

# THE FRIENDSHIP OF JAMES WALSH AND SITTING BULL

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By Russ Disotell



*Left: (Walsh) Walsh in his uniform as Yukon Commissioner; Sitting Bull ((Lakota: Thathánka Iyotake) 1831-1890*

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fair in his dealings with the Lakota. In the four years, the Sioux remained in Canada, there was never a shot fired between them and the Mounties.

American newspapers, curious about the fate of the notorious Lakota chief, sent reporters to Wood Mountain. Their stories dubbed Walsh, "Sitting Bull's boss", a nickname Walsh quite enjoyed. However, his newfound notoriety and advocacy for the Sioux soon caused problems. The Canadian government, concerned the Sioux might cause trouble with local tribes, wanted them to return to the U.S. Sitting Bull and his followers, initially happy with their new home, were in no hurry to leave. Ottawa saw the friendship between Walsh and Sitting Bull as an impediment.

In June 1880, Walsh was transferred to Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, to separate him from Sitting Bull and the Sioux. Sitting Bull couldn't believe his friend was gone

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James Morrow Walsh's life spanned the gamut, from obscure small town beginnings to national prominence and front page notoriety in the continent's newspapers. Any one of his accomplishments were worthy of note, whether his role in the founding of the North West Mounted Police, his appointment as Commissioner for the Yukon Territories, during the Yukon Gold Rush, or his successful business career later in life. Yet, he will forever be remembered as friend to Lakota Sioux Chief Sitting Bull and the sobriquet of "Sitting Bull's Boss", which would ironically cut short his NWMP career.

Born in Prescott, Ontario, on May 22, 1840, in his youth he restlessly moved from job to job. He did have an aptitude for military matters. He attended officer courses available to militia members and served during the Fenian Crisis. He had received a commission in the Red River Expeditionary Force, but subsequently turned it down to accommodate his wedding to Mary Elizabeth Mowat on April 19, 1870.

May 1873 saw Walsh offered a commission as a Superintendent in the newly minted North West Mounted Police. Walsh's efforts and skills were recognized, and in 1875 he was sent to what is now Saskatchewan to

establish Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills as a response to the Cypress Hills Massacre (1873). American rum runners and bison hunters had killed 20 members of the local Assiniboine. It was here he would encounter Sitting Bull (Lakota: Thathánka Íyotake)

In May 1877, Sitting Bull and nearly 5,000 Sioux crossed the border into Canada. After the June 25th 1876 Battle of the Little Big Horn, and the decimation of Custer and the 7th Cavalry, Sitting Bull and his people had fled before the relentless pursuit of the U.S. Cavalry. The constant travel and lack of food led to the decision to cross "the medicine line" into Canada.

Walsh with four Mounties and two native interpreters rode unarmed into the Sioux encampment to talk with Sitting Bull. This bold act impressed Sitting Bull, as did Walsh's promise to enforce the law with no concern for the colour of a man's skin. The Lakota chief later said that he felt a change that day, that he had entered a new world with white men different from those he had met before.

The Sioux settled near Wood Mountain, a distance from Fort Walsh, and Walsh ended up spending a great deal of his time there. He and Sitting Bull developed a mutual respect and friendship. Walsh was firm but

and walked to Fort Walsh to confirm his departure. Without Walsh's advocacy and the dwindling of the bison herds the remaining small band of Sioux returned to Montana in July of 1881.

Walsh's career with the NWMP was over. The government was furious with what they saw as his insubordination and interference. He was pressured to leave the force in 1883, after ten years of service. In 1884 he bought the property at 207 King St. E. in Brockville. The impressive home was named Indian Cliff after the western bluff of Wood Mountain. After a successful career with the Dominion Coal Company in Winnipeg, Walsh retired here in 1895. In 1897 he left retirement to become the Commissioner of the Yukon Territory during the height of the gold rush. Walsh died at Indian Cliff on July 25, 1905, and is buried at the Old Protestant Cemetery, west of Brockville. His funeral was one of the largest in Brockville history.

In an interesting footnote, Sitting Bull had given Walsh his war bonnet, worn at Little Big Horn, as a sign of their friendship. Walsh gave the bonnet to Cornelius Van Horne of the CPR and it now resides at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, as a remembrance of this historic friendship. [LH](#)