



Robert M. Utley All photographs courtesy of Robert M. Utley and Melody Webb unless otherwise noted.

The Old Bison: Robert M. Utley

By Paul Andrew Hutton

With his new book, *The Last Sovereigns: Sitting Bull & the Resistance of the Last Free Lakotas*, Robert M. Utley revisits the topic that first made his now legendary reputation as a historian of the American West.

This book, from the University of Nebraska Press, returns Utley to the subject that marked his most important early book – *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, published by Yale University Press in 1963. With 25 acclaimed books over the past 58 years Utley has earned a lofty reputation with his superb research, insightful interpretations and fine prose that has allowed him to effortlessly bridge the gap between academic and popular history.

The Last Sovereigns adds luster to that reputation with a masterful tale of cross-border intrigue and heroic resistance as Sitting Bull attempts to establish a new life for his people north of the “medicine line” separating the United States from Canada.

The Indian Wars and the Lakota people are familiar territory for Utley. His first publication, in 1949 when he was but

19 years old, was a pamphlet on Custer’s Last Stand (now highly prized by collectors on the rare book market). Since that little gem appeared, he has filled a small library with books on a wide range of frontier topics from the Indian Wars to Western outlaws to the Texas Rangers and mountain men, as well as countless magazine and journal articles, introductions and forewords. At the same time, he served in several key positions with the National Park Service and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation from 1947 to 1980 (with four years off for military service). He was also a founder of the Western History Association and, in 1967-1968, served as its youngest president.

In the 1990s he began to appear regularly on Western documentary programs on cable’s History and Discovery channels and other outlets so that he soon became a familiar, and trusted, “talking head” on the rapidly expanding cable television scene. As *The Last Sovereigns* appears, it is little wonder that Utley enjoys universal acclaim as the “Dean of Western History.”

Born in the company town of Bauxite, Arkansas, on Halloween night 1929, Utley was mostly raised in Indiana after his father, a chemist for ALCOA, was transferred to Lafayette, Indiana, in 1938. It was in Lafayette’s movie palace that the boy saw Warner Brothers’ 1941 big-budget epic *They Died With Their Boots On*. Errol Flynn and Olivia De Havilland as George and Libbie Custer transfixed the youngster – as they did so many others – and sent him to the Lafayette Public Library in search of books on General Custer and his last battle.

A lifetime passion was born. This later led him to seek summer employment at the Custer Battlefield National Monument, where he fell under the stern tutelage of the crusty Captain Edward S. Luce and the tender care of the superintendent’s wife Evelyn. He worked six summers at the battlefield while attending Purdue University to obtain his bachelor’s degree in 1951, and Indiana University, where he received his master’s in history in 1952. During this time he met Charles Windolph, the last 7th Cavalry survivor of the Little Big Horn, giving him a tangible connection to the battle that had so captured his imagination. He then went into the Army as an enlisted man in September 1952, but emerged four years later a lieutenant assigned as a historian to the Joint Chiefs of Staff office in the Pentagon.

Utley’s plan was to return to Indiana University to complete his doctorate with the noted Western historian Oscar Osburn Winther (who this writer also studied with at IU in 1970) and to write a dissertation on the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee. Life, however, intervened. On May 5, 1956, he married Lucille Dorsey, and a little over a year later their son Donald was born. Two years later a second son, Philip, arrived. These family responsibilities led him to accept a position as regional historian with the National Park Service’s Santa Fe, New Mexico, office and in September 1957 he moved his family to Santa Fe. His new position did not keep Utley from pursuing his scholarly projects, even though he had given up on any thoughts of becoming a college professor.

In 1962, Westernlore Press published his revised master's thesis titled *Custer and the Great Controversy: Origin and Development of a Legend*, and the following year Yale University Press published the fruits of his labors on the aborted Indiana dissertation as *Last Days of the Sioux Nation*. The latter was soon recognized as a modern classic of Western history. The book won the enthusiastic praise of Ray Allen Billington, the field's leading scholar, and the begrudging respect of the rest of the academic community. Nevertheless, despite all his accomplishments, Utley never got over feeling like the "red-headed stepchild" in the Western history academic family.

His high-profile position in Santa Fe, along with his publications, put Utley in the perfect position to unite Western history buffs, represented by the numerous Westerners Corrals across the country, and his academic friends such as Billington, John Porter Bloom, Robert Athearn and John Alexander Carroll in the 1962 founding of the Western History Association. Utley became its sixth president in 1967 at age 38. It was during his eventful term that the scholarly *Western Historical Quarterly* was established at Utah State University as the official WHA journal (joining a pictorial magazine, *The American West*, which did not long survive). The marriage of the buffs and the academics was always an uneasy one. It nevertheless held together for 45 years until a new generation of academics of narrower mindset began to purge the buffs from the WHA.

By the time he helped to found the WHA, Utley had returned to Washington as the chief historian of the National Park Service. He served in that capacity from 1964 until 1972, when he moved on to become assistant director for park historic preservation until 1977, when he became deputy executive director of the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. In all these positions, Utley played a key role in establishing the rules, guidelines and standards by which the government engaged with historic preservation. To say that this was often contentious and stressful work is a gross understatement. Finally, in 1980, weary of the endless bureaucratic battles, Utley retired from government service.

This important government work led Bob Boze Bell's *True West* magazine to do a 2007 cover story on Utley titled "The Man Who Saved the West." He left behind a rich legacy, not only in the many historic sites he saved, but also in the basic rules by which the government addresses issues of historic preservation. He also sponsored a group of NPS acolytes – Jerome Greene, Paul Hedren, Dave Clary, Doug McChristian and Neil Mangum, to name but a few – who carried on his work in the NPS and as published scholars. He even allowed at least two academics – this writer and Charles E. Rankin – into that select company of protégés.

During his Washington years, Utley was a prominent member of the Potomac Corral of the Westerners, and among his many friends from that group was Louis Morton of Dartmouth College, who had once served as chief civilian historian for the Army. Morton recruited Utley to



Receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of New Mexico, 1976.



With historian-editor-educator A. Russell Mortensen.



With Melody Webb, Paul Andrew Hutton and Tracy Hutton.

write the history of the frontier Army for Macmillan's prestigious "Wars of the United States" series. What was intended as one volume in the series soon became two: *Frontiersmen in Blue* in 1967 and *Frontier Regulars* in 1974. Both volumes became authoritative classics. They remain in print to this day and are the first two books to be consulted by any student of the American Indian Wars. Utley followed these volumes with *The American Heritage History of the Indian Wars* (with Wilcomb Washburn) in 1977 and then a volume in Ray Billington's prestigious frontier series – *The Indian Frontier of the American West* – in 1984.

This relentless writing schedule, combined with his government work and busy travel schedule, took an inevitable toll on Utley's domestic life. He separated from Lucille in 1975 and they were divorced in 1977. During this time Utley fell under the spell of Melody Webb, 16 years his junior and a devotee of Western history. This off-and-on-again romance continued until their Santa Fe marriage in 1980. It proved a remarkably perfect match, not only in terms of enduring love and mutual support, but also from intensely shared interests in history, the environment and preservation.



Santa Fe Scene

Now retired from government service and snug with Melody (who in 1979 had been appointed NPS historian for the Southwest Region) in a new home southeast of Santa Fe, Utley could finally turn his full attention to writing. He quickly completed the Indian frontier book for Billington's series and briefly contemplated turning to fiction with a novel on the Indian doctor Charles Eastman. Billington, along with Chester Kerr, the distinguished director of Yale University Press, reviewed some early novel chapters and suggested that Utley stick to what he had already mastered – nonfiction.

But what to do? A 1983 television broadcast of the movie *Chisum* solved the problem. John Wayne played the New Mexico cattle baron who, alongside Billy the Kid, fought for justice in the Lincoln County War in the 1970 film written and produced by Andrew J. Fenady, WWA's 2006 Owen Wister Award recipient for lifetime contributions to Western literature. The movie inspired Utley and Melody to motor down to Lincoln, New Mexico, to visit the sites and explore the true history of the famed conflict. The town of Lincoln, almost perfectly preserved from the days of Billy the Kid, instantly captivated Utley. Here was his next story.

Bob and Corky

By Paul Andrew Hutton

In 1984, Bob Utley encouraged me to leave Utah State University and accept a teaching position at the University of New Mexico, and not long afterward I moved to Eldorado, just outside Santa Fe, and we became neighbors. It was during this time that Bob came to truly despise my beloved cocker spaniel Corky.

This was not an exclusive club for Corky was not appreciated by any of my friends. Even though he had been a Christmas present to my ex-wife, she insisted that I take custody of the pup, for Corky was truly one of the most irritating and brain-dead mutts ever to trot across this planet. He and I made the long and adventurous trip from Logan, Utah, to Albuquerque together (the U-Haul broke down just outside Shiprock on the Navajo Nation).

I sure loved that pooch. Once I moved to Eldorado, Bob and Melody were kind enough to take Corky in whenever I had to travel out of town. Late one snowy winter night Melody let Corky out to do his business, but the recalcitrant pup refused to come back in. Dressed

only in her nightie she ventured out to retrieve him and the door slammed shut and locked her out.

Melody, accompanied by Corky, whom, she later fumed, seemed bizarrely pleased by their plight (he was a people dog for sure), trudged through the snow to bang on the bedroom window to awaken her sleeping husband. Otosclerosis, diagnosed in 1958, had left Bob with increasingly severe hearing loss and he thus wore twin hearing aids, which he naturally removed at night. It was quite some time before he noticed Melody was not next to him in bed and rescued her and Corky from the cold.

After that he swore to never again sit my dog.

When a serious family emergency called me back to Indiana, Bob reluctantly agreed to babysit Corky. Upon my return he haughtily declared that my dog had soiled his expensive rug – not quite an accurate translation of his words. I protested that this was not possible for, despite his many obvious faults, Corky had superb bladder control. As we walked across the room toward the door there was a shrill yelp



Corky, the cocker spaniel. Paul Andrew Hutton

and I saw Corky careening across the floor.

"Oh my God, Bob," I declared in shocked disbelief, "Why did you kick my dog?"

As he muttered a string of rather imaginative curses, Bob pointed to his soaked right pants leg, where Corky had made a clear statement on his feelings for The Great Man. Taking my beloved pup by the scruff of the neck I hurriedly departed.

Every year after the infamous leg incident Corky dutifully sent Bob a birthday card. He annually received in return a colorful note suggesting a visit to a nearby testing laboratory that needed animals.

Three New Mexico books followed: *Four Fighters of Lincoln County* in 1986; *High Noon in Lincoln* in 1987; and *Billy the Kid* in 1989. All three became essential volumes in the historiography of the Lincoln County War. The Billy biography became both a critical and commercial success. Utley added to his Lincoln County booklist in 2015 with *Wanted: The Outlaw Lives of Billy the Kid and Ned Kelley* published by Yale University Press. It was the success of *Billy the Kid*, along with an award-winning biography of George Custer, *Cavalier in Buckskin* in 1988 that opened doors to the New York commercial publishing world that had long eluded Utley.

In 1989, Utley was contacted by the distinguished New York literary agent Carl Brandt. They hit it off immediately. Brandt, who had an affinity for the West and also represented Wallace Stegner and David Lavender, approved of Utley's interest in writing a biography of Sitting Bull. Brandt took Utley's short book proposal to John Macrae at Henry Holt and Company and secured a handsome advance for *Sitting Bull*. Every author's dream to break into the rarified world of New York publishing had finally come true for Utley.

The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull was published in the spring of 1993 to rave reviews in the national press (including the *New York Times*, which often ignored "regional" titles) and quickly sold an astonishing



Melody Webb, Utley and literary agent Carl Brandt.

50,000 copies in Holt and book club editions. The book also received plaudits in the academic journals and won the Caughey Prize from the WHA and the nonfiction Spur Award from WWA. WWA also presented Utley with the Owen Wister Award in 1994.

In the summer of 1992, Melody Webb was appointed assistant superintendent at Grand Teton National Park, one of the crown jewels of the NPS, and Bob and Melody relocated to northwestern Wyoming. In the shadow of the Tetons, Utley began his next book for Holt, a history of the mountain

On the not-always-rewarding Custer Trail

By Paul Andrew Hutton

In our years as neighbors, Bob Utley and I often traveled together to history meetings. None was more memorable than our overland expedition from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Fort Riley, Kansas, in 1989 to attend the annual Little Big Horn Associates conference.

I had been a member of this Custer group since 1972 and often went to the meetings, and although Bob did not usually attend he was something of a living God to the outfit. John Carroll, Grand Poobah of the LBHA, had especially urged Bob to attend, for Carroll was certain that *Cavalier in Buckskin* would win the best Custer book prize that year. As we made the long drive, Bob gently lectured me on the importance of going to accept awards – no matter how obscure they might be. It was wonderful to bask in the glow of his *noblesse oblige* and to feel warmed by his willingness to travel so many miles to reward the Custer buffs for their generosity by a personal appearance.

Carroll had arranged for Bob to give the banquet address to the several hundred attendees so he could be seated

at the head table when the best book award was announced. I sat in the back of the room with friends and was rather surprised at the tepid response to Bob's address. Many of the Custer buffs were uncomfortable with Bob's candid comments on Custer's marital infidelities for they did not wish to see their hero descend from his marble pedestal. I sensed trouble.

When the best book award was announced, Bob was almost out of his seat before he realized it had gone to a book on the day-by-day movement of the Seventh Cavalry from Reconstruction duty in Kentucky to North Dakota in 1873.

It was a pretty quiet drive back to Santa Fe, but somewhere near Wagon Mound, New Mexico, I suddenly became convulsed with laughter. Utley was not amused and inquired of what so tickled me – not his exact language. Well, I replied, I was delighted to have finally come to clearly understand the meaning of the ending of one of my favorite films, John Huston's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

At the end of the film, the surviv-



Robert M. Utley and Paul Andrew Hutton.
Courtesy of Paul Andrew Hutton

ing protagonists are convulsed with laughter, despite the loss of companions and treasure, as they suddenly realize the insanity of their own hubris. Our friends in the LBHA had just taught us that valuable lesson – one that our hero Custer only learned in the last hour of his life.

We laughed all the way back to Santa Fe.



Jerry Greene, Paul Hutton, Paul Hedren, Utley and Ed Bearss at the 1983 Western History Association conference.

man era and the Western fur trade. *A Life Wild and Perilous: Mountain Men and the Paths to the Pacific* was published in June 1997 but was not the commercial success Utley had hoped for. It may well have suffered from the commercial triumph that Stephen Ambrose was then enjoying with his Lewis and Clark book. *Undaunted Courage* simply sucked in all the book buyers interested in early far Western exploration. Nevertheless, Utley's book remains in print from the University of Nebraska Press (which has issued several paperback editions of Utley's books), now titled *After Lewis and Clark: Mountain Men and the Paths to the Pacific*. It remains a fast-paced read and an excellent introduction to the far Western fur trade.

Donna Lusitana of Greystone Productions was so impressed by the book that she persuaded the History Channel to air a two-hour production based on it. Utley had worked extensively with Lusitana and her producing partner Craig Haffner at Greystone during the early days of cable television. Their documentary series *The Real West* had proved such a hit on the Arts and Entertainment network that it was spun off as key programming on the new History Channel.

Utley had also done several episodes of *Biography* with Greystone, including a 1996 two-hour show on Custer directed by Arthur Drooker. Greg Goldman, who like Drooker had worked previously with Utley on *The Real West*, directed

Melody Webb and Utley at Fort Bowie National Historic Site in Arizona.



the mountain man show. Former CBS newsman Roger Mudd hosted *Mountain Men*, which aired in March 1999. Despite several repeat airings the show did not appreciably enhance book sales. There appears to be precious little crossover between cable television viewers and book buyers.

In 1995, a drastic downsizing of the NPS gave Melody an opportunity to apply for early retirement. She had long been eager to pursue her own writing career, stalled since her 1983 graduation with a doctorate in history from the University of New Mexico and the 1985 publication of her prize-winning dissertation as *The Last Frontier: A History of the Yukon Basin of Canada and Alaska*. But the most compelling reason for retirement was to spend more time with her husband. By this action she most certainly sacrificed a spectacular future with the NPS, where she had been fast-tracking to higher positions.

Bob and Melody soon departed Wyoming for the delightful Texas community of Georgetown, some 30 miles to the north of Austin on the edge of the Hill Country. This would prove the perfect setting for Utley's next project – on the Texas Rangers – not only because of the congenial, small-town atmosphere of Georgetown, but also because of the nearby libraries at Southwestern University and the University of Texas in Austin. At the 1997 Western History Association meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota, Peter Ginna, the bright and aggressive young editor at Oxford University Press, approached Utley about his next book. Utley confided to Ginna that he probably “could not afford him” but urged him to talk to his agent.

Carl Brandt, who had not been pleased with the advance offered by Holt for the Texas Rangers book, quickly found an eager buyer in Ginna, who offered a handsome advance of \$95,000. Oxford, like Utley, had one foot firmly planted in the world of trade publishing and the other in the world of academic publishing and was the Rock of Gibraltar in the unstable, rapidly changing world of New York publishing.

It was a perfect fit. Much like the military frontier book for Macmillan so many years before, the Texas Rangers quickly outgrew a single volume. Oxford expanded Utley's work into a magnificent two-volume set: *Lone Star Justice* in 2002 and *Lone Star Lawmen* in 2007. The widely praised books supplanted the classic but hagiographic history by Walter Prescott Webb to become the new standard on this ever-so-distinctive law enforcement agency.

In 2012, Utley returned to familiar territory with both topic and publisher with *Geronimo* for Yale University Press. Yale had published *Last Days of the Sioux Nation* in 1963 (and brought out a new edition in 2004), so in a way Utley had now come full circle. He enjoyed an especially warm relationship with Christopher Rogers, his editor at Yale, who worked diligently to produce a book that might appeal to a broad public audience and yet satisfy the academic community. *Geronimo* lived up to that challenge, garnering excellent reviews in the national press as well as scholarly journals. The book won Utley his fifth Western Heritage Wrangler Award from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage

Museum in Oklahoma City and his third Spur Award.

In 2015, WWA inducted Utley into the Western Writers Hall of Fame, located at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming.

Utley has suffered a series of health-related setbacks over the past few years, but they have hardly slowed him down (this writer once rushed to his hospital bedside in Austin fearing the worst only to find him propped up with pillows – all sorts of wires and tubes attached – with his laptop out, working on book revisions). He has long suffered from severe hearing loss, and he has been in a constant race between his diminishing ability to hear and improvements in hearing-enhancement technology over the years. In 1958, he was diagnosed with otosclerosis, a hardening of the inner ear bones, and despite surgery his hearing still markedly declined over time. In 2006, he received a cochlear implant which helped considerably. This serious condition hardly slowed him down, and he remains a sterling example of how an individual can over-



Utley's 90th birthday party in 2019.

come any impairment.

He and Melody live in a comfortable retirement community in Scottsdale, Arizona, where he continues to write daily. *The Last Sovereigns* is his fourth book since *Geronimo*.

Utley's e-mail handle is Old Bison,

and it is certainly an apt appellation. Battered by time but unbowed, Utley, who turns 91 on Halloween 2020, carries on with a singular determination to tell the story of the American West, still standing strong as the leader of the Western history herd.

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