

CHAPTER 6

Wednesday, July 29

Deerfield Lake to Vanderlehr Creek

“I guess they can come this far.” (General Custer, quoted by Wood)

The train does not reach the place selected till daylight next morning. (Winchell)

Going back to the Indian trail it had followed since Floral Valley, the Expedition traveled up Gold Run toward Gillette Prairie—probably the same trail taken by the Lakota who fled their village on July 26. The route crossed a divide to Negro Creek, which proved to be the most difficult stretch encountered by the pioneer crew and the wagons. Most of today’s route would later be used for a short time by the Cheyenne-Deadwood Stage. Distance traveled: 15 miles.

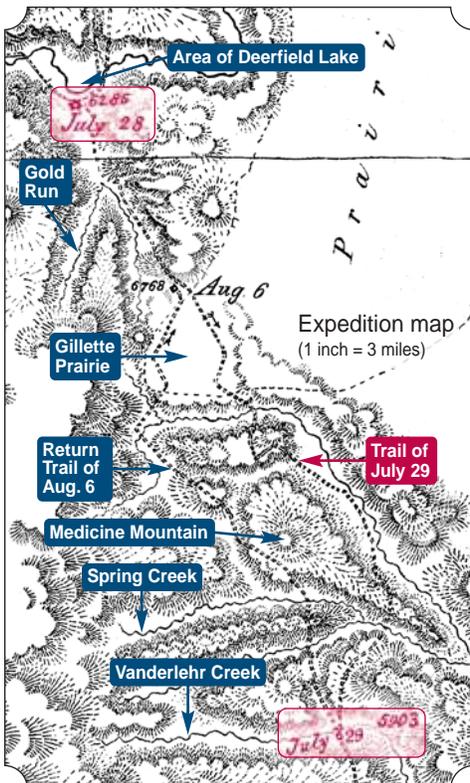
July 28

Taking the trail

U.S.G.S. MAPS: Deerfield, Ditch Creek, Medicine Mountain, Berne

CAUTIONS: The roads are all smooth gravel except for a short (and optional) side trip on a rougher trail.

TO START: From Hill City, check or set your odometer and drive 14.3 miles west on Forest Service 17, the Deerfield Road, until you reach FS 465 (Point A). Turn right and stop at the trail head (Point 2).

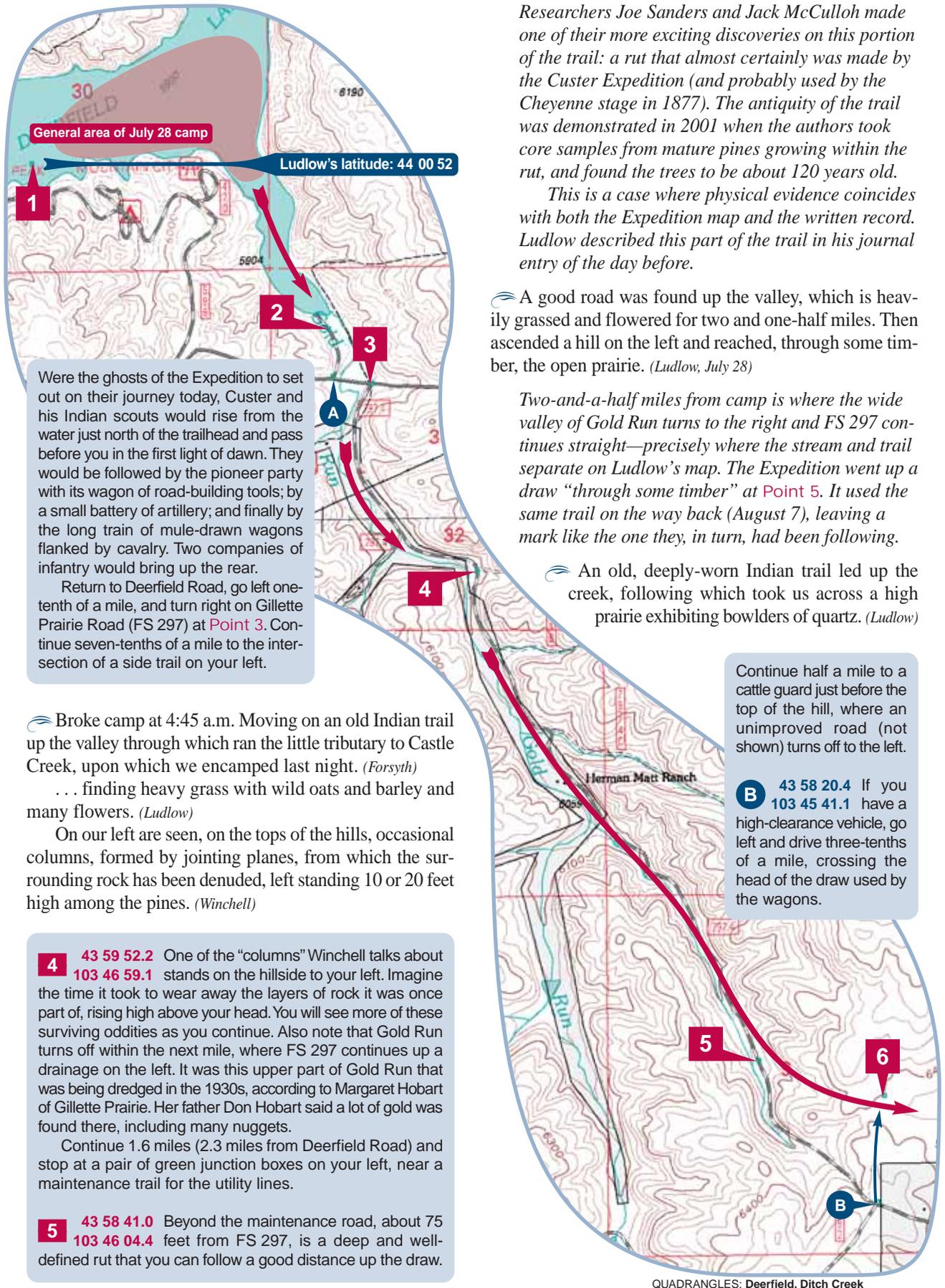


The river—if I may so call a stream some 10 feet wide—supplied us with fresh fish, the surrounding woods with deer, so there was no lack of good eating. Straw berries were also plentiful. Our table besides being supplied with the necessaries of life have some of its luxuries—a beautiful boquet adorned it. A gift of the valley—which abound in flowers of all kinds. But, like all things will, our encampment came to an end & we took departure on the 29th not at all willingly—though I must confess with some curiosity as we were to follow the Indian trail, that being the only way to get out and that even taking [us] over a rough road. (Power)

This idyllic description refers to the stopping place of July 28, now covered by Deerfield Lake. The camp centered on the confluence of Gold Run and Castle Creek, where a stage station was established in the spring of 1877 that grew into Mountain City, later called Deerfield. The town moved to its present location when Castle Creek was dammed to create the reservoir.

1 44 00 52 This is the last latitude and longitude reading recorded before the Expedition reached permanent camp, three miles east of present-day Custer. Ludlow’s map of the area in between is based entirely on distance measurements, compass bearings and sketches of the topography.

2 44 00 27.6 Your starting point for the day is a trailhead just south of Deerfield Lake, directly on the route.



General area of July 28 camp

Ludlow's latitude: 44 00 52

Were the ghosts of the Expedition to set out on their journey today, Custer and his Indian scouts would rise from the water just north of the trailhead and pass before you in the first light of dawn. They would be followed by the pioneer party with its wagon of road-building tools; by a small battery of artillery; and finally by the long train of mule-drawn wagons flanked by cavalry. Two companies of infantry would bring up the rear.

Return to Deerfield Road, go left one-tenth of a mile, and turn right on Gillette Prairie Road (FS 297) at Point 3. Continue seven-tenths of a mile to the intersection of a side trail on your left.

Broke camp at 4:45 a.m. Moving on an old Indian trail up the valley through which ran the little tributary to Castle Creek, upon which we encamped last night. (Forsyth)

... finding heavy grass with wild oats and barley and many flowers. (Ludlow)

On our left are seen, on the tops of the hills, occasional columns, formed by jointing planes, from which the surrounding rock has been denuded, left standing 10 or 20 feet high among the pines. (Winchell)

4 43 59 52.2 One of the "columns" Winchell talks about 103 46 59.1 stands on the hillside to your left. Imagine the time it took to wear away the layers of rock it was once part of, rising high above your head. You will see more of these surviving oddities as you continue. Also note that Gold Run turns off within the next mile, where FS 297 continues up a drainage on the left. It was this upper part of Gold Run that was being dredged in the 1930s, according to Margaret Hobart of Gillette Prairie. Her father Don Hobart said a lot of gold was found there, including many nuggets.

Continue 1.6 miles (2.3 miles from Deerfield Road) and stop at a pair of green junction boxes on your left, near a maintenance trail for the utility lines.

5 43 58 41.0 Beyond the maintenance road, about 75 103 46 04.4 feet from FS 297, is a deep and well-defined rut that you can follow a good distance up the draw.

Researchers Joe Sanders and Jack McCulloh made one of their more exciting discoveries on this portion of the trail: a rut that almost certainly was made by the Custer Expedition (and probably used by the Cheyenne stage in 1877). The antiquity of the trail was demonstrated in 2001 when the authors took core samples from mature pines growing within the rut, and found the trees to be about 120 years old.

This is a case where physical evidence coincides with both the Expedition map and the written record. Ludlow described this part of the trail in his journal entry of the day before.

A good road was found up the valley, which is heavily grassed and flowered for two and one-half miles. Then ascended a hill on the left and reached, through some timber, the open prairie. (Ludlow, July 28)

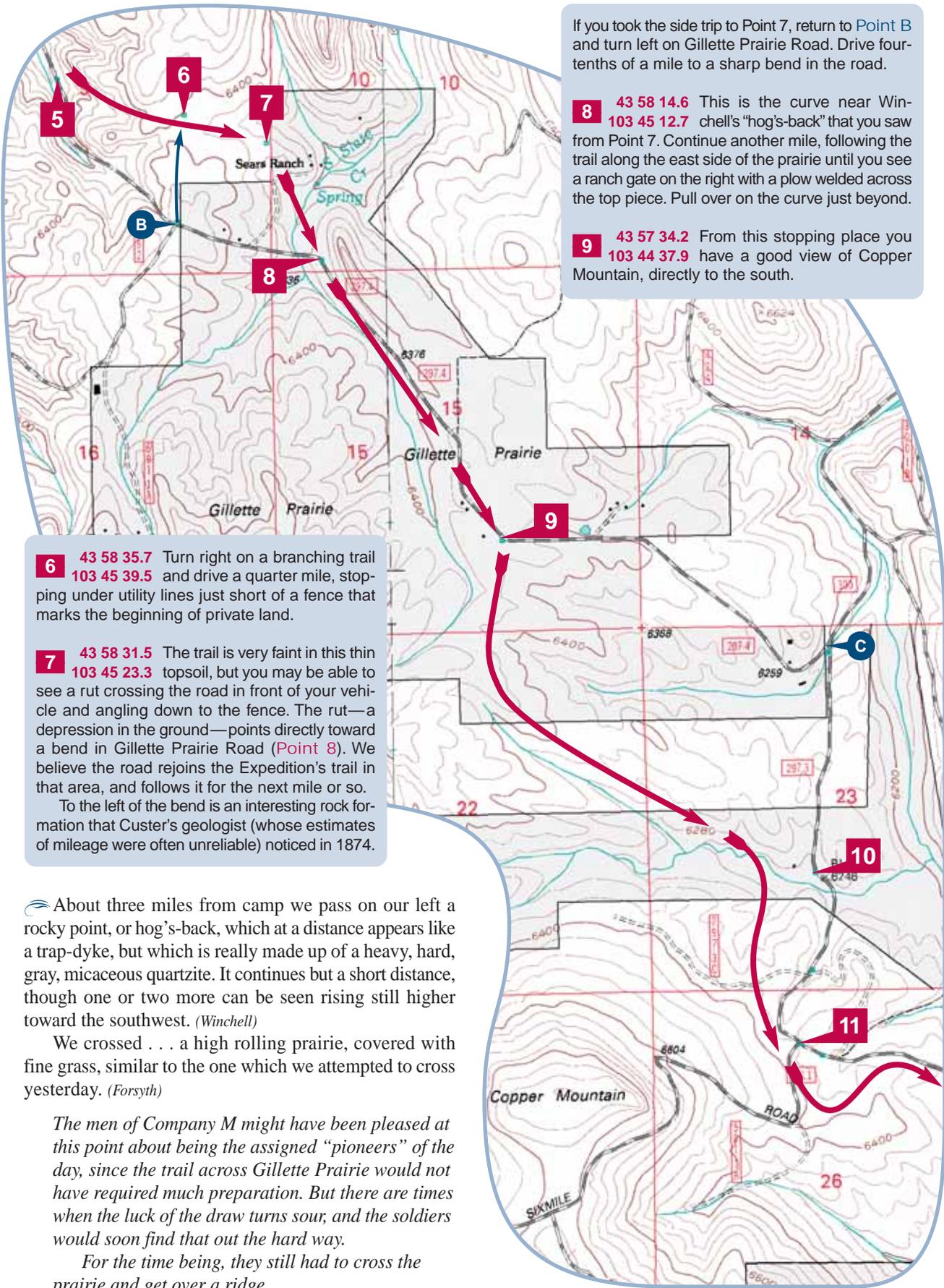
Two-and-a-half miles from camp is where the wide valley of Gold Run turns to the right and FS 297 continues straight—precisely where the stream and trail separate on Ludlow's map. The Expedition went up a draw "through some timber" at Point 5. It used the same trail on the way back (August 7), leaving a mark like the one they, in turn, had been following.

An old, deeply-worn Indian trail led up the creek, following which took us across a high prairie exhibiting bowlders of quartz. (Ludlow)

Continue half a mile to a cattle guard just before the top of the hill, where an unimproved road (not shown) turns off to the left.

B 43 58 20.4 If you 103 45 41.1 have a high-clearance vehicle, go left and drive three-tenths of a mile, crossing the head of the draw used by the wagons.

QUADRANGLES: Deerfield, Ditch Creek



If you took the side trip to Point 7, return to Point B and turn left on Gillette Prairie Road. Drive four-tenths of a mile to a sharp bend in the road.

8 43 58 14.6 This is the curve near Winchell's "hog's-back" that you saw from Point 7. Continue another mile, following the trail along the east side of the prairie until you see a ranch gate on the right with a plow welded across the top piece. Pull over on the curve just beyond.

9 43 57 34.2 From this stopping place you have a good view of Copper Mountain, directly to the south.

6 43 58 35.7 Turn right on a branching trail and drive a quarter mile, stopping under utility lines just short of a fence that marks the beginning of private land.

7 43 58 31.5 The trail is very faint in this thin topsoil, but you may be able to see a rut crossing the road in front of your vehicle and angling down to the fence. The rut—a depression in the ground—points directly toward a bend in Gillette Prairie Road (Point 8). We believe the road rejoins the Expedition's trail in that area, and follows it for the next mile or so.

To the left of the bend is an interesting rock formation that Custer's geologist (whose estimates of mileage were often unreliable) noticed in 1874.

☞ About three miles from camp we pass on our left a rocky point, or hog's-back, which at a distance appears like a trap-dyke, but which is really made up of a heavy, hard, gray, micaceous quartzite. It continues but a short distance, though one or two more can be seen rising still higher toward the southwest. (Winchell)

We crossed . . . a high rolling prairie, covered with fine grass, similar to the one which we attempted to cross yesterday. (Forsyth)

The men of Company M might have been pleased at this point about being the assigned "pioneers" of the day, since the trail across Gillette Prairie would not have required much preparation. But there are times when the luck of the draw turns sour, and the soldiers would soon find that out the hard way.

For the time being, they still had to cross the prairie and get over a ridge.

QUADRANGLES: Ditch Creek, Medicine Mountain

☞ At six miles from camp the view of these hills is also cut off on the west by the intervention of a high conical hill of the kind of rock last noted. (*Winchell*)

This was likely Copper Mountain, which dominates the southern end of Gillette Prairie—the “high, bare hill” climbed by Captain Ludlow the previous night (page 63). Copper Mountain also drew the attention of Colonel Dodge a year later (June 12, 1875), when he stopped to camp on Castle Creek.

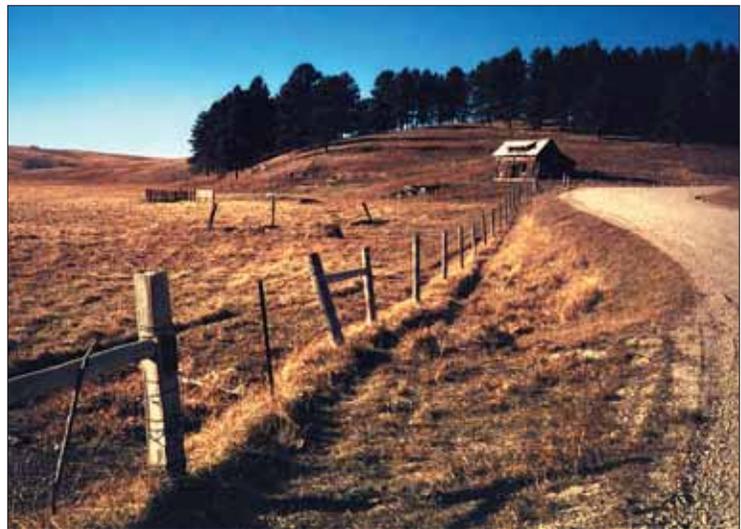
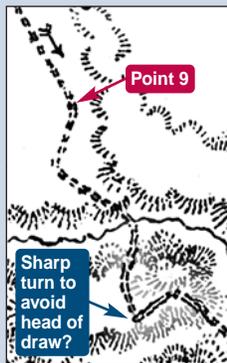
☞ About 6 miles from camp we were attracted by a high bare hill, & going to the top were amply repaid for our trouble—The view is more than fine or grand or magnificent. We seemed to be fixed in the center of a circle formed of huge hills & mountains. (*Dodge*)

The view caused Dodge, writing in his journal, to admit grudging admiration for Custer.

☞ The interior of this basin was filled with a mass of hill and canon mixed together in the most indiscriminate manner & apparently without system or order. Generally such a view would give some idea of the water shed, the course of the streams &c—but very little can be gained from any study of this most disorderly mass of material. The more I see of the Black Hills & its travel, the more credit I am disposed to give to Custer for his exploration of last year—I find his map remarkably correct, & it is of the greatest use to me. Even with it, I find it no easy matter to go where I want—and to him who had nothing but his compass & the capacity of his wagons for ups & downs to direct him, the finding of any route was a success. (*Dodge*)

What is it about some people that causes others to grit their teeth when forced to compliment them? Private Ewert had the same problem (Chapter 1), and a number of Custer’s fellow officers disliked him as well. To this day the General’s name can spark passionate arguments.

The “remarkably correct” map Dodge refers to is of course the Ludlow map that has been useful to us in locating the trail within the Hills. It suggests that the wagons briefly turned south from where you are parked at **Point 9**, then followed a drainage to the far end of Gillette Prairie. Note the shape of the trail on the enlarged section at right, and how well it correlates to the arrows on the opposite page (though they could not be verified on private land).



The old stage stop on Gillette Prairie, as it appeared in 2001. (Compare to the photo on page 100 in Parker and Lambert’s *Black Hills Ghost Towns*.)

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Drive one mile to **Point C**, the intersection of FS 297 and FS 300 (East Slate Road). Turn right on FS 297, now called Medicine Mountain Road. Drive six-tenths of a mile to a fence gate on a curve, the first safe place to pull off the road.

10 43 56 46.0 Just behind you on the right, if it is still standing, is the ruin of a stage station.
103 43 37.0

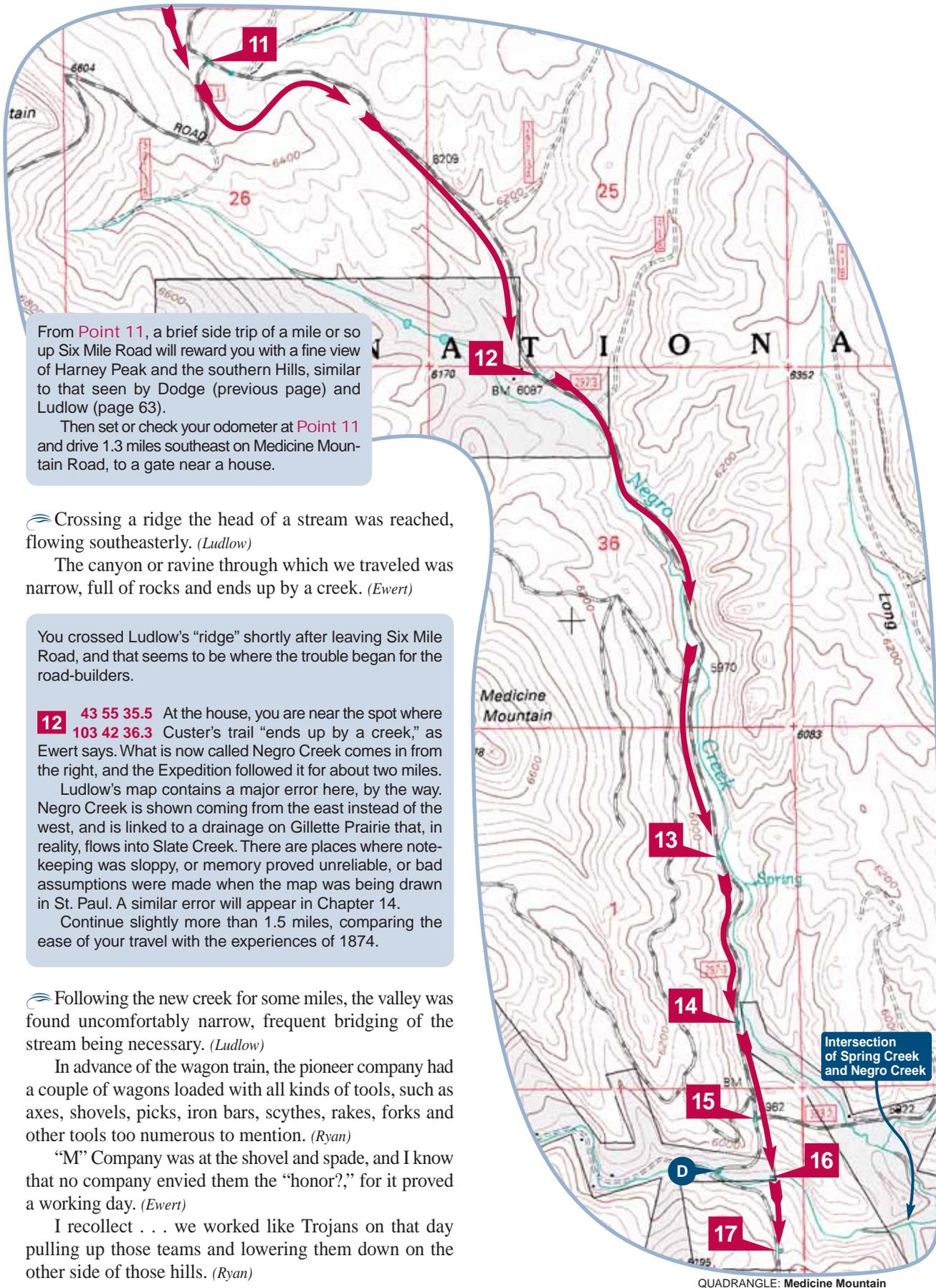
*At the far southeastern corner of Gillette Prairie (near **Point 10**) are the remains of a stop on the Cheyenne-Deadwood stage line that is generally believed to have been operated by a man named Gillette. South Dakota Geographic Names says the Prairie’s first occupant, Uriah Gillette (with one “l”), became a “successful rancher and famous hunter.” A man named Uri Gillette is described as “an old-time frontiersman” in Casey’s *The Black Hills and Their Incredible Characters*. The book reported that Gillette assisted stage-line superintendent William Ward after the famous Canyon Springs robbery of 1878. It would be interesting to know more about the man whose main legacy now seems to be a name on the map.*

The Expedition came down the drainage to the left in the photograph above, probably the “small valley” mentioned by Forsyth:

☞ The Indian trail . . . led us along over the prairie, through a small valley, across a wooded crest. (*Forsyth*)

It appears that Custer reached the “wooded crest” through a draw to the west of FS 297. Continue a quarter of a mile.

11 43 56 21.5 This is the intersection with Six Mile Road (FS 301), which climbs the shoulder of Copper Mountain. The Expedition’s route passed near here, going around the head of a drainage just beyond the intersection. This would account for a sharp jog in the trail shown at left on the enlarged, enhanced section of Ludlow’s map.
103 43 40.3



From Point 11, a brief side trip of a mile or so up Six Mile Road will reward you with a fine view of Harney Peak and the southern Hills, similar to that seen by Dodge (previous page) and Ludlow (page 63).
 Then set or check your odometer at Point 11 and drive 1.3 miles southeast on Medicine Mountain Road, to a gate near a house.

☞ Crossing a ridge the head of a stream was reached, flowing southeasterly. (Ludlow)

The canyon or ravine through which we traveled was narrow, full of rocks and ends up by a creek. (Ewert)

You crossed Ludlow's "ridge" shortly after leaving Six Mile Road, and that seems to be where the trouble began for the road-builders.

12 43 55 35.5 At the house, you are near the spot where 103 42 36.3 Custer's trail "ends up by a creek," as Ewert says. What is now called Negro Creek comes in from the right, and the Expedition followed it for about two miles. Ludlow's map contains a major error here, by the way. Negro Creek is shown coming from the east instead of the west, and is linked to a drainage on Gillette Prairie that, in reality, flows into Slate Creek. There are places where note-keeping was sloppy, or memory proved unreliable, or bad assumptions were made when the map was being drawn in St. Paul. A similar error will appear in Chapter 14.

Continue slightly more than 1.5 miles, comparing the ease of your travel with the experiences of 1874.

☞ Following the new creek for some miles, the valley was found uncomfortably narrow, frequent bridging of the stream being necessary. (Ludlow)

In advance of the wagon train, the pioneer company had a couple of wagons loaded with all kinds of tools, such as axes, shovels, picks, iron bars, scythes, rakes, forks and other tools too numerous to mention. (Ryan)

"M" Company was at the shovel and spade, and I know that no company envied them the "honor?," for it proved a working day. (Ewert)

I recollect . . . we worked like Trojans on that day pulling up those teams and lowering them down on the other side of those hills. (Ryan)

Intersection of Spring Creek and Negro Creek

QUADRANGLE: Medicine Mountain

The country . . . becomes more completely wooded and more mountainous, rendering it almost impassable for the train. (*Winchell*)

This is a hard day's march for the wagon train—Very bad roads. Hard work for the pioneer party. Travelled thro' narrow ravines, timbered hills, steep and stony places. (*Calhoun*)

13 43 54 25.6 There is nothing to see here now but an overgrown knoll, where you can find a small spring back against the hill. According to local tradition, however, this was the location of another stage station.

Despite the difficulties of the Expedition, its trail in this area was followed briefly by the Cheyenne and Deadwood stage after the route was shifted west from Hill City and Pactola in the spring of 1877. One of the stations on the line was called Twelve Mile Ranch, and said to be located on Spring Creek.

The actual site of Twelve Mile may have been a little to the north, according to Tom Kilian, a long-time summer resident on Spring Creek who has been a director and a chairman of the board of the South Dakota State Historical Society. A Norwegian pole-cutter named Freddy Martinson showed him remnants of a structure on Negro Creek (Point 13) in the 1950s. Foundation rocks and a threshold were still visible at the time. Martinson, who by then had lived for many years in the area, said the structure was an early stage station. Kilian believes that the statement was based on things Martinson had heard from old-timers along Spring Creek.

In any case, the owners of the stage line benefitted greatly from the work of Expedition soldiers.

☞ Rocks had to be removed, the creek had to be bridged every half a mile and once the point of a mountain had to be dug down 'ere the wagons could pass. (*Ewert*)

The country is a hard one to pass over with a wagon-train and we were 24½ hours making it. (*Grant*)

Recourse was had to the hills on the right. (*Ludlow*)

The place where the wagons climbed a hill to get away from Negro Creek is half a mile further on.

14 43 54 01.7 Medicine Mountain Road just begins its ascent here. On your left, Negro Creek swings east toward its confluence with Spring Creek—where Colonel Dodge would again try to ignore Custer's lead.

Most of the road construction nightmares occurred on Negro Creek, where Colonel Dodge—trying to follow the road a year later (June 13, 1875)—read the story of this day in physical scars on the landscape.

☞ Had a D—1 of a time working Custers trail out of a morass in which almost every wagon seems to have been stuck and to have each got out on its own hook. The first

They . . . struck almost the only route at all practicable for wagons.

seven miles [*taking him over the ridge past Six Mile Road*] were easily made, & in good time. We crossed a divide & struck a stream [*Negro Creek*] which Joe [*Merivale, a guide*] says is the head of Spring Ck & which is the origin of the Morass spoken of. (*Dodge*)

When Dodge came to the area of Point 14, not far from the end of Reno Gulch Road, he had his heart set on following Spring Creek to the east. He did not give up on the idea very easily.

☞ Custer's trail . . . turned off from the creek, & I wishing to make my permanent camp on it, followed it down. It got worse & worse, & after several bad crossings, & a lot of bad road, I sent Spaulding down to look at the prospect. He returned after an hour & and told me it was impossible to go down the Creek. Still hoping I left him to put the Comd in camp, and went down myself for about 4 miles. I can go down with wagons, though it will take a deal of work but could do nothing after I got there, the sides of the immense gorge being impassible even for pack mules. After a hard search for a better fate, I had to yield to imperative necessity & decide to go back tomorw to Custer's trail. (*Dodge*)

The Colonel apparently never realized that Custer was following a route developed over time by Native Americans. How must Dodge have felt, having to write almost the same words twice within two days:

☞ The more I see of the Country the more disposed I am to give credit to Custer for his march through here. He must have had a corps of guides more reliable than usual—for they certainly have struck almost the only route at all practicable for wagons. (*Dodge*)

Follow the Expedition wagons up the hill almost three-tenths of a mile, to the junction with Reno Gulch Road.

15 43 53 47.7 This is a safe place to pull over for any reading you may wish to do, or exploring on foot. Where Medicine Mountain Road turns sharply to the right just ahead, you should be able to see ruts going straight down the hill.

Drive another two-tenths of a mile, to a pullout on the right (Point D) just before the stone bridge over Spring Creek.

16 43 53 39.2 This reading is at the far end of the meadow to your left, where there is a ford on the creek. You will find ruts on the hill to the north, and you should be able to see an old trail across the creek.