Episode 705, Story 2: Crazy Horse

Elyse: Our next story goes in search of a Native American legend. More than a hundred and twenty five years after his death, the name Crazy Horse still echoes in the Black Hills of South Dakota. In life the Lakota warrior and spiritual man vowed to protect these sacred hunting grounds from encroaching settlers and gold miners. In 1876 he helped crush the US Cavalry troops of General George Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. But is this a true likeness of the warrior? Despite this fame, Crazy Horse refused to be photographed, shunning whites and their technologies. For years rumors of Crazy Horse photographs have tantalized collectors. More than a hundred and twenty five years after the warrior's death, Tim Giago of Rapid City, South Dakota has a framed image, which may be the only photographic image of this legend.

Tim: It said Tashunkawitko and Tashunkawitko is the Lakota name that means Crazy Horse.

Elyse: I'm meeting Tim at his home to find out more. Hi!

Tim: Hi, welcome to my house.

Elyse: Thank you!

Tim: Well about 27 years ago a construction manager came into my newspaper, the *Lakota Times*, and he had this with him. One of his employees, a Lakota man, had put it in hock and said he could have it if he went down and took it out of pawn. So he brought it down to my newspaper. Along with that was this letter, which is dated 1904, and it's all written entirely in the very old Lakota language. It says Tashunkawitko which means Crazy Horse.

Elyse: What do you know specifically about Crazy Horse?

Tim: Crazy Horse was really one of the great warriors of the Lakota. People said that bullets couldn't hit him. One of the reasons he's so admired and loved by the Lakota people today is he would never sign a treaty and he never sold out any land or any of his people. And, I mean, to me that's highly admirable.

Elyse: But what Crazy Horse looks like has long been a mystery. Do you know of any other photographs of Crazy Horse?

Tim: I've never seen one. I've seen photographs that were disproved that that's not Crazy Horse. It always proved to be someone else. I would like you to find out very much whether this is indeed a true picture of Crazy Horse.

Elyse: It's just as Tim suggested. There are a number of disputed images claiming to be Crazy Horse. Most of them have pretty shaky stories. And none resemble our guy. There's nothing obvious to suggest our man is even a warrior chief. No war bonnet or elaborate decoration. He does have a collar on and an eagle feather. But besides that, he's dressed pretty plainly. I'm trying to take the back off carefully. It looks like there's more Lakota writing along with a date, 1875. Ah, now this is helpful. Here again, Crazy Horse and 1875 in handwriting. But there's also a stamped name and address. "Alex Gardner, 1921 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington D.C." Let me do some digging. There was an "Alexander" Gardner who was a celebrated photographer in the 19th century. He photographed Abraham Lincoln. I'm not certain they were they same person, but Alexander Gardner was a Scottish socialist, who'd gotten interested in photography after seeing Matthew Brady's work. Brady and Gardner became the two best known photographers of the Civil War. But it seems that a number of Gardner's battlefield images from the war were controversial. He actually moved some bodies on the civil war battlefields to better suit his photographic needs. And this is interesting. Gardner traveled to the Lakota territories in 1868 to photograph negotiations between northern plains tribes and the government. The Fort Laramie Treaty established the great Sioux Reservation and protected the Black Hills for the Lakota. It's possible that this is an Alexander Gardner photograph, and that Gardner met Crazy Horse, but the date on our photo – if it's accurate – is seven years after Gardner photographed the Lakota Treaties. I think the first thing that I need to do is figure out exactly what this note says. I'm headed to the Oglala Lakota College in Rapid City. Lakota Language and Culture professor, Wilmer Mesteth, is skeptical of our image. He explains why Crazy Horse rejected photography.

Wilmer: In oral history they said he made a statement that these photographs were evil. And that anybody that took their photograph their soul was captured in the picture.

Elyse: Crazy Horse's rejection of this white man's technology was part of his defense of the besieged Lakota way of life. The 1868 treaty of Fort Laramie had guaranteed the Lakota their tribal lands, but just six years later the treaty would be violated.

Wilmer: In 1874, there was a expedition that came down into the Black Hills in search of gold led by General Custer and they did find gold in the Black Hills.

Elyse: Two years later, in June 1876 Crazy Horse helped defeat General Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. It was the worst US military defeat of the Indian wars. Although many Sioux contemporaries were photographed, the Lakota have relied on oral history for a description of Crazy Horse.

Wilmer: They said he was of medium height. His hair was light in color and his complexion was light. And he had a mysterious aura about him. They said you could almost feel his presence and his strength as a powerful man.

Elyse: This is the letter that came with the photograph. What do you think?

Wilmer: This letter is written in old Lakota orthography -- Lakota language.

Elyse: Wilmer tells me that old Lakota was used for a hundred years, until about 1960.

Wilmer: (speaks Lakota) "This photograph is a photograph of Crazy Horse."

Elyse: What else does it say?

Wilmer: (speaks in Lakota) "The way you would recognize that this is he is there is a scar on his left cheek."

Elyse: Is it true that Crazy Horse had a scar?

Wilmer: Yes, Crazy Horse was shot by a man called No Water in a jealous rage. He shot to kill Crazy Horse, but, uh, grazed him on the left side of the cheek.

Elyse: The man in the photo is favoring his right. If there's a scar on the left – I can't tell. Then it says. "We were with Crazy Horse way back then. This is me, Dewey Beard." Wilmer thinks that Dewey Beard may have dictated the story to someone – possibly to this "B. B. E." Signed at the bottom. And who is Dewey Beard?

Wilmer: Dewey Beard was there at the Little Big Horn at the age of 10 years old.

Elyse: And possibly knew Crazy Horse?

Wilmer: I'm pretty sure this person knew Crazy Horse, yes.

Elyse: In your opinion, do you think there's any possibility that this could be Crazy Horse?

Wilmer: I don't think so. This person in this photograph is of darker complexion. Crazy Horse himself was of light complexion.

Elyse: I'm not sure what to make of this. Wilmer thinks the note is legitimate. Still, history's verdict stands in our way.

Wilmer: Nobody's ever produced a photograph of Crazy Horse, ever.

Elyse: Wilmer suggested I visit the Crazy Horse memorial in the Black Hills. Sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski began the massive carving in the 1940s… and today it remains the world's largest mountain sculpture in progress. The monument is a testament to the importance of his memory. But where is the physical model for the massive face? Doug War Eagle is Crazy Horse's grandson.

Elyse: How was the monument built? I mean how do we know what he looks like?

Doug: It's just a closest replica of him. There never was a photo ever taken of our grandfather.

Elyse: He says the monument represents Crazy Horse's spirit, rather than his exact image. When I show Doug our photo, right away he's skeptical.

Doug: This man has an eagle feather in his hair. Our grandfather never wore an eagle feather in his hair. Our grandpa wears the red-tail hawk feather with a buffalo bone.

Elyse: Doug's brought something to show me that few outside his family have seen.

Doug: I brought two sketches of our grandfathers. The first one is Waglula, old man Crazy Horse.

Elyse: He says the warrior Crazy Horse was actually the third man to carry that name. In accordance with Lakota tradition, Crazy Horse inherited the name from this man, his father, when he became a warrior.

Doug: And the other sketch I have here is of the warrior.

Elyse: It was sketched long after his death in 1934, when Crazy Horse's younger sister described his appearance to a forensic artist. The likeness triggered an emotional reaction.

Doug: She cried. Cause she said that's the closest likeness that you will ever have of him.

Elyse: It's beautiful. Well he's certainly doesn't look like our photograph. It has the two feathers, the long-flowing hair, and a little bit of a scar.

Doug: That's the closest we'll ever get of our grandfather, the warrior. The one that fought the Battle of Little Big Horn.

Elyse: Doug is convinced our image isn't Crazy Horse. But this sketch was made by someone who never met Crazy Horse, six decades after he died. I'm taking the image to the Smithsonian, which houses the world's largest archive of Native American photographs. I want to show it to one of the Smithsonian's curators. But first, because there have been many bogus Crazy Horse pictures, while I'm here I also want to show it to staff photographer Don Hurlbert.

Don: Welcome to the dark room.

Elyse: Here's my piece and on the back it says 1875. I was wondering if you thought it was period.

Don: It definitely has characteristics from that time frame. Uh, it's yellowing. It's got a good gold tone to it. It has the shininess on the surface of the print that a modern print would not have. But prints of that age do.

Elyse: How would a print like this have been made in the 1870's?

Don: It was definitely a multi-day, multi-step process to make one of these prints. These guys did a lot of work to get these photographs. These prints came from glass plate negatives that were produced from the 1850s to 1880s. I can show you.

Elyse: The invention of glass plates meant that for the first time, photographers like Gardner had a photographic medium from which to make unlimited numbers of prints. Glass plates revolutionized photography.

Don: Now that I've cleaned and check it, we're going to bring it over here. Sit it down. Get a sheet of modern paper out, because we do not have any of the albumen paper with us anymore.

Elyse: Don says Gardner, or whoever took the photograph, would have made albumen silver prints, which exposed in sunlight. Today, using modern photo paper, developing a print in the dark room takes mere minutes. That's great. I learn more about the print from former archivist and Smithsonian volunteer Paula Fleming. She says the image was almost certainly taken by Gardner – not out west – but on the east coast, at the address on the back of our photograph.

Paula: He had a studio in Washington D.C. And he took most of his Indian portraits there.

Elyse: Well what would bring them to Washington D.C.?

Paula: After the Civil War the United States government renewed its efforts to deal with the Indians to resolve issues of land acquisition and annuities.

Elyse: Paula says hundreds of American Indians were invited to Washington as tribal delegations.

Paula: The government wanted to show the Indians the benefits of civilization. So they took them on trains and they took them to big cities to show them what it was like to be civilized.

Elyse: On the surface, the Washington visits were efforts to peacefully resolve land disputes, and demonstrate that the Indians were being treated respectfully. But Paula says the visits often included a stop which had a political agenda.

Paula: They would also take them to the arsenal and they'd show them stockpiles of weapons and cannonballs and they would have displays of military might. The government wanted to show them that it was actually futile to fight for their lands.

Elyse: They were gonna lose.

Paula: They were gonna lose.

Elyse: Crazy Horse's grandson had told me that the clothing and decoration in our image was not typical for the warrior. But Paula says not all the photographs taken in Washington were what they appeared to be.

Paula: Some photographers actually kept props to make sure the Indians looked exotic enough and sometimes they put the improper costumes on the wrong cultures.

Elyse: Paula has a surprise for me.

Paula: With thousands of photographs in the archives it can be a little daunting if you don't have a name. But, I did a little bit of research and, come here, I've got something to show you.

Elyse: Wow! It's a glass plate negative just like the one don showed me. It's the exact same image.

Paula: sure is. This negative was used to print that image.

Elyse: Is it Crazy Horse? Well Tim it was an incredible investigation. I tell him he has an authentic Alexander Gardner photo – one of the nation's most celebrated period photographers. There are a lot of experts that don't believe that Crazy Horse was ever photographed. And that made it really difficult. Finally though I was able to identify the man in your photograph by traveling to Washington D.C. - just like he did 150 years ago.

Paula: There was an Englishman by the name of William Henry Blackmore. And he commissioned Gardner to photograph delegations of Indians. He also published the images.

Elyse: That's our guy.

Paula: The man in the photograph is Wachape, whose English name is "Stabber" and he was an Oglala Lakota who came to Washington D.C. with Red Cloud on a delegation.

Elyse: The man in his photograph had witnessed one of the last peaceful negotiations between the Lakota and the Federal Government, before gold was discovered in the Black Hills. He was an important part of Lakota history and I think it's great that we know who he is now. Wachape had traveled to Washington with Red Cloud and the Lakota delegation. In contrast, Crazy Horse rejected diplomacy and defended Lakota traditions as a warrior to the end. Experts say that he never went to Washington. He stayed on his land to fight for his people and to fight the US Military.

Tim: I'm a great admirer of Crazy Horse and I really hoped that this was him. Well, I guess we'll never know what Crazy Horse looked like. I hope that I can take the photograph and find his descendants and pass the photograph down to them. We thank you for coming all the way out here to give us the news.

Elyse: After his victory at the Little Big Horn, Crazy Horse fought on until the spring of 1877. Then, his people weakened by war and hunger, he surrendered at Camp Robinson, Nebraska. Finally, on September 5, 1877, he was arrested and brought into the guardhouse. Realizing he was about to be locked up, Crazy Horse struggled and was stabbed by a soldier with a bayonet. He died late that night and soon after his body was returned to his elderly parents. To this day his final burial place is unknown, but his spirit lives on in the Black Hills.