

Othniel Charles Marsh and Sioux Chief Red Cloud

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The American west was a fertile landscape for fossil hunters of the late 1800s. Remains of fish, giant shells and bones were recognized as fossils by geologists and surveyors preparing the untamed land for the transcontinental railroad in the 1860s. They reported their findings to scientific journals and sold articles describing their experiences to newspapers in the east.

A rush to uncover western fossil riches began in 1871, the same year Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon were being explored. Reports of undocumented fossil types by these new expeditions lured major scientists into the great outdoors regardless of the hardships. One of the most renowned of these new explorers was Othniel Charles Marsh, a professor of paleontology at Yale College in New Haven, Connecticut.

Marsh explored many western sites with mixed results after receiving various reports and maps. On hearing of interesting samples found in the Dakota badlands, he decided to explore the area in November of 1874. This move into the Wyoming Territory was accompanied by a full entourage of wagons and a number of hired hands to do the lifting and digging.

The starting point for this expedition was an Indian agency not far from a railhead belonging to the Northern Pacific Railroad. The agency was named for Red Cloud, the local Oglala Sioux war leader and chief.



Red Cloud led the resistance during the Indian wars at Powder River hunting grounds where the U.S. Army was soundly defeated. After this conflict, he settled near the agency after the army agreed to close forts in the area and spent his remaining years mediating differences between the white man and the Sioux.

Evidence of gold quartz had also been found in earlier expeditions and that news brought many unwelcome fortune hunters onto Sioux lands. Marsh arrived white skinned and a stranger to the area. To the Sioux, these two traits marked him as another gold seeker. Some were so upset by his presence, especially by the number of wagons and men he brought with him, that they demanded the local Indian agent tell him and his party to return to the train and leave the area.

Marsh, a stubborn man by nature, refused to leave and insisted on meeting Red Cloud to discuss the purpose of his expedition. On hearing of this white man's refusal to leave, even after being told to do so by the Indian agent, Red Cloud's curiosity outweighed his distaste and he agreed to talk. The meeting resulted in Marsh obtaining Red Cloud's permission to look for fossils on Sioux lands. The Sioux were also familiar with fossils and called the remains 'Thunder Horses' in recognition of their size.

Using his maps and following Red Cloud's instructions, Marsh found several wagon loads of fossils and returned to the agency so the Indians could examine the rocks and fossils. After seeing that no gold was secretly hidden and Marsh had kept his promise, Red Cloud was impressed with his honesty and invited him to visit the nearby Sioux encampment.

While in the Sioux encampment, Marsh viewed food and supplies provided by the U.S. government's Bureau of Indian Affairs and became outraged after seeing spoiled foodstuffs and poor quality goods in terrible condition. He heard accounts of general corruption among U.S. government officers and agents. Returning east, Marsh reported on "our vile bureaucrats" to anyone who would listen, but few did.

The matter did not end there as Red Cloud sent further information to Marsh in the Spring of 1875 indicating no supplies had been provided to the Sioux after Marsh left the agency. Public reaction was immediate when Marsh reported these further

activities to the New York Herald newspaper resulting in a series of articles outlining the misdeeds of the Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Shortly thereafter, President Ulysses S. Grant "regretfully" accepted the resignation of Christopher Delano, U.S. Secretary of the Interior. A full investigation of the Bureau followed and Red Cloud's Oglala Sioux finally received the aid they were promised.

Red Cloud was impressed with Marsh's continued efforts and named him "the best white man I've ever seen". Further explorations by Marsh's workers were always accompanied by Sioux braves to protect and guide the diggers. In 1880, Red Cloud visited Marsh in New Haven and the two men became fast friends.

The illustrated cover was posted from Red Cloud Agency, Wyoming Territory on 25 June 1875 and is addressed to Professor Charles Marsh at Yale College in New Haven, Connecticut. The script docketing on the side indicates the letter was posted by H.E. Farnam using an imprinted envelope of J.W. Dear, an Indian trader at the agency. This likely indicates the content was not trader or agency business, but rather an envelope used on behalf of a third party.



As the contents are no longer with the cover, the following is speculation. Very little mail was sent from the agency addressed to Marsh, especially during this period. This cover may well have carried a personal message from Red Cloud to Marsh concerning his problems with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.