

Chief Plenty Coups State Park

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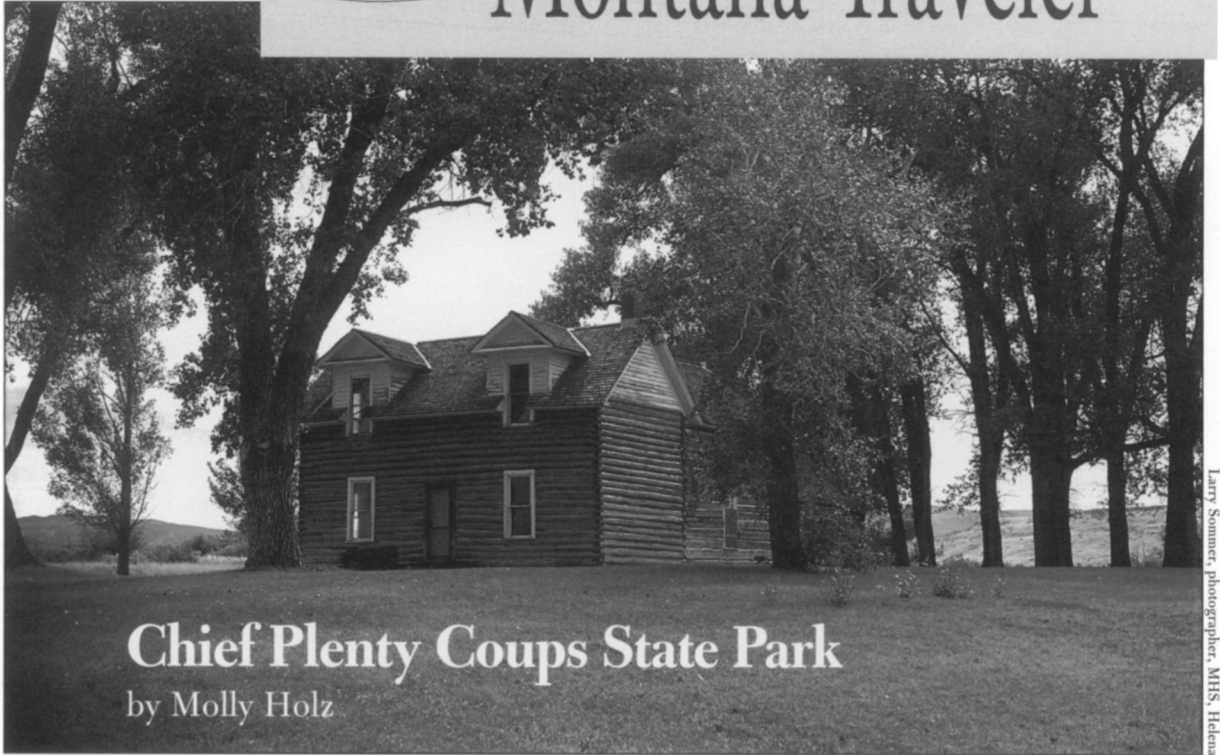
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Larry Sommer, photographer, MHS, Helena

Chief Plenty Coups State Park

by Molly Holz

Chief Plenty Coups home (above) is under study, as is the park, for improved restoration and interpretation.

When Plenty Coups, the last traditional chief of the Crow Indians, recounted his life story to the writer Frank Bird Linderman in 1928, he told of a vision. Conferring with Linderman at his home on the Crow Indian Reservation thirty-five miles south of Billings, Plenty Coups explained how the vision had set the course of his life. Though Plenty Coups was then eighty years old, his memory of it had not dimmed. When he had been about twenty, he said, he had visited a traditional Crow site in the Crazy Mountains and seen himself as an old man. "I saw the spring down by those trees," he told Linderman, "this very house just as it is, these trees which comfort us today, and a very old man sitting in the shade, alone." And so it had come to pass, along with the profound changes the vision implied and with which his people would have to contend.

Plenty Coups was revered in his lifetime for his wisdom and diplomatic skill in helping his people make the transition from traditional lifeways to reservation life as settled agriculturalists. Remembered for those qualities today, he is also commemorated with Chief Plenty Coups State Park, a park that includes the homestead where he sat beneath cottonwood trees and re-

lated the story of his vision to Linderman in 1928. That same year, on August 8, Plenty Coups presented his homestead for use as a park. "This park is not a memorial to me," he declared during the dedication ceremony, "but to the Crow nation. It is a token of my friendship for all people, red and white."

There is much to see at Chief Plenty Coups' homestead. There is a museum, the only one in the world focusing solely on Crow history and culture. There is the spring, revealed to Plenty Coups in his vision, which continues to bubble forth cold and strong. Chief Plenty Coups attributed his long life and good health to its supply of water, and it was beside the spring that he prayed about important decisions. The spring is sacred to the Crow people, who continue to hold ceremonies there. To the northwest are the grave sites of Chief Plenty Coups, Kills Together, his wife of thirty years, Strikes the Iron, whom he married in 1923, and his adopted daughter, Mary. To the north are sandstone bluffs that mark traditional Crow burial sites, and to the south stand the Pryor Mountains.

Plenty Coups' life at Pryor and his homestead on the reservation represented Crow efforts to balance forced assimilation to American ways of life with pres-



ervation of Crow cultural traditions. Speaking before the Senate Indian Affairs Committee in Washington, D.C., in 1908, Plenty Coups said, "I am chief of the tribe and as such I tell the younger men, 'Come follow me,' and raise the crop for my own support and I teach the young men what I know myself." One of the first Crow chiefs to take up farming, Plenty Coups settled on 360 acres in the Pryor Valley in 1883 and built a thriving farm. In 1908 the farm included 80 irrigated acres under cultivation and an apple orchard, supported 250 horses and 36 cattle, and produced 54 tons of hay, 250 bushels of wheat, and 280 bushels of oats.


Under tall cottonwood trees stands Plenty Coups' log cabin home, built in 1884, and beside it a log structure in which he operated a general store. Plenty Coups opened the store, which he called "the mess," in 1893 to sell fruit from his orchards and other supplies to local people and the laborers who constructed irrigation canals on the reservation. Plenty Coups, who did not write English, kept accounts on pieces of cardboard with drawings denoting customers' names and marks indicating the money they owed. At one point the chief explained, "I would rather hunt buffalo for a living, but we cannot. So I have opened a grocery store." It was a popular meeting place.

The one-and-a-half-story log house, with additions added in 1900 and 1909, was one of the most important buildings on the Crow reservation and accommodated many callers. On the ground floor was a kitchen and a large room for dances and councils as well as a bedroom for visitors, including the Jesuit priests who came to visit St. Charles Catholic Church and school that stood a few miles to the south. At Plenty Coups' request, Jesuits built the school in 1891 so that local children could receive an education and live at home. An advocate of learning English and of education generally, Plenty Coups advised: "Education is your most powerful weapon. With education you are the white man's equal; without education you are his victim and so shall remain all your lives." Upstairs was Plenty Coups' bedroom and a room where he kept important papers and photographs of notable occasions, including his having represented all American Indians at the 1921 dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington, D.C. Other of his affects—weapons, medicine bundles, Crow finery, items of spiritual significance, and such gifts as the rifle from Prince Albert I of Monaco—can be

viewed today at the park's museum.

When Plenty Coups and his wife Strikes the Iron deeded 189 acres "as a park and recreation ground for all people" (40 to be used as a park and the remainder to support its maintenance), they asked that one room of the house be reserved for display of the items Plenty Coups had collected. After Plenty Coups' death in 1932 the Bighorn County Commissioners assumed responsibility for the site and engaged a ranch caretaker. In 1941, a stone monument was dedicated at the grave site by the Billings Kiwanis Club, which assumed management of the park in 1951, in part due to Plenty Coups' induction in 1924 as an honorary Kiwanian. The organization operated a small museum on the first floor of the house, improved accessibility, placed headstones at the grave site, and paid for a caretaker. In 1961, stewardship of the site passed to the Montana State Highway Commission, which, in 1965, turned it over to the parks division of the Montana Fish and Game Department as a state park. With donations and tribal and state money, the museum was built in 1972, although the chief's home and store remained closed to the public because of their fragility. A \$100,000 grant in 1993 allowed for stabilization of building exteriors, and since 1994 an additional \$172,000 has been spent on park im-

provements, including stabilization of the house's interior. Further improvements are under study. In 1998, the site was designated a National Historic Landmark.

Chief Plenty Coups State Park is located about a half mile west of Pryor. Follow Highway 416 south from interstate exit 447 to Pryor Creek Road, which runs south to the town of Pryor. Take BIA Road no. 5 west to the park, which is located at the intersection with BIA Road no. 8. The park and museum are open from May 1 through September 30, the park 8 A.M. to 8 P.M., and the museum 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. Tours of Plenty Coups' home are available by arrangement with park staff. On the first Saturday in September, the park celebrates Chief Plenty Coups Day of Honor. In addition, the chief's story lives on in Linderman's *Plenty Coups: Chief of the Crows*. For more information write to Chief Plenty Coups State Park, Box 100, Pryor, Montana 59066, or call (406) 252-1289. 

MOLLY HOLZ is assistant editor of this magazine.

