

What did Crazy Horse look like?

There has always been controversy in historical and academic circles over whether or not there is, or ever was, a photograph of Crazy Horse. Even on the Internet there was an argument going as to the authenticity of a photo put forth by Native American academic activist Ward Churchill at the University of Colorado and proclaimed as the real thing.

No photograph claimed to be that of the great Lakota chief has ever been authenticated. And there are varied reasons given as to why the great chief is supposed to have refused to allow his picture to be taken. The usual reasons, of course, are variations of Crazy Horse's reply recalled by Indian agent Valentine McGillicuddy when he urged the chief to pose for a picture: "His invariable reply to my request was 'My friend, why should you shorten my life by taking from me my shadow?'"

A strong case is made by Tom Buecker, curator of the Fort Robinson Museum near Crawford, Nebraska, that one good reason no photo was ever taken is that, for all but a short time in his life, Crazy Horse was never in the vicinity of a photographer. Right up to his death, Crazy Horse could never be called a "hang around the fort" type.

In Crazy Horse's time the photo equipment was bulky and the process of photography was time consuming, from preparing glass plates to immediately developing the negative after taking the picture. Dark room, backdrop, supplies and other equipment had to be on hand for work, usually in a town or fort. In addition, lengthy exposure time required the subject to pose, which would have made it almost impossible for a snapshot to be taken of an unsuspecting person.

In the short time that Crazy Horse was in the vicinity of a photographer – near Fort Robinson after his surrender in 1877 – his fame worldwide was so great that a photographer would have made much in fame and fortune for getting a picture of him; and the photo itself would have been circulated around the world. This would negate the likelihood of a later discovery of a Crazy Horse photo in some obscure collection; or of finding one that is not clearly identified as the great leader. In the only photo clearly identified as Crazy Horse the man in the photo is much older than the famous chief, who died in his early 30's.

As for McGillicuddy's recollection of the chief's reply, Buecker notes that, even though it was a moving statement, "it is probably another piece of McGillicuddy folklore..." The agent was also a physician and attended the chief in his last hours. He was proud of this fact and likely would have embellished to call attention to his association with Crazy Horse.

Although other credible sources, such as Mari Sandoz, have given similar reasons for his refusal as McGillicuddy claims, Buecker's opinion seems more real. Although I am not an expert on Lakota religion or culture, I have never read or heard from a credible source of any Lakota taboo against having one's image captured by photography, certainly not fear of death. Great Sioux leaders like Sitting Bull, and even several holy men of the time willingly posed for photographs. Red Cloud is second only to Lincoln in having his portrait done by photography. If Crazy Horse did refuse to have his picture taken, it would be more likely that he wanted to do nothing to satisfy the curiosity of whites, whom he considered mortal enemies, or that might indicate participation in an alien culture he despised.

Descriptions of Crazy Horse's facial and physical features are abundant, both from Lakotas and a few whites who knew him well. These are included in letters and transcripts of interviews and in books based on those primary sources, and all are consistent in their descriptions. These descriptions generally help disprove the claims of authors and some respected historians that any

photo purported to be that of the great leader is the real thing.

Sometime prior to 1940, Oglala Lakota artist Andrew Standing Soldier rendered an ink and watercolor sketch based on descriptions of old men and women who knew Crazy Horse personally. Standing Soldier was an artist who did extremely accurate portrayals of Lakota life in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as historic events. Of his Crazy Horse portrait, relatives and close friends of the war leader reportedly pronounced it an excellent likeness.

But claims still arise in new books and periodicals that some photo or other is that of Crazy Horse.

And modern day depiction of Crazy Horse in movies, paintings and monuments continue to be stereotypical caricatures of what an Indian man is "supposed to look like." Take for example the massive sculpture transforming a granite mountain in the Black Hills. The face on that mountain doesn't portray the chief's fine featured countenance described in so many reliable sources. For one thing, the nose is a feature that would be more like that of the ancient Red Cloud in his final days than that of Crazy Horse. However, this does not demean the good intentions on the part of the Ziolkowski family and foundation of honoring so great a leader.

But, as Buecker concludes his article, "The lack of that definitive, exact image that we hold so important, plus our not knowing where Crazy Horse is buried, adds to the mystic attraction people have of him today. But rest assured, even without a photograph, the deeds of Crazy Horse live on."

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