

A Report from the Spotted Tail Indian Agency on the Month of April, 1877**Era: The Development of the Industrial United States (1870-1900)****Document Citation:** J.M. Lee, Acting Indian Agent, to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Washington D.C., May 1, 1877, Letterpress Volume, October 21, 1876 – October 10, 1877, Outgoing Correspondence, Spotted Tail Agency, Record Group 75 (RG 75); National Archives-Central Plains Region, Kansas City, MO.**Background:**

Lt. Jesse M. Lee, a U.S. Army officer in the 9th Infantry, wrote this report to the Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs describing events at the Spotted Tail Agency during April, 1877. Lee was serving as acting Indian Agent (normally a civilian post) at the Spotted Tail Agency in northwestern Nebraska. Many of the Indians living at the Agency at that time were members of Chief Spotted Tail's band of Brulé Sioux. The Brulé tribe was part of the Lakota Sioux, the westernmost division of the people known collectively as the Sioux.

In 1877, Spotted Tail was about 54 years old, and the preeminent leader of the Brulé Sioux. Over the course of his life, he had closely observed white culture, and had come to believe that peace with the United States was essential to tribal survival. Peace had come to mean adapting the semi-nomadic culture of the Sioux to life on a reservation overseen by a white Indian Agent working for the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Indian Affairs officials hoped and believed that reservation Indians could be made to adopt the habits of "civilization": the English language, Christianity, farming, Western clothing, the nuclear family, a money-based economy, and more. Many treaties with Indian tribes specified that Indians would receive supplies and financial assistance in return for agreeing to live on reservations.

The 1860s and 1870s were marked by the encroachment of white surveyors, prospectors, and settlers onto Sioux territory, and resulting conflicts between the Sioux and the U.S. military. In June, 1876, a coalition of Sioux and Cheyenne defeated Lt. Col. George A. Custer's 7th Cavalry in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Despite this famous victory, the winter of 1876-77 saw the practical end of armed Sioux resistance. The traditional Sioux lifestyle relied on hunting buffalo herds that were quickly disappearing from the plains. Hunger and the hope of security ultimately impelled the Sioux to return to their agencies. In the immediate aftermath of the battle, military officers such as 1st Lt. Jesse M. Lee were placed in temporary control of Indian agencies, and the weapons and horses of Indians at the agencies were confiscated, as Lee describes in his report. The great Sioux leader Crazy Horse and his band of Oglala Sioux surrendered at Camp Robinson (by the Red Cloud Agency) in May, 1877. He was killed by a soldier in a fracas the following September.

The digital images were taken from a letterpress volume. The letterpress was an early form of duplicating machine.

Glossary.

Brulé: [Broo-LAY] A tribe within the Lakota division of the Sioux people.

Crazy Horse: 1849-1877. A leader of the Oglala Sioux.

Lee, Jesse M.: A career military man, Lee was assigned to the 9th Infantry in 1871. He reached the rank of major general before his retirement in 1907. A photograph of Lee can be viewed online at <http://gallery.unl.edu/picinfo/1124.html> .

Minneconjou: A tribe within the Lakota division of the Sioux people.

Oglala: A tribe within the Lakota division of the Sioux people.

Red Cloud Agency: Established in 1871 near Fort Laramie, it became the Pine Ridge Agency in present-day South Dakota in 1878.

Sioux: [Soo] A semi-nomadic American Indian people who lived in the upper Midwest in the nineteenth century. The Sioux had three major geographic divisions, the Lakota, Yankton-Yanktonai, and the Santee. Each division was composed of tribes such as the Brulé, which belonged to the Lakota division of the Sioux people. Each Lakota Sioux tribe, in turn, was composed of “lodge groups” or bands. A band typically included 50-100 related people, though the size of individual bands varied greatly. In 1880, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs reported that 39,342 Sioux were living on the Great Sioux Reservation; more than 26,000 of which were Lakota Sioux.

Spotted Tail: 1823-1881. A leader of the Brulé Sioux.

Spotted Tail Agency: The first agency to be constructed within the Great Sioux Reservation established by the treaty of 1868, it was named the Whetstone Agency after its initial location on Whetstone Creek north of Fort Randall in Dakota Territory. In 1874, it was renamed the Spotted Tail Agency, and moved to northwest Nebraska. Camp Sheridan was established near it. In October of 1877, the Brulé Indians of the Spotted Tail Agency were moved to Dakota Territory, and in 1878, it was renamed the Rosebud Agency.

Wahzahzah: A Sioux tribe; the name has been spelled in a variety of ways.

Suggested Teaching Activities.

1. Ask a student to read the opening sentence aloud to the class. *“The Beef now delivered by Messers. Powers & Mabrey is in good condition for the season of the year & mostly of cattle that have wintered in this section of the country, some of them even are half breed American cattle.”* Discuss its meaning and implications with the class: Why would the season affect the meat? Why would it matter where the cattle wintered? How did the type of cow affect the meat? Why might Lee comment on the good condition of this shipment?

2. Have students read the transcription and note the major challenges Agent Lee confronts. Discuss these as a class and attempt to place them in their historical context.
3. Agent Lee makes numerous references to Crazy Horse and Indians “coming in” from the north. Have students write an essay or make a timeline that explains the historical context of these references.
4. Ask students to summarize the living conditions and attitudes of the Indians on the Spotted Tail Agency based on the report.
5. Compare and contrast the situation of the Indians at the Spotted Tail Agency with a modern-day refugee population in the news. Examine issues like political status of the refugees, camp administration and governance, availability and distribution of food and shelter, education of children, etc.
6. Analyze Agent Lee’s attitude towards the Indians. Was he sympathetic towards them? Did he condescend to them?
7. Discuss and analyze Agent Lee’s statements about the schooling of Indian children. Why did Agent Lee believe a boarding school would be preferable to a day school? Why did Spotted Tail and other Indians want Indian children schooled in their native language? What was the U.S. Government’s purpose in requiring the education of Indian children in a treaty? The education (sometimes forced) of Indian children in boarding schools run by whites is frequently condemned today. Acquaint students with the subject using a school text or some of the resources listed on the Library of Congress Learning Page Teaching Unit on the subject.
8. After completing the activity above, encourage students to draw parallels between the views of Agent Lee and Spotted Tail and modern perspectives on topics like bilingual education, the importance of a common language in developing a national identity, and the benefits of multiculturalism. Ask students to consider whether the study of American Indian history has relevance in addressing modern problems.
9. Search the Archival Research Catalog (ARC) www.archives.gov/research/arc/ and the Library of Congress American Memory collections memory.loc.gov/ammem/ for digitized materials about Chief Spotted Tail. Display some of the images found. As a class, ask students to examine the images using the photo analysis worksheet. How might these enhance one’s understanding of Chief Spotted Tail and the Brulé Sioux? For instance, Agent Lee mentions the reluctance of the Sioux to adopt white dress. What sorts of clothing appear in the photographs?