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WANTED

Sitting Bull and His Photographic Portrait

> Says a Dakota exchange: "Sitting Bull is getting to be quite a lady-killer in his old age, having received numerous requests for photographs, and offers of marriage." This reminds one that Sitting Bull was also a lady killer in his youth, and that when the Sioux surrendered he wore a fine collection of scalps at his belt to prove it.
> —*Washington Post,* 27 October 1889

In the years after the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, Sitting Bull became the subject of intense and widespread scrutiny. The attention accorded him manifested itself most visibly in the nation's newspapers, where the Lakota chief's actions and statements were frequently recorded. Headlines that featured "Custer's killer" helped to sell newspapers, and the nation followed with interest his exile in Canada and his eventual surrender at Fort Buford, Dakota Territory, in July 1881. While such reports held out the possibility of offering the public something more profound about Sitting Bull and the predicament of American Indians more generally, they rarely shed any light on the complexity of his character and the difficult position in which he and his followers found themselves. Instead, they served chiefly to reinforce prevailing assumptions, most importantly, that Sitting Bull remained an unrepentant and at times violent renegade still at war with the United States.

Not surprisingly, Sitting Bull's surrender elicited a wave of new front-page reports. It also prompted a rush to secure his likeness. At least two engravings of the famous chief—drawn by artist-correspondents who had gained an audience with him—had appeared prior to 1881. Yet, once in American custody, first at Fort Randall and after May 1883 at the Standing Rock Agency, Sitting Bull attracted the attention of numerous photographers eager to obtain images that might be marketed to a wide audience. Many American Indian leaders posed before

the photographer's camera during this period of heightened conflict with authorities of the United States government. However, because non-Indians regarded Sitting Bull as perhaps the most renowned fugitive of the age, the public longed to attach a face to his name. Given this demand, interest in his photographic likeness continued unabated through the time of his death in 1890.

Although photography seemed to bring Sitting Bull face to face with the larger public, the great majority of images did little to enlarge their understanding of him. Those who had more than a passing acquaintance with Sitting Bull acknowledged that he was a complex figure. As the Dakota physician and author Charles Eastman wrote in his book *Indian Heroes and Great Chieftains* (1918), "It is not easy to characterize Sitting Bull. . . . There are few to whom his name is not familiar, and still fewer who have learned to connect it with anything more than the conventional notion of the bloodthirsty savage. The man was an enigma at best" (p. 107). Because of the manner in which photographers tended to represent Sitting Bull—in a contrived pose, often within a studio setting—these portraits provided only a limited amount of useful information about him. More often, especially when accompanied by a leading title or caption, they acted to further the prevailing stereotype.

When these images are viewed together within the context of the dramatic social and political changes that Sitting Bull and the Lakotas confronted in the 1880s, however, a fuller picture of his life during this period begins to take shape. In the dozen photographs that follow, the extent of the fascination that non-Indians held about him is plainly evident. While these images speak volumes about how he was understood, they also can provide a revealing—albeit incomplete—glimpse into the many challenges that he encountered. Increasingly forced to adapt to a lifestyle consistent with the demands of United States officials, Sitting Bull often struggled with such radical changes. Although he tried farming and showed a cursory interest in Christianity, he never accepted the vision that government authorities held for American Indians; at times, he was altogether resistant to these proposed plans. As a group, these photographs bear witness to a sad and troubling decade in the life of Sitting Bull and in the history of Lakota-American affairs.

William R. Cross, "Sitting Bull and True Autograph," Bailey, Dix, and Mead, 1882, albumen silver print, Sitting Bull Collection, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society

Having been pursued by the United States military and exiled in Canada for more than five years following the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Sitting Bull surrendered to authorities at Fort Buford on 19 July 1881. Defections from his group and a dwindling food supply compelled him to take this precipitous action. Nebraska photographer William R. Cross is credited with securing this early image of Sitting Bull not long afterwards at Fort Randall, where the Hunkpapa chief was transferred and imprisoned beginning in September. Three local men—Joshua Bailey, George Dix, and John Mead—likely commissioned Cross to create a series of photographs centering on Sitting Bull that could be marketed to a national audience. This autographed cabinet card was the first in the twenty-four-part set and shows him holding both a club and a pipe. Commentators at the time of his surrender noted that he wore a plain, light-colored shirt similar to the one in this portrait.

William R. Cross, "Sitting Bull, Squaw and Twins," Bailey, Dix, and Mead, 1882, albumen silver print, Nebraska State Historical Society (B194-11)

Sitting Bull remained incarcerated at Fort Randall for almost two years. During this time, many visitors came to see him. While some wished to lend their support, most were interested solely for the thrill of seeing and being seen alongside the famous chief. In this image, No. 11 in the Bailey, Dix, and Mead set, an unidentified European American woman in a pleated skirt and a hat sits on a chair beside Sitting Bull and members of his family, all of whom sit on the ground before a tipi. The twins mentioned in the photograph's title sit on either side of a white girl—possibly the daughter of the woman in the skirt. Mounted on the light-colored horse in the background is Charles Bentzoni, a captain in the Twenty-fifth Infantry, the military unit stationed at Fort Randall. This photograph suggests the simultaneous fascination with and fear of the notorious Lakota leader. During his time at Fort Randall, Sitting Bull was often unhappy. With little to do and little understanding of what the future held for him and his followers, he fluctuated frequently between anger and submissiveness.

William R. Cross, "Sitting Bull and His Favorite Wife," Bailey, Dix, and Mead, 1882, albumen silver print, Nebraska State Historical Society (B194-5)

During his lifetime, Sitting Bull had at least five wives. At Fort Randall, though, he had only two, Seen-by-the-Nation and Four Robes. While journalists were keen to report about Sitting Bull's exploits as a warrior, in the years after his surrender they also fixated on details regarding his domestic life. The fact that he had two wives added further to the perception of him—and of American Indians more generally—as maintaining a lifestyle wholly different from those in "civilized" society. His marital status complicated and ultimately squelched the efforts of the Catholic Church at this time to add him to their numbers. While he had no desire to leave one of his wives, images such as this double portrait—Seen-by-the-Nation is seated at his side—pointed to the idea shared by many non-Indians that even an unreconstructed chief such as Sitting Bull might be capable of being assimilated. This image is No. 5 in the Bailey, Dix, and Mead series.

Robert L. Kelly, "Sitting Bull—Sioux Chief," Northwest Photography Company, 1883, albumen silver print, Denver Public Library (Z-37)

In the spring of 1883, military officials released Sitting Bull from Fort Randall and permitted him to rejoin his tribe at the Standing Rock Agency. The steamboat that carried him north up the Missouri River stopped at Pierre, where Sitting Bull disembarked long enough to sign autographs and to pose for local photographer Robert L. Kelly. Wearing a wide-brimmed hat with a butterfly pinned to his hatband, Sitting Bull was headed to a new and uncertain life under the direction of Indian agent James McLaughlin. Although the Hunkpapa chief stood ready to compromise on earlier demands, he continued to see himself as an important war chief and holy man who deserved a voice in his tribe's ongoing negotiations with United States authorities. McLaughlin was reluctant to acknowledge Sitting Bull's political standing, and the two men quickly grew to dislike each other. Given the popularity of this portrait, the Northwest Photography Company in Chadron, Nebraska, obtained a copy and began to issue it on their studio mounts.

J. F. Miller, Sitting Bull with mother, daughter, and grandson, ca. 1883, albumen silver print, Sitting Bull Collection, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society

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This photograph shows four generations of Sitting Bull's family. At left sits his mother Her-Holy-Door, and at right sits his daughter Many Horses and her young son. A local Dakota Territory photographer, J. F. Miller, took the photograph, probably not long after the family's relocation to their new home at Standing Rock. Throughout his life, Sitting Bull's family remained close to him. They endured his military campaigns, traveled with him during his exile in Canada, and accompanied him to Fort Randall and, later, to Standing Rock. Especially after the death of his father in 1859, Sitting Bull leaned on Her-Holy-Door for support and advice. Her death in 1884 made the transition to reservation life additionally difficult.

David F. Barry, "Sitting Bull," 1885, albumen silver print, Denver Public Library (B-77)

Of particular note in this cabinet card portrait by Bismarck photographer David F. Barry is the crucifix that Sitting Bull wears. Father Pierre-Jean De Smet reputedly gave it to him in 1868 during his visit to Sitting Bull's camp. Ongoing military conflicts marked this period, and the celebrated Jesuit missionary traveled to encourage the Hunkpapas to sign a treaty accepted earlier that summer by other Lakota tribes at Fort Laramie. Although Sitting Bull ultimately refused, several Hunkpapa leaders did sign. In 1883, various newspapers published reports that Sitting Bull was preparing to join the Catholic Church. He never did so. While he listened politely to De Smet and later to Bishop Martin Marty, he remained wedded to his traditional Hunkpapa spiritual beliefs. To Sitting Bull, the crucifix given to him as a gift served as a symbol of his power and authority. Wearing one did not signal—as non-Indian audiences might have perceived—his conversion to Christianity.

William Notman, Sitting Bull and William Cody, 1885, albumen silver print, Denver Public Library (B-346)

Although restrictions limited Sitting Bull's freedom, opportunities arose for him to travel beyond the reservation during this period. Because of his marketability, promoters sought to secure his cooperation and temporary release from Standing Rock. As early as 1877, efforts were made to convince him to perform on a theatrical stage. Sitting Bull refused this and, initially, other such invitations. In 1885, though, he agreed to sign a contract to appear with William F. ("Buffalo Bill") Cody's Wild West show. For fifty dollars a week and the right to sell his autograph and his photographic likeness, he made appearances with Buffalo Bill's troupe. During a tour that lasted four months, he visited more than a dozen cities. One stop was Montreal, Quebec, where Cody and Sitting Bull posed for this photograph in the studio of William Notman. While the famous chief was not made to perform in its historic reenactments, the Wild West show theatricalized—and ultimately distorted—a complex chapter in the recent history of the American West.

William Notman, Group portrait with Sitting Bull and William Cody, 1885, albumen silver print, Denver Public Library (NS-14)

William Notman created this group portrait on the same occasion as the previous image. In addition to Sitting Bull and Cody, this photograph includes, from left to right, interpreter William Halsey (seated), Dakota performer Crow Eagle, Cody's adopted son Johnny Baker (seated), and famed naturalist William ("Adirondack") Murray. Even though Notman removed the studio's painted backdrop from this image, he has placed the same grasslike rug before the group to add a sense of wilderness to the view. Cody has taken off his wide-brimmed hat, but Sitting Bull and Crow Eagle pose in feather headdresses. It is noteworthy that the decorated shirt Sitting Bull wears is not his own but, rather, one most likely made by a member of the Crow tribe. Cody often supplied his performers with striking costumes. Despite certain awkward moments, reports suggest that Cody and Sitting Bull got along well during their time together. This photograph suggests a desire—perhaps shared by all—to commemorate the summer's tour.

David F. Barry, "Sitting Bull performing ceremonies at 'Standing Rock,'" 1886, albumen silver print, Sitting Bull Collection, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society

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The Standing Rock Agency was named for a rock formation resembling a woman with a child on her back. The Hunkpapas had long regarded this rock with great significance. In 1886, Agent James McLaughlin decided to move it to a new location on the reservation. This photograph by David Barry documents the dedication ceremonies of the rock at its new site. With a crowd of Indians and non-Indians looking on, Sitting Bull and McLaughlin stand beside the rock at center. An interpreter leans on a post at right. Sitting Bull frequently commanded center stage in important negotiations and ceremonies, despite the presence of other Hunkpapa leaders who took an active role in tribal affairs. During this period, McLaughlin and the famous chief were frequently at odds, but in this image the two men come together to honor this important landmark.

David F. Barry, "Sitting Bull's Trial at Standing Rock Agency," 1886, albumen silver print, Sitting Bull Collection, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society

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David Barry was also at Standing Rock in 1886 to document a meeting of various tribal and government leaders. In this image, Sitting Bull stands at center before the assembled crowd while McLaughlin, wearing a dark hat, sits with other United States officials behind the table at center left. This photograph, according to its caption, records "Sitting Bull's trial at Standing Rock Agency for instigating the Crows to go on the war path." During the summer of 1886, Sitting Bull made national headlines for leading a contingent of one hundred Lakota men to the site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. There, on the tenth anniversary of that battle, the group held a dance to commemorate their victory. Sitting Bull also used the occasion to chastise the neighboring Crows for submitting so readily to the government's program of acculturation. His speech prompted subsequent problems on the Crow reservation and led authorities to discipline Sitting Bull and his followers.

Charles M. Bell, Sioux delegation in Washington, D.C., 1888, albumen silver print, Sitting Bull Collection, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society

Sharp disagreements over land policy arose again in the late 1880s, as United States officials sought to assign specific allotments to individual American Indian families and to open up surplus land to non-Indian settlers. Sitting Bull and others vehemently opposed the General Allotment Act, passed by Congress in 1887, and refused to agree to its principles. When a government commission sent out to Standing Rock and other agencies in the summer of 1888 failed to secure approval, authorities organized a delegation of sixty-one American Indian leaders to travel to Washington, D.C., in October to continue the discussion. This photograph records the delegation gathered on the steps of the Interior Department, where they were meeting with officials from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Sitting Bull remained wary of all compromise proposals, an attitude that is reflected in his decision to stand apart (at far left) from the larger group. Amidst great controversy, a land agreement was ultimately brokered and garnered enough signatures for passage. Sitting Bull never signed and was incensed by the subsequent land rush prompted by the breakup of the Great Sioux Reservation.

Photographer unknown, "Sitting Bull's Log Cabin Morning of the Fight," ca. 1891, Sitting Bull Collection, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society

The Sioux Agreement of 1889 furthered the sense of anger and despair at Standing Rock. Fearing a violent uprising amidst the uproar of the Ghost Dance, government officials ordered the arrest of Sitting Bull in December 1890. To carry out this action, McLaughlin turned to the agency's Indian police force. When Sitting Bull's followers resisted those who came to arrest him, gunfire erupted, and in the exchange the police shot and killed the chief. News of his death made international headlines. It also escalated tensions at Standing Rock and other agencies and helped to spark the Battle of Wounded Knee two weeks later. Since this time, the circumstances surrounding Sitting Bull's death have been widely debated and have garnered much popular attention. This photograph of a re-creation of the attack on Sitting Bull's cabin is one product of the public fascination with this event. Taken a year or two later, it filled the demand from those eager to know more about his death. Like other photographs of the chief, though, it also helped to transform Sitting Bull into a one-dimensional symbol of the larger struggle for freedom and justice faced by American Indians more generally. For the last decade of his life, the chief confronted not only United States authorities and the military that supported them, but also distorted perceptions about his identity and his larger goals for himself and his tribe.

Selected Reading

For Sitting Bull and his role in events on the Northern Great Plains during the nineteenth century, *see* Robert M. Utley, *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), and Gary Clayton Anderson, *Sitting Bull and the Paradox of Lakota Nationhood* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996). On the photographic representation of American Indians during the nineteenth century, *see* Susan Bernardin, et al., *Trading Gazes: Euro-American Women Photographers and Native North Americans, 1880–1940* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Elizabeth Edwards, ed., *Photography and Anthropology, 1860–1920* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992); James C. Faris, *Navajo and Photography: A Critical History of the Representation of an American People* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Paula Richardson Fleming and Judith Luskey, *The North American Indians in Early Photographs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986); Mick Gidley, *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Frank H. Goodyear III, *Red Cloud: Photographs of a Lakota Chief* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), and "The Narratives of Sitting Bull's Surrender: Bailey, Dix & Mead's Photographic Western," in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, ed. S. Elizabeth Bird (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 29–43; Tim Johnson, ed., *Spirit Capture: Photographs from the National Museum of the American Indian* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998); and Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Partial Recall: Photographs of Native North Americans* (New York: New Press, 1992).