



BINGO

Charging Horse Casino & Bingo

The Northern Cheyenne – Building Tribal Economy

by Eric Casey

In September, 1878, three Northern Cheyenne leaders, 65-year old Chief Morningstar, Little Wolf, and Wild Hog, led 342 Cheyenne out of Oklahoma under the cover of darkness, some on horseback and many on foot. There were 85 men, warriors and elders, 120 women, 69 boys and 72 girls. They were leaving 'Indian Territory.' They were going home.

After the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876 the Northern Cheyenne, about 1,000 strong, were forcibly relocated from Montana down to the Darlington Reservation in Oklahoma where around 4,000 other Cheyenne and Arapaho had already been confined. The buffalo had been nearly eradicated from the Plains, and it wasn't long before starvation and disease set in around Darlington, including a deadly measles outbreak in the spring of 1878. The federal government failed to deliver promised food and medical supplies and, as summer turned to autumn, the situation grew increasingly grim.

The Cheyenne journey to their homeland is epic. Overwhelmingly outnumbered, pursued and harried every step of the way by the U.S. Army, the Cheyenne pressed forward step by step, evading the troops as much as possible, and fighting as often as necessary. With brilliant diversionary tactics, warriors would frequently engage the troops or lead them away on a chase, buying precious time for the main body of women and children to move further north. They crossed through the entire state of Kansas and into Nebraska, reaching the Sand Hills near the South Dakota border in early October.

Four cavalry forces and several civilian posses closed in on the Cheyenne, and there was no choice but to split up. Chief Morningstar and Wild Hog led a group to the northeast, and on October 25th they were surrounded by soldiers and captured about 30 miles east of Ft. Robinson, where they were to be imprisoned until the army could return them to Oklahoma. But Morningstar's people weren't going back to Oklahoma. They were going home. In January, 1879, on a freezing cold night, 107 of Chief Morningstar's band broke out of the barracks and raced through the snow for freedom. Cheyenne Dog Soldiers formed a rear-guard so that families and women and children could get away, and they found themselves instantly outgunned and outnumbered by the soldiers pouring out of the fort. The Dog Soldiers held their defense until the end, and their sacrifice is all that allowed anyone to escape.

Many perished that night, others were recaptured, and a few completely vanished. Chief Morningstar and his family survived, traveling on foot for 18 days through the snow and cold, finally reaching shelter on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota.

Meanwhile, Little Wolf had led his band westward, splitting into smaller groups in order to evade the pursuing army. Little Wolf's band was ultimately captured in March of 1879, in southeastern Montana, and taken to Ft. Keogh. They were eventually allowed to camp nearby, near another Cheyenne band led by Two Moon, a veteran warrior who had managed to stay in the north.

In November, 1884, then President Chester Arthur created a 271,000 acre reserve around Ft. Keogh for the Northern Cheyenne. It was officially called the Tongue River Reservation and later expanded to its current size of about 445,000 acres. Chief Morningstar and his band were allowed to return to Montana from Pine Ridge, as were many of the Cheyenne from the Darlington reservation. Through incredible perseverance and sacrifice against overwhelming odds, a Cheyenne homeland was secured. It is impossible to tell the story of Charging Horse Casino and Bingo without celebrating the incredible determination of the Cheyenne people to protect their culture and traditions while working step by step to create a sustainable tribal economy.

The challenges are immense. The Cheyenne reservation knows a 70+% unemployment rate, and if wealth was measured only in annual income, the reservation has one of the lowest average annual incomes in America. There is a powerful need here for infrastructure, for business, and for jobs, and that need is matched by a powerful will to create positive change.

Building the Cheyenne economy is one of the many focuses for the tribal government led by President Eugene Little Coyote. In a quote from the Billings Gazette upon his election last year, President Little Coyote said, "Two hundred years ago, the tribe had its own education, justice, military and economy. Those systems were diminished as the tribe's independence and self-sufficiency eroded. Now, it's time to reverse those trends. I believe in a new hybrid system of traditional values and capitalism," he said. "It's time for us to take our eyes off the ground, hold our heads high because it's the return of the Cheyenne."

One of two Cheyenne-owned business enterprises on the reservation, the Charging Horse Casino and Bingo opened in January, 2002, and has 100 Class II video keno and poker machines, a 500-seat bingo hall, and a 40-seat family-style restaurant serving wonderful food in a warm, relaxed atmosphere. In fact, having enjoyed breakfast, lunch, and dinners there, I can tell you that it feels just like being in someone's house... and in way you are. Charging Horse is an extension of the community, and this community truly makes its guests feel welcome.

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Charlene Alden, General Manager at Charging Horse, explained the importance of the gaming business. "Fifty percent of our net profit goes directly to our tribal government to fund four essential services," she said. "We fund elder care, youth services, an emergency charity fund, and a burial fund." The other 50% of profit is held by the Charging Horse business enterprise to develop the facility and reinvest.

"It's also about jobs," she continued. "We currently provide 44 jobs in association with the casino, bingo, restaurant, and administrative operations. In addition, our people are learning important work-related skills, in both personal responsibilities as well as in areas of business and customer service." To work at the casino/bingo, an employee must have a GED or be a high-school graduate, be drug-free, and pass a background check.

The bingo hall currently operates three sessions per week, and doubles as an event center, hosting special activities such as amateur boxing. Started back in the early '80's, bingo ran for awhile at a local Boys and Girls Club, but lost the facility after a few years. It was started up again in a Quonset-hut in 1994, and moved in to the new Charging Horse facility in 2001.

This is quite the bingo hall. Last June, I witnessed a packed house of bingo players from all over southern Montana and even northern Wyoming turn out to play for a special prize – a hand-tooled Billy Cooper Team Roping Saddle. I had no idea that a saddle could generate that much enthusiasm!

Another unique Charging Horse offering is a car-giveaway, usually four times per year. Budgets are tight, and the cars are used, but always in great shape. "The car give-away helps family independence," Charlene explained. "Even if it's just four families per year." On a reservation with no public transportation, and where many households don't have a car, this is yet another example of pushing progress forward, step by step.

From the outside, the Charging Horse Casino displays a simple harmony with the land around it. The facility was built into a hill near central Lame Deer, right off of Highway 212, which is one of the most beautiful and historic drives in southern Montana.

About forty miles southwest of Lame Deer is the site of the Battle Where the Girl Saved Her Brother, also called the Rosebud Battlefield. Forty miles due west of the casino is the site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, where the allied Cheyenne and Lakota warriors fought to defend their

families and their way of life in that pinnacle battle in 1876. "We Cheyenne have many stories," General Manager Alden tells me with a smile.

And many more are to be written. Charlene explains that long term objectives of the Northern Cheyenne Gaming Commission include adding hotel and convenience store amenities to enhance the current casino/bingo, and the possible development of a second gaming facility elsewhere on the reservation. A water park is under consideration, as is historical tourism, and of course, the pursuit of Class III gaming, which the state of Montana has been less than cooperative about.

Standing on the front steps of the casino I can see the Head Chief and Young Mule Memorial Hill just across Highway 212. A line of white rocks marks the path where in 1890 two young Cheyenne warriors, the hill's namesakes, charged down into a line of waiting soldiers. I learned this story well, and it amazed me, but you will have to visit the Cheyenne to hear it in person.

You can also see, from the porch of Charging Horse, the Lame Deer cemetery. It is here that Chief Morningstar and Little Wolf rest, along with many other leaders and veterans.

The Cheyenne spirit is not burdened by history, but strengthened by it. Today's leaders know that decades of economic deprivation cannot be turned around overnight, but that it will be turned around, with Cheyenne determination, and with progress made step by step.

This is a story about Charging Horse Casino and Bingo and the role Charging Horse will play in building tribal economy. But the real story is about how a community meets life's adversities with little daily heroisms and pushes forward. This is an honor story.

I had the occasion to stand on the front steps of Charging Horse at dawn. The air was crisp, cool, clear, and the sky was black to velvet blue, with the sun just breaking on the horizon. There, in the eastern sky... shining down on Cheyenne country, all the coal in the world could not be squeezed into a diamond as bright as that Morningstar. ♣

For more information about Charging Horse Casino, visit www.charginghorse.com

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