

There was gold in them thar Black Hills

Author explains economics, politics behind Custer's 1874 expedition

BY KATHERINE LUCK
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Just two years before his infamous “Last Stand,” Brevet Maj. Gen. George Armstrong Custer set off on a secretive expedition deep into the Black Hills region of what today is South Dakota. Officially, he and the 1,000 armed troops he led were scouting a site for a military fort that would protect white settlers from Native American tribes.

But is that really why he was there?

In “Thieves’ Road: The Black Hills Betrayal and Custer’s Path to Little Bighorn,” historian Terry Mort digs beneath the surface of Custer’s seemingly straightforward 1874 expedition and makes a startling discovery: There was gold in them thar hills, and Custer aimed to find it. Bolstered by meticulous research, Mort paints a vivid picture of the economic and political environment in which Custer’s Black Hills expedition took place. In the years following the Civil War, the United States became mired in the worst economic depression it had ever experienced. The influence of private interests – most notably the railroads – was at an all-time high. And the country was flooded with immigrants from Europe who were fleeing even greater economic hardships abroad.

An influx of gold into the economy seemed like a cure-all to the struggling nation’s woes. Experts suspected that the remote, unexplored Black Hills might conceal a cache of precious metal. All they had to do was discover it and the gold rush would be on, simultaneously pulling the economy out of the depression, providing homes and jobs for thousands of unemployed immigrants and satisfying railroad companies’ demands for government aid in their westward expansion.

“Much of the settlement of the West started with the discovery of gold. It wasn’t the sodbusters and cowboys who started the westward movement,” Mort notes. “More

often than not, settlement followed the miners.”

But there was a roadblock. In 1868, the Black Hills legally became the property of the Sioux through a treaty negotiated with the U.S. government.

“The Sioux were the strongest of the Plains tribes, and they actively sought to extend their territory and hunting grounds,” Mort explains. “They were fiercely protective of their territory.”

Custer seemed the natural choice to lead an expedition across the Sioux’s land. In the years following the Civil War, he had gained a reputation as a pitiless “Indian fighter.” He was fiercely ambitious and no stranger to the hardships of frontier life. Nor was he under any illusions about the troops under his command.

“Poorly trained, most were unemployed men who could find no other work in the depression-ravaged economy,” Custer said. “Morale was low, too, because of harsh discipline, poor living conditions, low pay, and the remoteness of so many frontier posts.”

Mort painstakingly details Custer’s trek across the vast plains and the calamities he and his soldiers faced. And his description of what Custer and his troops found when they finally reached the Black Hills is riveting. Custer’s aggressive attitude and pugilistic tendencies, which eventually led to his downfall at age 36 at the hands of the Sioux, are made clear, as are the pitfalls in the Manifest Destiny mythos that drove him.

And yet, even more intriguing than Mort’s deconstruction of the origin story of the Wild West is the ethical conundrum that he presents when he questions just who the Black Hills truly belonged to.

While it is indisputable that the U.S. government eventually seized the land from the Sioux in violation of its own treaties, “the Sioux got that same land in much the same way – and without payment or negotiation,” Mort writes. “The Sioux

believed in the right of conquest more fervently than the Americans who were now encroaching upon them. They didn’t need a treaty or international law to make it so; they only needed victories and enemy scalps ... at the turn of the 19th century the Sioux attacked and evicted the Cheyenne, the Kiowa, and the Crow from the Black Hills.”

According to Mort, the bad faith with which the U.S. entered into its treaty with the Sioux was irrelevant. Within the Sioux’s worldview at the time, the land was forfeited to the U.S. government by the same “right of conquest” that had made it the Sioux’s property years earlier.

“Treachery and trickery were acknowledged and celebrated tactics against enemies. If the Sioux were again deceived in negotiations with the government, they could hardly claim foul, at least tactically. ... The Sioux are not innocent victims.”

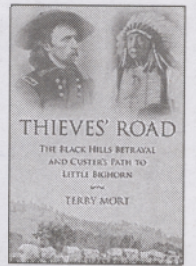
This is an uncomfortable notion to consider, but Mort presents it as crucial to understanding the violence with which both cultures reacted to what they saw as encroachments on “their” land.

“None of the parties, red or white, emerges blameless. In that sense, the (Black) Hills are a metaphor for the settlement of the west. There was more than enough cruelty, violence, and guilt to go around,” Mort writes.

A century after the fact, the U.S. government acknowledged that the Black Hills were illegally appropriated and set aside compensation that today is worth over \$1 billion.

However, members of the Sioux tribes have consistently refused to accept the funds, arguing that they never offered the Black Hills for sale. The conflict that drove all the players in “Thieves’ Road” – the desire for land versus the undeniable value of gold – shows no sign of ending soon.

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“Thieves’ Road: The Black Hills Betrayal and Custer’s Path to Little Bighorn”
by Terry Mort

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