of 1882-83 appears to be to minimize the number of Indians on the reservation, and particularly Young's estimate of them, in order to show that the size of the reservation should be reduced. Young, on the other hand, believing just as firmly that the reservation acreage is none too large as it is, possibly overestimates the numbers of his Indians to keep it intact.

The Benton *Record* takes credit for the move to reduce the size of the reservation in the following editorial of Jan. 5, 1882: "We have labored faithfully

to show the true condition of the Indians both on this side of the British line and across, and we claim a fair share of the credit for the active steps now being taken to curtail the Blackfoot reservation, by which means alone can any certain guarantee be given for the protection of our settlers against predatory redskins."

In another editorial entitled "Help Maginnis," in the Jan. 12, 1882, *Benton Record*, the help of the stockmen is enlisted: "What the people of this section should do, and it would be well for the stockmen to take the initiative, perhaps—is to call a mass meeting, pass proper resolutions and appoint a committee to collect and furnish evidence to Delegate Maginnis of the true state of the facts in this case of the people of Northern Montana vs. Major John Young, Indian agents and Inspectors in general, the South Piegan Indians et al. There is little difficulty in obtaining evidence to irrefutably establish the fact that less than 3,000 Indians occupy nineteen - twentieths of 28,000,000 of acres of Northern Montana—or rather that this land is falsely claimed by Indian agents to be occupied by these Indians who are habitually listed at four or five times their actual number; that little game is to be found on this reservation; that under present conditions there is no hope of civilizing or improving these Indians; that on the contrary, a premium is put upon the indulgence of their bad propensities; and that by the continuance of this reservation that not only constant loss results to settlers from the depredation of these Indians, who kill cattle and steal horses, but that the progress and development of the richest portion of Montana is seriously interfered with and to serve no good or defensible aim whatsoever. . . . It is of the most vital importance to all Northern Montana that this reservation should be cut down as soon as possible, and all of us should lend all the assistance in our power to accomplish it. Call a mass meeting. The Stockmen's Associations

are the most enterprising and public spirited organizations of this section and we appeal particularly to them in the premises."

Major Young meanwhile is not silent; he is strongly opposed, in the interests of his Indians, to the movement afoot and recognizes the implications of the *Record* editorials. He writes on Jan. 17, 1882, that a strong effort is being made for a further grab of Indian lands, pointing out that it has been six years since the curtailment was made from the Teton to Birch Creek and saying, "the *Benton Record*, in the interest of the Choteau County 'Stock Association' is constantly abusing the Agent . . . and stirring up . . . dissatisfaction among the Indians, all for the purpose of getting the Government to again take a slice off the reservation, and thus increase the stock ranges."

He writes Dec. 26, 1882 again to the Commissioner, calling his attention to the bill before Congress to reduce the size of the reservation and asking that steps be taken to prevent its passage. On the same day, Young writes a long and persuasive letter to Martin Maginnis himself, saying that if the reservation is reduced, "it is my conviction that white men with all their intelligence and energy, if numbering only one-twelfth of what the Indians do, could not make a living off it," and giving his view that the Indians will become self-supporting by stock-raising rather than by the more intensified farming: the present reservation is none too large for their needs. "More soldiers," he concludes, "would be needed to keep tribes on the proposed reduced reservation than are now in all Montana."

The efforts of the stockmen and the contemporary newspapers are intensified; there are references to Major Young as "... that snivelling old fraud,"<sup>16</sup> and they culminate in the investigation of Young by the Grand Jury of Choteau County, with its report appearing in the April 28, 1883, *Benton Record*:

<sup>16</sup> *Benton Record*, Feb. 2, 1882.



No one appreciated the majesty of the Blackfeet Indian in his natural habitat or recorded it so well as Charles M. Russell. And no one deplored more the deterioration of the tribes which later came. This beautiful oil, "Where Tracks Spell War or Meat," hangs in the Gilcrease Institute of Art and History, in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

"Much of the time of this Grand Jury has been occupied by the examinations into depredations by Piegan Indians upon the cattle herds on the borders of this county, and from the testimony of a number of Indians, it is the opinion of this Grand Jury that the greater part of these depredations are chargeable directly to the incompetency of Major John Young, present agent Blackfeet Agency. Evidence has come before us of his telling Indians they could kill cattle on the north side of the Marias, and testimony is ample to prove that nearly all of the Indians are in a starving condition, ten ounces of meat each for one week being the ration allowed them. . . . He wilfully misrepresented the condition of these Indians to the departments at Washington, and their forbearance from open revolt is to be commended.

"He has also refused to subserve the ends of justice by refusing to deliver to a Deputy Sheriff stolen property. Has been charged with keeping a harem of young Indian girls, and in our opinion there is nothing that would tend more to the peace of this county, the safety of property, the welfare and happiness of these Indians than his removal at

once. All of which is respectfully submitted."

W. G. Conrad, Foreman

Jere Sullivan	John M. Boardman
E. E. Boardman	Joseph Hirschberg
William Morrow	Chas. Crawford
John H. Green	John Harris
Geo. D. Patterson	A. F. Ockerman
J. H. Rice	Edward Dunne
J. C. Adams	Frank Coombs
Chester Eaton	W. G. Conrad

— Grand Jurors

On the same day in the same paper the following editorial entitled "A Nice Agent," appears, indicating to what depths the campaign had sunk: "This paper has repeatedly demanded the removal of Major Young, the Piegan Indian agent, on the ground that he was dishonest and incompetent, and we have always been prepared to substantiate those charges if required to do so. We have witnesses who will make affidavits that Young, if not a thief, is at least the protector of thieves, and that while accomplishing no good for the Indians, and is detested by them, he has made his agency a rendezvous for horsethieves and a depot for stolen property. This is certainly bad enough, but we were not prepared to believe that the old fraud is



A famous chief of the Blackfeet in an earlier and better day, Little Dog, is pictured here in his lodge with a member of his family. Note the rich trappings and comfortable surroundings of these people.

also keeping a harem of young Indian girls, as stated in the recent report of the Grand Jury. His age alone would have saved him from the accusations if the fact had not been too evident for disbelief, and no one can well doubt that Young is the most unprincipled old fraud that has yet struck this Territory."

The effect of this slander on Young can well be imagined; he writes to the U.S. Marshall in Helena on May 1st, 1883, referring to the attack made against him by the Grand Jury in Ft. Benton, that "the whole relation is without a shadow of foundation in truth," and that he is "deeply outraged." He points out that a large part of the Grand Jury are Cattlemen and his stand in opposition to their struggle to reduce the size of the reservation is sufficient reason to account for their desire for his removal.

Word gets around quickly, and there are others, apparently, who recognize the unfairness of the tactics used against Young. T. C. Power writes him May 31, 1883, and, referring to the forces at work against him, says, "Gen. Ruger informs me he is doing all he could to have your Indians furnished more supplies. Very sorry to see the Ft. Benton intimidators so successful. Those fellows will go for anyone they cannot control. Have written the Hon. Commissioner in your behalf. I am doing all possible to get the balance of your goods up the river. They will be along soon. We are doing our best for you."

It must be borne in mind that the peak of this abuse came at a time when the spectre of starvation for his Indians was becoming increasingly large for Major Young and his problems must have seemed nearly insurmountable. The whites of the area were aware of the insufficient rations for the Indians, and since, like sin, starvation is an easy thing to be against, at least on paper, they were opposed, laying, naturally the blame on Young:

"Our reports state that the Piegiens are starving. This is no news . . . the whole government is insufficient for their support and they do not receive one-third of that . . ." <sup>17</sup>

"The party who took the trouble to defend Major Young in the columns of the *Independent*—probably Young himself—said that it was wrong to attack the agent instead of the department for ration issues. . . . It is hardly fair to throw the responsibility upon the government, while he is drawing rations for about two thousand and more Indians than he has or ever had under his control. Besides, the Indians at the Belknap Agency are well fed, while Young's Indians are always starving." <sup>18</sup>

As if the opposition of the stockmen were not enough to contend with, Major Young, during his more than seven years at the agency, had antagonized, through a personal feud, representatives of two more large and influential segments of the life of the Territory. One was the Catholic Church, through the Jesuit priests who operated the nearby St. Peter's Mission and who filled their school with Indian children from the Blackfeet reservation.

During Grant's administration, the various Indian reservations were divided among the religious denominations; this was done arbitrarily, without regard to the previous Christianizing in-

<sup>17</sup> Benton *Record*, May 5, 1883.

<sup>18</sup> Benton *Record*, May 2, 1883.

fluences, and the Blackfeet reservation was assigned to the Methodists. This action unfortunately disregarded the early work among the Blackfeet by Father DeSmet and Father Nicholas Point and the already strong Catholic ties of the many early traders who had married Blackfeet women.

Major Young was apparently a staunch Methodist<sup>19</sup> and bull-headed as well. There is a long and bitter exchange of letters between Young and Father Prando and Father Imoda, too involved to go into here, on the subject of recruiting boys for St. Peter's with Young finally ordering the Jesuits off the reservation.

Young shows real bigotry in his numerous letters on the matter, giving the Jesuits ample reason for their opposition, and he writes to the Commissioner on Jan. 3, 1882, concerning their activities on the reservation: "I have no confidence in these missionaries, nor have I seen any good resulting from their many years occasional visits to these tribes. None of the heathenish practices abated, no civilization in any shape taught. . . . There is one of these Rev. Fathers on Birch Creek (the border of the reservation) and he has so frequently been brought to my notice as the author of false statements to the Indians, tending to make them dissatisfied with the management here. . . ."

Young refers to a letter dated July 2, 1882, a letter he received from Father Prando, the Reverend Father on Birch Creek mentioned above, saying that it contained "vague hints at charges against me coupled with a threat."

The other individual with whom Young carried on a running feud was none other than White Calf, the head

chief of the Blackfeet. The lack of rapport between Young and White Calf showed itself as early as 1877 in a squabble over returning a stolen horse<sup>20</sup> and erupted periodically, in various incidents also too involved to develop here, until the departure of the Agent. Young describes White Calf, in a letter July 26, 1876, to the Commissioner, as "an intelligent active Indian . . . commanding manner, very vain, great talker . . . very selfish, undoubtedly brave."

The *Benton Record* naturally, capitalizes on this clash, remarking in an editorial on Jan. 19, 1882, "Major Young for a long time has evidently believed himself to be possessed of the Blackfoot Agency and Reservation in fee simple. His recent insolence and brutality to poor old White Calf, the chief of the

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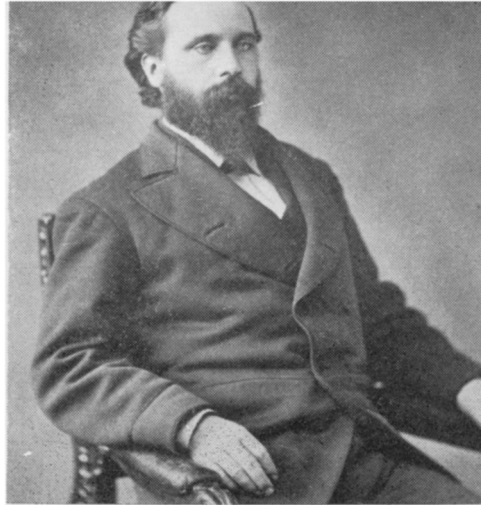
Artist Carl Bodmer here pictures Wolf Calf, a young Piegan Indian, as he saw him at Fort McKenzie in August, 1833. This rich young Piegan could hardly visualize the degradation of his people 50 years later.



<sup>19</sup> Young received a letter from "Brother Hugh Duncan," a lawman well-known for his work in the early Methodist Church in Montana, dated Oct. 17, 1883. Duncan refers to a recent mission meeting at Bozeman and says, "The board would stand by you as long as you wanted to stay . . . I am very glad your health has been so good I pray the Lord will preserve you and keep you many years in usefulness you can do much for these poor people more than anyone else."

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Young to Commanding Officer at Ft. Benton, Aug. 29, 1877.





T. C. Power, leading pioneer merchant, at the far left, may have been Agent John Young's only friend and confidant in the futile efforts to get food to his starving Indian charges.

Martin Maginnis, left, was Territorial representative in Washington in 1882 when he introduced a bill further curtailing the Blackfeet reservation. The editorial pressures exerted upon him by the Territorial press to take such an action are recorded in this article.

Piegans . . . alone indicate this. Delegate Maginnis has commenced an action in ejectment, however. So pack your carpet-bag, Major, pack your carpet-bag."

The antagonism between Young and Father Prando and Young and White Calf undoubtedly accounts for the natural proclivity of both men to represent themselves as the saviour of the Blackfeet in their time of starvation. Both Joseph Kinsey Howard and James Willard Schultz give Father Prando credit for getting out the news of the suffering on the reservation. Frank Vielle, in the interview previously mentioned at Heart Butte, said that White Calf rode to Ft. Shaw to report the starvation conditions. Pleasant as it would have been to the champion of the dying Blackfeet, there was scarcely a need, as we have seen, to get "out" the news of the conditions.

James Willard Schultz has in his books contributed much to the understanding of the history of Montana and particularly that of the early Blackfeet reservation. However, in the matter of the Starvation Winter, Schultz undoubtedly took his slant from his great friend, the ubiquitous Joseph Kipp, and the Indian people with whom he lived. Let it be remarked further that if White Calf's feud with Young were not enough to sow seeds of resentment in the rest of the tribe, the Agent's duties on issue day of distributing the meager rations would surely solidify his unpopularity.

The thought occurs that possibly the Department of Indian Affairs, anxious to disclaim responsibility and to avoid the blame for the deaths of that winter, was publicly critical of Young and attributed the cut in rations to, as was so loudly proclaimed in the press of the day, the rosy picture he painted of the condition of the Blackfeet. But the Department stood firmly behind Young, reinforcing his requests for more aid, in the Annual Reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

In the Annual Report for the year ending June 30, 1881, pp. 10-11, the Commissioner asks that Congress appropriate more for the Blackfeet and quotes a letter from Col. Ruger, commanding the district of Montana: "The facts pertinent are that the supplies provided for these Indians are entirely inadequate for their subsistence the coming winter. The game obtainable on their reservation is not sufficient, if added to the issues by the agent, to prevent great suffering and even starvation."

In the Annual Report for 1882, p. 53, the Commissioner says of Young, "Some months ago the agent of the Blackfeet Indians who is, I believe, a good man and a faithful agent, made a request that his Indians be allowed to cut some of the pine timber in the mountainous part of the reservation, manufacture it into lumber, and trade the lumber for provisions to prevent starvation; but under the law as it now exists, this could not be allowed. Then the agent

asked permission, which was granted, to solicit contributions among his friends in the East, to prevent suffering among his Indians; and now, while I write, word comes that these Indians are nearly destitute of food."

There is scarcely any glowing report on the agricultural accomplishments of the Blackfeet or any figures to show that they are no longer in need of government support. What does come through of interest, however, is the decreasing number of Indians depending on the agency, which is quite possibly the reason Congress reduced the annual appropriations.

Young explains this in the *Annual Report* for 1882, p. 160: "For the past three years there has been a steady decrease in the number of Indians claiming support at this agency. These Indians—Blackfeet, Blood, and Piegan—are consolidated and known as Piegans and form part of the same family across the line in the Dominion of Canada. . . . Until within three years, no rations or annuities were given by the Dominion Government, and the attraction of the rations and annuities here naturally enticed their relatives from the north. This immigration greatly increased the length of our roll. Since the giving of rations and money annuities at the north, at Fort McLeod, was commenced, the

attractions have been in the other direction. The failure of buffalo on the American side has removed another inducement for the northern Piegans to come here."

In the *Annual Report* for 1883, p. 48, the Commissioner comments on the deplorable conditions of the Indians at the agency: "The reduction by Congress of appropriations for subsistence of the Blackfeet, Blood and Piegan Indians . . . has already caused a great deal of suffering among these Indians, and is a source of constant and increasing anxiety and embarrassment to this office. . . . Repeated trials have shown that successful farming on these reservations would be impossible, even to whites." The Commissioner goes on to quote the report of a special Inspector sent to gather firsthand information: "Never before have I been called upon to listen to an Indian council to such tales of suffering. . . ."

These tales of suffering became more and more harrowing as the months go by.

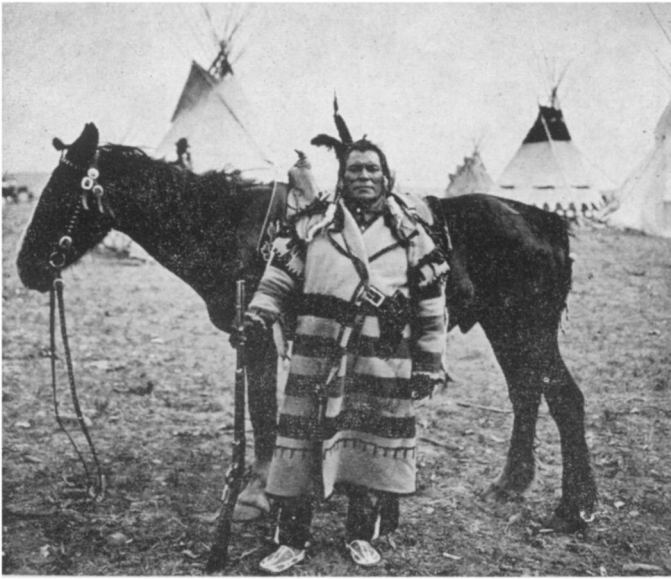
"A few of the Birch Creek Piegans have got along tolerably well this winter on sheep meat taken from the 'Bone Yard' of a band infected with scab."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Benton *Record*, May 26, 1883.

The interior of a Blackfeet Indian lodge is shown in this fine photo which also appeared in "Sport Among the Rockies," taken on the Blackfeet reservation in the fall of 1888. The man in the center was identified in 1943 by several older Indians as Chief Lodge Pole, last chief of the "Small Robes Band." He died in old age, about 1895.





At the left is Bear Chief, a particularly fine Blackfeet type. Well mounted, armed and dressed, this man was typical of the comfortable status the Blackfeet had achieved before circumstances of government red tape and loss of the buffalo contrived to bring on disastrous starvation.

The attendance of the children at the agency school has fallen off because "much of the time they have nothing to eat and cannot go to school."<sup>22</sup>

"The little children seemed to have suffered most; they were so emaciated that it did not seem possible for them to live long and many of them have since passed away. . . . In the latter part of June and the forepart of July so great was their destitution that the Indians stripped the bark from the saplings that grow along the creeks and ate the inner portion to appease their gnawing hunger."<sup>23</sup>

Most pathetic of all is the demoralizing effect of the long starvation. Writing of the thieving bands of Crees which have been stealing the Blackfeet horses, Young's successor describes the once mighty warriors: "The Indians live in such fear of their enemies that when any of them are reported in the vicinity, they forsake their houses and little gardens and collect in the immediate neighborhood of the Agency buildings."<sup>24</sup> He says the presence of constant military force is necessary to keep raiders away and to give the Indians confidence to remain at their houses and farms.

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Commissioner from Allen, June 4, 1884, Blackfeet Agency Archives.

<sup>23</sup> Allen's report on conditions, *Annual Report* for 1884, pp. 150-51.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Allen to Commissioner, June 4, 1884, Blackfeet Agency Archives.

The Commissioner himself conclusively sums up the problem, its cause and its solution, in the *Annual Report* for 1884, pp. 2-3: "One great cause of embarrassment in the management of the affairs of this Bureau is the failure to make the appropriations for the Indian service in time so that deliveries may be made at the distant agencies within the year for which the appropriations are made. . . . It is . . . very evident that unless the Indian appropriation bill passes early in the session, many of the goods and supplies for the extreme northwestern agencies cannot possibly reach their destination within the year for which they are purchased.

"The newspapers of the country have been full of complaints for months past because certain Indians at the extreme northern agencies were suffering for food, and by inference the cause of this suffering was attributable to neglect on the part of this office; while on the contrary, the suffering of these Indians for lack of food was attributable *directly* and *entirely* first, to the fact that the appropriations for them were not made until three months after they should have been made, and second, that when made, the amount allowed was less than was asked for by this office, and consequently, insufficient for the absolute wants of these Indians. The Blackfeet, Blood and Piegan Indians . . . were driven to great straits to sustain life during the winter and spring of 1883 and 1884, being compelled to kill many of their horses and young stock cattle for food, and to resort to every possible expedient, such as eating bark, wild roots, etc. and there is little doubt that many deaths amongst them were the direct result of lack of food.

"It is evident that owing to the entire disappearance of game and the inability of these Indians to support themselves for the present by agriculture,



1880's tribal leaders photographed at the Blackfeet Agency, later identified by Rides-at-the-Door, were, left to right, Stabs-by-Mistake, White Antelope, Neck, White Calf (father of Two-Guns-White-Calf of buffalo nickel profile fame), Moves Out and Rides-at-the-Door.

and the absence of stock herds old enough and large enough so that the increase might afford a permanent even if very limited supply, they will be compelled to depend nearly altogether on the government for food for several years to come. . . . In view of all these circumstances, I believe that there has never been a time in the history of these tribes when judicious assistance and encouragement from the Government would have been so beneficial to them as at present.

"I have called attention to these things before, and now do so again, with the hope that Congress may see the necessity of making appropriations for the Indian service as to *time* and *quantity* so as to prevent in the future all just complaints of this character."

Thus, in the end, it is apparent that the responsibility for the tragedy of that winter falls where, in a democracy, it usually falls: on the indifference of the Congress of the United States, which is of course, in the last analysis, the indifference of the people themselves.

Following is a condensed table of the yearly reports sent in the *Annual Report* to his Department by the Blackfeet agent:

Year	Blackfeet Population	Amount Appropriated	Number of Acres Cultivated by Govt. Indians		Stock Owned by Indians		Value of robes and Furs Sold	Percent of Subsistence Obtained By		
								Indian Labor In Civilized Pursuits	Hunting, Fishing, etc.	Issue of Govt Rations
1881	7,500	\$40,000	90	85	4,000	80	\$12,500	25	50	25
1882	6,000	50,000	100	155	2,000	65	12,000	15	10	75
1883	4,500	35,000	80	195	1,000*	20	900	13	12	75
1884	2,300	35,000	51	10	1,100	----	500	18	15	67
1885	2,000	50,000	54	20	1,100	----	200	12	8	80

\* Half of the Indian horses died of "cutaneous disease".