

BIG HORN CROSSING HAZARDS

"Heap Shallow" Deeper Than Wagon Box

Indian Guide Proves Not Too Reliable

by W. R. Bandy

I spent many years as a government surveyor in the early days, subdividing the public lands into sections. A party of from seven to twelve of us and a cook lived in tents camping around in the rougher, unsettled portions of Montana and Wyoming preparing the land for settlement.

Numerous incidents occurred from time to time, humorous and otherwise, some of which stand out from the routine. One of the memorable ones took place as we were moving camp across the Crow Indian Reservation in October 1912.

We had been surveying the land for the U. S. General Land Office on the head of the Little Big Horn River in Wyoming. Early snows had forced us to move from the Big Horn Mountains to the low lands and we were enroute to other work near Lovell, Wyo. We were moving across the Crow Reservation to get there. Our wagon train, heavily loaded with camp equipment had stopped for lunch along the road above the small trading post of St. Xavier, Montana. We were busily engaged at feeding the horses and preparing lunch when someone rode up and said "How."

Looking up we saw a full blood Crow Indian on a pinto pony. A couple of families of Indians in wagons had passed by but none had responded to our greetings so we were somewhat surprised when this one stopped.

After his greeting our visitor sat expressionless on his pony and gazed at us. With the exception of Karl Suhr, the head teamster, and I the party was made up of young fellows from Missouri and Iowa, and my wife, Inez, who was spending her first summer in the West. None of these folk had ever seen a real Indian on his home range and were all bug-eyed with wonder. They lined up alongside the wagon giving him the once over from head to foot.

Our Indian visitor who appeared to be about 50 years old was not painted and decked out in full regalia as were those pictured in our history books, but he looked real to us! While he did not have a full feathered headdress he did have long braided hair, and some long eagle feathers dangling from a string tied to his battered hat. He made a colorful sight with his bright red scarf, buckskin moccasins, and bright red saddle blanket. His bridle was decorated with brass

rosettes and a shiny bit. Anyone could see by his natural dignity that he was no ordinary Indian.

I suspected he had some motive for stopping other than just to look us over. Of course our wagons loaded high with camping equipment was an unusual sight in this remote area of the reservation. I had been running survey camps for several years but this was to be my first business contact with an Indian, so I was not over confident.

However, the situation seemed to call for someone to break the ice. I was dubious, but screwed up my courage enough to walk out and greet him by saying "How" in as friendly a voice as I could muster. He then said "You cross river?" So that was what he wanted!

He had noticed we were headed for the Big Horn River and wanted the job of guiding us across the treacherous ford. I nodded my head and he said "Me show you good place." With the accent on the good. I was somewhat skeptical for we had just passed a white man on horseback down the road who told us the river was a little high and the ford a difficult one to follow. He had advised me to wait until he returned in an hour or so to lead us across and we were waiting for him.

I hedged, trying to find out how deep his "good" place was. So I asked him, "How deep?" and held my hand at the bottom of the wagon box and added, "This deep." He shook his head and grunted something. I raised my hand half way up on the side of the wagon box and asked again, "This deep?"

This time he shook his head vigorously so I raised my hand to the top of the box. He mumbled impatiently, shaking his head, jumped off his horse and shook the brakebeam which is only two feet from the ground, saying "Heap shallow - Good place!"

He was so emphatic that we decided to take a chance. We had a long drive ahead and this would save time. I started negotiations by asking "How much." "One dollar," he says, holding up one finger. Having some fresh deer hides in the back of the wagon, I offered him one in place of the dollar. Holding up a hide I asked, "Show us across buckskin?" After closely examining the hide he replies "Yes." We then started to hitch up the teams and get under way when he said to me "Pay now." I gave him the deer hide and he tied it on the back of his saddle, saying, "We go," and rode up the road motioning us to follow.

Suhr was driving the lead wagon with part of the men aboard. I was driving the second wagon with my wife beside me and some of the men

riding on top of the load behind. My wagon was the heaviest one and was drawn by the heaviest and strongest team, Buster and Blaze.

We had to drive up the river a mile or so before reaching the ford. Our guide was happy as he led the caravan. He was proud to have his neighbors see him as some of them passed us on their way to town, with the squaws sitting flat in the wagon boxes. His eagle feathers were flying in the breeze. Playing the part of a regular scout he would occasionally ride first to one side of the road and then to the other as if looking in the brush for a possible enemy, or something. He would keep well ahead all the while, watching us out the corner of his eye.

Reaching the turnoff to the river ford we approached the swift and roily river with some misgivings. It was some 400 feet wide with a gravel island about one-third the way out. We could see the main current was beyond the island.

Not hesitating, the Indian entered the water, angling slightly up stream toward the lower end of the island. This channel proved to be shallow, no deeper than the brake beam as he had said. We reached the island with increased assurance. However, the trustworthiness of our glamorous guide was soon to receive a mild shock.

As we drove up the island he rode back to the lead wagon and said to the astonished Suhr, "Show money!" Suhr, somewhat taken aback, did not understand at first, so the guide repeated "Show money." Suhr, beginning to understand replied "Boss paid you."

The Indian with some show of belligerency again demanded "Show money." Suhr, pointing back at me said, "See boss." As the Indian rode back to me I said "I gave you buckskin, show us across." His surprising reply to that was "Buckskin you all right--him one dolla."

We were all somewhat shocked at this serious turn of events out in the middle of a wild river. Not so much because of the extra dollar but because of the shadow it cast upon the reliability of our guide on whose good judgment we were trusting our safety.

Although I had thought the deal was closed by the delivery of the deer hide I thought it best to hand him another dollar rather than risk making him angry for the worst part of the river lay ahead of us. As soon as I gave him the other dollar he said "We go" and led us on. The river really looked forbidding beyond the island. The water was muddy and pieces of driftwood were floating by.

The Indian led us to the upper end of the island and entered the boiling water, quartering down stream with the current. I placed my

wagon in the lead as we started across the bad channel. We indeed found the worst part of the crossing ahead. Our spirits already low sank deeper as we hit high water that came up to the bottom of the wagon box. It got deeper and deeper as we advanced and soon was half way up on the side of the box threatening to splash over.

This was about all we could stand and still we were far from the other shore. The swift water was piling up against the horses and they were having difficulty in holding their feet. The pinto which was some ways ahead appeared to be swimming. The situation was frightening. Fortunately we were angling down stream with the current.

I recalled the guide's boastful assurance that the water was "Heap Shallow." What would he call deep? I suppose the river had risen more than he realized.

A comical sight diverted our troubled thoughts momentarily at this time. Glancing down the stream my wife noticed our kerosene can floating down the middle of the stream. We always hung the kerosene can on a wire hook on the back of the wagon to avoid getting kerosene on the groceries and it had floated off the hook. My wife was the first one to see the joke and pointed to the potato still on the spout in the best tradition of the day. When we last saw the can it was riding high on the waves and we wondered how much oil we had in our lanterns.

We struck a deeper place just before reaching the far bank. My trusty team plunged for a moment to keep from being pulled down. When they finally found solid footing they stopped to get their wind. The current threatened to turn the wagon over so I shouted to my wife to jump out on Buster's back and leap from his neck to the shore. This she did without hesitation although she knew he had never been ridden and was pretty snorty. She landed in the edge of the water making a big splash and clambered ashore.

Our guide already across waved his hat and let out a war-whoop, and shouted "White squaw heap good jumper." My team managed to pull the wagon to dry land and I heaved a sigh of relief. The other teams made it also and everyone was happy. While we were congratulating ourselves my wife suggested we have our pictures taken with our glamorous guide. When he saw the camera he began to preen himself and lean back; all set for his picture. He had an eye for business for the shutter had barely clicked when he said "Twenty-five cents."

After extracting this last tribute from us he displayed great interest in our welfare by urging us to camp there on the river over night.

Motioning to a nearby campsite he says "Sleep," laying his head over against his hand, closing his eyes. I thought it was too early to stop for the night so I shook my head. Again he urged us to "Sleep here" and waving his arm westward added "Up and way over sleep--sleep here." I then said "Big hurry--we go on--sleep."

I asked him to sign a subvoucher (receipt) for the two dollars I had paid him. He said "No write." I asked him his name and he said Big Corral. I was not sure I understood correctly that his name was Big Corral, so I asked him to make his mark on the subvoucher. He then took the pencil and made a circle saying "My name."

With that deal closed we drove westward over the hills. It was only about three o'clock in the afternoon and we were anxious to leave the river and all of the distressing thoughts behind. The road passed through uninhabited rolling prairie where all we had to do was find a good place to camp when night came.

In this latitude the days begin to get short by the middle of October so we soon began to look for signs of wood and water for a campsite. However nothing but more prairie was visible. Sundown came and darkness approached and we were reminded again of the old Indian's warning of "Up and way over sleep." We realized he knew the country all right.

The wind was blowing and it was going to be a chilly night. It was way after dark when Suhr and Willis spotted a clump of bushes off to the south of the road. Scouting around we found a spring and the remains of an old corral fence with pieces of poles lying around for firewood.

A moon low in the sky made enough light to set up a hasty camp. My wife was quick with the cookstove and soon hot coffee and fried venison was bringing an eventful day to a close.



GLAMOROUS GUIDE — Big Corral, a Crow Indian, who took the Bandy surveying party across the Big Horn River in 1912, was decked out in a combination whiteman clothes and Indian costume. He had eagle feathers tied to his long braids, bright red moccasins and bright red saddle blanket. W. R. Bandy is to the left with his wife, Inez, right.