



Indian Country
TODAY MEDIA NETWORK.com



The Custer Battlefield Museum in Garryowen, Montana, says the man in this picture is Crazy Horse. Native historians and photography experts aren't so sure. Image source: Wikimedia Commons

Is This Crazy Horse? Investigating Indian Country's Most Controversial Photo

Angela Aleiss
2/19/15

Once again, the debate over the alleged tintype photo of Crazy Horse has surfaced. [True West magazine](#) in its January 2015 issue features "100 Best Historical Photos of the American Indian," and photo number 97 includes the tantalizing caption, "Is This Crazy Horse?"

The privately owned Custer Battlefield Museum in Garryowen, Montana, says it is. The tintype has been the museum's prized possession for almost 15 years, and [its website boasts](#) of a "striking correlation between the eyewitness descriptions of Crazy Horse and the man in the portrait," supposedly taken in the late summer of 1877 at Fort Robinson, Nebraska (merely weeks or days before his death on September 5). The museum says it can trace the photo's provenance to its first owner Baptiste (Little Bat) Garnier, who claimed to persuade the Lakota leader to have his picture taken.

The museum's online store sells the Crazy Horse photo for \$1.



A version of this tintype has been promoted as a photo of Crazy Horse. Is it?

But this isn't the first time someone has claimed an ["authentic" photo of Crazy Horse](#). Numerous so-called images of the Lakota leader (and his [personal belongings](#)) have appeared over the years despite that Lakota historians and biographers believe that Crazy Horse never posed for a photograph.



Portrait of a group of Indian men from Denver Public Library. The information provided in the album is as follows: 'At the Wild West Earl's Court with a crouch hand camera during July, August and September 1892. Buffalo Bill's Show.' Presented to Nat Salisbury Esq for use of the staff with A.R. Dressers Compliments Springfield Bexley Heath. Kent, England Oct. 1892

But experts believe that the image could be an Indian performer from Buffalo Bill's Wild West, which operated from 1883 to approximately 1917.

"This 'Crazy Horse' photo definitely looks like an individual who is dressing up for a photo or a performance," says Jeremy Johnston of the [Buffalo Bill Center of the West](#) in Cody, Wyoming.

RELATED: [Is This Drawing a Self-Portrait of Crazy Horse?](#)

Johnston is the Curator of the museum's Western American History and Managing Editor of the *Papers of William F. Cody*. He says the "cross-cultural" attire of the man is consistent with the Indian performers who often posed in both Western and Native clothing for Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows.



Two Indian Men standing and Woman seated. Photo has handwritten date of 1905. Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming, U.S.A.; P.421.013

"To me, this 'Crazy Horse' photo looks like some of those that were sold as souvenirs and postcards in Germany," Johnston says by telephone. "The attire just doesn't fit the [1870s] era."

Donovin Sprague, Minnicoujou Lakota historian and author, agrees. "The person in the photo is dressed in a flamboyant manner unlike how Crazy Horse dressed," he says. Sprague teaches history at the Black Hills State University in South Dakota and is related to Crazy Horse through High Backbone (Hump), the brother to the biological mother of Crazy Horse.

"The Ascot Tie is not a style of Crazy Horse," Sprague says, adding that American businessmen wore Ascot Ties close to the 20th century.

The breastplate itself appears to date later than 1877. "During 1877 or earlier, there were smaller breastplates with double rows of between 14 and 25 hair pipes compared to the one in this photo which has 51 per row," Sprague explains by e-mail.

In fact, photos of Buffalo Bill's Indian performers reveal similar armbands and breastplates along with the westernized style of tunic and pants.



Portrait of Indian Man Standing. Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming, U.S.A.; P.421.050.

But what about the photo's Victorian-florid backdrop? Mark Osterman, Process Historian for the [George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film](#) in Rochester, New York, says fancy backdrops were common for studio portraiture in the U.S.

"This is a ferrotype [tintype] made with a [four-lens Bon Ton camera](#)," says Osterman. "The original plate was size 5" x 7" and the four individual images were cut from the plate and generally inserted into or pasted from behind to a paper mat. The black edge on the right and top shows that this image was on the top right of the set of four."

"It is a skylight studio portrait and not taken in a tent," Osterman adds, citing "the gradient of light coming from behind the background to the right" as a sign. The elaborate set seems to indicate that the studio was located in a large city like Chicago or New York rather than a military camp in western Nebraska.

So far, no one has found the same background in any other photo.

Osterman describes the object on the left as a typical studio photographer's "posing chair" facing backward. "The box with the knob is that part of the chair that allows the arm/back rest to move up and down," he says. A cast iron "head immobilizer" would have been placed behind the subject to prevent him from moving during the six- to 20-second exposure required for the photo. This is another potential clue that the image was taken in a city. "An itinerant photographer working in a studio/darkroom tent would generally use a much lighter chair," Osterman says.

"The floor, chair, and background smack of the 1870s," says Osterman, adding that photographers would also reuse the same equipment for years later. "So this could be as late as the 1880s or even into the 1890s. Very difficult to say," he says.

So who really is that stoic-looking man in the Crazy Horse tintype?



Portrait of No Neck from Denver Public Library. The information provided in the album is as follows: 'At the Wild West Earl's Court with a crouch hand camera during July, August and September 1892. Buffalo Bill's Show.' Presented to Nat Salisbury Esq for use of the staff with A.R. Dressers Compliments Springfield Bexley Heath. Kent, England Oct. 1892

[Various sources](#) have suggested that No Neck, the Hunkpapa Lakota leader who surrendered with Crazy Horse in 1877, might be the man in the photo. No Neck performed with Buffalo Bill's Wild West from 1891 to 1903. But an 1892 photograph of No Neck from the [Denver Public Library Digital Collections](#) does not appear to be the same man as in the "Crazy Horse tintype."

Meanwhile, the public's fascination for Crazy Horse souvenirs seems endless. "My family plans to publicize [a fake knife in a museum](#) attributed to Crazy Horse," says Sprague. "The beaded sheath colors are red, white, and blue. How patriotic!"