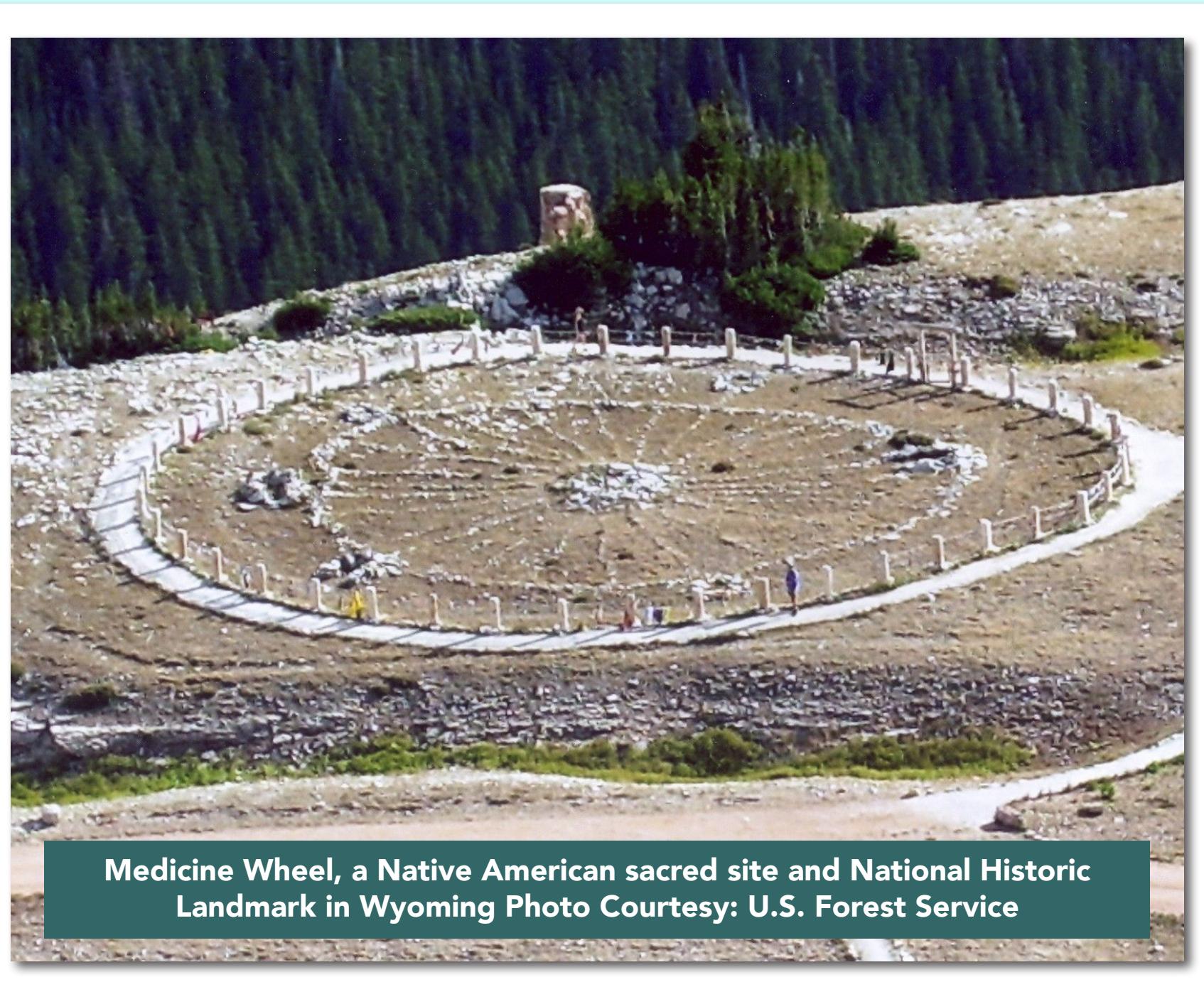


# Bighorn Mountain Heritage of Plains Indian Tribes

## Sacred Site



Medicine Wheel, a Native American sacred site and National Historic Landmark in Wyoming Photo Courtesy: U.S. Forest Service

Located in the northwestern part of the Bighorn Mountains twelve miles south of the Montana border is the Medicine Wheel/Medicine Mountain National Historic Landmark. This archaeological site includes one of the largest stone medicine wheels in North America. Located at 9,640 feet in elevation, the Medicine Wheel is situated on the slightly sloping limestone surface of the prominent northwestern ridge of Medicine Mountain. The age estimates for the Medicine Wheel range from a few hundred years to more than 3,000 years, but artifacts and other archaeological evidence indicate the area has been visited by Native Indians for nearly 7,000 years. The Medicine Mountain landscape is, and has been, a major ceremonial and traditional site for many regional Native Indian Tribes such as the Arapaho, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Crow, Kiowa, Kootenai-Salish, Plains Cree, Shoshone, Lakota, and Ute.



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## The Legend of Big Metal

In the days soon after the Crow came to this area, a boy and his stepfather went hunting. While the boy was looking over the edge of the canyon, the stepfather pushed him. The boy disappeared from view, and the cruel stepfather returned to the village telling the others that the boy had started home earlier in the day. A search party was sent out and when no sign of the boy was found it was assumed another tribe had captured him.

However, the boy was safe; an outcrop of cedars had broken his fall. Here, from his precarious perch, he waited, hoping and praying for rescue. On the fourth day, his prayers were answered. He was rescued by seven bighorn sheep led by Big Metal, the Chief of the Bighorns.

Big Metal was a magnificent creature with horns and hooves of glistening metal. He gave the boy his powers and his name, Big Iron. In turn, the seven sheep gave the boy a power that the sheep possessed: wisdom, sharp eyes, keen hearing, great strength, a strong heart and sure footedness. They then gave him a warning: "We seven rule these Bighorn Mountains. The rivers down there in the bottom are the Bighorn River. Whatever you do, do not change the name. It shall be known as the Bighorn River. If you ever change the name of the river there will be no more Apsálooke (Crow Tribe). The Apsálooke will be no more."

The bighorn sheep told the boy that they would lead him out of the canyon if he promised to go back to the village and deliver the message. Big Iron was to report to the tribe what the stepfather had done. Big Iron returned to the village and upon seeing him the stepfather ran away and was never seen again. Big Iron told the story of the seven rams and what had they done for him and told him about the land. Big Iron went on to live through four generations of the Crow tribe retelling the story of the ram to every generation.

The Bighorn River carved the Bighorn Canyon that is part of the northern range of the Bighorn Mountains located in current day Montana. Today, the Apsálooke reside on the Crow Nation Reservation located in southeastern Montana.

For more Apsálooke history, visit the Library at Little Big Horn College.

## Sacred Heritage

The Bighorn Mountains are the most sacred area to the Crow Tribe. Apsálooke is the tribe's name in Crow language, which means children of the large-beaked bird. The entire mountain range is an integral part of their history. While these mountains have been used for hunting to ritual practice; there are also many legends told about this high country. Crow oral tradition cite the tribe under the leadership of two brothers: No Intestines and Red Scout. Even though the tribe was two separate bands they camped together. At what is now called Devil's Lake, the two brothers did a vision quest together. During the vision, No Intestines was told to seek the seeds of the sacred tobacco. Once he located this tobacco No Intestines and his band would be in the center of the world and this would be the best place for his people. The group following No Intestines and his vision would become the Crow Tribe who currently live in southeastern Montana on Crow Nation reservation. However, Red Scout's vision quest was to settle on the Banks of the Missouri River and grow corn. This is the separation of the Crow people from the Hidatsa tribe.

No Intestines and his band began a long westward trek. The journey west first led them to the region around current day Cardston, Alberta. No Intestines fasted again and on the fourth day he received a second vision that the area was too cold and they had not reached their destination. The group headed south and passed Great Salt Lake in current day Utah. They headed southeast and reached the Canadian River in Oklahoma, called Arrowhead River by the Crow. No Intestines fasted again and his vision told him to travel north following the Missouri River to the Platte River. Then they followed the Powder River north until they reached the Bighorn Mountains in current day northern Wyoming.

To the Crow the highest peak on the crest of the Bighorn Mountains is called Awaxaawakússawishe, which means Extended Mountain and the peak is considered the center of their world. No Intestines fasted for the fourth time and received a vision telling him that he was in the right place and the tobacco seed could be found at the bottom of Awaxaawakússawishe. As he looked to the base of the mountain, he saw the seeds as "twinkling stars," Ihkaxáaxaaheetak. Thus, the Crow made their home in the region which is now Montana and Wyoming with the Bighorn Mountains as their sacred heartland.



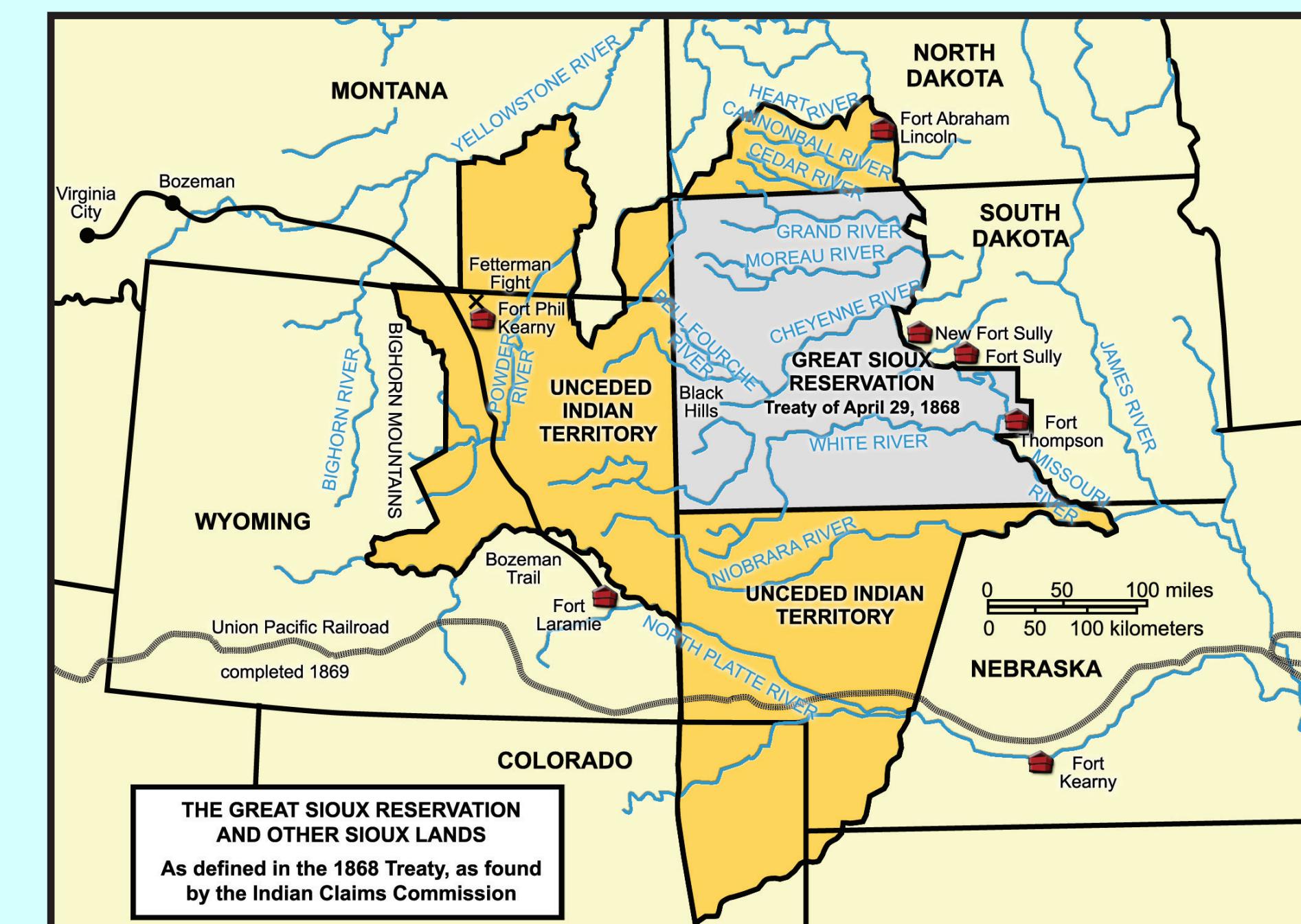
## Land Treaties

Land treaties that were negotiated within the land of the Bighorn Mountain Region offer explanations to the current location to many of the Plains Indian Tribes. In 1825, the Apsálooke chiefs (Crow Indian chiefs) entered into their first treaty, a friendship treaty, with the United States. The purpose of this treaty was to perpetuate friendship and trade between the United States and their citizens and the Crow Indian Tribe.

By the mid-1800s, the Plains Indian tribes felt the impact of the Western expansion and the consumption of natural resources. In September of 1851, the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs arranged a huge gathering at Fort Laramie Wyoming to discuss newly assigned territories for each tribes' village.

Continuous Western expansion and the discovery of gold in Montana, the Bozeman Trail was scouted as a northern short cut from the Oregon Trail and was routed through designated Indian territories.

In 1868, another Fort Laramie Treaty meeting was arranged, but this was for a new federal policy that focused on placing all Native Indian Tribes on permanent reservations. The 1868 treaty established the Great Sioux Reservation. East of the Bighorn Mountains became the Unceded Indian Territory specifically for bison hunting held by the seven bands of Lakota (Sioux). When gold was found in the Black Hills of South Dakota in 1874, the 1868 treaty was then broken. Due to the extermination of the bison, the Unceded Indian Territory was the first to be removed from the 1868 treaty. The Great Sioux Reservation was then divided for the seven Lakota bands into five smaller parcels of land that are the current reservations: Standing Rock, Cheyenne River, Lower Brule, Rosebud, and Pine Ridge.



1868 Fort Laramie Treaty Map Courtesy of the North Dakota Studies Program, State Historical Society of North Dakota. Native Tribes' Flags Courtesy of the Donovan Sprague Collection.



Flags of Plains Indian Tribes (L - R) Top Row: Arapaho Tribe of the Wind River Reservation; Blackfeet Tribe; Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe; Crow Tribe of Montana; Crow Creek Sioux Tribe; Eastern Shoshone Tribe; Flandreau Santee Tribe of South Dakota. Middle Row: Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation; Fort Belknap Indian Community (Assiniboine and Gros Ventre); Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation; Kiowa Indian Tribe of Oklahoma; Lower Brûlé Sioux Tribe; Northern Cheyenne Tribe. Bottom Row: Oglala Sioux Tribe; Rosebud Sioux Tribe; Santee Sioux Tribe; Sisseton and Wahpeton Sioux Tribe; Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of North and South Dakota; Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation; Yankee Sioux Tribe of South Dakota.