

Custer's Last Stand dramatized

ABC reenacts Battle of Little Bighorn

By Amy Schmidt

"War Party," "Dances With Wolves," "Son of the Morning Star." The time was right for the adaptation of Evan S. Connell's best-selling novel recounting the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

After all, it's been almost a year to date since "Lonesome Dove" made its debut, and audiences are hankering for more.

"Son of the Morning Star" should appease them. The four-hour epic miniseries chronicling the Plains Indians Wars and General George A. Custer premieres on ABC Sunday, Feb. 3, and concludes Feb. 4.

"Midnight Caller's" Gary Cole stars as Custer; Rosanna Arquette ("Desperately Seeking Susan") plays his wife, Libby; Rodney A. Grant ("Dances With Wolves") portrays Crazy Horse; and Dean Stockwell ("Quantum Leap") depicts General Phil Sheridan. The screenplay was written by Melissa Mathison, Academy Award-winner for "E.T.: The Extraterrestrial" and wife of actor Harrison Ford.

"Son of the Morning Star" (which was the name given Custer by his Indian scouts) traces the general's volatile military career in the West and his crucial role in the U.S. government's brutal war of attrition against the Indians. The Sioux Indians had already been displaced by settlers moving West and had made a treaty with the government, giving them the rights to the Black Hills in South Dakota. But after gold was discovered in the Black Hills, President Ulysses S. Grant ignored the treaty, and the rush was on to get the gold and move the Indians out.

Custer, having been court-martialed, saw it as an opportunity to promote himself. An arrogant man, he insisted on his own personal regimental flag and travelling with a pack of hounds wherever he went.

On June 25, 1876, under a sweltering sky on a grassy ridge in Mon-

tana, Custer and 265 officers of the Seventh Cavalry perished swiftly at the hands of one of the largest-ever Indian gatherings, led by chiefs Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. Custer's Indian scouts had estimated their numbers, but he had refused to believe them.

Filming "Son of the Morning Star" on location in Montana required extensive planning. A number of the people who worked on Kevin Costner's "Dances With Wolves" worked on this film as well, including Doris Leader Charge, who served as the Sioux language and cultural adviser. Leader Charge and teacher Albert White Hat translated the script of "Son of the Morning Star" into Lakota, the language of the Sioux. Costner also cast Leader Charge in his film as "Pretty Shield," a Sioux matriarch.

Cathy Smith, a 19th century Plains Indian expert and renowned Indian beading and quill artist, also worked on both films. Smith was

dedicated to making "Son of the Morning Star" right. She even went so far as to locate the original manufacturers of Italian glass "trade beads" used for barter with the Indians.

Today, a small museum marked by a high-flying American flag overlooks the white crosses on the hill where Custer's men perished. At the reservation across the freeway, known as Crow Agency, Mont., it is small consolation. The economy is bad, but the movie industry is a boon. Residents can only hope more films like "War Party" and "Son of the Morning Star" soon will be "movin' to Montana."

Gary Cole stars as the flamboyant and controversial General George A. Custer in "Son of the Morning Star." The ABC epic miniseries, debuting Sunday and concluding Monday, chronicles Custer's defeat by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

WEDNESDAY



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