

The Lakota Sioux

By Gene Gade—President, Vore Buffalo Jump Foundation

Did the Lakota Sioux use the Vore Buffalo Jump? Many visitors make the casual assumption that the Sioux must at least have been among the users of the Vore site. After all, the Lakota were the dominant tribe in the Black Hills region in the 1800's when most of history was first written. Images of Sioux mounted on horses, wearing full headdresses, attacking wagon trains and fighting the US army with rifles are indelibly fixed in the minds of millions of movie-goers and readers of popular histories and western novels. Of course, those images do have a basis in events that occurred during the final decades of free-roaming, bison-hunting Plains tribes. Many people and sources also blithely proclaim that the Sioux had been in possession of the Black Hills for a very long time before their dramatic clashes with the westward expansion of the United States in the mid-19th century. Such claims need to be examined as objectively as evidence allows.

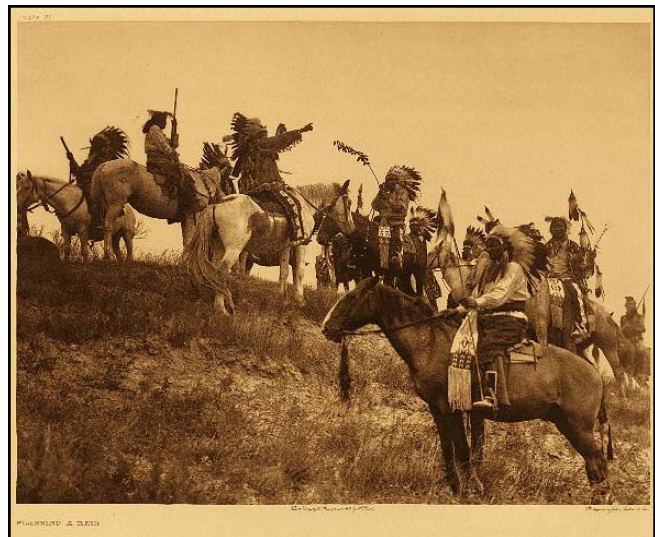
To this point, excavation at the Vore site provides no definitive answer to the question of whether the Sioux were among those who used the Vore buffalo jump. We may never know for certain, but there are clues in regional archaeology, in the oral histories and Winter Counts of the tribes and in the smattering of written records indicating that the history of the tribe and the region are far more nuanced than most people realize. These lesser-known sources provide a more complex, but no less fascinating, glimpse at the history of the Sioux from about 1650 to 1800. That time span corresponds to the last century and a half of Vore Buffalo Jump use and may help us answer the question of whether the Sioux were among the users of the site. The issue may be more than intellectual trivia. If archaeology established that the Sioux were the only users of the Vore site, or even that they used it for a long period, that could bear on current political-economic questions such as Sioux claims to ownership of the Black Hills.

Migration of the Sioux

The sparse written history that does exist strongly suggests that the Sioux accomplished their own westward migration during those 150 years. They evidently moved slowly from what is now Minnesota through the Dakotas to eastern Wyoming and Montana. In the process, wrote historian George Hyde, *“they developed from little camps of poor people afoot in the vast buffalo plains into seven powerful tribes of mounted Indians.”*

The farther back in time one goes, the less precise the history. However, some scholars believe that the ancestors of the Sioux lived in the southern US and migrated slowly through the Midwest. When they start to appear in the journals of French traders and clergymen in the late-1600's, they were woodland people, living near the headwaters of the Mississippi River. About 1650 a Frenchman, Nicolas Perrot, described the Sioux as fiercely aggressive toward their Algonquin-speaking neighbors to the north and east, particularly the Crees. Sometimes they even attacked their own relatives, the Yanktonai-Assiniboins, who associated with the Crees. Other Frenchmen, Pierre-Esprit

Radisson and Jesuit missionary-explorer, Jacques Marquette, also recorded battles between Sioux and Cree in the Lake Superior region in 1658 and 1670 respectively. The balance of power between the warring tribes shifted when the Crees and others obtained guns from the French and British. Bacqueville de la Potherie recorded that, by the mid-1680's, the Crees, Ojibwas and Assiniboines had driven the Sioux



When the Oglala Sioux arrived in the Black Hills about 1800 they already possessed horse and guns

south to the valley of the Minnesota River near modern Mankato. From there the Sioux divided. Some stayed in the woodlands (Santee). Some moved northwest toward the headwaters of the Minnesota River (Sisseton-Wahpeton) and 5 Lakota tribes continued northwest (Hunkpapa, Two-kettles, Miniconjou, Sans Arcs and Blackfeet Sioux).

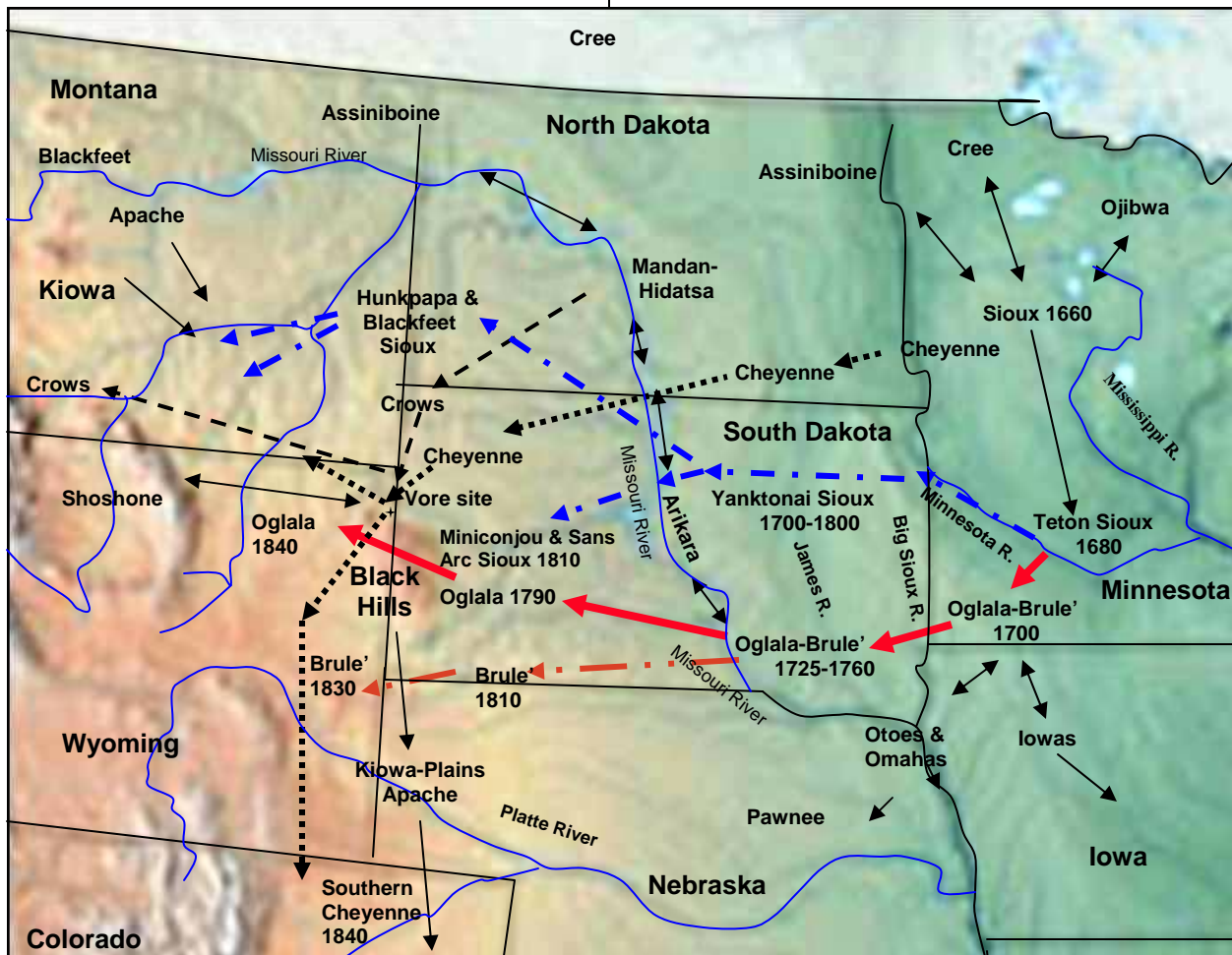
However, the ancestors of the Oglalas and Brules', moved west and south, out of the woodlands and into the prairies. This group eventually abandoned all agriculture and developed a pattern that included hunting buffalo in SW Minnesota in the summer, wintering on or near the Blue Earth River and traveling to a French trade fair in the spring. During those years, the trade fair was held at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, just south of modern Minneapolis. It was at these fairs that the Sioux acquired most of their guns in trade for buffalo hides and other furs. This seasonal movement pattern persisted until at least 1700. (It should be noted that, while the Sioux obtained guns earlier than some Plains tribes farther

west, they still used bows and arrows extensively— sometimes with metal trade points—right to the end of their hunting/raiding days.)

Continuing West

Now fully committed to buffalo hunting on the Plains, The Oglala/Brule' group continued slowly moving west, warring with the neighboring tribes as they went. They attacked and displaced the Iowas, Otoes, Ponkas and Omahas to the west or south. Between 1725 and 1750, the Oglala/Brule' Sioux occupied what is now southeast South Dakota as far as the James River (near present Mitchell, SD).

Their northern cousins (who became the other five tribes of Teton/Lakota Sioux) moved into NE South Dakota and SW North Dakota, in the process putting pressure on the Cheyenne and other tribes in that area. Both groups of Sioux were still attending the spring trade fairs which had now been moved to the headwaters of the Minnesota River near Big Stone Lake and the present South Dakota border. (Continued next page →)



Migration of Black Hills region tribes 1650-1840 Adapted from Hyde, 1937 and other sources

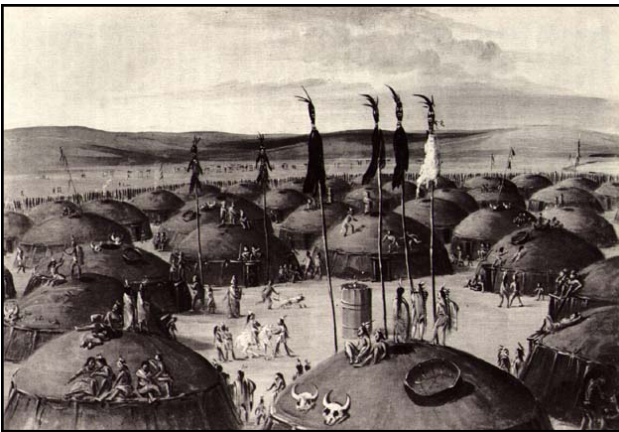
The Arikara Barrier

As they moved slowly westward toward the Missouri River about 1740, the Sioux encountered a barrier far more formidable than the river itself. A tribe as powerful as they were already occupied the area. These were the Arikaras, who were close relatives of the Pawnees of eastern Nebraska.

The Arikaras lived in large fortified villages of earthlodges usually located on the plateau above the Missouri. They built their towns in easily-defended places that were protected by deep ravines, high log walls and man-made ditches. In the first three-fourths of the 1700's, they had many such villages that controlled the river for most of its course through South Dakota. This placed the Arikaras directly in the path of the westward-moving Lakota.

For several decades there were nasty but inconclusive fights between the two tribes, each of which had a major advantage. The Sioux had guns acquired from the French. (The indirect influence of Europeans also affected the Sioux when the French and Indian War taking place in eastern North America temporarily interrupted the supply of guns and ammunition that gave the Sioux their principle advantage.)

The Arikaras combined farming along the river with seasonal buffalo hunts that took them considerable distances both east and west of the Missouri River. In the 1740 to 1770 period, Arikara buffalo hunts apparently



George Catlin's drawing is of a Mandan village very similar to the fortified Arikara towns that blocked the westward movement of the Sioux for half a century. Small pox epidemics in the 1770's greatly diminished the strength of the Arikara allowing the Sioux to cross the Missouri and push toward the Black Hills.

took them far enough west that they encountered the horse-mounted Kiowas who were then in control of the Black Hills. Trading and/or warfare with the Kiowas brought an enormous benefit to the Arikaras, Spanish horses! The result of all this activity was essentially a stalemate between the Sioux and Arikara that kept the Sioux east of the Missouri for nearly 50 years.

Viruses Tip the Balance

The balance between the two tribes did not really shift until three different small pox epidemics devastated the Arikaras and the other northern river tribes (Mandans and Hidatsas) in the 1770's. Fully 80% of the Arikaras died in these terrible episodes. After that, the Arikaras could no longer defend the river south of the Bad River/Missouri River confluence (present day Pierre, SD). Those who survived the great pestilence consolidated into just a few villages along the Missouri north of their former territory. At that point, about 1775, the Oglala crossed the Missouri River.

For a number of years the Oglala operated primarily toward the west along the Bad River drainage. The Brules' also moved west but were mainly south of the Oglalas in the White River valley. The other five Teton tribes remained temporarily stalled by the river tribes, but eventually crossed the Missouri into the western Dakotas.

Horses

About this time, the Sioux also acquired a few horses, probably from their sometime allies, the Cheyennes. As with the other Plains tribes, horses revolutionized Sioux culture, allowing them to make a long and swift movements and to hunt and raid farther west. It was on one such raid, led by Chief Bull Bear, in 1776, that the Oglala made their "discovery" of the Black Hills. At that time, the Sioux still had very few horses and the Cheyenne had gained control of the Black Hills.

For the next couple of decades, the Sioux wintered along the Missouri River but did most of their buffalo hunting to the west of it. Some of them still went east to trade fairs in spring, but the traders had followed their migrating customers and held the fairs on the James River. →

The "Winter Count" of a prominent Oglala named American Horse provides some information about his tribe from 1775 to 1800. (Winter Counts are pictographs painted on a buffalo robe to record the major event of each year. The American Horse Winter Count is the only one for the Oglala that is known to have survived.)

During this period (1775-1795) the Oglalas and Brules' were fighting their neighbors on several fronts: the Omahas, Pawnees and Ponkas to the south; the Arikaras and Mandans to the north; the Kiowa in the Black Hills area; the Crows, who were mostly north of the Black Hills along the Little Missouri; and sometimes even the Cheyennes.

Eventually, the Sioux and Cheyennes drove the Kiowas and Crows away from the Black Hills, with the Kiowas heading toward their eventual home on the southern Plains, the Crows moving west of the Powder River and eventually into the lower Bighorn River drainage. The Sioux also made peace with the Cheyennes. They sometimes fought and sometimes traded with the Arikaras.

The journal of a trader named Jean-Baptiste Truteau documents that, by 1795, the Oglalas were out near the Cheyennes and close to the Black Hills. They probably gained dominance there about 1800. They still usually wintered east of the Black Hills, often on or near the Missouri River.

After 1800 many written accounts document that the Sioux tribe continued to move west. At the zenith of their power, the Sioux were the dominant tribe in very large area of the upper Plains, roughly from the Canadian border south to the Platte River and from the Bighorn Mountain range all the way east to Minnesota. They continued expanding west, which resulted in war with the Crows and increasing conflict with the Shoshones, Blackfeet and Assiniboines in the years immediately before their own defeat.

Unfortunately for the Sioux, another culture, much larger in population and possessing superior technology, was aggressively expanding to the West at the same time the Sioux were reaching the height of their power, namely Caucasian Americans.

Conflict was probably inevitable when whites began their large-scale emigration into lands occupied by the Sioux. War came in the

form of the Santee uprising in Minnesota (1862), the Bozeman Trail-Red Cloud War (1865-68) and the Sioux War of 1875-78.

End of the Trail

When G.A. Custer's 7th Cavalry attacked the large Indian village on the Little Bighorn on that famous hot June day in 1876, he encountered a remarkable assemblage that never occurred before or after. Sioux from all seven Teton/Lakota tribes as well as their Cheyenne and Arapahoe allies were in one camp that extended for miles along the river. The tribes were at their maximum power, but they were also hemmed in at the extreme western margin of the vast domain they had acquired over the previous two centuries.

From that point the decline of Sioux power was precipitous. The buffalo upon which their economy depended were destroyed. The US Army attacked them relentlessly. Thousands of white immigrants flooded into their lands. Within a couple of years the proud Sioux were confined to reservations that were a tiny fraction of their former territory.

Did the Sioux Use the Vore Site?

Returning to the original question of this article: It is not possible to state with certainty whether the Sioux used the Vore Buffalo Jump. However, the foregoing history suggests it is unlikely that they did. Use of the Vore site ended about 1800, just as the Sioux were arriving in the region. Moreover, use of buffalo jumps was phased out when horses and guns became abundant. As we have seen, the Sioux were already hunting mainly from horseback and possessed some guns when they arrived in the Black Hills. Buffalo jumps, including the Vore site, were nearly obsolete when the Sioux appeared in the Black Hills.

Artifacts excavated from the site as well as evidence from oral traditions suggest that the Kiowa-Apache, Shoshone and Cheyenne were using the Vore site in the 1750 to 1800 period. Distinctive stone points and tools along with other types of evidence suggest that the Crows and Shoshone probably used the site before that. However, there is no such evidence of use by the Sioux. Perhaps future research at the Vore site will answer the question definitively.

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