Nakota (Assiniboine) Chief Red Stone “Hoonga Ea Sha” (1833-1896)

Signed 1886-87 Treaty. He was allied with Broken Arm, Chief of Nakota/Cree Canoe Paddlers

Nakota and Sioux at the Fort Peck Agency and Fort Belknap Reservation; Red Stone establishes his group at Wolf Point.

Under Wanatan's leadership in the 1820s and 1830S, Cuthead tribal enemies to the north included Minnesota and Pembina-Turtle Mountain Chippewas and Red River Metis, and to the northwest included Assiniboines and Western Crees. Directly west, Wanatan maintained generally amicable relations with the Arikaras, but often hostile relations with the Hidatsas and Mandans. He died in 1840 and the Cuthead chieftainship passed to Red Leaf"  

In 1856 General William S. Harney summoned a Sioux treaty council at Fort Pierre. He unilaterally appointed tribal head chiefs, and permitted them to designate other sub-chiefs. For the Hunkpapas, he designated Bear's Rib. For the Upper Yanktonais, he selected Black Catfish, and one of the nine chiefs Black Catfish selected was Medicine Bear. Both would become important figures at the Fort Peck Agency.

General Harney's influence on federal Indian policy was minimal, for Congress failed to ratify the 1856 Sioux treaty he brokered. In spite of General Harney's arrogant and authoritarian treatment of Sioux leaders at Fort Pierre, the meeting somehow did secure short-term peace between the Missouri River Sioux and the federal government."  

Missouri River Assiniboines in the 1850s were spared the intense white intrusions that traumatized Yanktons, Yanktonais, and Lakotas. Like all northern plains tribes after 1849, however, the Assiniboines could not avoid the new attention of federal Indian policymakers and the Army concerning the entire trans-Mississippi West. Except for one brief interlude in 1831, Assiniboines had limited relationships with the Indian Affairs Office.

In 1831, Secretary of War Lewis Cass ordered Indian agent John E A. Sanford, the Mandan Subagent of the Upper Missouri Agency, to bring some upper Missouri River tribal leaders to Washington, D.C. Sanford persuaded only four tribesmen to accompany him. Two were Plains Cree, and of these the only one identified was a chief known as Eyes on Both Sides, but more commonly as Broken Arm. A third member was an unidentified Upper Yanktonai Cuthead. Last was Assiniboine Stone Band Chief, The Light (and son of Chief Iron Arrow Point).

Upper Missouri Indian Agent Alexander Redfield had accompanied Blackfeet Agent Vaughn from St. Louis, and when the Assiniboines arrived at Fort Union in mid-July, 1857, he estimated they had lost one-quarter of their total population.

He noted that thirty miles downriver, an Assiniboine camp of thirty lodges was left
standing, with some deceased persons left there, totally abandoned with all material items still there. Above the Mandan and Hidatsa villages at Fort Berthold, he met with Lower Assiniboine Chief Broken Arm of the Canoe Paddler Band, and at Fort Union various groups of the Rock (Stone), Canoe, Northern, and Girls Bands came to visit him and receive their 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty annuities. He estimated total Assiniboine population at 470 lodges, which he calculated to be 3,700 persons. The imprint of the smallpox destruction still lingered. Redfield described the Assiniboines who visited him at Fort Union as looking dejected and discouraged. They were also destitute — he described them as the poorest tribesmen he had ever seen. In fact, they could council with him for only a short time, due to their lack of food."

On July 28, 1864, General Sully engaged this camp at a site in the Little Missouri River known as Killdeer Mountain. The extensive Sioux camp included Inkpaduta's Wahpekutes and other Dakotas, Yanktonais (Cuthead chief Medicine Bear), and Hunkpapas (including Sitting Bull and Four Horns), Sans Arc, Blackfeet, and Minniconjou Lakotas. Sully used his artillery with lethal effect, and the Sioux were forced again to abandon their village, which Sully burned to the ground."

In 1865, General Sully received reports about Upper Yanktonai internal divisions concerning war and peace. Colonel Charles A.R. Dimon, commander at Fort Rice, established by General Sully on the west bank of the Missouri River, ten miles north of the mouth of the Cannonball River, reported on November 26, 1864, that Black Catfish and most of his band were interested in peace, but that Medicine Bear was strongly arguing against it. On January 24, 1865, Colonel Dimon supported a recent communication from the commanding officer of troops posted at the Fort Berthold trading post that Medicine Bear and Upper Yankton chief Struck by the Ree (the son) were concentrating anti-white Sioux forces in the Fort Berthold region. Other witnesses reported that Struck by the Ree boasted that he would never shake hands with whites, and that Medicine Bear supported killing all the Americans they could."

"Lower Assiniboines" resided historically more downstream on the Missouri River, generally between the Milk River and as far east as the White Earth River in present-day North Dakota. Lower Assiniboines were primarily Canoe Paddler Band members, led by such chiefs as Red Stone and Broken Arm. In contrast to their Upper Assiniboine brethren. Lower Assiniboines had generally more strained Gros Ventre relations. Assiniboines at the time of the agency founding in 1868 also had unfriendly relations with the River Crows. It is unclear if the Upper Assiniboines, because of their alliance with Gros Ventres, had more friendly River Crow relations. Lower Assiniboines and River Crows clearly had hostile relations when the agency was founded.

The most remarkable transformation of intertribal relations, however, was that between Lower Assiniboines and Upper Yanktonai Cutheads. This can be seen in an observation made by the 1866 peace commissioners when they met Red Stone's band, for they noted that these Assiniboines were camped together with Medicine Bear's Cutheads. These two tribal groups frequently camped and hunted together. One Yanktonai band of thirty
lodges led by Little Thigh was intermarried and resided with Lower Assiniboines, although these tribesmen still considered themselves Yanktonais.

The new alliance and friendship, which reportedly included intermarriage between the two tribes, was exceptional because Upper Yanktonais and Assiniboines had warred against each other since the late eighteenth century, when both resided in the lower Red River region of present-day Minnesota, North Dakota, and Manitoba. The alliance was also very recent. Writing in the years 1855-1856, Edwin T. Denig, American Fur Trade Company trader and important observer of upper Missouri River tribes, wrote that at this time the Cutheads had been making peace overtures to the Assiniboines. He noted, however, that Assiniboines were especially cautious because they had been treacherously betrayed twenty years before. In 1836, Denig recounted, twenty-four Assiniboine men and warriors accepted a Yanktonai offer of tobacco and went to their camp for a council. But during the council they were ambushed, and only one Assiniboine escaped. For such reasons, Assiniboines were too distrustful to council together, and war between the two tribes continued."

Denig's description is intriguing because he states that the Upper Yanktonai Cutheads initiated peace offers to the Lower Assiniboines. Most accounts around this period would indicate that the Cutheads were a larger tribe/band. Red Stone's camp in 1866 and 1869 was estimated at 200 lodges, while Medicine Bear's camp in 1866, was an estimated 300 lodges. When Medicine Bear appeared on the Milk River in 1871, however, that grouping was 500 lodges, but it also included other Cuthead chiefs, and to some degree would reflect their lodges. The logic of tribal alliance decisions based on tribal size would lean toward Assiniboines initiating the rapprochement.

The most important transformative issue of the 1870, however, and one which defined the agency forever, was the large numbers of Sioux who arrived, and the suddenness with which they did so. This was foreshadowed in September, 1869, when one thousand Upper Yanktonais arrived at Fort Buford military post (founded in 1866 at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers) and demanded a reservation of their own. Key tribal leaders included Upper Yanktonai Cutheads Medicine Bear, Thunder Bull, and His Road to Travel; Upper Yanktonais Shoots the Tiger, Afraid of Bear, Catches the Enemy, and Heart; and one band of Sissetons led by Brave Bear and Your Relation on the Earth."

One week later, a Takini band of Upper Yanktonais led by Calumet Man, Afraid of Bull, Long Fox, Eagle Dog, and Standing Bellow, came to the post and made the same demand. Post commander Lieutenant Colonel Henry A. Morrow received both groups and wrote their demands on petitions which he forwarded to his superiors, until a treaty might be prepared for them. Morrow encouraged the Yanktonais to winter near the fort, and promised to help feed them. There was little game around the fort and in October he informed his superiors that unless he was permitted to issue food to these tribesmen, they would starve over the winter. In November, he received authority to do so, at least until the Indian Affairs Office decided on some course of action. That winter, 200 lodges of Red Stone's Lower Assiniboines camped with this large number of Yanktonais. In another sign of the rapid infusion of Sioux to the area, a large group of Hunkpapa and
other Lakotas wintered further up the Missouri River, from which they warred against the Crows. ""

By around 1866 or 1867, Standing Buffalo realized that he could never safely return. He also chose not to return because there was no game there. In 1867, however, he was not a rich man. His band was camped near the Souris River, and they were destitute and starving. They were encountered by Lower Assiniboine Broken Arm's Canoe Paddler band, who fed and cared for them. This story was recounted in 1939 by an eighty-nine year old Assiniboine named Red Feather, who witnessed this as a little boy. When Standing Buffalo explained four years later to Agent Simmons that he was a rich man, he spoke with the experience of the mercurial conditions plains tribesmen often faced.^^

In early June, 1871, Medicine Bear invited Standing Buffalo to lead a raid against the agency Gros Ventres and Upper Assiniboines. Standing Buffalo declined, stating that he had made a promise to Milk River Agent Simmons to live peacefully with these two tribes. At this point, the verbal exchange deteriorated. Some Cutheads and even some of Standing Buffalo's own warriors derided their chief, saying he was not a chief at all if he listened to whites and refused to lead his own people's war parties. Tragedy then struck, when these critics accused Standing Buffalo of cowardice. Standing Buffalo became enraged and promised that not only would he lead the war party, he would die in the process. Standing Buffalo returned to his camp, gave all his possessions away, and advised his son Little Standing Buffalo and his brother who was not identified to keep their peace promise with Agent Simmons. On June 5, 1871, Standing Buffalo led a large war party against a camp of Gros Ventres and Upper Assiniboines on the west slope of the Bearpaw Mountains. When faced with superior numbers of Gros Ventres and Assiniboines, Standing Buffalo charged with only his coup stick, and was slain.^^

Standing Buffalo's death irreparably destroyed the unity of his band. They blamed Medicine Bear for their leader's death. The camp drove out their tribesmen who favored continued raids against the agency Gros Ventres and Assiniboines.

These exiled Sissetons and Wahpetons then joined Medicine Bear's Cutheads. Approximately half of Standing Buffalo's band left the Milk River Agency, led by Little Standing Buffalo, and relocated permanently to Canada. Standing Buffalo's nephew, Sipto (Beads), returned to the Devil's Lake Agency in Dakota Territory. Those remaining at the agency were led by Standing Buffalo's brother. ^

Removing the River Crows fell to William H. Fanton, appointed on August 13, 1873, as Indian agent for the new Fort Belknap Agency.

Less complicated was the transfer of Lower Assiniboines and Sioux from the original Milk River Agency to the new Fort Peck location, where they joined the new agency Lakotas. Simmons visited them during his agency-wide trip in May, 1873. The two tribal groups consented to relocate. For the Canoe Paddler band of Lower Assiniboines, Simmons reported 648 persons under Red Stones' band, 416 under Broken Arm, 480 with Bobtail Bear, 272 with Little Bull, and 400 followers of Red Snow.
Agent Alderson's first winter of 1873-1874, while typical of the precarious nature of the Milk River Agency, also marked a watershed for the Lower Assiniboines. Admission of the Sioux over the previous two years had precipitated dramatic changes for the Gros Ventres and Upper Assiniboines, and now they disturbed relations with their friends and allies, the Lower Assiniboines. On February 4, 1874, Fort Belknap Agent William H. Fanton informed Indian Commissioner Smith that Lower Assiniboine chief Red Stone wanted the Milk River Agency Assiniboines to join the Fort Belknap Upper Assiniboines. This was not Red Stone's preferred alternative, for he wanted to establish an all-Assiniboine agency at the mouth of Poplar Creek and the Missouri River, where they could begin farming. Fanton seems to have informed Red Stone that this was not possible because Commissioner Smith himself had already opposed such measures.

Fanton strongly endorsed Red Stone's proposal to relocate to Fort Belknap. Consolidation would improve tribal conditions at the Milk River Agency, because, according to Fanton, there was "an ill feeling" of "old standing" between Red Stone's band and the Yanktons (which likely meant or at least included Upper Yanktonais), and this was recently worsened by the killing of an Assiniboine by a Yankton.

Fanton argued that consolidation benefited Fort Belknap, for he believed that Upper Yanktonai chief Long Hair was "indeed anxious" for a reunification of Assiniboines. The Gros Ventres were a small tribe with many horses, and Fanton believed this would accelerate a recent trend of increasing Lower Assiniboine horse acquisition. Consolidation increased the Gros Ventres' ability not only to defend themselves against enemy horse raids, but also improved the overall defense and security of the Fort Belknap tribes. Fanton mentioned the fly in the ointment of this proposal, which was that the Gros Ventres still distrusted the Lower Assiniboines, not only because the latter had raided against them, but especially because of their friendship with all the Sioux." Gros Ventre opposition was likely the reason Red Stone's suggestion went no further.

Having failed both to create a new Assiniboine agency at Poplar River and to relocate to Fort Belknap, Red Stone proceeded to a third alternative, which was to remain within the Milk River Agency, now moved to Fort Peck, and establish a lower Assiniboine subagency at the confluences of either Wolf Creek (present-day Wolf Point) or Poplar River. This would further burden the administration of an agency already rocked by incorporating the Sioux. To secure Indian Affairs Office approval, Red Stone seems to have fully appreciated the attraction of his bold and extraordinary offer to take up agriculture.

Red Stone could have begun farming at any time. Simmons stated that he had discussed the possibility for two years both with the Assiniboines and the Standing Buffalo Santees. Had the Lower Assiniboines moved to Fort Belknap, Fanton would have supported farming, but at this time he was trying to persuade Indian Commissioner Smith to allow his agency Indians to become ranchers." Fanton was ahead of his time in seeing the advantages of raising cattle over dry land farming in this part of the Northern Plains.
By early spring of 1875, Red Stone and what appears to be a majority of Lower Assiniboines relocated to Wolf Creek. Using the work oxen and agricultural supplies that arrived in the fall of 1874, agency staff helped break fifty acres, but Assiniboines planted their first crops of wheat, corn, peas, potatoes, turnips, squash, and other vegetables. They also weeded, hoed, harvested, built fences and a large root cellar, and cut and stacked ninety tons of hay.^

It is unclear why Alderson selected the Wolf Creek location over Poplar River, since it appears that he had still not personally visited Poplar River. In his annual report in October 1875, Alderson claims credit for the Assiniboine decision to separate from the main agency at Fort Peck. "I induced a majority of the Canoe Indians to separate themselves from the wilder tribes of this agency, and locate at Wolf Creek."

Fort Belknap Agent William Fanton's correspondence to Indian Commissioner Smith a year earlier in February 1874 indicated the contrary: due to tensions with the agency Sioux, Chief Red Stone was already determined to separate, either to a new, all-Assiniboine agency at Wolf Creek or Poplar River, or to Fort Belknap, where they would unite with the Upper Assiniboines.

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