**Matȟó Wayúhi (Conquering Bear)– Oregon Trail**

National Trails Intermountain Region – Historical Vignettes Project

**SAMPLE**

In early 1834, two fur traders, John Sabille and Charles Galpin, arrived in the Pahá Sápa (the Lakota name for the Black Hills) and visited the encampments of the Oglala and Sičháŋǧu Oyáte (Brule) bands of the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ, or the Great Sioux Nation, to tell them of a new trading post being built on the North Platte River near the Laramie fork. Fur trappers and traders had gathered there with an abundance of goods. When the curious among the Oglala and Brule arrived, Fort William, owned by the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, was fully operational. Though the establishment changed names and ownership several times, it was best known as Fort Laramie. While the fort provided some benefit to the Indigenous people who camped and traded there, the negative impacts cannot be understated in that the new economy of the region increased division within the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ. Equally significant was the arrival of John Walker and his family in 1840, who had stopped at the fort for supplies before continuing their migration to Oregon. Their small wagon train, led by mountain man Thomas Fitzpatrick, marked the beginning of a stream of hundreds of thousands of emigrants that flowed into the Pacific Northwest in the ensuing years. The arrival of emigrants among the Lakota- and Dakota-speaking people of the region strained their timber, grass, and water resources and threatened to damage the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ’s relationship with the United States government. Matȟó Wayúhi, born to the Brule band at the turn of the nineteenth century, took part in the unfolding story of the Oregon Trail and the contest for control of the homelands of the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By 1850, the Oglala and Brule had gained an impressive amount of territory as it expanded northward from the North Platte River to the Powder River and eastward into the Pahá Sápa, in the present-day Black Hills of South Dakota. Tensions between emigrants and the Sioux grew increasingly strained as the California gold rush and the close of the Mexican-American War turned what had been mostly a trickle of new arrivants into a flood, which threatened to permanently disrupt the Plains peoples’ seasonal migratory cycle on which they depended. By that time, Matȟó Wayúhi was a young chief of the Brule with a reputation as a strong, successful warrior. When he learned that representatives of the United States intended to negotiate a treaty 1851with the Plains Nations on 1 September, Matȟó Wayúhi joined the thousands of Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Crow, Gros Ventres, Assiniboine, Shoshone, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara who gathered at Horse Creek, near Scotts Bluff, about thirty-six miles from Fort Laramie.[[2]](#footnote-2)

When David D. Mitchell, a negotiator on behalf of the United States and Supt. of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, insisted that each of the Indigenous Nations in attendance choose a single leader to represent them, the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ protested, arguing that their political system operated on a consensus-building model rather than one in which an elected leader held authority to make decisions for the entire Nation. Even as the other Nations chose their leaders, the Sioux resisted the imposition. Mitchell eventually presented them a listed of possible candidates and they chose the first name on the list, Matȟó Wayúhi, who became the default representative for the Brule band of the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ. He expressed reluctance and dismay at the decision, to no avail, pleading with Mitchell to withdraw his name because "to be chief of all the nation, I must be a big chief or in a few moons I shall be sleeping on the prairie." Matȟó Wayúhi acted with the intention of establishing peaceable relations and the desire to curtail Euroamerican settlement and mitigate its effects on the Lakota way of life. He wanted to engage in treaty-making as an effort to bring peace and tolerance to an increasingly violent relationship between the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ and the United States. Matȟó Wayúhi faced challenges from younger Sioux chiefs and warriors who wanted only to fight.

On 17 September 1851, Matȟó Wayúhi, along with the other "head chiefs," signed the Treaty. The result of two weeks of negotiation, the language of the treaty guaranteed safe passage for emigrants wishing to cross the Great Plains and allowed the United States to build roads and erect forts in the region in exchange for an annuity in goods and supplies equal to $50,000 per year for fifty years. Another goal of the treaty was to establish peace among the constantly warring Plains Nations by setting boundaries. On 20 September 1851, a wagonload of goods, supplies, and gifts arrived and once distributed, the treaty conference ended.

Almost immediately, violence erupted among the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Crow Nations. Only three of the seven bands of the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ had signed the Fort Laramie Treaty, and in the ensuing years, divisions within the seven bands grew increasingly tenuous and led to a struggle over leadership. When the treaty was sent to the United States Senate for ratification, the senators amended the treaty to just ten years of payments, considering the fifty-year provision too extravagant. When Thomas Fitzpatrick presented the amended treaty to its signers in 1853, he found the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ even more resistant and resolute in their opposition to anyone who attempted to move onto their lands and use their resources. Matȟó Wayúhi continued to advocate for peaceable relations and compromise with the United States military. He did so in spite of the growing number of Sioux who encouraged militant resistance. The Sioux and other Nations encamped outside of Fort Laramie also grew hungry after long waits for the arrival of annuities.

In mid-August 1854, a Mormon emigrant train traveled through Fort Laramie on its way to Salt Lake City. About eight miles from the fort, near a trading post operated by James Bordeaux, they passed through a Brule village. Although stories differ on what happened next, a cow belonging to the emigrant party ran into the village and High Forehead, a Miniconjou staying with the Brules, shot and killed the animal with an arrow. The wagon train continued toward Fort Laramie while the people in the village prepared to feast. On 18 August 1854, the owner of the cow complained to Lt. Hugh Fleming, a senior officer at Fort Laramie, who then sent for Matȟó Wayúhi, who the U.S. military still considered to be the "head chief" of the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ and, in turn, the leader of the village where the cow had been killed.

Article Four of the Fort Laramie Treaty stated that restitution had to be made for any property stolen and, as leader, Matȟó Wayúhi was responsible for its enforcement among the Sioux. He knew well the terms of the treaty and that the killing or thievery was a matter to be settled with the Indian Agent John Whitfield rather than through meeting with military officials. When Lt. Fleming, ignorant of the treaty's stipulations, insisted that High Forehead be arrested for the theft, Matȟó Wayúhi refused because he had no jurisdiction over the Miniconjou, for he was not a chief of that Lakota band and had no authority to act. The owner refused all offers of compensation and demanded justice from the army. While Matȟó Wayúhi had almost convinced Fleming to wait for Whitfield's arrival, Sec. Lt. John L. Grattan intervened in the matter, immediately supporting the owner of the dead animal. Fleming then ordered Matȟó Wayúhi to bring High Forehead to the fort so that he could be arrested. The Brule leader continued to refuse the overstep, arguing further that he had no authority and could not, for cultural reasons, bring harm to a guest of the village. Fleming, frustrated by Matȟó Wayúhi’s non-compliance, told the Brule chief to expect a detail of soldiers to arrive in the village the following day.[[3]](#footnote-3)

En route to the Brule village, Matȟó Wayúhi informed a village of Oglalas of his discussions with Fleming and Grattan. That evening the two bands held council; the older chiefs wanted to reach a peaceful end to the matter while, at the same time, the younger Sioux made it clear they did not intend to follow the provisions of the treaty and prepared for confrontation. Grattan left the fort the next afternoon with twenty-two soldiers, seven volunteers, and a nervous, drunken interpreter named Auguste (whom the Sioux did not trust), convinced that they would be able to apprehend High Forehead without much commotion. He instructed his men to load their muskets but not to put on the percussion caps.[[4]](#footnote-4) As the detachment reached a bluff overlooking the Sioux encampments, Grattan got his first view of their size and faltered in his resolve to confront the awaiting Oglala, Miniconjou, and Brule warriors. Auguste, the inebriated interpreter, taunted the Sioux while Grattan enlisted the help of James Bordeaux, a trading post operator who had kinship relations to and the trust of the Sioux, to negotiate High Forehead's peaceful surrender. Both hoping to avoid violent conflict and to honor his position within the Sioux culture, Matȟó Wayúhi maintained that he had no authority to arrest High Forehead, who had sent word that he planned to fight to death rather than surrender. With all of the negotiators frustrated by the impasse, Matȟó Wayúhi walked away from Grattan toward the village, Boudreau returned to his trading post, and Grattan, determined to complete his mission, opted for violent confrontation and readied his detachment for battle.

There is not a consensus on who started the Grattan Fight, sometimes called the Grattan Massacre, but, in the end, every soldier in Grattan’s detachment perished on the battlefield. It was considered the first military disaster for the U.S Army in the North American West. The Sioux lost one warrior, Matȟó Wayúhi, who died from his numerous injuries in the days after the fight and was buried on a scaffold. In the wake of the fighting, supposedly eyewitness reports came in from soldiers, traders, and other civilians in the Fort Laramie area. The accounts presented conflicting evidence and the army had to answer for the loss. The official army position maintained that the Sioux had started the fighting and that Matȟó Wayúhi had led Grattan’s detachment directly into a trap. Indian Agent John Whitfield did not support the official explanation and argued that both Fleming’s and Grattan’s inexperience with the Sioux and their outright failure to comply with the Fort Laramie Treaty led to the violent confrontation.

Ultimately, the U.S. Congress, convinced by the army’s position, agreed to expand military operations in the west in an effort to eliminate the “Indian problem.” In the ensuing years, travelers on the Oregon Trail also mischaracterized the Grattan Fight, contributing their own interpretations to the memory of the affair. Other engagements and people of the First Sioux War would be better remembered, such as Fetterman, Little Bighorn, and Wounded Knee. Matȟó Wayúhi, as the appointed, reluctant “head chief” and as a Brule leader, pursued peace with the U.S. Army at every opportunity. War came to the northern Plains in the wake of his death.

1. Fort Laramie notes – insert multiple sources in next round of edits [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Paul N. Beck, *The First Sioux War: The Grattan Fight and Blue Water Creek 1854–1856.* New York: University of America Press, 2008. The first chapter of this text discusses in details the events that led to the negotiation of the Fort Laramie Treaty. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Beck, *The First Sioux War*, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Beck, *The First Sioux War*, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)