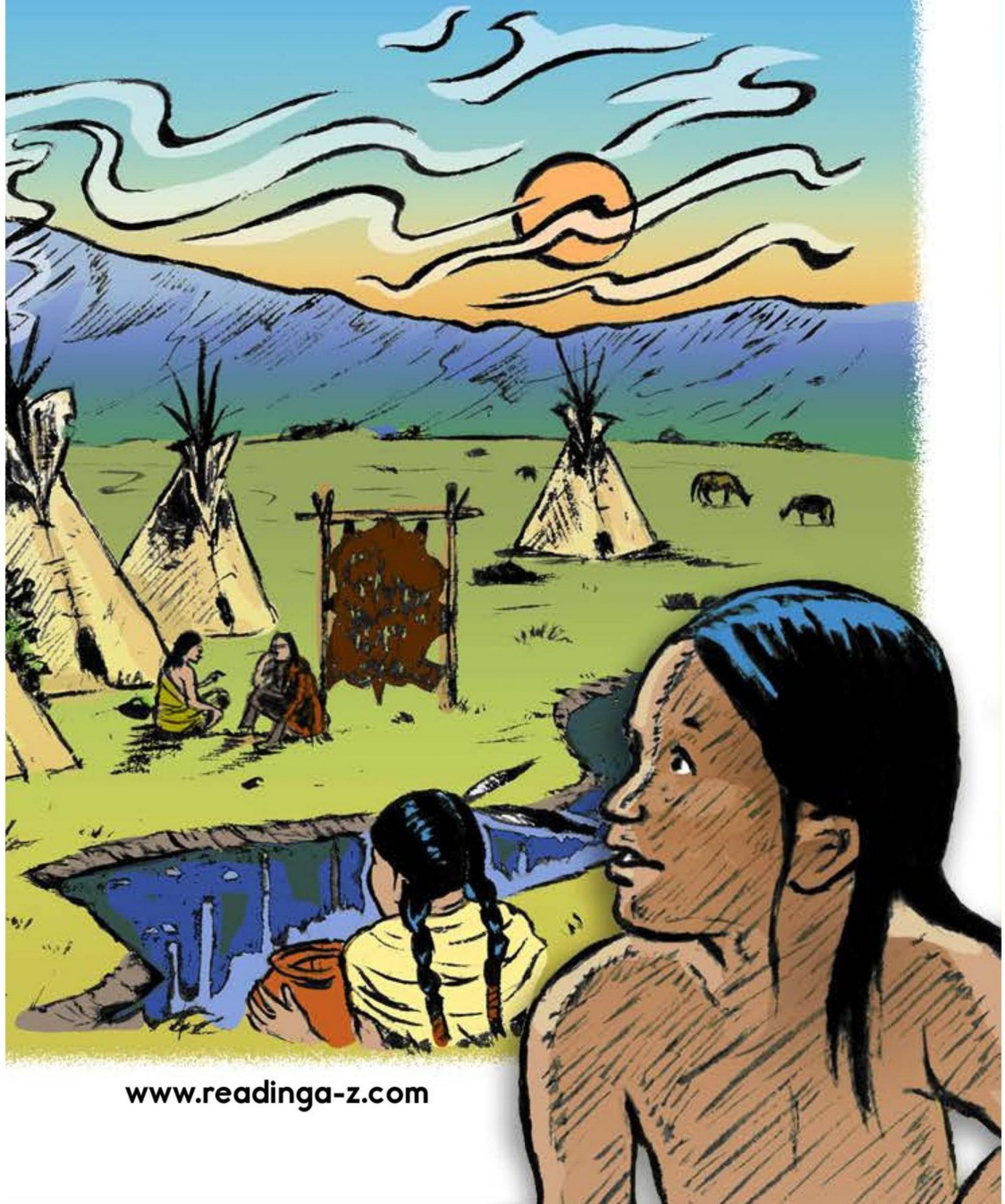


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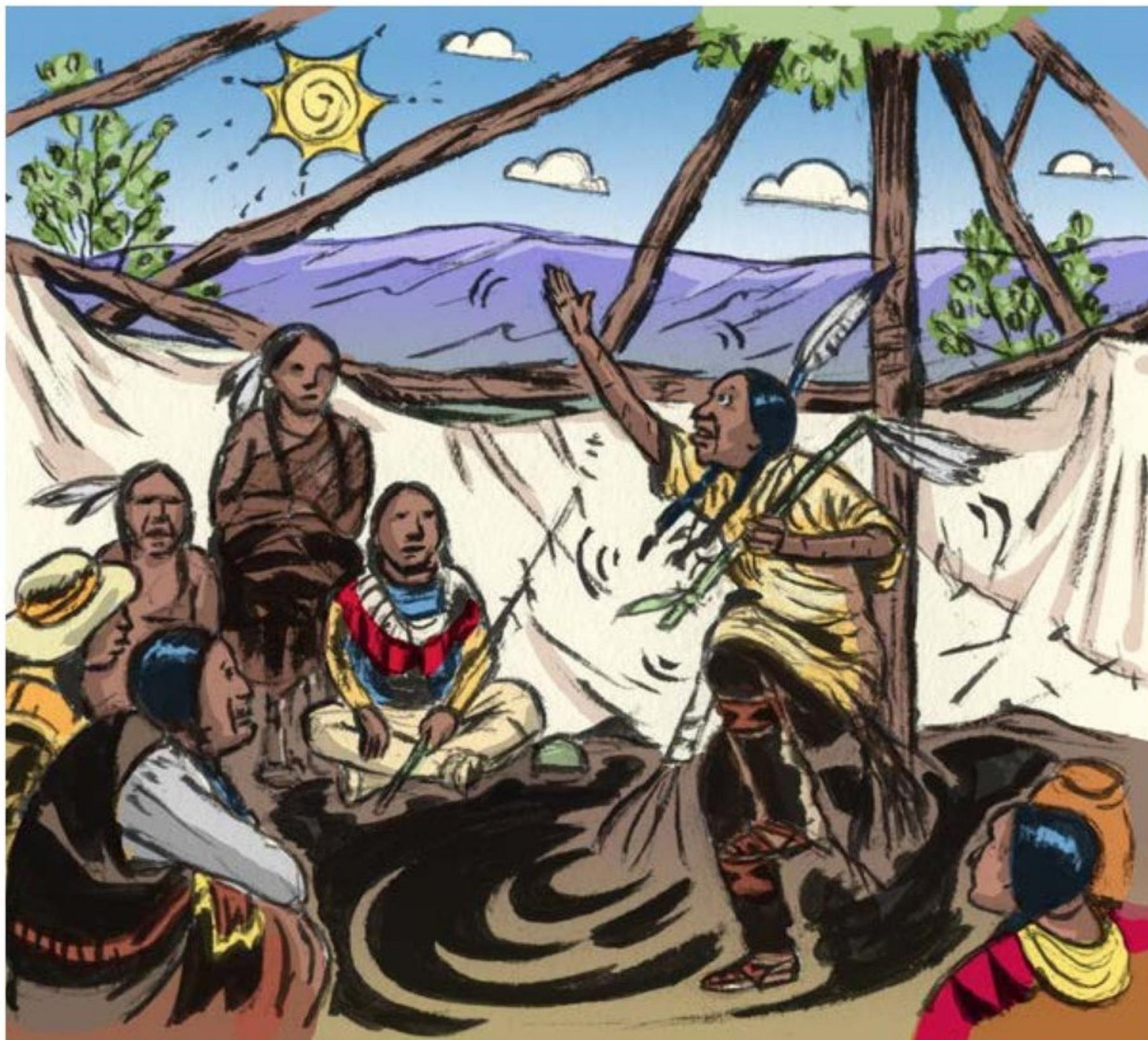
The Cheyennes

Written by David L. Dreier

Illustrated by Linda Pierce



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The Vision Quest

The Cheyenne boy sat atop the rocky hill with his knees crossed and stared into the **infinite** sky. Day became night. Night faded into day. Then it was again night. A full moon glowed. All of nature was silent. The boy felt as though he was the only human being in the world. Never in his eleven years had he known such loneliness.

Throughout his **ordeal**, the boy did not move. Nor did he eat or drink. He was waiting for a vision that would tell him who he was. Before being taken to this remote place, he had received instruction from a tribal **shaman** and purified himself in a **sweat lodge**. Now, with his empty belly aching and his throat as dry as the dust on his moccasins, he waited. He felt faint and yearned for sleep.

Suddenly, the boy saw a great bird **silhouetted** against the moon. The bird glided downward and landed a few feet in front of him. It was huge, bigger than an eagle and as black as the night itself.



The bird looked in the boy's eyes and spoke. "You have done well, young one," it said. "I have been sent by the Great Spirit to be your guide through life. Wherever you are, there will I be also, though hidden from mortal view. Take your strength from me, and you will become a great warrior."

The boy was filled with **awe**. "I will," he promised.

"Good," said the great bird. "Now grow into manhood and prosper." With that, the bird **catapulted** itself into the air and flapped its mighty wings. In a moment, it had vanished back into the spirit world.



The sun was rising when three braves from the village came to get the boy. They found him in a deep sleep. "Look at him," one of the men sneered. "I told you he wouldn't be able to stay awake." He shook the boy to wake him. The boy's eyes opened and he sat up.

"I had a vision!" he exclaimed. The man shook his head. "It was just a dream." The boy knew otherwise, but he said nothing more. He didn't want to tell anyone about his vision until he had shared it with the shaman.

The braves gave the boy some food and water. Then the four of them started back to the village.

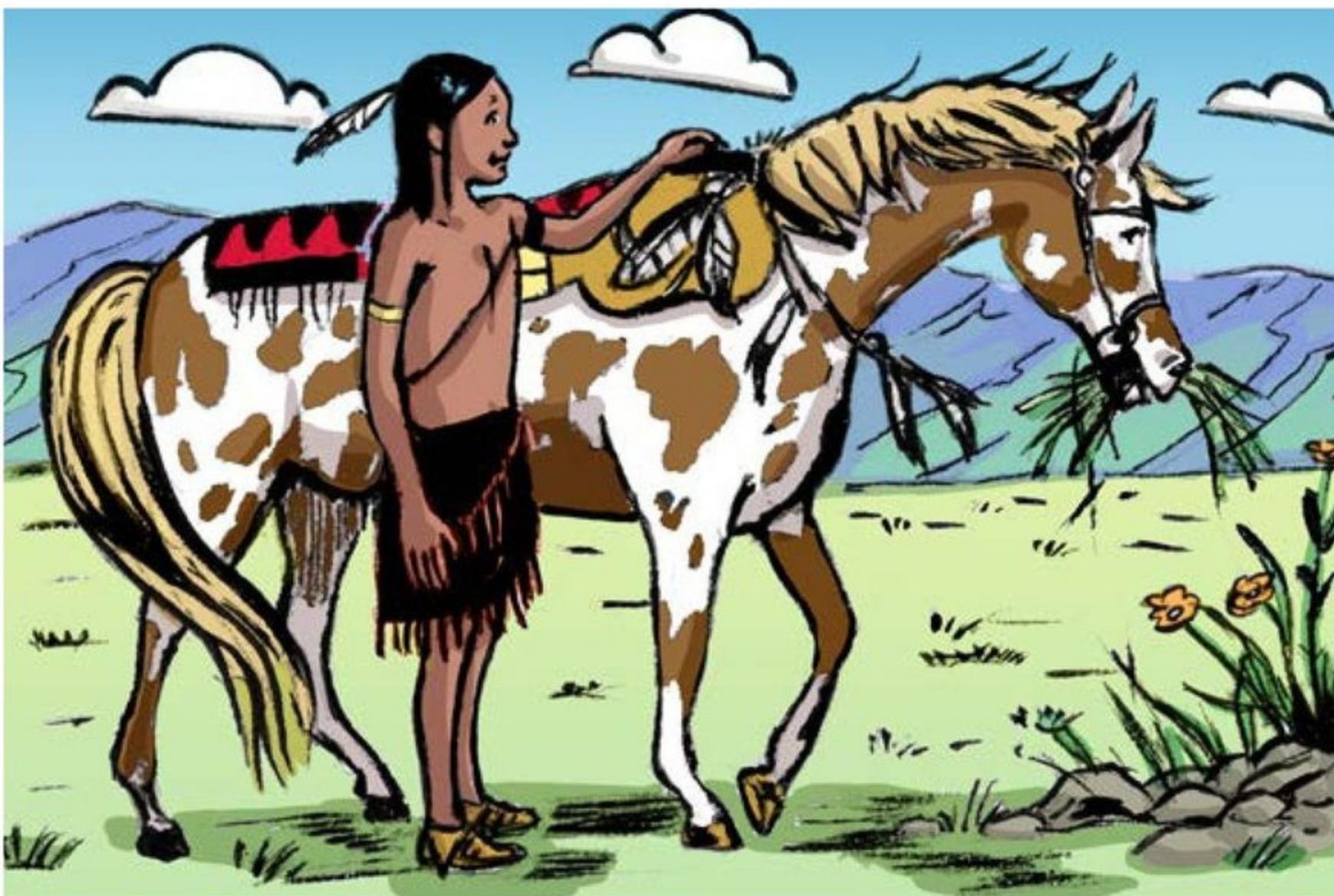
Black Bird

The next day, the boy went to the shaman's teepee. He sat with the shaman on a buffalo robe and told him about his vision. The holy man smiled and nodded, **wisdom** in his old eyes. "It was a true vision," he assured the boy, "not just a dream. The black bird you saw is not an ordinary bird. It is a mighty spirit who will protect you from all danger."

The shaman patted the boy's arm. "You are lucky to have such a guardian," he said. "In honor of it, you should be named Black Bird. Then whenever you hear your name, you will remember your vision."

So it was that the boy received the name of Black Bird. His father, Proud Elk, organized a celebration in his honor. The people of the Northern Cheyenne village feasted, sang, and danced well into the night.

Soon after the celebration, Proud Elk gave Black Bird a present: a brown-and-white spotted pony. The boy ran over to the pony and warmly rubbed its neck. The animal whinnied softly in appreciation. Black Bird jumped onto the horse and rode out of the village as fast as the wind. Never had he felt so glad to be alive.



Moving Onto the Plains

Originally, the Cheyennes (shy-ENS or shy-ANS) were a hunting and farming people living in what is now Minnesota. In the 1700s, they obtained their first horses. These immensely useful animals had been brought to the Americas by Spanish settlers.

The horse opened up a new life to the Cheyennes and many other Native American tribes. The Cheyennes left their settled woodland life and became buffalo hunters on the Great Plains.

The Cheyennes were pushed westward by their enemies, the Sioux (soo), who had also adopted the horse and moved onto the plains. It was the Sioux who gave the Cheyennes their name, which means “People Who Talk Strangely.” The Cheyennes called themselves “Our People.”

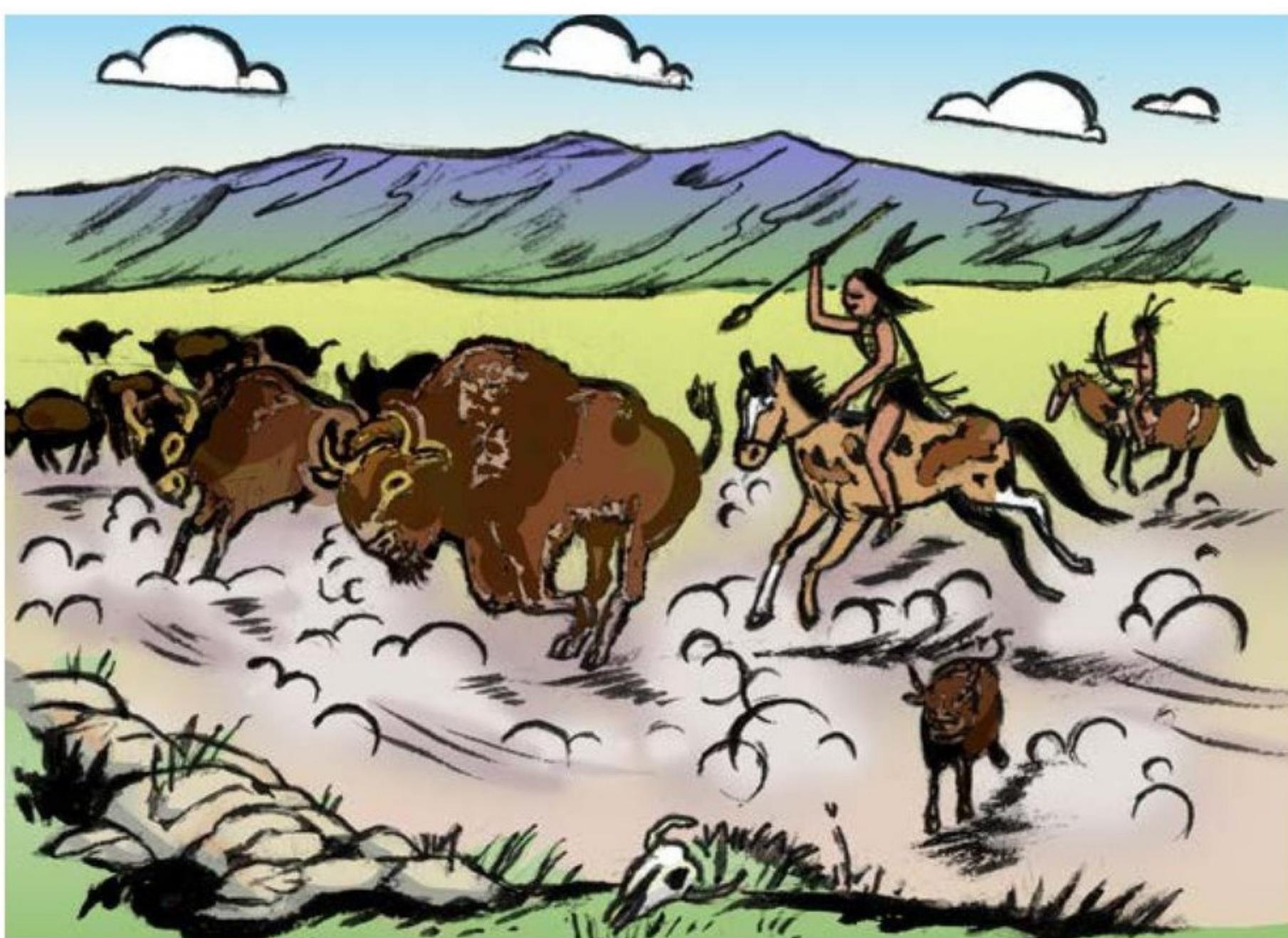
In the mid-1830s, the Cheyennes split into northern and southern groups. The Northern Cheyennes and Sioux later became allies who fought battles together against the U.S. Army.

The Buffalo Hunt

On a warm autumn day, a brave came galloping into the Cheyenne village on his horse, raising a cloud of dust. “There’s a big herd of buffalo not far away!” he yelled. Within moments, all the young men in the village had grabbed their rifles or bows and arrows and were riding out to find the herd.

“Can I join the hunt?” Black Bird asked his father. “No,” Proud Elk said. “You’re still too young. But you can ride out and watch.”

That was good enough for Black Bird. He jumped onto his pony and tore after the large group of braves that were riding toward the buffalo herd.



The women of the village were happy. They got out their cooking pots and piled wood for fires. Fresh buffalo meat for dinner!

Out on the plains, the braves rode alongside the thundering buffalo herd. Whooping loudly, they brought down one buffalo after another with bullets and arrows. Black Bird watched from the side of a low hill, wishing he could take part.

The hunt lasted for just half an hour. When it was over, dozens of buffalo lay dead on the ground. Women from the village came out to help the men strip the hides from the carcasses and cut up the meat. There would be plenty to eat tonight.

The Destruction of the Buffalo Herds

The Native Americans of the Great Plains needed the buffalo to survive. The buffalo—more correctly called the American bison—gave them food, winter robes, and hides to cover their teepees.



In the early 1800s, an estimated 30 million American bison roamed the Great Plains. By 1875, when Black Bird's story begins, the huge herds were disappearing. White hunters killed bison by the millions for meat, hides, and bones. By the late 1880s, the great herds were nothing but a memory. Only a few hundred bison remained in the United States.

An Unexpected War

Winter came and hardened everything. Temperatures dropped to 50 degrees below zero. Black Bird's people had moved their village of about sixty teepees to the Powder River in northern Wyoming. There, joined by members of a few other tribes, they huddled against the cold and waited for spring.

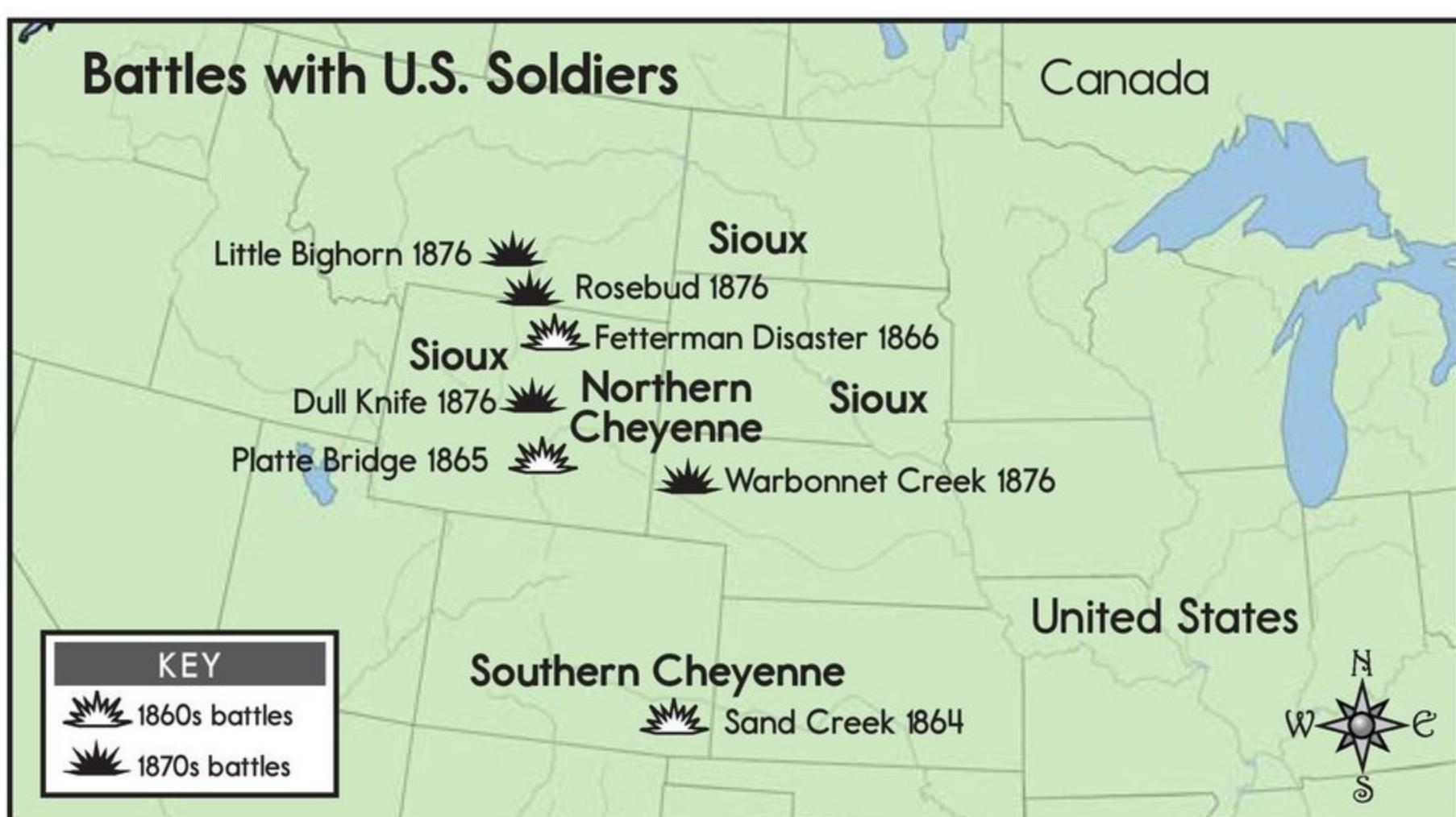
By this time—early 1876—many Native Americans on the Great Plains had given up fighting the mostly white settlers moving into their lands. They were living on **reservations** and accepting food and supplies from United States government agencies. But there were still many groups, known as the hunting bands, which refused to become “agency Indians.” They lived in an area in Wyoming and Montana that had not yet been **ceded** to the United States in a treaty. Among them were large numbers of Northern Cheyennes and Sioux. These tribes thought they were at peace with the United States. They were wrong. They were at war.

The U.S. government had decided that it was time, once and for all, to bring the hunting bands onto the reservations. It wanted to end Native American **sovereignty** in the Unceded Territory and open the nearby Black Hills to settlers.

The Black Hills were beloved by the Cheyennes and Sioux, who owned the land. But the hills were already full of gold miners, and the U.S. government had stopped trying to keep them out.

U.S. officials sent word to the hunting bands that they had to come to the reservations or face military attack. The Sioux and Cheyennes ignored this warning. As far as they were concerned, they were on their own land and harming no one. Why would the government want to send its bluecoat soldiers against them?

On a cold morning in March, Black Bird was wakened by the sound of bugles and gunshots. He jumped up from beneath his buffalo-robe blanket and ran to the entrance of his family's teepee. Outside, hundreds of bluecoat horse soldiers were attacking the village.





Throughout the village, warriors grabbed their rifles and ran outside to fight. The braves gathered at the edge of the village and began shooting at the soldiers. Many of the soldiers were setting fire to teepees.

When the fight was over, four soldiers were dead and six wounded. Only two members of the village had been killed and a few others wounded. But about half the village was destroyed. The soldiers rode away.

Now almost **destitute**, the people of Black Bird's village sought refuge with a band of Sioux led by the greatest Sioux chief, Sitting Bull. He welcomed them.

“Soldiers Falling Like Grasshoppers”

Spring came, and warmth began returning to the land. The Powder River country was peaceful.

In May, Sitting Bull led the Sioux and Cheyennes of his combined village farther north and west. They set up camp on the Rosebud River in Montana. Other hunting bands joined them. By mid-June, the village numbered more than 450 teepees and contained about 3,000 people, including some 800 warriors. A successful buffalo hunt brought fresh meat into the camp.

It appeared that the hunting bands might be allowed to spend the summer in peace. At least that's what everyone hoped. They didn't really believe it. They knew that the United States government was **determined** to turn all of them into agency Indians. It was only a matter of time before the bluecoat soldiers came back.

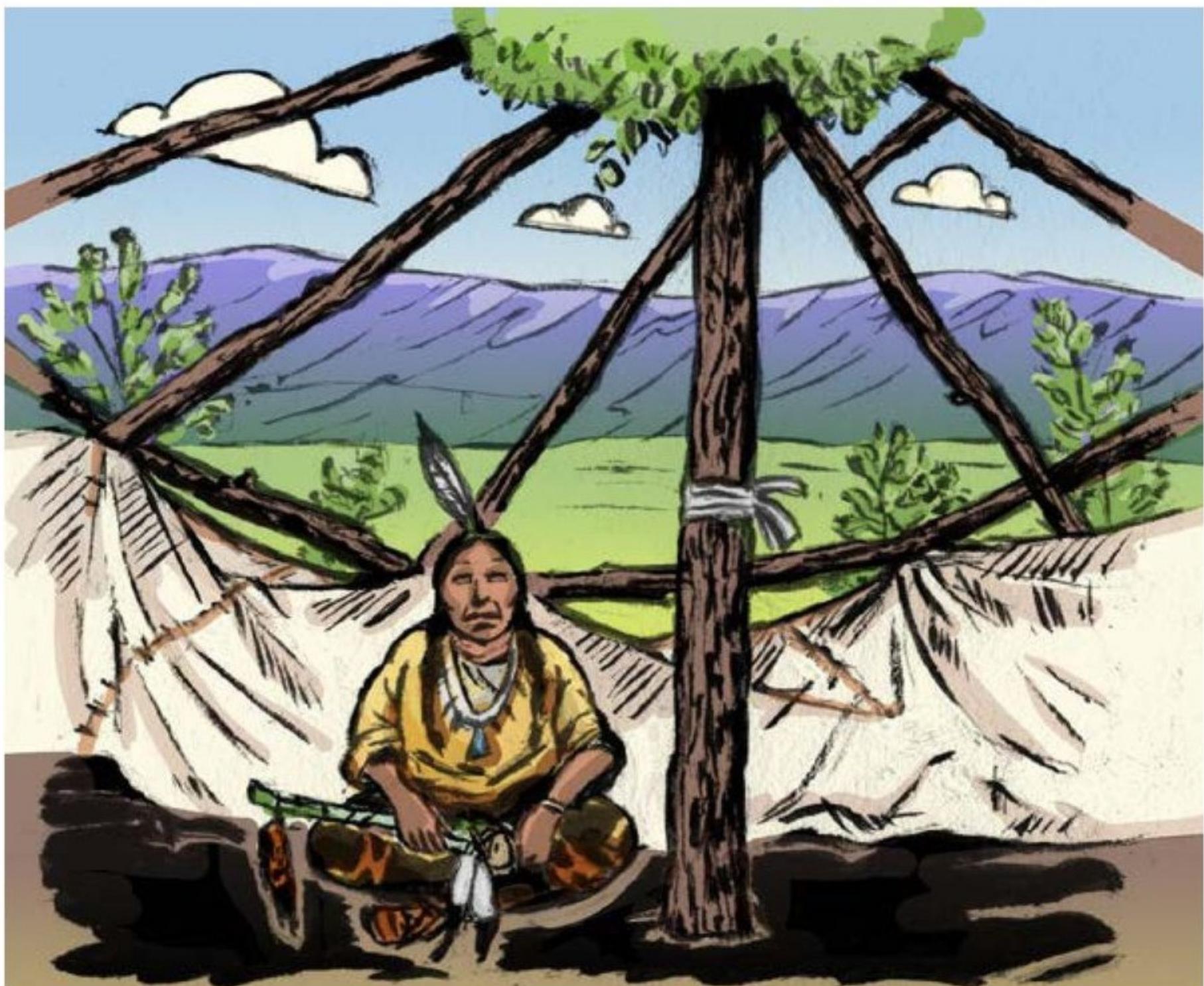
One day as he passed through the center of the village, Black Bird saw a sight he had been waiting to see. Men were lowering one end of a cottonwood log into a hole dug in the ground. When they had moved the log into a vertical position, its forked top towered more than thirty feet in the air. At the top of the pole was a bundle containing a buffalo hide, tobacco, and other religious offerings.

Black Bird ran into his family's teepee, where his parents and two sisters were finishing an afternoon meal. "They're getting ready for the sun dance!" he cried.

It was time for the most important religious ceremony of the Plains people. And this year, Sitting Bull would be the central figure in it.



On the appointed day, Sitting Bull danced for hour after hour around the sun pole. His arms hurt and bruised, he danced and stared at the sun. Then he went into a **trance**.



The Sun Dance

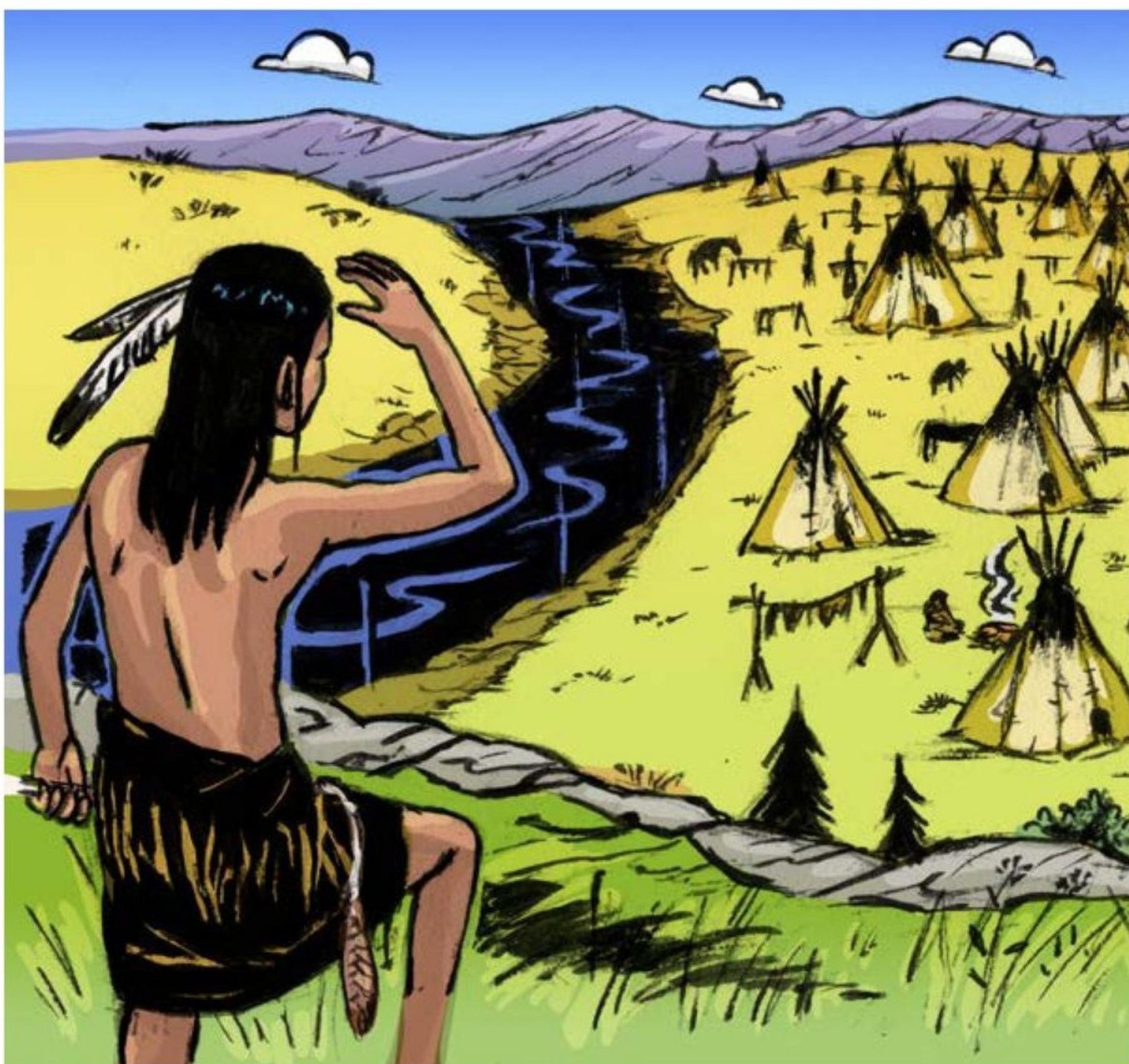
The sun dance was held once a year by many Plains tribes near the time of the summer **solstice**. It lasted for up to twelve days. The ceremony's purpose was to celebrate the sun and its role in bringing the earth back to life after the frigid deadness of winter.

When he came back to his senses, Sitting Bull said that he had seen a vision. Bluecoat soldiers, as numerous as grasshoppers, were falling upside down into the village. The meaning of the vision was clear to him: the Sioux and Cheyennes would be attacked by a large force of soldiers and would win a great victory over them.

The Battle of the Greasy Grass River

After the sun dance, the village moved again. This time it settled next to a small river in Montana that the Sioux and Cheyennes called the Greasy Grass. The U.S. settlers called it the Little Bighorn.

By this time, more people, including many from the Sioux reservation, had joined the village. More than a thousand teepees were arranged along the west bank of the river. The village contained as many as 12,000 people, including at least 2,500 warriors.



On a hot early-summer afternoon—it was June 25th in the settlers' calendar—Black Bird stood on a hill on the east side of the Greasy Grass. He gazed across the river at the huge village. Surely there had never been so many native people together in one place.

Suddenly, there was a huge **commotion** in the village. "The horse soldiers are coming!" Black Bird heard someone shout. Within moments, warriors were pouring out of teepees, weapons in hand, and jumping onto their horses. The warriors met a large group of horse soldiers at the south end of the village. There was intense gunfire, and the soldiers began to retreat across the Greasy Grass River to the safety of some high **bluffs**.

Black Bird strained to see what was going on, but the battle was too far away. He felt disappointed that he wouldn't get to witness the fight. Then, to his **astonishment**, another large column of horse soldiers came riding toward him. He could see that they intended to cross the river and attack the village from the north.

Alerted to the new attack, warriors began galloping back toward the north end of the village. They rode across the river, stopping the soldiers' attack. The soldiers retreated to a hill near the one

where Black Bird stood. The soldiers **dismounted**. Within seconds they were surrounded by 1,500 yelping warriors.

The warriors didn't know until later that the soldiers they faced that day were led by the officer they called "Long Hair"—Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer. All they knew was that they had the upper hand. And they were determined to kill every bluecoat on the hill.

The scene was one of **chaos**. The soldiers fought bravely, but the surging warriors overwhelmed them. Felled by bullets, arrows, lances, and clubs, the soldiers went down by ones and twos, and then by the dozen.

Within an hour, the battle was over. Custer and all of the 210 men under his direct command lay dead.



Charles M. Russell painted "The Custer Fight" in 1903. His painting shows Cheyennes and Sioux on horseback riding toward U.S. troops on a hill.

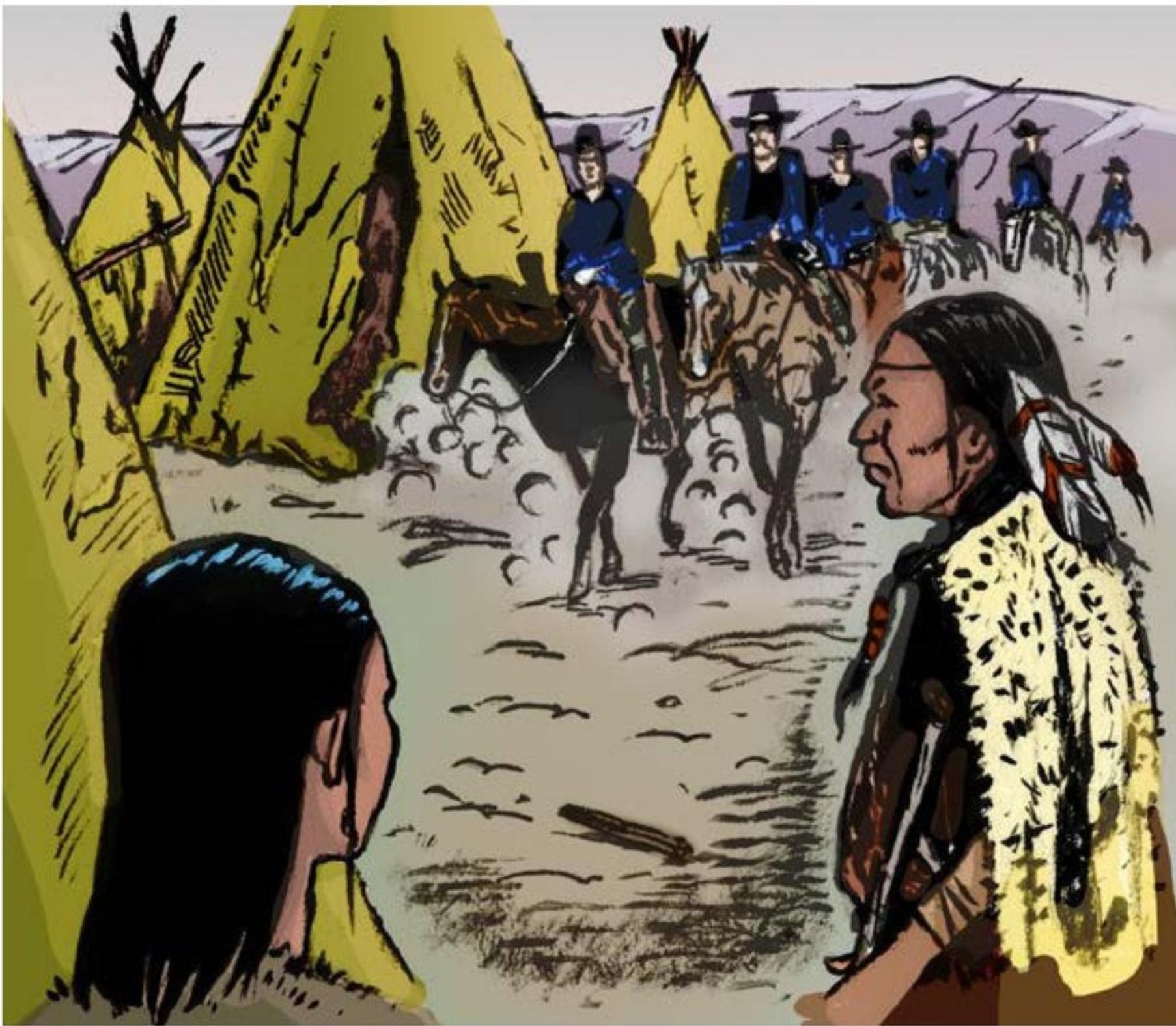
The End of Freedom

It was a week after the battle, and the Cheyennes and Sioux were moving west. Before leaving the Greasy Grass, the warriors had tried to finish off the soldiers who had retreated to the bluffs. But then they saw more bluecoats coming and gave it up. In all, they had killed about 260 soldiers. Only a few dozen warriors had died.

It was a great victory, but it would be their last. Back east, army and government leaders were already laying plans for the final defeat of the hunting bands.

Black Bird's group of Cheyennes separated from the Sioux. The great mass of people was splitting up again into smaller bands to search for buffalo herds. Black Bird nudged his pony in a new direction, following the other members of his group. He waved good-bye to a Sioux boy he had befriended, wondering if he'd ever see him again.

The next few years were **brutal** for the Cheyennes and Sioux. The bluecoat soldiers hunted them down wherever they went. With hardly any buffaloes to be found, many people were starving. One by one, groups of Sioux and Cheyennes surrendered and agreed to live on the reservations.



On a bitterly cold morning in the winter of 1879, Proud Elk stood at the entrance of his teepee. In the distance, a column of soldiers was approaching the Cheyenne camp. With only ten teepees, it could hardly be called a village.

Proud Elk turned to his family, who were eating a meager breakfast of buffalo pemmican. "Soldiers are coming," he said. Black Bird was now approaching warrior age, but he knew there would be no fight. He finished his breakfast in silence as the hoofbeats of the approaching soldiers' horses grew louder.

Afterword

The United States Congress granted the Cheyennes and other Native American tribes U.S. citizenship in 1924. The 2000 U.S. Census listed more than 11,000 Cheyennes. Most Cheyennes live in Oklahoma or Montana. A Northern Cheyenne reservation in Montana has more than 4,300 residents, though some are from other tribes. The several thousand Southern Cheyennes in Oklahoma live on federal land granted to them or in Oklahoma towns. There is no longer a Southern Cheyenne reservation.

Like other Native Americans, many Cheyennes have tried to join American society, and some have achieved great success. One of the most famous is Ben Nighthorse Campbell. Campbell, who is half Northern Cheyenne and a tribal chief, was a U.S. senator from Colorado from 1992 to 2005.



Former Colorado Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a 1964 Olympian in judo, speaks at the 1999 Olympic Day ceremony to honor past, present, and future Olympians.

Glossary

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| astonishment (<i>n.</i>) | great surprise or amazement (p. 18) |
| awe (<i>n.</i>) | mixed feelings of wonder, fear, and respect (p. 5) |
| bluffs (<i>n.</i>) | steep cliffs or hills with broad faces (p. 18) |
| brutal (<i>adj.</i>) | extremely difficult to cope with; harsh (p. 20) |
| catapulted (<i>v.</i>) | thrown something with great force (p. 5) |
| ceded (<i>v.</i>) | given up or surrendered (p. 11) |
| chaos (<i>n.</i>) | confusion; lack of order (p. 19) |
| commotion (<i>n.</i>) | confusion; noisy activity (p. 18) |
| destitute (<i>adj.</i>) | without food, clothing, or shelter (p. 13) |
| determined (<i>adj.</i>) | feeling a firmness of purpose, especially when facing some difficulty (p. 14) |
| dismounted (<i>v.</i>) | got down from the back of an animal (p. 19) |
| infinite (<i>adj.</i>) | endless; going on forever (p. 4) |
| ordeal (<i>n.</i>) | a hard or difficult experience (p. 4) |

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| pemmican (<i>n.</i>) | dried meat pounded into paste, mixed with melted fat and dried fruit, and pressed into small cakes (p. 21) |
| reservations (<i>n.</i>) | lands set aside for Native Americans (p. 11) |
| shaman (<i>n.</i>) | a healer or spiritual leader in tribal society (p. 4) |
| silhouetted (<i>v.</i>) | caused to appear dark but surrounded by light (p. 5) |
| solstice (<i>n.</i>) | the time of year when the Sun is farthest from the equator (happens twice each year) (p. 16) |
| sovereignty (<i>n.</i>) | the freedom to be in charge of one's own affairs (p. 11) |
| sweat lodge (<i>n.</i>) | a special place usually heated by steam and used for ritual sweating to clean or purify the body or spirit in some way (p. 4) |
| trance (<i>n.</i>) | a state of being in which a person seems half asleep and half awake; a state of being associated with visions or other spiritual messages (p. 15) |
| wisdom (<i>n.</i>) | great knowledge and sense (p. 7) |

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Author's Note: An 11-year-old Northern Cheyenne boy named Black Bird is believed to have been present at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. This story is not based on the actual experiences of Black Bird as not much is known about him, but this story could have been his.

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