THE CUSTER LEGEND:

AN AMERICAN FOLK-MYTH

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THE CUSTER LEGEND: AN AMERICAN FOLK-MYTH

By

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PREFACE

This study represents a culmination of several years formal research, and many more of natural interest. The name of Custer means much in North Dakota and Montana where I resided before coming to Michigan. I have talked personally with one of Custer's troopers (Jacob Horner of Bismarck) and made the accepted pilgrimage to the battleground.

However, these are merely the nominal requirements for membership in The Club. Of far more importance have been my correspondence with recognized authorities, chief among them Fred Dustin of Saginaw, and certain original contributions of value in the field.

To illustrate, the majority of the Army and Navy Journal items here used have never appeared elsewhere. All are valid, and one or two have great value. Other writers have touched the "Journal" as a source, but I am certain I am the first to have made an exhaustive page-by-page examination of the entire files. As a result, much of this paper can truthfully be said to be "new and original" from an historical viewpoint.

The subject naturally overlaps history and American Literature, but to my knowledge has never before been treated in this manner. My purpose is first to show that there is an invalid Custer Legend, then to re-examine some of the means by which it came into existence.

Inevitably this leads into matters of great controversy, but I am fully prepared to produce five more substantiating sources where I have cited but one.

This brings up certain matters of style. Few people outside this limited field can realize how often all valid rules of research and evidence are evaded. It is a seemingly trivial matter, but I wish to state definitely that I have been wholly honest in the use of elided quotations; I have not - as both critics and defenders of General Custer have done inexcusably - used ellipsis marks to distort fact.

For similar reasons the inter-linear system of notes was adopted. It defines the source unmistakably and at once, in a paper necessarily heavily documented. This also accounts for fullness of citation, and certains variations in form. Works once cited in full are thereafter cited by title or the author's name, whichever is advisable in a field where all titles seem to read alike. A few are also given full bibliographical entry because of importance to the general field, although only incidental here.

With the exception of a convenient hyphenation, all Army and Navy Journal reference is complete as to volume, page, and date. I have also included in the appendices certain items for immediate reference, and a personal theory on the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

In addition to the College, Michigan State, and Lansing Public Libraries, I had the opportunity of using the North Dakota State Historical Library and the Public Library of

Anaconda, Montana - in the last two I was able to locate material not available in Michigan. I wish to express my appreciation to the staffs of them all for the courtesies shown me.

Although plan and content of this study is entirely my own, I am indebted for the inspiration and title to a short passage of Fred Dustin's speaking of "the myths that went to make up the Custer Legend of the Little Big Horn." Actually, I have touched but a few of the major ones.

As for the rest, as I freely acknowledge all weaknesses, I also lay complete claim to whatever excellencies as well. This has truly been a one-man job. I wish to say too, that had I had more time I would have written a shorter thesis. It is my hope that the "amens" are modulated and not too many in number.

Earl K. Brigham

Lansing, Michigan
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THE CUSTER LEGEND

There is a fungoid growth of folk myth surrounding the historical figure of General George Armstrong Custer that can never be wholly eradicated. It was spawned in the unhealthy climate of blind adoration and bereavement, and burst into flourishing strength when fed by the distillation of a thousand lies. It has been deliberately nourished and tended until its unwholesome vegetation has not only obscured the true measure of the man, but has poisoned the memory of a dozen others unfortunate enough to be in historical association.

It has nothing to do with his legitimate record as a Civil war cavalry leader - a record even the most dispassionate reading can truthfully sum up as "brilliant." It has nothing to do with his true achievements on the late frontier, his peaceable handling of Indian affairs and the opening of new lands. And it has scarcely nothing at all to do with the actual facts of his far-famed "massacre" at the Little Big Horn River on June 25, 1876.

It had its inception, naturally enough, in the sudden passing of a vivid, colorful figure under circumstances mysterious and dramatic enough to satisfy the most Gothic imagination. No harm in that, for such spontaneous folk myth comes quickly to be recognized as something apart from unadorned fact, and any strong-minded man dead has his own Parson Weems. The garden variety of historical ivy seldom serves for long to obscure the existence of Cromwellian warts.

But when the natural cycle of such folkmyth is inhibited, the growth becomes rank and poisonous, distorting the outline of both the man and the events of his life until barely recognizable. Then those who have carefully nourished it retire satisfied. But inevitably, sooner or later, someone more fastidious as to fact comes along to scale the bark of history clean, to show the fungous and the tree as two things apart. And from then on, the tree shows scars it need never have bared.

Such a process has already taken place in the case of General Custer. In the case of the man, Frederic Van de Water has done an accurate - and savage - character dissection in the book Glory-Hunter. In the case of the last battle, Fred Dustin - critically analyzing material accumulated for over fifty years of his lifetime - has given us his definitive history The Custer Tragedy.

To a greater or lesser degree each has been complemented or aided by the works of such Custer scholars as E. A. Brininstool, Col. W. A. Graham, Dr. Charles Kuhlman, Charles E. DeLand, Capt. E. S. Luce, O. G. Libby, Charles M. Camp, Thomas B. Marquis, and others. And one writer at least, Frazier Hunt, has redeemed an inexcusably inaccurate earlier work with a recent contribution of great value: The story of Charles Windolph, last survivor of the actual battle, I Fought with Custer.

The cumulative results of such studies has served, and will serve, to bring the Custer Legend into closer line with accurate history. It is true that his storybook reputation

has suffered in the process, but this is the fault of those who refused to let true historical waters seek their level - not of the modern day scholars. Ironically, those who professed to love him best have done him the greatest disservice, for only when the myths have been dispelled and his undeserved fame dissipated will he claim the place in history that is rightfully his: "The Murat of the Union Army," and a great frontiersman who - had he appeared on the western scene thirty years earlier - might have eclipsed Fremont.

That a "hand-fed" Custer Legend exists is patent to anyone honest enough to make more than a cursory examination of the history of the Battle of the Little Big Horn. (There are still those who are not, and they shall be mentioned later). But how it came into existence as an American folk myth, and some of the artifical means employed to disseminate it, has never been carefully demonstrated. Such is the purpose and the object of this paper.

-I-

To a pre-comic book generation the Custer Legend needs little explanation. Those final arbiters, the tobacco and distilling companies, have long educated the American public to the "true" story of "Custer's Last Stand" with multi-color lithographs of a Montana <u>gotterdammerung</u>: The invincible U. S. Cavalry overwhelmed by hordes of anthropoid Sioux, Custer - wielding a sabre that had been shipped to Fort Lincoln and in a full set of regimentals left at home in a closet - dying godlike the last man.

In matter of truth, the popular artists may have been

as close as anyone - for seventy-years study has brought the true details in little better focus - but cited as authorities, or used to inflame pro-Custer sentiment, such paintings of "The Last Stand" have only served to bolster wholly unrelated theories, and many false myths.

As a result, a representative version of the Custer Legend runs something like this - in an imaginative cracker-barrel session:

"Custer'd made the 7th the best dam' regiment in the whole Army, and whipped the Indians so often they'dve surrendered without a fight if they'd known it was 'Long Hair' was after them. But it seems he'd cut his hair short just before the battle, so the Sioux didn't recognize him. He'd done that because he was mad. You see, when Secretary of War Belknap was impeached Custer furnished all the evidence against him, and as a result President Grant took his command away from him.

"Everybody knew the Sioux were shaping for a showdown fight, and Custer was the only man who could handle them; but Grant removed him just the same. That was early in 1876. But Terry, who was one of the other generals, was scared of tackling the Indians alone, so he demanded that Grant let Custer go. So Custer finally got his old regiment back, and as soon as he got to Montana he sailed right into them - Terry turned the expedition over to him - and overtook the whole Sioux nation on the banks of the Little Big Horn.

"But something went wrong with Custer's very carefully worked out plan of battle although he divided his forces the

same way he'd done in all his Indian victories. Major Reno turned yellow and ran away from the village as soon as a bunch of old squaws flapped their blankets at him, and he absolutely refused to go to Custer's support the way he'd been ordered to. Custer signaled him from downriver by firing three shots, but Reno wouldn't go. Reno could practically see Custer being wiped out. His own men called him yellow. Custer died last up on the hill, and when Sitting Bull found out who he was he wouldn't let the Indians touch his body. They were all scared of 'Long Hair.'

"Oh yes. There was another officer named Benteen who had all the ammunition. Custer sent orders to him 'Hurry up with the packs!' but Benteen hated Custer's guts so much he joined Reno instead, and they just waited there, even though there were no Indians for miles around. Neither of them had a man killed until the Indians had massacred Custer and come back."

Questioning might bring out the startling facts that "Reno was dead drunk as well as yellow;" "all the Indians were better armed than the troops, every warrior had a repeating rifle and maybe a couple of revolvers, too;" "the only survivor was Curley, a Crow scout - he took a Sioux blanket to Custer to let him escape, but Custer told him to go instead;" "all the rest of the Crows ran clear back to Powder River;" and "the reason Sitting Bull could fight so well was because he was half-white and had military training."

Or it might go into a dozen minor myths: "Rain-in-the-Face had sworn to get revenge on Custer, so he cut out

his heart and ate it." (Interruption, "No, it wasn't General Custer's heart Rain-in-the-Face cut out, it was Captain Tom Custer!" "No, it was General Custer; it says so in Longfellow's poem!" "No, it was Tom Custer!" etc. etc.) Or, "There's an old guy right in our home town that was the only white man to escape alive. He was captured by the Sioux, but Sitting Bull said 'Let him go; he's too young to die!' He's got absolute proof." (On investigation, the "actual survivor" turns out to have been only seven years old at the time of the Battle - much the youngest man on the expedition - and undeniably "too young to die" at the Little Big Horn).

And so the cracker-barrel experts - with or without West Point training or college degrees, verbally or in expensively brought out editions - go on. A mention of Custer's Civil War record, the Yellowstone and Black Hills expeditions, or names like Gibbon, Crook, Chief Gall, Crazy Horse, Congressman Clymer, Captain MacDougall, "Washita", and Mitch Bouyer, ordinarily bring only a blank look - and a muttered explanation about "amateurs" trying to horn in on the argument. And so it will go on, as long as there exists an Army officer who has ridden a horse, a man whose grandfather actually knew an Indian (no preferance as to tribe), or a hack writer with time between beers to bat out something sensational on any given anniversary of the battle.[1]

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1. No bets need be dropped to start a fight among pro- and anti-Custer factions, only the obscurest and most off-hand reference. To illustrate, LIFE for June 21, 1948, ran reproductions of several of the "Last Stand" paintings - the point of the article being that a Chicago man made an exclusive hobby of collecting all the different versions he

could find. This led to a flood of "Letters to the Editors" on everything from the color and length of Custer's hair to the final whereabouts of the famed equine survivor "Comanche." (Cf. LIFE, July 12, 1948, pp. 8ff.) My father informs me that Custer's Last Stand was the cause of many arguments and knock-down fights even in the Wisconsin lumber woods of the early 1900's - although not a lumberjack present had ever seen anything but a woods Indian, and the only information any possessed was sketchy hearsay at the best.

It is not mere facetiousness, however, that begins a study of the Custer Legend in such a manner. Our "cracker barrel version", formalized in style, and occasionally documented, can be found in literally dozens of books and periodical articles. Some are honestly labedled as fiction, and many are honest attempts at historical research - colored by old prejudices. But by far the greater number are fiction masquerading as history - backed up only by the same old half-truths and discredited suppositions, truculently presented as if vehemence is an adequate substitute for critical proofs.[2]

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2. A specific example of each type is offered for personal comparison. (1) Fiction: The Master of the Strong-hearts, by Elbridge S. Brooks. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1898). Jack, the young hero, knew everybody personally from Custer to Sitting Bull. His Indian friends tell him the "true" story of Custer's Last Stand, similar to the version above. (2) History: Custer, Fighter of the Plains, by Shannon Garst. (New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1944). Garst's bibliography shows he had access to most of the best Custer material, but he prefers to present the same old threadbare inaccuracies - refurbished by convenient conversations unknown to other writers, and the actual participants. Garst's book is a "juvenile," but there is no excuse in even a juvenile history for cutting the pattern to fit the cloth - particularly with correct sources at his fingertips. (3) Fiction-as-History: Custer, the Last of the Cavaliers, by Frazier Hunt. (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1928). Hunt, a popular war correspondent of World War I, is supposed to have written this book as a favor to Mrs. Custer, to refute "lies" that were beginning to appear about the battle. Apparently he complied the same afternoon, as mistakes - quite aside from any theories on the battle itself - are in great number on facts that the most elemental research or proof-

reading would have corrected. It is not documented, and there is no bibliography. In his 1947 book I Fought With Custer, referred to in the text, and a collaboration with his son, Hunt has yielded nothing in his admiration of Custer, but has gained a proper objectivity that makes it as valuable as the first work is useless.

Broken down, the principal points of the Custer Legend seem to be that: (1) Custer was the foremost - many imply the "only" - Indian fighter in the post-Civil War army. He made "his" regiment, the 7th U. S. Cavalry (incredibly confused by some with the 7th Michigan Cavalry of the Union Army), "the best on the plains." And though a strict disciplinarian, he was "the beloved leader and friend of all his men."

(2) Custer was a political martyr. As a Union Democrat, he was of an opposite political faith to the party in power. So when he had "exposed" the pampering of such tribes as the Kiowas in his book My Life on the Plains, he acquired the enmity of powerful figures in Washington. Then, when through some obscure means it was learned he held important evidence against Secretary of War Belknap, and testified before the Clymer Investigating Committee, he "broke Belknap." Grant, in retaliation removing him from command of the already authorized 1876 Sioux Expedition, was finally forced by "the clamor of public opinion and protests from the Army" to allow Custer to go.

(3) Custer was betrayed in his final battle. "Dividing his forces as he did in all his Indian battles" he sent Captain Benteen with one battalion to the left, and Major

Reno directly against the village, while he surprised the Indians from "the lower end." Reno "made a cowardly retreat without losing a man," Benteen "deliberately delayed in obeying an order to join Custer", and Custer died with all his men "looking back for help." While it is granted that Reno and Benteen, too, were fired upon, "Custer's battle lasted long after sunset." And from then on a hundred minor myths spring up from the battle itself.

The points could go on interminably, but to any but the cultists of Custer history enough have been given. A re-covering of well worn historical and literary ground is inescapable, but some of the tediousness necessary to first presenting "The Custer Legend" and then explaining its origins can be avoided. It can be avoided by comparing typical quotations with correct statements of fact - wherever possible returning directly to an authentic and accurate <u>contemporaneous</u> sources.

THE INDIAN-KILLER

Says Michigan's General J. H. Kidd in 1910:

> In this Indian warfare [1866 to 1876] Custer and his regiment, like Custer and the Third Cavalry division in the last campaign of the civil war, were easily foremost. He was the most successful Indian fighter of his day, and was so regarded by all the military authorities. For this reason when a campaign was determined upon to end the Indian troubles, he was looked upon as the proper leader.[3]

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3. J. H. Kidd, "Historical Sketch of George Armstrong Custer," in <u>Ceremonies Attending the Unveiling of the Equestrian Statue to Major General George Armstrong Custer by the State of Michigan, and Dedicated at the City of Monroe, Michigan, June Fourth, Nineteen Hundred and Ten</u>, p. 103f.

(Hereafter, any reference to this historical sketch shall be cited only as J. H. Kidd; any reference to other parts of the printed proceedings only as Monroe Ceremonies 1910.) General Kidd was an Ionia man with a distinguished Civil War record in his own right. His book Personal Recollections of a Cavalryman (Chicago, 1893) is a valuable source of material on Custer's Civil War period; but it does not make him an authority on the last battle.

This certainly implies that any fight in which Custer and the 7th Cavalry did not participate was of little importance. Actually, however, Custer took part in only three engagements which by any interpretation of the facts - giving him full benefit of the fact that numbers of troops engaged was often the least important factor in judging Indian warfare - can be considered major Indian battles. These were the Battle of Washita in 1868, the Yellowstone fight of 1873, and the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

At Washita, November 27, 1868, Custer with 11 troops of the regiment destroyed a sleeping village of 103 Cheyennes under Black Kettle, and an unknown - but small - number of Kiowas and Arapahoes. His loss was some 23 men killed and 14 wounded. On the Yellowstone in 1873, one man was wounded in the August 4th skirmish, and 4 killed and 4 wounded on August 11th - with an Indian loss "much larger than ours."[4]

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4. Cf. Fred Dustin, The Custer Tragedy, pp. 25-27; and Cyrus T. Brady, Indian Fights and Fighters, p. 165f. (Hereafter, Fred Dustin or C. T. Brady, shall be understood to refer only to these works. Any other works by either author will be cited in full.)

Considering only the organized warfare on the "plains" - for neither Custer nor the regiment saw action in the important Paiute or Modoc campaigns of 1872-73 - there were many impor-

tant engagements that had nothing to do with either. Some of them were the "Fetterman Massacre" (1866), Plum Creek (1867), the "Wagon Box" and "Hayfield" fights (1867), Beecher's Island (1868), Summit Springs (1869), North Fork of Red River (1872), Palo Duro (1874), Salt Fork of the Brazos (1874), "Washita River" (1874), McClellan Creek (1874), and of course Reynolds Fight and Crook's 1876 repulse on the Rosebud.[5]

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5. Cf. Struthers Burt, Powder River (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1938), pp. 81-182 passim.; and Stanley Vestal, Warpath and Council Fire (New York: Random House, 1948), passim.

This scarcely made Custer "the most successful Indian fighter of his day "nor his regiment. "...easily foremost." Nor was it to the discredit of either. But Custer was excellent newspaper copy, his victory at Washita had come at a time when the country was sick of the bumbling campaigns on the frontier, and he was not at all adverse to presenting his work in a glowing light in articles for the Eastern magazines. It was, as his commanding officer Colonel Sturgis was to say later:

> ...He wrote much upon the subject of Indian warfare and the people of the country who read his articles naturally supposed he had great experience in savage warfare, but this was not so, his experience was exceedingly limited, and that he was overreached by Indian tactics, and hundreds of valuable lives sacrificed thereby, will astonish those alone who may have read his writings - not those who were best acquainted with him and knew the peculiarities of his character.[6]

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6. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 806 (July 22, 1876). This was not the famous "Sturgis Interview" but a separate

letter to the editors of the Army-Navy Journal, dated "St. Louis Barracks, July 14, 1876." In it Col. Sturgis disclaims much of what was quoted of him in the "Interview", but ironically his disclaimer was printed before the interview was given wide publication. (Cf. Vol. 13, p. 826).

Just how good a fighting force the 7th Cavalry was is still hard to determine. One reason is that the Custer partisans use every conceivable argument to enhance the reputation of their idol, often canceling off each other. Talk of "that matchless veteran force," "that splendid and experienced regiment," "the swagger Seventh Cavalry" is always linked with slurring comments on the material of the men, so as to show his talent for making soldiers out of "ruffians."

> But before he could set about the task of subduing the unruly redskin, Custer found himself with another job of major proportions on his hands. It was the immense job of whipping the motley crowd of ruffians that composed the Seventh Cavalry into a snappy military outfit to suit his exacting tastes....Most of the mob that made up his division had no love of a soldier's life. They had enlisted mainly to get their expenses paid to the West. Shortly they would slip from the camp some night and go to the gold fields....Of course, there were good soldiers, too, but the ranks were made up mainly of ruffians. Custer was determined to make a real cavalry outfit of them inspite of obstacles. He adopted "Garryowen"....Its catchy tune...helped to lift the spirits of this unruly mob that Custer was drilling so mercilessly.[7]

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7. Shannon Garst, Custer, Fighter of the Plains, p. 101f. (Hereafter cited as Shannon Garst.) I have stated my personal opinion of Garst's book in Note 2, above.

There is probably considerable truth in the statement, but it is unreasonable in its sweeping manner. After all, one of the finest fighting forces of World War II - the New Zealanders at Thermopylae - gloried in the name of "Blamey's

Mob." It also brings an important point to light: At this period of American history, volunteers were considered far superior in morale and dependability to Regulars, odd as the notion strikes us today. And Custer's Civil War admirers unconsciously thought of the Seventh in the same terms as the crack volunteer regiments he commanded in wartime, thereby reaching the natural conclusion that subordinates must have mishandled a splendid fighting machine.

On this point it is a little surprising to read The Nation's comment on the Last Stand:

> ...Seldom in history can we find instances of such complete destruction of men, many of whom might no doubt have run away. The personal control of the leaders must have been magnificent to enable them to hold to their colors to the death of every man of five companies of regular soldiers, not volunteers, not men interested in a cause, but men who went into the army for a living, perhaps a refuge.[8]

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8. (Review of Whittaker's Life of Custer), The Nation, Vol. 24, p. 180 (March 22, 1877). It was a representative attitude, however. Trooper William Slaper of the 7th tells of his enlisting: "At that time, any young man wearing the uniform of a United States soldier was looked upon as an idler - too lazy to work. Being in my own home town, and well known, I felt somewhat ashamed of being seen in uniform." (See E. A. Brininstool, A Trooper With Custer, p. 18.)

No one seems to deny, however, even critics like Van de Water or Dustin, that Custer had a high talent for organization and training, and that he infused his men - as a regiment - with an undeniable éclat. Thomas Windolph, our oldest living Congressional Medalist and last living survivor of the actual battle at the Little Big Horn, still recalls:

> You felt like you were somebody when you were on a good horse, with a carbine dangling from

> its small leather ring socket on your McClelland saddle, and a Colt army revolver strapped on your hip; and a hundred rounds of ammunition in your web belt and in your saddle pockets. You were a a cavalryman of the Seventh Regiment. You were a part of a proud outfit that had a fighting reputation, and you were ready for a fight or a frolic....Oh it was a fine regiment, right enough. And there wasn't a man in it who didn't believe it was the greatest cavalry outfit in the entire United States Army.[9]

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9. Frazier and Robert Hunt, I Fought with Custer, pp. 53, 56. (Hereafter cited only by title.)

It would be caviling to point out that any other veteran of 96 years feels the same way about his regiment, or that Windolph, as a Troop "H" man, received his direct training from Captain Benteen, not Custer. Obviously something of the immense self-confidence and dash that was Custer at his best could impart itself even to a recruit, particularly a wide-eyed immigrant lad like Windolph, fresh from Germany.

Effectiveness of the regiment was another matter, however. The problem seems to be that Custer was far too often not at his best. In 1865, his handling of the Volunteer 3rd Michigan Cavalry in Texas brought on a general mutiny. In 1867, his harsh treatment of deserters - ("bring none in alive") and failure to recover the bodies of two troopers killed by Indians near Downer's Station - and, incredible in the light of his present-day fame, to try to exact reprisal - led to a court-martial - The little-known verdict: Guilty; suspension from rank and command, and forfeiture of pay for one year.[10]

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10. These incidents are thoroughly covered in many

Custer studies; some, like Mrs. Custer excusing the actions and attributing the 1867 Court Martial to "enemies," and others placing undue emphasis on minor points to add to his discredit. Actually, as a study of Army life and regulations of the period disclose, much of the blame should go on the system itself: It offered far too many possibilities for a martinet to exact harsh punishments in the name of discipline. For Custer, who functioned best himself when under the firm hand of a Sheridan or a Stanley, the privileges accorded rank were sometimes disastrous. (For full discussion see Fred Dustin, pp. 13-16; 20-23; Van de Water, Glory-Hunter, pp. 127-135, 168-177. Both explode Mrs. Custer's belief that "a jealous enemy" brought the charges and that the court was packed with "enemies." Actually, it was ordered by General Hancock.)

There were many similar incidents, but most seem to point up the fact that Custer judged everything by his personal reactions. He was made of "buggy springs and rawhide" himself, easily remained alert on three or four hours sleep, and was seemingly tireless. It made him blind to the average physical resources, or discomforts, of his enlisted men. And since he traveled with extra horses for his own use, the totaled strain on the regiment could exceed human endurance.

William C. Slaper has given us what is probably the enlisted man's view of Custer - as distinct from Windolph's description of the regiment and its elan:

> ...He was a fearless and brave soldier, and many will agree with me that he was also a hard leader to follow. He always had several good horses whereby he could change mounts every three hours if necessary, carrying nothing but man and saddle, while our poor horses carried men, saddle, blankets, carbine, revolver, haversack, canteen, 10 days' rations of oats and 150 rounds of 45-caliber ammunition, which of itself would weigh more than ten pounds - and we had no extra horses to change off.[11]

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11. E. A. Brininstool, A Trooper With Custer, p. 47. (Hereafter cited only by title). I have purposely omitted two comments often used against Custer: "He treats his dogs

better than his men;' and 'There goes taps, and before we get a mouthful to eat reveille will sound, and 'Old Curley' will hike us out for the march.' Mrs. Custer mentions in her writings that the General was aware of both comments and thought them highly humorous. This I consider naive of her, but not necessarily incorrect. Not knowing the true source of either - whether made by good soldiers or malcontents - or the circumstances, they must be disregarded to be fair. Slaper, however, was a high type Regular, who proved his coolness and bravery in the final battle. Like Windolph, however, he was under a troop commander agreed by all to be a 'fine officer' - in the fullest and highest sense of the term - Captain T. H. French.

Mrs. Custer also unwittingly confirms this in an account of riding cross-country with her husband, who frequently left her behind in the chase: 'Often we had no path, and the general's horse 'Vic' would start up steep banks after we had forded streams. It never occurred to his rider, until after the ascent was made, and a faint voice arose from the valley, that all horses would not do willingly what his thorough-bred did.'[12]

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12. Elizabeth B. Custer, Boots and Saddles, p. 65. (This is the 1913 edition, and it must be pointed out that Mrs. Custer re-edited the 1885 version, omitting some comments that some critics turn against her husband. The two texts show much variance, although unimportant).

For the present, then, it is fair to conclude that Custer was not the enlisted man's idea of a 'good officer,' and that his much-vaunted status as a 'beloved leader' was the estimate of persons not forced to serve under him.

Two other points must be considered in judging the effectiveness of the 7th Cavalry, when it actually set out upon the ill-fated 1876 Sioux Expedition. Its officer personnel, and its enlisted personnel. Compared with the original

regiment of 1867, the officers were of high type in 1876, but there still remains General Stanley's savage comment on those belonging to "the Custer Gang." Stanley, not Custer, was in command of the 1873 Yellowstone Expedition, but apparently his first problem was to demonstrate the fact to Custer.

The following quotation - consolidating from letters of June 28, July 1, and August 15, 1873 - is complete in itself:

> [June 28]...I have had no trouble with Custer and will try to avoid having any, but I have seen enough of him to convince me that he is a coldblooded, untruthful and unprincipled man. He is universally despised by all the officers of his regiment, excepting his relatives and one or two sycophants. [July 1]...I had a little flurry with Custer as I told you I probably would. We were separated four miles and I intended him to assist in getting the train over the Muddy River. Without consulting me, he marched off 15 miles, cooly sending me a note to send him forage and rations. I sent after him, ordered him to halt where he was, to unload his wagons and send for his own rations and forage and never presume to make another movement without orders. I knew from the start it would have to be done and I am glad to have had so good a chance when there could be no doubt as to who was right. He was just gradually assuming command, and now he knows he has a commanding officer who will not tolerate his arrogance. [August 15]...Custer behaves very well since he agreed to do so.[13]

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13. General D. S. Stanley, Personal Memoirs; as quoted in Glory-Hunter, p. 242f. Respecting the two officers, Joseph LaBarge, the noted Upper Missouri steamboat captain, said: "Custer seemed to me to be generally unpopular; that is, I rarely heard him well spoken of. Stanley, on the other hand, always appeared to be a gentleman of rare qualities, one who never forgot to treat a civilian as a man - something that many officers were little disposed to do." (See Fred Dustin, p. 27).

The "relatives" are easily identified - Capt. Tom Custer and First Lieutenant James Calhoun, who married

Margaret Custer - the "sycophants", less easily so. Certainly the latter would include Capt. Thomas B. Weir, and possibly Capt. George W. Yates and the Regimental Adjutant, Lieut. W. W. Cooke - all who came to the 7th Cavalry with Custer - and Keogh, who was considered Custer's closest friend. But family relationships extended throughout every frontier unit of the times, since traditions ran high and the relatives of officer personnel were naturally thrown together. In the 7th, not only was Calhoun a brother-in-law of Custer, but Capt. Myles Moylan was Calhoun's brother-in-law. Lieuts. Gibson and McIntosh were also married to sisters.

Much more important, was the split in officers dating from the battle of Washita in 1868. At that time, Major Joel Elliot, Sgt.-Major Kennedy, and 15 troopers were cut off two miles from the main force, and wiped out. Although the battle was on November 27th, it was not until December 7th that Custer recovered the bodies - having made no effort at the time of the battle to aid Elliot, although firing was heard "nearly all day," and reported to him.[14]

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14. See Glory-Hunter, Chaps. 6 & 7, pp. 187-208.

Benteen, who had been a wartime brigade commander, had once had the far younger Elliot as a subordinate, and was extremely loyal to him. He never forgave Custer for what he repeatedly referred to as the "Major Elliot affair." From then on the officers were divided into "Custer" or "Benteen" factions, with the younger West Pointers coming in trying to remain friendly with both. It could scarcely be termed a

healthy situation for a combat unit.

As to the men, by 1876 the enlisted personnel was probably of a higher calibre than the "ruffians" of the regiment's earlier years but it also showed a much lower percentage of battle-tried men. The figure generally advanced is "30% to 40%" new recruits. This may be high, as many writers have tried to prove, but we can state definitely that some 212 new men joined the regiment between October 1875 and May 1876.[15]

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15. Fred Dustin, p. 108: "...On October 20, 1875, one hundred and fifty recruits arrived at Fort A. Lincoln, fifteen of whom had served previously." Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 593 (April 22, 1876): "...The Supt. of Mounted Recruiting Service was ordered April 15 to forward sixty-two recruits to St. Paul, Minn. for assignment to the 7th Cavalry as follows - 25 to Co. B, 19 to C. G, and 18 to Co. K. (S. O., W. D., AGO)."

Although Windolph now recalls that "...One thing that people get wrong about the recruits was that about half of the 150 new men we had were men who either had Civil War service or had already served a five-year hitch in the army,"[16]

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16. I Fought With Custer, p. 50.

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his memory is at fault both as to the number and percentage. At the Reno Court of Inquiry in 1879, when the Recorder, Lieut. Lee, tried to bring out the fact that most of the recruits were ex-servicemen, Sergeant Culbertson of Troop A, refused to raise his estimate of, "About one out of ten."[17]

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17. Fred Dustin, p. 109.

Among the April recruits were William C. Slaper, whose

story E. A. Brininstool has preserved, and Jacob Horner - who is still living in Bismarck, N. D. Horner reports that of his contingent, 78 were left unmounted for lack of horses, and he himself walked 318 miles in cavalry boots to the supply camp at Powder River. Many took off their boots entirely and marched barefooted, and all were almost entirely unfit for duty at the finish. Some obtained horses at Powder River, but Horner and several others had to remain at the Supply Camp - part of some 85 men of the regiment who never left it for the battle.[18]

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18. Usher L. Burdick and Eugene D. Hart, Jacob Horner and the Indian Campaigns of 1876 and 1877, pp. 10-15. With Thomas Windolph of Lead, S. D. - who has been frequently referred to - Horner is the last of "Custer's Seventh Cavalry;" although only Windolph was in the actual Battle of the Little Big Horn. Horner lives at 609 Fourth St., Bismarck, with a personal friend of my family's, Mrs. Hugh H. McCulloch. I had dinner with him there June 8, 1945. He has been embarassed in the past by sensation-seeking persons who find his story too prosaic, apparently resenting his failure to go into the battle without a horse, too. Since he has a good combat record against the Nez Perce and in subsequent campaigns up to 1881, the 1876 expedition is a small part of his very interesting life story, and has been overemphasized. I heard in July of this year (1948) that he is still alive.

"The most successful Indian fighter" and his "easily foremost" regiment are thus seen to be the first part of the Custer Legend readily disproved. Leaning backward to be fair we can come to this appraisal of the 7th Cavalry of 1876 and its acting commander:

It was a good representative line outfit of the "Indian-fighting Army." Custer had made it a top parade-ground regiment, but going into battle it was as average as any other in the Cavalry line, with at least 30% untried

recruits, some not properly fit nor equipped for combat. What it gained in glamour and publicity from the natural color - and personal press-agentry - of its Lieutenant Colonel, it lost in effectiveness through his erratic handling of officers and men.

The "matchless Seventh" was matched or surpassed in frontier service by the First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, or Sixth, when it was under the direct command of Custer. It is now generally overlooked, but while the Seventh dates its traditions from the Little Big Horn - the worst defeat ever sustained by the Regular Army - its reputation really begins after the battle. The Custer Legend gave the regiment a unifying and inspiring tradition that set the 7th Cavalry apart as the American Light Brigade - a tradition that made the highest type men proud to serve in the ranks or in command. There is no need to further belabor the obvious: What Custer notably failed to give it in life, he gave it in death.

As to Custer himself, he always needed a strong hand on his check-rein. With the wise Pleasanton, the cautious Torbert, or the shrewd Sheridan superior - and present - his dash made him a superb field officer; others could do the staff work. If his fearless charges opened weak points in the Confederate lines, troops were rushed up to exploit them. If he broke on the spearpoint of Southern fire, he could fall back on the main army and re-form for a fresh assault, his retreat quickly covered. Van de Water has summed it up neatly: "Here was no strategist; but a tireless body and a

mind as hungry for war as a bent bow. Custer was a weapon that Sheridan knew how to use."[19]

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19. Glory-Hunter, p. 69.

But with other minds to worry out the plans for skilful retreat or consolidation of unexpected gains, Custer could ignore such things in his tactics. Such dependence on his superiors came to be second nature, and indeed in time came to seem to be no dependence at all; "Custer's Luck" seemed all-sufficient to any situation. And in a great war it was.

But in "peace" on the frontier, matters were different. There were no quick communications, no great masses of men at the disposal of his superiors or of him. And against the Sioux, with a command he had purposely - and contrary to plan - made independent, he proved tragically inadequate. The vital part of "Custer's Luck" - a clear-minded superior in heavy force, easily communicated with - he deliberately outran at the Little Big Horn.

THE POLITICAL MARTYR

The second important myth in the Custer Legend is that Custer was a man martyred by his enemies for political reasons. Hazen tried to "get him" for Washita. He "got" Belknap, the impeached Secretary of War. And Grant "got him" for "getting" Belknap. Custer "alone" had the courage to expose the frauds being perpetrated by the Indian traders, including of course the selling of guns superior to those used by the Army. In all cases, the implication exists that Custer was sat on par-

ticularly hard because he was a Democrat, the others "all" Republicans.

Custer came by his party loyalties honestly and naturally. His father was a Democrat and even though a Republican congressman, John Bingham, was persuaded to appoint him to West Point, Custer considered himself a Democrat. Custer owed his Lieutenant Colonecy to Andrew Johnson, from whom he had tried unsuccessfully to gain permission to join Juarez in Mexico for a year. Johnson first offered him a full Colonecy of the newly organized 9th Cavalry, a negro regiment.[20] But he had refused. Ironically enough, long

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20. Fred Dustin, p. 15.

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after Custer was dead it was the colored troopers of the Ninth, arriving by forced marches, who saved Custer's old regiment after they had "revenged" him at Wounded Knee in 1890.[21]

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21. Stanley Vestal, The Missouri (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1945), pp. 237-241. Ironically enough, Benteen had been offered a Majority in the Ninth about the same time, but refused it. Although in 1893, when he reached his Majority through Regular Army promotion, Benteen was then assigned to the Ninth. One of the things which makes the Custer affair so fascinating to so many persons is the many minor ways in which the lives of the principals were so inextricably bound up - although the limited size of the Army from 1866 to 1898 made much of it as natural as it seemed fateful.

However, Custer made such an impression on President Johnson that he was invited to accompany him on the famed "Swing around the Circle." Later he attended an abortive Soldiers' and Sailors' Convention at Cleveland, allegedly in hopes of furthering his own aspirations for the presidency.

He made a terrific political blunder by introducing the then infamous Nathan B. Forrest from the platform - an unthinkable breach of etiquette for a Union officer in 1866. It finished his naive hopes for a political future.[22]

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22. Frederick Whittaker, A Popular Life of General George A. Custer, pp. 343-345. (Hereafter cited as Whittaker's Life). I have purposely refrained from citing Whittaker on any material used so far, because he is the source on nine-tenths of the misconceptions forming the Custer Legend. By establishing the Legend from other sources, knowingly or unknowingly inspired by him, and then treating his part, the artificial character of so many myths yet current can better be illustrated.

Custer's quarrel with General W. B. Hazen was a little difficult to construe on a political basis. It was principally concerned with the aftermath of the Battle of Washita in 1868. General Hazen had been expressly assigned to Fort Cobb, Indian Territory, by General Sherman to protect the Kiowa Indians under their treaty "rights." When Sheridan and Custer entered the Kiowa reservation, insisting that the Kiowas had taken part in the battle and must be punished, Hazen sent word to the column:

> Indians have just brought in word that our troops today reached the Washita some twenty miles above here. I send this to say that all camps this side of the point reported to have been reached are friendly and have not been on the war path this season.[23]

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23. Quoted in Glory-Hunter, p. 210.

In a brilliant move, Sheridan and Custer arrested the Kiowa chiefs who accompanied the courier to attest their good faith by their presence, and took them to Fort Cobb. Or as

Custer states it in a letter to his wife of December 19, 1868, "...we refrained from attacking, but permitted...Lone Wolf and many other chiefs and warriors to come into our lines."[24] The tribe which Hazen had managed to assemble near

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24. Elizabeth B. Custer, Following the Guidon, p. 46.

Cobb immediately scattered, and there were bitter words between the three officers. Hazen stated later in print:

> I saw at once that they Sheridan and Custer held me accountable for seriously marring the success of their operations by warning them, two days previously, that the Indians between themselves and my camp were settled under my peaceful protection....Their opinions that the Kiowas had fought them at the battle of Washita were so firmly fixed that I thought it both futile and unwise to endeavor to correct their impressions.25

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25. General W. B. Hazen, Some Corrections to "My Life on the Plains," (St. Paul, 1875) as quoted in Glory-Hunter, p. 211.

When Custer's articles for Galaxy in 1873-74 were published as My Life on the Plains (New York, 1874) he called Hazen's dispatch the "word of a fool" in about so many words, and cast other aspersions on his character, record, and ability. Hazen retaliated with a brief pamphlet Some Corrections to "My Life on the Plains" in which he took Custer, the famed Battle of Washita, and his book all apart in indignant and scathing prose. It well-documented as to the exact facts, i.e., the Kiowa tribe had been assembled by him at Fort Cobb on November 20, 1868 - a full week before the battle - and that the trail Custer was following was made before the battle.[26]

26. Glory-Hunter, p. 210f; Fred Dustin, p. 26.

That was the "political" Hazen-Custer controversy. Later, before the Clymer Committee, Custer oddly rang in Hazen's name, saying that because Hazen had violated a gag fule imposed by Secretary Belknap, Belknap had exiled him to Fort Buford, at the mouth of the Yellowstone. Hazen denied this in a letter from Cincinnati, May 14, 1876, to the Army and Navy Journal,[27] but was summoned to Washington anyway.

27. See Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 661 (May 20, 1876). "I have known from the first that order did not emanate from the War Department." Cf. Sheridan's May 2nd letter to Belknap "I have yet to learn that you had anything to do with ordering that regiment...." (Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 642).

The absurd part of the "political charge is that Hazen, too, like Custer, was a life-long Democrat.

The Belknap controversy is another matter, and reasonably well-known. It can be summarized briefly. It began with a letter sent by the same General Hazen to James A. Garfield in January of 1872, stating that J. S. Evans, the post trader at Fort Sill (which had replaced old Fort Cobb) was paying $12,000 a year for the privilege to Caleb P. Marsh of New York. Marsh handled all the affairs of Mrs. Bowers, Belknap's sister-in-law who lived with him in Washington, and who became his wife following the death of the first Mrs. Belknap.

The first Mrs. Belknap influenced her husband to give Marsh the post-tradership at Fort Sill. He in turn contracted

it to Evans for the sum stated. To return the favor, Marsh offered one-half of the amount to Mrs. Belknap. Since he was handling for Mrs. Bowers property to the value of $90,000, the Fort Sill money was included with the legitimate dividends- which on the elevation of Mrs. Bowers to the second Mrs. Belknap were often paid directly to General Belknap.

This was construed by Belknap's enemies as a bribe, but his friends insisted he was unaware of the source of the money coming to his wife. Whichever the true case, and it has yet to be settled satisfactorily from an historical standpoint, the 1872 charge was dug out by a Democratic Congressional investigating committee, headed by Heister Clymer, and made an issue in the 1876 campaign. On March 2, 1876, Clymer recommended that the House begin impeachment proceedings against Belknap. The same day, Belknap resigned as Secretary of War, some say to flee the country, others say to prevent an investigation that would expose Mrs. Belknap's part.[28]

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28. See Fred Dustin, pp. 29-39 passim. Dustin makes a very good case that Belknap was innocent of his wife's transactions on the post-traderships. He is supported by a letter written to the New York Evening Post, March 13, 1876, signed "J. C." and identified as a Captain John Codman; the letter was reprinted in the Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 514 (March 18, 1876). It has been overlooked by all historians of the case as far as I am able to ascertain.

Clymer, however, felt justified in launching a full-scale investigation, and Custer offered himself as a witness.

Frazier Hunt states the standard version of this part of the Custer Legend:

> ...Custer felt that there was a strong odor of graft around the war department and he didn't hesitate to make his views known. He was a democrat, and he rather enjoyed airing his views on this Republican administration of Grant's. Somehow, some way, Mr. Heister Clymer found out that Custer had some damaging information against Belknap, and wasn't afraid to talk. Immediately he sent for him to come to Washington and testify.[29]

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29. Frazier Hunt, Custer, Last of the Cavaliers, p. 130. (Hereafter cited by title).

There has been much said about this "somehow, some way" Clymer learned of Custer's "information," but secondhand comment can be dispensed with entirely. Custer informed Clymer himself, as this contemporary news item clearly indicates:

> The newspapers report that General Custer, March 3, telegraphed from St. Paul, Minn., to Mr. Heister Clymer, member of Congress, that, "An investigation of the tradership along the Missouri River would expose as disgraceful a state of affairs as has recently been discovered in connection with Fort Sill."[30]

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30. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 503 (March 11, 1876). There may also have been a letter (See Glory-Hunter, p. 272), or those who so state may only have been confused as to exact means. Several other sources giving similar material can be disregarded here as the news item clearly precedes them all.

Since the 1876 Sioux Campaign was already past the planning stage and into the actual organization, Custer then tried to avoid actual appearance, offering to testify by wire, by mail or messenger. Despite aid given him by General Terry and others, who saw that his appearance might delay the column, in the end he went, and according to another recent apologist,

> Custer's presence, however, was required and, fussing and fuming, he set out for Washington. His exasperation at having been called away from his important plans did not tend to temper his testimony against Belknap to any great extent. Without mincing any words he told what he knew about the graft connected with post tradership. Reporters interviewed him. Willing to let the chips fall where they would, he spoke his mind and was quoted in the newspapers.[31]

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31. Shannon Garst, p. 139f.

Once on the stand, and subject to legal insistence on something more than hearsay, Custer made an extremely poor witness. His sworn testimony nearly boiled down to two points: He was so suspicious of the Secretary of War he could hardly be civil to him on Belknap's 1875 inspection of Fort Lincoln, and he knew of some dealings in corn clearly marked for the Indians.

Testified Custer, when asked how long Belknap stayed at Fort Lincoln; and with whom he stayed:

> Well, sir, he did not stay with anybody.... I knew of his coming and gave such attention as his official position required; a salute was fired, but my knowledge of his transactions and my opinion of them was such that I did not meet him at the edge of the reservation, as was customary. I stayed at my door and waited till he came, and transacted what business I had to transact with him and he went away.[32]

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32. From "Sale of Post Traderships" as quoted in Fred Dustin, p. 41.

This puzzled Belknap so much he wrote to General J. W. Forsyth of Sheridan's staff to see if his own memory was incorrect. Forsyth replied with a letter - headed "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, Chicago, Illinois,

April 15, 1876* - which he gave Belknap permission to publish or circulate as he saw fit:

My Dear General Belknap:

In acknowledging the receipt of your letters of Friday and Sunday, I take the opportunity of saying that your recollections of the visit to Fort Lincoln is correct. Upon our arrival at the steamboat landing at Fort Lincoln, the report was brought to us that General Custer was ill, and I supposed from what was told me that we would find him in bed; but, to my surprise, when we drove up to the front of his quarters, General Custer came out in uniform to the sidewalk in front of his house to meet us, and welcomed you to house and post. During our stay at Lincoln I had a few moments private conversation with him, and he told me that he had been very sick all night with dysentery or diarhoeia, and that he was in bed when our arrival was reported, but that he made the effort, got up and dressed so as to be able personally to meet you, show you the post, etc., etc.

I remember that Mrs. Custer was desirous that we should stay for luncheon with them, and said that she would send out and invite all the ladies of the garrison; that they were all anxious to see the Secretary of War, etc. When informed by you of your limited time and stay with them, she expressed her regret, and spoke of the disappointment of the ladies of the 7th Cavalry.

General Custer drove you around the post, both the upper and lower one, and upon your return to his quarters sent for all the officers of his command and presented them to you. When we left the house General Custer got into the ambulance, or wagon, with you, and accompanied you to the steamboat landing, went on board the boat, and remained on board up to the last moment, only leaving the steamer as she pushed off from the bank. He acted as though he was anxious to see as much of you as possible, and by his presence to make your stay as agreeable as possible.

In fact, you were, in my opinion, treated by General George A. Custer during your visit at his post (Fort Lincoln) last summer with all the politeness, courtesy, and distinguished consideration that he was capable of, or could think of. As regards wine, etc., your stay at his house was too limited for any entertainment; and as everybody in the party knew that the host did not drink liquor of any kind, no one expected wine,

or anything of the sort.

I have yet to meet a single officer of the Army who approves of the action of either Custer or McCook as to their testimony. It is nothing but hearsay, which is largely made up of frontier gossip and stories.

. . . . . .

Yours truly,
J. W. Forsyth[33]

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33. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 595 (April 22, 1876). I reproduce this letter in full principally because it has never appeared elsewhere in print, although the North Dakota Historical Society has an MS. of mine on the matter. Both Dustin and Van de Water were ignorant of it, accepting Custer's version fully.

Of the testimony that he had been forced to receive illegal corn while commandant of Fort Lincoln, on direct orders of the Secretary of War, the following item is complete, and needs no comment:

> The New York Times says: In his testimony before the Clymer Committee, General Custer stated that while at Fort Abraham Lincoln, he refused to receive a certain amount of corn, believing it had been stolen from the Indian dept.; that he reported the facts to the War Dept. about Sept. 1875, that no action was taken upon his report and that subsequently he was obliged, by orders of the War Dept. to receive the corn. Mr. Clymer applied to the Secretary of War for a copy of General Custer's report, and the Secretary of War has replied saying: "I have caused a careful examination to be made in the office of the Secretary of War, the offices of the Adjutant General, Quartermaster-General, and the Commissary-General for the report stated to have been made by General Custer, but no report of that character can be found; nor is there any record of the receipt of such report, or of any directions to Gen. Custer from the War Department or any of its bureaus respecting this subject."[34]

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34. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 615 (April 29, 1876).

Two weeks later, the committee had additional reports from Lt.-Gen. Sheridan and General Terry, commanding the Dept. of Dakota, definitely settling the matter, and utterly discrediting Custer's testimony:

> ....Sheridan: "It is shown by these papers that the corn was received at Fort Lincoln on orders of Brigadier General Terry, commanding the Dept. of Dakota, after a thorough investigation of the whole transaction." ...General Terry says: "The transaction was fully inquired into here, and by evidence given under oath it was shown conclusively, I think, that no fraud had been committed or attempted. To make assurance doubly sure, however, before payment was made to the contractors they were required to give ample bonds to idemnify the government in case fraud should be subsequently discovered."[35]

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35. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 612 (May 13, 1876).

"Fearlessly and almost proudly" Custer may have told what he knew, but what he knew turned out to be utterly worthless. Even a lifetime friend and defender like Col. G. A. ("Sandy") Forsyth had to admit long afterward, "his evidence was all hearsay and not worth a tinker's dam."[36]

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36. C. T. Brady, p. 217. This Forsyth should not be confused with General J. W. Forsyth who wrote the letter to Belknap cited in Note 33. "Sandy" Forsyth, like Custer, had been a protege of Gen. Sheridan's in the Civil War - in fact, accompanying him on the famous ride at Winchester. He also served with Custer on the 1873 Yellowstone Expedition under General Stanley. Some years after the Battle of the Little Big Horn he was given command of the 7th Cavalry, and since he was in command at Wounded Knee in 1890, it was said widely that he opened fire with Hotchkiss automatic guns on the Pine Ridge Sioux encampment to "revenge Custer."

But in trying to smear Belknap who he may have despised for good personal reasons, although none are known, Custer

wielded his tar brush too widely. He brought in the name of Orvil Grant, younger brother of the President, and then in a wild effort to prop up the collapsing edifice of his "evidence" unbelievably impugned the personal honesty of Grant himself.

Of a Captain Raymond and Orvil Grant, and Raymond's appointment as post trader at Fort Berthold by telegram, Custer charged that "...Raymond showed the telegram to several persons in Bismarck, and claimed that he paid Orvil Grant $1,000 for getting the appointment for him."[37] Unsupported

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37. I Fought with Custer, p. 125. This part of the lengthy transcripts of Custer's testimony that Frazier and Robert Hunt have included in Windolph's story, on pp. 124-131.

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by proof this was bad, but far worse was to come. When President Grant's executive order extending the boundary of the Sioux Reservation to the east bank of the Missouri came up in the testimony, Custer left the unmistakable implication that it had been done - not to control better sale of rum to the Indians as publicly stated - but to favor the same men dealing in post tradership, again including Orvil Grant.

There was much other, but when Custer left the stand for the last time he made immediate plans to leave for Fort Lincoln. First, however, he called at the White House, and seemed genuinely surprised that Grant - whom he had just branded publicly as so personally dishonest he would use his executive power to aid his younger brother - that Grant should not be interested in seeing him.

Idolaters picture him as some sort of a ragged, but pure-of-heart, military orphan, shivering in the rain outside

the rich man's palace. And to heighten sympathy for Custer, they nearly always telescope this scene in the White House lobby with others yet to come in a few days. For on April 20, just when Custer was actually leaving, he was again handed a summons from Clymer to remain in Washington for the formal impeachment proceedings of Secretary Belknap.

Making every effort to evade the duty, Custer finally went through channels first to Sherman, then up to the new Secretary of War, Alphonso Taft, and from Taft to Grant. But Grant had a new answer: Since General Custer's presence "seemed to be so necessary in Washington," let the Fort Lincoln column move under a different commander. Custer's carelessness with his political tar brush had painted him right into a corner. This was the myth of "Grant's Revenge."

After much discussion as to who would supercede Custer as head of the Sioux Expedition, General Terry accepted Sheridan's suggestion that he go himself. As to the regiment, on May 5, 1876, S. O. 60, Dept. of Dakota stated in regard to the 7th Cavalry: "Companies A, C, D, F, I...to form part of column from Fort Abraham Lincoln against Sioux Indians, under Major M. A. Reno. All baggage and families left in quarters at fort."[38]

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38. See Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 640 (May 13, 1876).

The remainder of the story, at least, has been kept in a nearly correct form, only that it is interpreted to mean that the Army just simply couldn't get along without Custer,

and that Terry, Sheridan, Sherman, and Grant gave way before a whirlwind of righteous public indignation. Custer frantically left Washington without proper authorization, and was caught up short in Chicago, being placed under arrest. Finally, however, after many futile efforts, a telegram to Grant composed for him by Terry - 'appealing as soldier to soldier not to let his regiment march without him' - brought a reprieve. He could go with the column, but only as in command of the 7th Cavalry.

Long as this re-hash has been, it is short compared to the many meticulous studies made of this brief interval in Custer's life. But all have been constricted into a brief popular myth: Custer 'got' Belknap and Orvil Grant, and Grant purposefully humiliated Custer for doing his duty. But the keen-sighted American public, god bless 'em, forced their wicked president to stay his hand - And wasn't he sorry, too, when only a few brief days away the man he (Grant) had wronged was dead.

Mrs. Custer quite understandably, but amazingly, managed to compress the whole series of events - from the March 3rd telegram to Clymer to Custer's reinstatement and arrival at the Fort May 10th - into

> The preparations for the expedition were completed before my husband returned from the East, whither he had been ordered.[39]

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39. Boots and Saddles, p. 248.

And even as recently as 1947, Frazier Hunt cannot resist titling one chapter in his otherwise clear-spoken book

on Thomas Windolph, "Was Grant's Harsh Rebuke Responsible for Custer's Death?" A higher respect for his cherished newsman's reputation for getting only true fact no longer lets him ignore contrary evidence - as he did in his 1928 book - but he must still end cryptically, with a rhetorical wagging of the head:

> ...Grant had been stern with him. But Custer had his regiment back and there was action ahead.
>
> No man will ever know for certain how much all this had to do with Custer's actions and decisions on the Little Big Horn forty-seven days later.[40]

Charles

40. I Fought With Custer, p. 135. It must be clearly understood that this is Frazier and Robert Hunt here speaking, not Trooper Thomas Windolph who was actually in the battle. All Windolph has to say is: "There was a lot of suspicious talk going on all around the place Fort Lincoln . Custer was still in the East, and you could hear a hundred tales of how he was being kept away from the expedition because he had got under the skin of President Grant." (p. 49f.)

Of all the Custer myths making up the Legend, this is in many ways the most disgusting, for there is always a blasphemous hint of Gethsemane in the choking recital of Custer's immense forbearance toward Grant. Custer, pure of heart, free of guile, utterly forgiving even as the crown of thorns is pressed down on his brow. Custer forgiving Grant for believing that proven mistruths under oath could be given out with personal malice. Custer marching bravely to a foreseen fate, forced to his death by a vindictive political enemy.

Enter a small child downstage left, with a placard: "Next Week, EAST LYNNE!"

THE DEAD HERO

Naturally, the most important part of the Custer Legend deals with the Battle of the Little Big Horn, June 25, 1876, and events just before or after. The battle, and the circumstances surrounding Custer's death, have spawned myths with a profusion to make many facts still impossible of determination. Fred Dustin spent over 50 years gathering material and eliminating unnecessary detail - and still needed 220 oversize pages and several appendices to present as economical an account as exists of Custer's life, and is still adequate to cover controversy. And Dustin at 82 is still finding new material, worthy of consideration.

The Congressional library can show some 28 pages solid of Custer titles, and Captain E. S. Luce, present superintendent of the Custer National Monument, has already been over two years in compiling a comprehensive Custer bibliography - and it must be constantly revised to include unknown items of real value. And now, seventy years after the battle - in which tens of thousands of military men and civilians have tramped the battlefield - he has located the site of an heretofore overlooked skirmish line, where dismounted men 'apparently put up a good hot fight for half an hour or more.'[41] It might conceivably revise all existing

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41. Personal conversation with E. S. Luce, Superintendent of the Custer National Monument, March 14, 1948.

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theories, at least as to Custer's final - and yet unknown - movements.

Therefore, before going into some of the major myths capable of disproof on the much-argued, much -investigated, much-praised, and much-condemned Last Stand, we will give in full the briefest - and in many, many ways the most sensible - account of the battle. It was given direct to the famed Indian painter E. A. Burbank by Two Moons, the great Cheyenne chief:

"Heap big fight. Heap dust."[42]

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42. E. A. Burbank and Ernest Royce, Burbank Among the Indians (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1944), p. 173. This, of course, has no relation to Hamlin Garland's famous interview with Two Moons printed in McClure's Magazine, Vol. II, No. 5, 1898.

A standard account of the Custer Legend, and one lent an air of authority because of its writer, is that attributed to (Mrs.) Annie Gibson Yates, the grieving widow of Captain George W. Yates, killed with Custer. Appearing in 1908 in a book entitled The Boy General, a compilation of Mrs. Custer's various writings by one Mary E. Burt, it bears a footnote: "Edited from a paper prepared by Annie Gibson Yates and revised by Lieutenant-General Nelson A. Miles." One of the gallant widows of the 7th Cavalry, and a lieutenant-general of the Army! How could anyone help but accept it as true history - even when "edited" by the 1900 version of a sob-sister.

Enough of it will be quoted fully to show the Legend as it existed 30 years after the battle, and as it still exists with individual variation or embellishment:

Two days after the Battle of the Little Big Horn the sun rose bright and glorious over The Boy General as he lay in that long sleep from which no mortal wakes. A true leader to the last, he lay at the head of his army on the summit of a ridge overlooking the battle-field, surrounded by his heroic followers. Here with him were his two brothers, Tom Custer and Boston, and his nephew Armstrong Reed, Captain Yates, Lieutenants Cooke, Smith, and Reilly, all lying in a circle of a few yards, their horses beside them. The companies had successively thrown themselves across the path of the enemy. The last stand had been made by Yates's company. Not a man escaped to tell the tale, but it was inscribed upon the surface of the barren hills in a language more eloquent than words.

In the ravine below lay the troops arranged in order of battle, as they had fought, line behind line, showing where defensive positions had been successively taken up and held till not a man was left to continue the fight. ...Lieutenant Smith's skirmishers, still holding their gray horses, were lying in groups of four. Lieutenant Calhoun was on the skirmish-line, and Lieutenant Crittendon and each of the company had fallen in the place to which the tactics would have assigned them.

The true soldier asks no questions; he obeys, and Custer was a true soldier. He gave his life in carrying out the orders of his commanding general. He was sent out to fight and was expected to accomplish results. He had advanced carefully and cautiously upon the enemy, taking three times as much time for the approach as is regarded necessary in the marches of cavalry troops to-day. He often took counsel with his officers and halted to examine all abandoned camps and trails. He was instructed not to let any Indians escape, and was expected to compel them to settle down on their reservations. He had trained and exhorted his men and officers to loyalty, and with one exception they stood true to their trust, as was shown by the order in which they fell. A lieutenant holding an important sheltered position, who should have kept the enemy at bay and could easily have done so, became excited and panic-stricken, gave confused orders and counter-manded them, and finally led a stampede which allowed the Indians to concentrate on one point and advance on Custer's band with overwhelming numbers.

The government, through its Indian agents, had unwittingly provided the savages with better rifles than it had given to its own soldiers.

These reservation Indians had from time to time slipped away from their rightful grounds and joined the hostile red men. They should have been reported to the War Department by the agents employed to look after them....And so it happened that Custer went out to meet less than a thousand Indians and found himself face to face with three thousand, supplied with long-range rifles with which they could stand at a safe distance and take effective aim, while his own men had to extract empty and corroded cartridge-shells, often with their knives, from their inferior short-range rifles. A few days previous to this General Crooke had been sent by the commanding General, Terry, to do battle with the Indians in another place. He was defeated, and the Indians, intoxicated with the victory, had come with greater courage against Custer, and this, with many other unavoidable circumstances, forced the battle before Terry and his men could come up and unite with Custer's forces. General Terry was new to Indian warfare and had to plan the battle as he put it, from 'a conjectural map of an unexplored country,' and without knowing positively the situation of the enemy. So was the brave Seventh Cavalry sent down to the Valley of Death, and the Thermopylae of the western plains is on our national records.

When a relief corps was sent to look up Custer's trail, the column came to a part of the division that had been led by the runaway lieutenant. The men were still fighting in the timber. They gave cheer upon cheer to the soldiers who had come to their relief, and the Indians fell back....

A quarter of a century has elapsed since the Battle of the Little Big Horn. At that time Sitting Bull in Dakota, and Crazy Horse in Wyoming, with their allies Crow King, Gall, Low Dog, Rumph and Two Moons kept a territory of 90,000 square miles in terror, slaying without mercy travelers, settlers, woodchoppers, and hunters. To-day hundreds of thousands of happy people in snug homes on well-tilled farms, or in pretty villages, rejoice in the peace and prosperity of the same country which still has room enough for as many Indians as ever lived there.

As a pioneer the name of George Armstrong Custer will live side by side with that of LaSalle, Captain John Smith, Boone, and Miles Standish. And he has won unfading glory as a soldier, through his efficient zealm devoted patriotism, and high courage that counted death in loyal service, a victory.[43]

43. Mary E. Burt, ed., The Boy General (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), pp. 198-204.

Obviously this is a book for younger readers, like Shannon Garst's 1944 juvenile, but neither is easily dismissed. Garst, as previously stated (See Note 2, above), had full access to some of the most carefully written Custer books existent. And Miss Burt in her day had the help of General Miles, Captain Godfrey and his famed Century article, and Mrs. Yates - particularly in the material just quoted. Says Miss Burt in her preface: "...This is a chapter long desired by all the young readers who are interested in getting a clear account of the Battle of the Little Big Horn. It is the only simple, reliable, and brief account of that battle that has been put in shape for children's reading."

"Simple" and "children's reading" it is, indeed, but the same story - often little better told - can be found in a dozen "adult" books written since Miss Burt's time. Therefore, we have the most important part of the Custer Legend in a convenient nutshell - ready to be cracked and found wormy by analytical comparison with documented fact. And the very fact that it is a "juvenile", and consequently more representative of popular thinking, makes it ideal for our purposes.

It is necessary to recapitulate briefly the events leading up to Custer being present in the Big Horn country the fateful week of his death.

On December 6, 1875, the Commissioner of Indian

Affairs, under instructions of the Secretary of the Interior sent the following word to several different Indian agents:

> ...notify Sitting Bull's band and other wild and lawless bands of Sioux Indians residing without the bounds of their reservation, who roam over western Dakota and eastern Montana including the rich valley of the Yellowstone and Powder Rivers, and make war on the Arickarees, Mandans, Gros Ventres, Assiniboines, Blackfeet, Piegans, Crows and other friendly tribes, that unless they shall remove within the bounds of their reservation (and remain there) before the 31st of January next, they shall be deemed hostile and treated accordingly by the military force.[44]

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44. P. E. Byrne, Soldiers of the Plains, p. 25. (Hereafter cited as P. E. Byrne). The "soldiers" in Byrne's title does not refer to Army troops but to the hostile Indians whose military abilities, maneuverings, and strategy he analyzes and evaluates as exceeding that of the officers and men sent against them.

The letter did not reach any of the agents until December 20, and because of the severe winter weather runners sent out to the Indians in some cases did not even reach the Sioux until after the expiration of the January 31st time limit; and in other cases there was no possible way in which the order could have been complied with in the brief time remaining. Nevertheless, at the precise time of expiration, the Secretary of Interior surrendered jurisdiction over the "hostiles" and the War Department started planning punitive action.

Sheridan, as commander of the "Military Division of the Missouri" - embracing all territory bordering the Missouri and west to the Rocky Mountains - operated through two departmental commanders: Crook and Terry. Crook commanded the Department of the Platte, and was equal in rank

and separate in action from Terry, commander of the Department of Dakota, and at all times Custer's superior officer.

Crook was never under Terry's command, and he was never "sent by the commanding General, Terry, to do battle with the Indians in another place." He opened the 1876 campaign by moving out of Fort Fetterman, Wyoming Territory, on March 1st, with 10 full troops of Cavalry, 2 companies of Infantry, 86 wagons, 4 ambulances, and a pack train of 400 mules. On March 16, General J. J. Reynolds with 6 troops of Cavalry attacked Crazy Horse's Village, was repulsed and thrown back on the main column under Crook. Crazy Horse then so harried the main force the entire expedition withdrew to its base at Fetterman.

It was this defeat of Crook's that brought about the concerted movement Custer was to take part in. Crook was to form another column of some 1050 men from Wyoming; General John Gibbon to form a Montana column of some 400 men from Fort Ellis; and there was to be a Dakota column of some 1200 men, originally slated for Custer. Terry was to be in overall command of both the Montana and Dakota columns, and after Custer's blunders in Washington took active command of the latter. The three forces were to drive the hostiles back to their reservations.

Crook, independent in command, moved his second expedition in three months from Fort Fetterman on May 26th. On June 17th he overtook a force of Sioux on the Rosebud in Montana a few miles south of Custer's defeat a week later.

For the second time Crook was defeated by Crazy Horse and withdrew to a temporary base at Goose Creek. He had no contact with Terry's force - except through the headquarters of Sheridan in Chicago - until after the Battle of the Little Big Horn.[45] This is his only connection with the Custer

45. P. E. Byrne, pp. 38-57 passim.

Legend, except as a convenient contrast designed to heighten Custer's fame - and lessen the stigma of defeat.

"Crook," says General Kidd, "like Custer, had seen service in the Indian country but, unlike Custer, had not distinguished himself by any marked success as an Indian fighter."[46] In the 1876 campaign honors seemed to be about

46. J. H. Kidd, p. 104. General Sherman, however, rated Crook "our greatest Indian fighter" - and a study of his career lends the tribute great support.

even, except that Crook lost but 10 dead and 21 wounded - and returned to win at Slim Buttes in September. Custer took some 225 men to death with him, and his regiment was rendered virtually ineffective, never again campaigning as a unit.

Terry and Gibbon, however, made contact on June 8, 1876, and joined forces on the Yellowstone. From June 10th to the 19th, Reno with part of the 7th Cavalry was on a scout, and returned with reports of a great Indian trail leading toward the valley of the Big Horn River. With this intelligence Terry and Gibbon formulated a plan on the night of June 21st - Custer sitting in through the courtesy of his superiors

and to soothe his still bruised ego. The plan was simple: Custer with the main body of cavalry, the 7th, would march up the Rosebud (South) and by a long swinging march meet Gibbon's slower moving column of mixed infantry and cavalry near the mouth of the Little Big Horn on June 26th, trapping the Indians between them.

"The true soldier asks no questions; he obeys, and Custer was a true soldier. He gave his life in carrying out the orders of his commanding general" - so says Mrs. Yates (or General Miles through Miss Burt). But there is no question at this late date that Custer most certainly disobeyed his orders. He did not follow the route tenatively laid out for him by his superiors - and there was no good reason for his not doing so - and he brought on the battle a full 24 hours before schedule.

Every type of excuse has been advanced for him, General Godfrey even italicizing parts of Terry's written order to Custer to excuse his departing from it. General Miles professed for years to have an affidavid "from a party also present" at the council of war proving that Terry verbally gave Custer a free hand. And finally Terry's plan was belittled as "fatuous" or "preposterous" based on a "guess" that the Indians were on the Little Big Horn.[47]

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47. See C. T. Brady, Appendix A, pp. 359ff.; Fred Dustin, passim.; Glory-Hunter, pp. 356-370; etc., etc.

The written order is not going to be quoted or reproduced in full here (a virtual sacrilege in a Custer paper - but see Appendix I), because in the final analysis it is of

little importance - save that had Custer actually triumphed in his premature attack its wording might have strengthened his alibi. Certain parts, for example, have been treated like the words of Christ by his critics, unbelievable stress being placed on his failure to scout a watercourse named "Tulloch's Creek" according to definite instructions. And the courteousness of address used by Terry to boost the morale of his crestfallen subordinate has been tortured by apologists into a carte blanche to let Custer start a brand new campaign of his own, if he felt like it. The controversy over the last order is a study in applied semantics, not history.

Cutting through the hedgerows of verbiage, the problem of fact against myth comes down to a few simple points: (1) What was decided at the conference of June 21st? (2) Was Custer present at that conference, and therefore aware of what was decided - regardless of any forms of military formality thereafter carried out? (3) If Custer was given complete independence of operation could it be done without a clear understanding on the part of his superiors present? (4) Did Terry and Gibbon understand that Custer was to be in position at a certain stipulated time, and did they so conduct their own movements? (5) If Gibbon and Terry were in agreement as to what part Custer was to play - and Custer was present and therefore informed - and Custer's movements were at variance with this agreement, then Custer disobeyed his orders.

The reports of Gibbon and Terry are thus of far more importance than the famed written order. Said Terry in his

report to Sheridan:

> ...At a conference which took place on the 21st between Colonel Gibbon, Lieutenant Colonel Custer, and myself, I communicated to them the plan of operations which I had decided to adopt. It was that Colonel Gibbon's column should cross the Yellowstone near the mouth of the Little Big Horn, and thence up that stream, with the expectation that it would arrive at the last-named point by the 26th; that Lieutenant Colonel Custer with the whole of the Seventh Cavalry should proceed up the Rosebud until he should ascertain the direction in which the trail discovered by Major Reno led; that if it led to the Little Big Horn it should not be followed; but that Lieutenant Colonel Custer should keep still farther to the south before turning toward that river, in order to intercept the Indians should they attempt to pass around his left, and in order, by a longer march, to give time for Colonel Gibbon's column to come up.
>
> This plan was founded on the belief that at some point on the Little Big Horn a body of hostile Sioux would be found; and although it was impossible to make movements in perfect concert, as might have been done had there been a known fixed objective to be reached, yet, by the judicious use of excellent guides and scouts which we possessed, the two columns might be brought within cooperating distance of each other, so that either of them which should be first engaged might be a "waiting fight" - giving time for the other to come up....[48]

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48. As reprinted in I Fought with Custer, p. 144f.

Said Gibbon in his report to Sheridan:

> ...That evening the plan of operations was agreed upon. Lieutenant Colonel Custer, with the Seventh Cavalry, was to proceed up the Rosebud till he struck an Indian trail, discovered during Major Reno's scout. As my scouts had recently reported smoke on the Little Big Horn, the presence of an Indian camp some distance up that stream was inferred.
>
> Lieutenant Colonel Custer was instructed to keep constantly feeling toward his left, well up toward the mountains, so as to prevent the Indians escaping in that direction and to strike the Little Big Horn, if possible above (south) of the supposed location of the camp, while my command

> was to march up the Yellowstone to the mouth of the Big Horn to the mouth of the Little Big Horn and up that stream, with the hope of getting the camp between the two forces. As it would take my command three days to reach the mouth of the Big Horn, and probably a day to cross it over the Yellowstone, besides two more to reach the mouth of the Little Big Horn, and Lieutenant Colonel Custer had the shorter line over which to operate, the department commander strongly impressed upon him the propriety of not pressing his march too rapidly....[49]

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49. As reprinted in I Fought with Custer, p. 146f.

And said Terry in his confidential telegram to Sheridan, July 2, 1876, a week after the battle:

> ...The movements proposed for Genl. Gibbon's column were carried out to the letter and had the attack been deferred until it was up I cannot doubt that we should have been successful....
>
> I send in another dispatch a copy of my written orders to Custer, but these were supplemented by the distinct understanding that Gibbon could not get to the Little Big Horn before the evening of the 26th.[50]

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50. As quoted in Fred Dustin, p. 197.

Unless even now - since Custer apologists keep the controversy raging - absolute proof could be brought forward that Gibbon and Terry were men lacking in integrity, or as officers of such mendacious character as to color, distort, or omit pertinent facts for self-protection in their official reports to their superior officer the fact of disobedience is indisputable. Nor can it be said, as has at times been hinted, that Gibbon and Terry were cursed with the failing memory of old age. "Grizzled old General Gibbon" and "kindly old General Terry" were 50 and 49 years old respectively at the time.

Nor was Terry's plan a "preposterous guess," but a skilful use of limited intelligence. He had definite information as to terrain, the Crow Scouts led by Mitch Bouyer being on familiar ground, Reno's scout having covered the country from the Powder to the Rosebud, and Captain Ball's scout of April 24th to May 1st having passed right over the site of the coming battle. It was for this reason he wanted the Infantry as well as the Cavalry within supporting distance. As to numbers of Indians neither Terry, nor any other officer in the Army, could conceive of such immense numbers concentrating forces prior to actual proof in the battle.

But the final test of his "fatuous plan" was the actual location of the Indians, and the actual position of Gibbon's column on the day appointed. Terry and Gibbon were in the valley of the Little Big Horn, within ten miles of the battle site, the evening of June 26th, and in the morning of the 27th advanced directly over the battlefield. The myth of a carte blanche order or of Custer "giving his life in carrying out the orders of his commanding general" is exploded: Rather, his disobedience brought death to 225 men, and a battle was lost.

"He had advanced carefully and cautiously upon the enemy, taking three times as much time for the approach as is regarded necessary in the marches of cavalry troops today." The time regarded necessary, of course, must always depend on a particular set of conditions at a given time. Custer's conditions had less to do with the speed of his horses than with the coordinating of it to properly complete a junction

with Gibbon. But the "carefully and cautiously" must be broken down.

The 7th Cavalry left the Yellowstone June 22nd and went into action shortly after noon of the 25th. The actual line of march has variously estimated from 90 miles (J. H. Kidd), 106 miles (Godfrey), 125 miles (Benteen), and 107 miles not counting extra mileage for Reno and Benteen (Fred Dustin). Godfrey has stated in making one of his estimates, "...that is to say, ninety-one miles up to noon June 25 when it was decided to attack, and one hundred six miles in all four days. That doesn't indicate that we made forced marches."[51]

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51. C. T. Brady, Appendix A, p. 390. Kidd obviously has taken Godfrey's lower estimate. Benteen's estimate is used by Terry in his July 2nd telegram to General Sheridan.

On a straight average Godfrey would, of course, have been right but the marches varied in length, and grew progressively longer as men and horses grew more tired and the battle approached. Dustin roughly agrees with Godfrey in his total but has broken it down by times as well as days in his study:

> ...On June 22, the command marched twelve miles, going into camp about 4:00 p.m. On the 23rd, starting at 5:00 a.m. the march was thirty-three miles, camping at 4:30. On the 24th, moving at 5:00 a.m., marched until 1:00 p.m., moving out again at 5:00 p.m. and camping at 7:45 p.m., distance twenty-eight miles. On the 25th, the command marched at 1:00 a.m., none of the men having had more than three hours sleep and many none at all. This march continued until about 4:00 a.m., and was resumed at 8:00 a.m., covering a distance of probably fourteen miles to the ravine at the foot of the Crow's Nest. From this point to the Custer Field Monument the distance is not less than twenty miles over his route, and

> Reno in reaching his final position traveled still farther, while Benteen's troops added at least six to eight miles in their march.
>
> It will be manifest, therefore, that Custer's and Reno's battalions marched over sixty miles from five o'clock in the morning of the 24th to approximately two o'clock in the afternoon of the 25th; Benteen upwards of seventy miles and the pack train and its escort over fifty-five miles - in a period of thirty-three hours including halts, with very little sleep or food, hardly any water, almost no grass, and but few oats for the animals.[52]

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52. Fred Dustin, p. 102.

Godfrey to the contrary, that does sound like "forced" marches. However, Windolph recalls today:

> ...We were all fairly tired, men and horses alike, but we weren't anywheres near being worn out. Each of us had started with a twelve-pound bag of oats tied on to our saddles and we were almost to the end of them. But we'd let our horses graze as much as we could and with two or three oats a day our mounts were doing fairly well. Most of them were strong young cavalry horses.[53]

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53. I Fought With Custer, p. 73f.

But Trooper Slaper in 1925 - and that many years closer to the actual march in his memory - states flatly:

> ...This forced march had much to do with the worn condition of our horses during the battle of the Little Big Horn. The grazing had been poor for several days, and as we were traveling in light marching order - that is, without wagons - there was little, if any, grain for our horses.[54]

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54. A Trooper with Custer, p. 26.

And finally we now have the comment of Lieutenant Frank Gibson, written to his wife July 4, 1876 - only ten days after

the actual events:

> ...On the twenty third, we struck an Indian trail, only two days old, so we marched night and day at a trot and gallop with occasional short halts so, of course, the men and horses became exhausted for the need of rest and food, but still we went pushing and crowding along.[55]

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55. (Mrs.) Katherine Gibson Fougera, With Custer's Cavalry, p. 266f. The letter was headed "Camp on the Yellowstone River, Montana Territory, July--4, 1876." Mrs. Gibson mentions that it was written in pencil on government toilet paper. There is also a letter of Benteen's of the same date now available, but he makes no special mention of the march to the battlefield.

"Cautious" Custer actually seems to have been on the march, in most cases throwing out Indian scouts and watching for danger signs, but "careful" would have to include more thought as to what he was doing to his men and animals than is shown. As for his march taking "three times as much time... as regarded necessary...today" one wonders where General Miles was when Mrs. Yates made that comparison, or if he actually would ride men three times harder than Custer did his.

As to his "often taking counsel with his officers," Lieutenant Gibson has also left us the impression made by his doing so, since it was completely contrary to accustomed procedure. Again quoting from his July 4th letter to Mrs. Gibson:

> ...As we marched along through the heat I could not but recall the rather odd talk we had with Custer the evening of the twenty second. When officers' call was sounded we assembled at his bivouac and squatted in groups about his cot...We were cautioned to husband our mules and ammunition and, finally, he asked all officers to make suggestions to him at any time. This struck

> us as the strangest part of the meeting, for you know how dominant and self reliant he always was, and we left him with a queer sort of depression. McIntosh, Wallace, Godfrey and I walked back to our tents together and finally Wallace said - "I believe General Custer is going to be killed."
>
> "Why?" asked Godfrey.
>
> "Because I never heard him talk in this way before - that is, asking the advice of anyone."56

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56. With Custer's Cavalry, p. 267f. Godfrey tells the same story in his 1892 Century article - but with an interesting difference. He omits the qualifying phrase "- that is, asking the advice of anyone;" which changes the meaning considerably.

And Windolph adds an eyewitness account of how Custer received an actual suggestion - one from Benteen on the morning of the battle. Windolph wanted permission to trade horses with a trooper named McCurry, and rode up to Benteen to get it:

> ...I went to look him up and get his permission, and I found him with General Custer and several of the officers at a conference. I approached as near as seemed respectful and while I was waiting to catch Benteen's attention, I couldn't help but overhear part of the conversation.
>
> Charlie Reynolds, the famous white scout - who was never to see the sun set that day - was talking, and I heard him say that there was the biggest bunch of Indians he'd ever seen over there. Finally I heard Benteen say to Custer: "Hadn't we better keep the regiment together, General? If this is as big a camp as they say, we'll need every man we have."
>
> Custer's only answer was: "You have your orders."...57

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57. I Fought With Custer, p. 75f.

All of which leads us naturally into the most vicious myths of all: Benteen's "treachery" and Reno's "cowardice" -

or sometimes "drunken cowardice" - and the disobedience to orders of both. Mrs. Yates refers only to "a lieutenant holding a sheltered position...led a stampede" or "the runaway lieutenant", but other writers of juvenile literature - intended as such or not - are less circumspect.

Frazier Hunt's 1928 book is full of off-hand references to Reno and Benteen by name, pointing them up as the villains of the piece. "Lovely Mrs. Custer rode by his side this first day. They talked of many things - of the general's young brother and his nephew, accompanying them on the expedition; of the hate that Major Reno, the senior officer in his command, and Benteen, his ranking captain, bore for him. He would conciliate these two....To Major Reno - who had for three days been chafing under the fancied insult that Custer was degrading his rank by giving him nothing to do - was assigned the advance....He [Reno] had only hate and prejudice against Custer....They [Reno and Benteen] had only scorn for him - those two who hated him..."etc., etc. ad nauseum, ad infinitum.[58]

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58. Custer, Last of the Cavaliers, passim.

Shannon Garst goes at it like a good pulp fictioneer, sowing the seeds of suspicion against Reno and Benteen with a blacksmith's subtle touch. He requires a fuller excerpting, and his embellished account of the battle shows an opinionated vindictiveness lacking in Mrs. Yates.

> Custer looked over the officers who were to assist him, appraising them swiftly. Benteen hated him bitterly, he knew, and a slight trace

> of scorn crossed his face as he looked at the older man - scorn that one should allow personal spites and animosities to becloud military matters. But Benteen was a capable and courageous soldier. Custer felt that he could depend on him in an emergency in spite of his personal feelings.
>
> A slight frown clouded his face as his glance passed quickly over Reno. Reno was a young man who had acquitted himself creditably in the Civil War. He, too, was inexperienced in Indian campaigning. Custer didn't quite trust Reno, and he hardly knew why. It was a feeling based more on instinct than fact. Probably Reno would come through all right....

And later -

> In the rapid-fire manner in which he gave directions, he said, "You are to march with the greatest possible rapidity. Each officer will look carefully to his men and do what is expected of him." He looked levelly at Reno and Benteen as he said this.[59]

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59. Shannon Garst, pp. 145, 151. The unintentional irony of the line "He, too, was inexperienced in Indian campaigning" almost redeems Garst's book.

Custer's bitterest enemies could scarcely do worse by him than such writers. The bestowing of a Christ-like forbearance on him in his political episodes makes one merely angry; but the melodramatic Galahad pictured in these passages unfairly turns on him the demolishing weapon of laughter. Instead of a man of indisputable personal bravery going to death, he takes on the airs of the Model Youth of the storybooks, who always states priggishly: "You may have my bicycle, Geraldine. Being a gentleman means more to me than losing my dearest possession."

Of Benteen's active dislike and scorn for Custer there can be little doubt - some of it beyond question dated from the "Major Elliot affair" at Washita, but the causes went

farther back and deeper than that. Benteen was an embittered idealist with an unshakable code of conduct that gave him the invincible courage to stand up to man, God, the Indians - or his superior officer. It was his great strength throughout a life that might have broken a lesser man.

Benteen was a Virginian who remained loyal to the Union and fought in the Union army during the Civil War - with all the heartbreak such a course necessarily brought to a native Southerner. He commanded a brigade of volunteers in the campaigns of the "West" and held a regular army brevet of Colonel. In the years immediately preceding the Little Big Horn he was in command of Fort Rice - an old army post south of Bismarck that had once been abandoned and allowed to go ruin, and which was never repaired when garrisoned once more.

Fort Lincoln had few enough conveniences, but it was at least not isolated, as Bismarck was just across the river - a busy riverport as well as terminus of the new Northern Pacific. Old Fort Rice was - and is - completely isolated. Duty there actually drove men insane, and Benteen in the winter of 1876 buried his youngest child in the desolate post cemetery by the rotting hulks of the fort's "quarters."[60]

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60. With Custer's Cavalry, pp. 224-256. Mrs. Gibson gives as vivid a picture of garrison life as any of Mrs. Custer's books - and of an even more heartbreaking kind. The Benteen child died while his father was out on special duty, and Mrs. Gibson helped Mrs. Benteen prepare the burial - even donating her wedding dress to line the makeshift casket.

He had made his personal sacrifice to opening of the West

long before the Custer family.

Yet his conduct was such that enlisted men as well as officers became undying partisans of this iron captain who showed and asked no favors. Interestingly enough, the two 7th Cavalry veterans still living both express their tremendous admiration for Benteen - although Horner's springs from the Nez Perce campaign of 1877 rather than the Custer massacre.[61]

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61. Horner still remembers the sight of Benteen forming and leading a mounted charge under fire at Canyon Creek, Sept. 13, 1877. (See Jacob Horner, p. 20f.) Windolph as a Troop H man begins his story for Frazier Hunt with "...I'm proud to have known and fought under Captain Benteen of 'H'. He was just about the finest soldier and the greatest gentleman I ever knew. And I might as well say right now that I'm a Benteen man...." (See I Fought With Custer, p. 2f.) Some believe that Windolph is prejudiced because Benteen made him a sergeant in the field at Little Big Horn, but the fact remains that "no troop commander is a hero to his men" unless he is outstanding. Slaper has left similar testimony as to Captain French of "M", as has William Morris. But many others are conspicuous by their absence.

There is likewise on record endless testimony from officers like Gibson, Wallace, Barnum, Edgerly - who were on Reno Hill - and later additions to the Seventh like E. A. Garlington and Hugh L. Scott. All of it shows that Benteen was of the best of everything that the phrase "old army" still implies.

All of which is to say that Benteen was not only a man of recognized integrity and courage, as an officer he was much that we know Custer was not. Since the barren satisfaction of living up to his personal code was all too often his only reward he was repelled by the vivid Custer's delight in personal glory as he was by his thoughtless treatment of the

rank and file. From the first meeting he disliked him. Custer spent most of the time in reciting his Civil War prowess, interspersed with reference to the Third Division order book. "I had been on intimate personal relations with many great generals and had heard no such bragging as was stuffed into me that night," wrote Benteen of the younger man's conversation.[62]

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62. Glory-Hunter, p. 155.

Actually the only common ground the two men shared was their matchless, almost foolhardy, personal bravery. Both gloried in a good hard fight, and seemed to delight in defying enemy bullets. Beyond that they were exact opposites. Doubtless the younger superior felt obligated to justify his rank to an equally experienced subordinate, but from that day on Benteen was the foreboding and ever-present conscience of the 7th Cavalry. Even at the Little Big Horn he was right when he urged Custer to keep the regiment together (See Note 57 above).

The final charge against Benteen narrows down to whether or not he deliberately tarried once he had received the famous order: "Benteen. Come on. Big Village. Be quick. Bring packs. P. S. Bring packs." Says the Custer Legend, through Garst:

> ...As Benteen read the message he could hear the sound of firing up the valley.
>
> The language of the note was urgent. Benteen knew what Custer meant by "packs." It meant ammunition, and he was obviously in dire need of it. Yet Benteen sent no word to his commander and made no move to send his pack

> mules that were already loaded with 2,000 rounds of rifle ammunition each.
>
> Why Benteen failed to heed that urgent cry for help will never be known.
>
> He did, however, urge his troops along to where he could join up with Reno's men on the bluffs along the river.[63]

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63. Shannon Garst, p. 158.

Three inferences are plain: Benteen had the packs with him, Benteen deliberately lagged, and Benteen deliberately joined Reno instead of going to Custer. And, of course, this was really Custer's "second" message to Benteen; Sgt. Daniel Kanipe having given the first. Now to check facts against myth.

The packs were a separate battalion - formed by Custer - with Captain McDougall and Troop B as a guard, and First Lieutenant Mathey in charge of the mules. All told there were about 130 men. They were not "with" Benteen until both battalions joined Reno on Reno Hill. It was to Captain McDougall, Sergeant Kanipe was properly directed, with any message to Benteen secondary "if he saw him," Kanipe says:

> Custer and his troops were within about one-half mile of the east side of the Indian camps when I received the following message from Captain Thomas Custer Kanipe's company commander : "Go to Captain McDougall. Tell him to bring pack train straight across the country. If any packs come loose, cut them and come on quick - a big Indian camp. If you see Captain Benteen, tell him to come quick - a big Indian camp."
>
> On my route to Captain McDougall I saw Captain Benteen about half way between where I left General Custer and the pack train. He and his men were watering their horses when first seen. Captain McDougall and the pack train were found about four miles from the Indian camp. The pack train went directly to the bluff where I left Custer's five troops. When we reached there

we found Reno with a remnant of his three troops and Benteen with his three troops.64

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64. I Fought with Custer, p. 82. This is from Kanipe's own account written later for the Montana Historical Society magazine.

Benteen's officers apparently did not feel at the time that they "had lagged." Again using Lieutenant Gibson's letter of July 4, 1876, we get a very concise account of what happened up Benteen's joining Reno:

> ...Benteen's battalion...was sent to the left about five miles to see if the Indians were trying to escape up the valley of the Little Big Horn, after which we were to hurry and rejoin the command as quickly as possible. We never saw Custer after that. He went on with the balance of the command and, when he got in sight of the village, ordered Reno, with companies A, G, and M to cross the Little Big Horn and open the fight.... all this time Tom McDougall with B company was about three miles in our rear, bringing up the pack train. When we got within two miles of the village Benteen got a note from Cooke Custer's adjutant which ran thus - "Come on-big village-be quick-bring packs." We didn't wait for the packs as we felt pretty sure no Indians had passed our rear.
>
> When we reached the battleground we found utter confusion. Reno had made a charge and had been repulsed....We joined our three companies with Reno's, put ourselves in position on the hill, and waited for McDougall to come up with the packs, and just before he reached us the Indians commenced to swarm around us like devils, thousands of them all with modern rifles, while we were using old carbines, so we were immediately on the defensive.65

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65. With Custer's Cavalry, p. 268f.

Benteen also wrote a lengthy letter to his wife July 4, 1876, but his official report to Reno dated the same day is more concise as to the points mentioned. The important

excerpts are:

> ...Another mile and a half brought me in sight of the stream and plain in which were some of our dismounted men fighting, and Indians charging and recharging them in great numbers. The plain seemed alive with them. I then noticed our men in large numbers running for the bluffs on right bank of the stream. I concluded at once that those had been repulsed, and was of the opinion that if I crossed the ford with my battalion, that I should have had it treated in like manner; for, from long experience with cavalry, I judge there were 900 veteran Indians right there at that time against which the large element of recruits in my battalion would stand no earthly chance as mounted men. I then moved up to the bluffs and reported my command to Major M. A. Reno. I did not return for the pack train because I deemed it perfectly safe where it was...; and another thing, it savored too much of coffee-cooling to return when I was sure a fight was progressing in the front, and deeming the train was safe without me.[66]

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66. I Fought With Custer, p. 185f. On verbal orders, Benteen made a written accounting of his time and movements for inclusion in Reno's formal report.

Only one more example of the kind of errors propagating the Custer Legend need be cited. General J. H. Kidd, in his intense admiration for his fellow Michigan soldier, grew original with the truth in regard to the ease of communications between Benteen and Custer:

> ...Benteen had plenty of time to overtake Custer if he had zealously and in good faith obeyed the order to "Come on!" and "Be quick!" The trumpeter who brought the order went back and was killed with the others.[67]

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67. J. H. Kidd, p. 113.

The "trumpeter who brought the order," John Martin - who as Giovanni Martini had fought under Garibaldi - actually

died in Brooklyn, N. Y., December 24, 1922, more than forty-six years after "the others."[68]

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68. A Trooper With Custer, p. 125. The same year of his death, 1922, Trumpeter Martin was located by Col. W. A. Graham and his story printed in the U. S. Cavalry Journal for June, 1923.

In Reno's case, separating myths, lies, rumors, supposition, slander, and vicious insinuation from fact is a prodigious task. Reno was made the goat of the Custer disaster, and unfairly subjected to some of the most mendacious and savage attacks on public record. Some are so utterly unfair, and far afield from known conditions, in their basic premise as to arouse indignation even at this late day.

It was assumed at once, without waiting for proof, that Reno - as the only other field-grade officer with the regiment at the Battle of the Little Big Horn - was not only fully aware of Custer's plan of combat once the issue was joined, but had presumably had a hand in drawing it up and was given explicit orders as to his part in it. Consequently when he was repulsed in the initial attack on the Indian village, withdrew to the hills, and then failed to make a junction with Custer's immediate command it was prima facie evidence to Custer adherents of wilfull disobedience to orders.

When the dramatic facts of the Last Stand became known - that not a man under Custer escaped alive - the ugly word "cowardice" was thrust forward as a reason for the "disobedience." Then the courtmartial of public opinion sharply diverged as to the primary cause of all. One faction

brought forth a myth of "drunkenness," and another persisted in charging clear-headed treachery - based on a mythical hatred of Custer. In the seventy-two years given them since the battle Reno's detractors have yet to bring forth valid proof for either.

An official Court of Inquiry (not a "court-martial" as the term is popularly understood) investigated all the charges in 1879, and completely exonerated Reno. But it was termed a "whitewash" - although nearly every surviving officer of the fight was present and some enlisted men - and conveniently disregarded by his detractors. Since Reno was even then under a two-year suspension from rank and pay on another court-martial charge - he was found guilty of "scandalous misconduct" at Fort Aberchrombie in 1877, on charges which have no relation to the battle - he was in a poor position to fight back.

And he continued to make himself a convenient target. After resuming his rank in the 7th Cavalry in 1879, he was subjected to one of the most farcial courts-martial on record, and dismissed from the service for "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman." He remained about Washington for the next ten years, seeking reinstatement and drinking heavily to forget his wrongs. While under surgery for a growth on the tongue, he died in a Washington hospital on March 30, 1889.

These separate, and often totally unrelated events, are telescoped in the Custer Legend into one convenient damning sequence, in form something like this: "Reno caused

Custer's defeat and death at the Little Big Horn, was court-martialed, dismissed from the service and drank himself to death." It is little wonder the Legend has survived so many writings with such an open-and-shut case against Custer's second-in-command.

But many recent Custer scholars have found plenty of hidden springs in that "open-and-shut case." E. A. Brininstool and Col. W. A. Graham have rather conclusively justified Reno's movements in the river bottom, and Fred Dustin has demolished most of the grave charges made about his conduct on the hill. Since that time some new evidence of a contemporary nature has come to light, and in the second part of this paper - explaining how the Custer Legend was artifically created - other "hidden springs" will be disclosed.

For the present we will concern ourselves only with the way it exists, and try to show Reno's true actions. Some of the minor myths can be dispelled first, before the major charges are considered - although we definitely shall not recover every disputed point of the battle.

Reno had a Civil War record nearly as distinguished as Custer's, and he antedated him in service. He graduated Number 20 in the West Point class of 1857, and was commissioned in the First Dragoons. At the opening of the war he was made Captain of the First Cavalry, and rose through "gallant and meritorious services in the field" to Brevet Major (Kelley's Ford, March 17, 1863), Brevet Lieutenant Colonel (Cedar Creek, October 19, 1864), and was commissioned Colonel of the 12th Pennsylvania July 20, 1865. Three months

previously, on March 13, 1865, he had been given brevet commissions of Colonel and Brigadier General of the U. S. Volunteers.[69]

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69. I Fought With Custer, p. 163; Fred Dustin, p. 16. Dustin notes elsewhere (p. 215) that "we have never noted his being called 'General,' as the writers almost invariably call Custer." But I am certain in my own mind that this had nothing to do with disparaging Reno, but rather to avoid confusing him with Brig. Gen. J. L. Reno, noted Civil War cavalry leader greatly admired by Lincoln and killed in 1862. It is after General Jesse L. Reno that old Fort Reno in Wyoming, Reno, Nevada, and Fort Reno, Oklahoma were named. As to Custer - in fact and Regular Army rank only a Lieutenant Colonel - always being called "General", I have used it myself throughout this paper because that is the way he is remembered in the popular mind.

He did not join the 7th Cavalry until 1869 - after the Battle of Washita - and spent much of the time from then until 1874 on special service in the West: scouting expeditions into Colorado, protecting railroad surveys, and escorting the commission establishing the final Canadian line. It was true that he has left no record of previous participation in Indian skirmishing, but he was scarcely inexperienced in the West. In point of technical fact, his frontier service long antedated Custer's, as Reno served from the time of his graduation from West Point in 1857 until ordered East in 1861 at Fort Walla Walla, Washington Territory.

Reno was, then, a veteran and experienced Cavalry leader of high ability, and he was hardly what objective examination would term "new" to the West. His personality was rather colorless, however, and he cannot be said to have been prepossessing. There was never a "Reno faction" in the Seventh as there was definitely a "Benteen faction" and a

"Custer gang." But no valid proof of his hating Custer exists.

However, since even a careful (for his time) writer like Brady believed in it, it will have to be briefly considered. Ignoring the inaccurate work of Hunt or Garst entirely we find:

> His relations with General Custer had not been friendly; so inimical were they, in fact, that Custer was begged, before starting on the fatal campaign not to intrust the command of any supporting movement to Reno. Custer refused to allow any such personal considerations to prevent Reno receiving the command to which his rank entitled him.[70]

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70. C. T. Brady, Note, p. 232.

Who begged Custer is not stated (though the inference elsewhere seems to be that it was Mrs. Custer), and the statement rings pretty much of something growing out of the controversy, rather than contributing to it. While we cannot directly refute it, we do have the word of men contemporary to the events that casts such doubt upon its existence it must be considered myth instead of fact. Van de Water gives us some of their names:

> It is probable that, later, Reno grew to loathe Custer's memory as a man will detest another whose death has brought him obloquy. There is scant warrant for the tale of earlier animosity. Generals Scott and Garlington, who joined the 7th Cavalry immediately after the campaign, never in those early days heard the story of this alleged hatred. Colonel Varnum, sole surviving officer [1934] who rode with Custer, also denies it. So does Theodore Goldin, veteran of the Little Big Horn. Benteen hated his superior with a divine consistency. Other officers in his regiment disliked Custer. The only warrant for the legend of a Reno-Custer feud is the Major's later admission that, through long acquaintance, he had come to have small

regard for his Lieutenant Colonel's military ability.[71]

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71. Glory-Hunter, p. 298. Reno made a statement at his Court of Inquiry in Chicago in 1879: "Well, sir, I had no confidence in General Custer as a soldier. I had known him all through the war." See Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 16, p. 493 (Feb. 15, 1879) for an account of this testimony.

As to the rumor of Reno's being drunk - and as such naturally unfit to command - this lie is one of the easiest to nail. The rumor was not even born until at least two years after the fight, as was clearly brought out at the 1879 Court of Inquiry. There it was mentioned - as a rumor - during cross-examination, and carefully investigated: Two civilian packers, Churchill and Frett, were brought in and questioned. Both tried to prove that Reno was drunk, but the testimony of officers present not only clearly refuted the charge, but branded it definitely as pure rumor.

The pertinent parts of the testimony of Lieutenants Mathey and Edgerly and Captain Benteen say:

> Lieutenant Mathey: "I saw no indication of drunkenness on his part, and never heard an intimation of it until last spring...."
>
> Captain Benteen: "I may say I was with Major Reno all the time the night of the 25th. I saw him every fifteen or twenty minutes till 3:00 a.m. I laid down in his bed. He was as sober as he is now. He is entirely sober now and was then. There was no time during the 25th and 26th when there was any indication of drunkenness on the part of Major Reno. He could not have been staggering and stammering without my knowing it...."
>
> Lieutenant Edgerly: "I saw Major Reno the night of the 25th about nine o'clock. He came along toward where I was from the direction of Captain Benteen's line. He was perfectly sober. No evidence that he had been drinking at all. I saw him again at two o'clock, and he was perfectly sober then. I never heard the faintest suspicion of intoxication until I came here to

Chicago this time. If he had been intoxicated the officers would not have permitted him to exercise command."[72]

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72. Fred Dustin, pp. 213-214. Dustin had opportunity to examine the official transcript, which is hard to obtain. However, the sworn testimony can be followed very easily through the full reports published during the court by various newspapers, and especially through the Army and Navy Journal coverage. To get a full picture - and also full opportunity to decide for oneself the charge that the court was a "whitewash" - see Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 16, pp. 407, 442-443, 473, 493f, 513, & 563f (Jan. 18 to March 15, 1879).

Nevertheless, the "drunk" charge was revived after Reno's death and Cyrus Townsend Brady gave it serious consideration enough to ask Captain E. S. Godfrey - in the last several years of his life very zealous in protecting his reputation as the Custer authority - a direct question on it. Godfrey answered, No! "I don't think Reno was drunk, for I don't believe there was enough whiskey in the whole command to make a 'drunk'."[73]

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73. C. T. Brady, Appendix A, p. 376. Brady was led to ask the question because of an article in the Northwestern Christian Advocate for September 7, 1904, citing the Rev. Dr. Arthur Edwards' conversations with Reno - both the men then dead - as proof. But the article quickly degenerates into a sad little tract on the evils of demon rum, with Major Reno the supposed terrible example. It was just another historical toadstool springing from the lush ground of revived controversy.

The testimony of officers present under oath, and the word of Major Reno's most distinguished detractor; when they agree, rumor must not only be discounted but put out of circulation as well.

Reno's actual conduct in the fight is a matter more complicated to show in its true outline. Much of the

criticism of it had dyed down with the Court of Inquiry and his death in 1889, when Godfrey revived it in his famed Century article of January 1892. In his recapitulation of the causes of Custer's defeat, he stated:

> FIRST: The overpowering numbers of the enemy and their unexpected cohesion.
> SECOND: Reno's panic rout from the valley.
> THIRD: The defective extraction of the empty cartridge shells from the carbines.[74]

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74. Edward S. Godfrey, "Custer's Last Battle," Century Magazine, Vol. 43 (21 n.s.), p. 383 (January, 1892).

Since Godfrey was the only officer actually in the battle who ever published an article on it, his word was accepted everywhere as authoritative and final. And since he rose to the rank of Brigadier General, it was considered an absolutely conclusive military verdict as well. But actually Godfrey was no more an eyewitness of Reno's movements in the valley than Mary E. Burt or Mrs. Yates or Frazier Hunt and Shannon Garst. Godfrey, as an officer of Benteen's battalion, knew nothing of Reno's movements until Benteen joined Reno on Reno's Hill: And Benteen had been ordered from the column some ten miles from the point where Custer gave Reno his orders, and the actual attack was opened.

If an analysis is to be objective at all it is mandatory to keep in mind Col. W. A. Graham's warning:

> "The truth is - and I think you will recognize it when you think it over - that most of the criticism and condemnation of Reno comes from men who were not with him in the valley, and whose ideas upon that matter were based on hearsay, not always too accurate; and upon the natural disdain that arose from his passing the buck to Benteen, as soon as the latter came up.

> "I hold no brief for Reno, but I believe in giving even the devil his due; and it is not necessary to attack and condemn Reno in order to attack and condemn Reno in order to account for what happened to Custer."[75]

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75. E. A. Brininstool, Major Reno Vindicated (From a Letter written in 1925 by Col. W. A. Graham, U. S. A.), p. 19. The italics are Colonel Graham's.

And if an analysis is not to be objective there is no point in making it.

Reno's part in the battle was in two distinct roles: (1) As leader of the advance guard, commanding Troops M, A, and G, he went down the river bottom at a gallop and opened the attack. When he was met in unexpected force by the Indians he dismounted his men near a grove of timber to fight on foot, until he would be supported by the main force under Custer. When the Sioux began to outflank him, he mounted his men and cut through them to the hills, in an action costing several lives.

(2) Once on the hill, he was joined by Benteen's battalion, the pack train under Lieutenant Mathey, and the rear guard under Captain McDougall. As ranking officer he assumed general command. When the pack train was finally up, he made a movement in the direction taken by Custer - moving slowly because of the wounded - but was again attacked in force. Withdrawing to his original position - as supposedly the best quickly available for defense - he threw up sketchy breastworks, and was immediately besieged by large numbers of Indians, many of whom could occupy higher ground. The siege lasted through the nights of June 25th and 26th, and was

relieved only by the appearance of Gibbon and Terry - marching up the valley for their intended junction with Custer.

Therefore, we will first separate myth from fact on his role in the valley, and then as to his actions on the hill.

There are two schools of thought on the valley maneuvers (among the Reno critics). One is that he was justified in dismounting his men to fight on foot, but was "cowardly" in leaving his position in the timber. The other is that he was not justified in dismounting at all, and should have charged through on horseback - even if every man was killed.

Both have one definite stumbling block to their theories: Almost absolute agreement by critic and partisan alike that Custer's only order to Reno was that the village was "running away", to "move forward at as rapid a gait as you deem prudent, and charge afterwards, and that the whole outfit will support you."[76]

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76. Fred Dustin, p. 110. The order was actually delivered to Reno by Lieut. Cooke, the Adjutant. All writers agree on the phrase "the whole outfit will support you," which Reno gives in his official report. (Cf. Custer, Last of the Cavaliers, p. 187; J. H. Kidd, p. 111; Major Reno Vindicated, p. 21; C. T. Brady, p. 234; etc.)

As a result it becomes necessary to explain away the fact that Custer most assuredly did not support Reno. This is done by mystic and cryptic references to "The plan." If in The Plan, Custer told Reno that he would "support" him by riding up the bluffs along the flank of the village, and Reno's course of action was definitely laid out for him by his

superior - and he failed to follow it - the case against Reno in the valley was clinched.

> Major Marcus A. Reno and Custer marched on together with the plan to separate before they came to the Valley. Reno, with three troops, was to continue straight down the Valley; Custer, with five troops, would go to the northwest. Captain McDougall, with one troop, was to follow with the supply train.[77]

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77. Shannon Garst, p. 153.

With the plan in existence, Reno obviously should either have kept riding through the Indian village, or - if justified in dismounting by their great force - was failing to carry out The Plan by leaving The Valley for The Hill. This naturally led to making out as poor a case for Reno as possible by talk of the "impregnable" position in the timber, and of giving the impression that Reno's force was much greater than it actually was, and Custer's much smaller - thus "proving" that Reno had sufficient men to cut through to Custer, but that Custer lacked sufficient men to cut through to Reno.

Frazier Hunt repeatedly mentions "Reno's whole force of 170 men" and Custer's "...192 enlisted men, thirteen officers, four Indian scouts, one civilian scout and three additional civilians - in all less than one third the strength of the regiment...."[78] The inference plainly being that

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78. Custer, Last of the Cavaliers, pp. 171; 184.

Custer's force exceeded Reno's by only 22 men.

Actually, Reno's force - counting everyone with it,

27 Indian scouts (Rees, Crows, Dakotas, and 2 half-breeds), 2 white scouts, 2 surgeons, and 2 interpreters - was not more than 150 men. Custer's total force reached 225 - an actual difference of 75 men.[79]

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79. Fred Dustin, p. 108.

Attention then shifted to that "impregnable position in the timber" - and beyond that, always The Plan:

> Here in the woods he Reno was, in a very few minutes, almost completely surrounded by hostiles, but he had a three-foot cut bank along the two sides, and heavy cottonwoods in the rear for protection. There is little question but that he could have held out here for hours, against almost any number of Indians.
>
> Perturbed at the non-appearance of Custer, who had told him that "the whole outfit will support you" - which support Custer was about effectively to give by attacking the Indian village on its flank farther to the north and across the river - Reno completely lost his head.[80]

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80. Custer, Last of the Cavaliers, p. 186f. Cf. C. T. Brady, p. 235.

Now all that is needed is proof of The Plan. But there is none, no one has yet produced evidence invalidating Reno's own statement:

> ...No mention of any plan, no thought of junction, only the usual orders to the advance guard to attack the enemy....I sent word to Custer that I had the enemy in my front very strong, and then charged...supposing my command, consisting of 120 officers and men and about 25 scouts and guides, followed by the columns of Custer....You will see by this that I was the advance guard and first to be engaged and draw fire, and was consequently the command to be supported, not the one from which support could be expected....All I know of Custer from the time he ordered me to attack until I saw him buried, is that he did not follow my trail....[81]

81. From "Reno's Reply to Rosser," Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 11 (August 12, 1876). The Confederate General T. L. Rosser had been a West Point classmate of Custer's, and a firm friend after the Civil War - in which they met in battle several times. After the Battle of the Little Big Horn he openly attacked Reno as bringing about Custer's defeat and massacre in letters to several different newspapers of wide circulation.

As a matter of fact, even Godfrey, who revived the charges with his "panic rout from the valley" analysis, somewhat altered his ideas in the years following the appearance of the Century article. When the historian Joseph Mills Hanson was preparing his book The Conquest of the Missouri, Godfrey wrote him concerning chapters pertaining to the battle:

"Don't forget that Custer told Reno that the whole outfit would follow and support him. Reno had the advance, and Custer did follow to a point near the Little Big Horn and then branched off to the right, but that was not premeditated."[82]

82. Joseph M. Hanson, The Conquest of the Missouri, Note, p. 286. The italics are Godfrey's. No date cited, but the book came out in 1908.

Further supporting Reno - and Godfrey - is the known fact that the regimental adjutant, Lieutenant Cooke, and Captain Keogh of Troop I - both later found killed with Custer - actually started toward the village with Reno, obviously believing his was the direction of the main attack.[83]

83. This was brought out in Lieut. G. D. Wallace's testimony at the Reno Court of Inquiry in 1879. Cf. Col. W. A. Graham, The Story of the Little Big Horn, p. 35.

Whatever The Plan really was, it was Custer, not Reno, who failed to carry it out. But before leaving it - and the myths it bore by sophistical parthenogenesis - a commonsense conclusion by Dr. Charles Kuhlman should be quoted:

> It is the opinion of most military men that Reno had a right to assume that Custer would support him from the rear. All, or nearly, all the officers who testified at the Inquiry in 1879, said they so understood the order. This implies that Custer, when he gave the order, either intended this kind of support and later changed his mind, or else deliberately betrayed Reno. As Mr. Brininstool and others have repeatedly pointed out, when Custer changed his apparent plan, it was absolutely necessary that Reno should be informed of it. The contention is so obviously well-founded that no fair-minded person will be inclined to dispute it. Since Reno positively denied under oath that he received any communication whatsoever from Custer after parting from him at the lone tepee, and no reliable evidence has been found that a messenger was sent, the suspicion has arisen that Custer intentionally betrayed Reno.
>
> This is a deduction I find it impossible to accept, as I find it impossible to accept the charge that Reno and Benteen later intentionally betrayed Custer.[84]

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84. Charles Kuhlman, Custer and the Gall Saga, p. 10.

When there is serious talk among scholars that "Custer betrayed Reno" a myth has certainly completed its cycle. All that remains to be proved or dispelled of the action in the valley, then, is Reno's leadership and whether or not he displayed cowardice. The officers that went into the valley with Reno were Capt. Thomas H. French of Troop M, Capt. Myles Moylan and First Lieut. Charles C. DeRudio of Troop A, First Lieut. Donald McIntosh and 2nd Lieut. George D. Wallace of Troop G, Lieutenants Charles A. Varnum and Luther R. Hare in charge of the scouts, and Lieutenant Benjamin

Hodgson, Reno's adjutant.

McIntosh and Hodgson were killed, but all of the other officers except French testified at the Reno Court. And in addition - and perhaps more important - we have the opinions of several enlisted men to draw on as to just what happened in the valley. This evidence alone is sufficient to condemn or acquit Reno's actions in the valley - that of any others not present is hearsay.

Brady states the version still part of the Custer Legend, though Brininstool and Dustin have already exploded most of it:

> It is a painful thing to accuse an army officer of misconduct; yet I have taken the opinion of a number of army officers on the subject, and everyone of them considers Reno culpable to a high degree....I am loath to believe that Major Reno was a coward, but he certainly lost his head;... His indecision was pitiful. Although he had suffered practically no loss and had no reason to be unduly alarmed, he was in a state of painful uncertainty as what to do next....
>
> ...There had yet been no panic, and under a different officer there would have been none; but it is on record that Reno at last gave an order for the men to mount and retreat to the bluffs. Before he could be obeyed he countermanded that order. Then the order was repeated.... It was then repeated for the third time. Finally, as those farther away saw those nearest the flurried commander mounting and evidently preparing to leave, the orders were gradually communicated throughout the whole battalion....Eventually they broke out of the timber in a disorderly column of fours....
>
> Reno calls this a charge, and he led it. He was so excited that, after firing his pistols at the Indians who came valiantly after the fleeing soldiers, he threw them away....All semblance of organization was lost in the mad rush for safety. The troops had degenerated into a mob.[85]

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85. C. T. Brady, pp. 240-241.

Thirty-two officers and men or scouts were killed, 7 men wounded, and Lieutenant DeRudio and 15 men left behind in the timber, in the entire action in the valley. General J. H. Kidd dismisses the skirmishing on foot, and the action along the line of retreat, with a single sentence: "Reno ran away to the hills without making any fight to speak of."[86]

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86. J. H. Kidd, p. 114.

For this reason, and similar deprecatory remarks by other military men of rank, it seems wise to give some idea of what the enlisted men thought first - as enoisted men have the very telling habit of judging a commanding officer by how many of them he gets out of a tight spot with their necks whole, rather than concerning themselves with the fine points of pure military.

Said Sgt. F. A. Culbertson of "A" Troop at the Reno Court:

> If the skirmish line had not been retired, or had been held there three minutes longer, I don't think anyone would have gotten off the line. I don't think Major Reno could have held the timber but a very few minutes. My estimate of the number of Indians about his position on the skirmish line and in the timber, is about 1000 to 1200. During the 25th and 26th I saw Major Reno several times in positions of great danger....I saw no evidence of cowardice on the part of Major Reno at any time.[87]

---

87. A Trooper with Custer, p. 103.

Said Sgt. Thomas O'Neill of "G" Troop in an private account of his adventures in the valley (he was one of the men left behind):

As the Indians came out in great numbers to oppose us, and moreover as from this point we could see the extent of the village and the immense number of Indians it contained, and how impossible it appeared for us - about 130 or 140 men - to attempt the charge through such a superior force, our officers decided to act on the defensive. Orders were thereupon given to "Dismount and prepare to fight on foot." Three troopers out of each four men dismounted, the fourth man holding the horses....

...Our right rested near the brush, the left extending about two hundred yards across the plan, the men being three years apart on the line....Shortly the Indians began to close in our left flank, which was not as well protected. Major Reno evidently realized the danger of our being surrounded, or flanked, and wheeled our line....Twenty men under Lieut. McIntosh (of whom I was one) were ordered to deploy in skirmish line and scout the brush, in order to ascertain if the Indians could attack us from the rear ....As we discovered no Indians between us and the river, the lieutenant came back and reported....

But we observed that they were forming in greater numbers on our left, where they could deliver a flank fire. It was thought by our officers that they were forming for a charge on that end. A brisk consultation was held by the officers, who shouted back and forth from their positions on the line. It was decided to retreat to a place where they could defend themselves better, as we were losing many men and horses. The order was thereupon given by Major Reno to "get to your horses, men." While this order was being given and executed, the fire from the troopers slackened materially - in fact, it practically ceased....

Reaching our horses the command "Mount" was given. It was to be a charge to reach the other side of the river....Every man of our small command seemed to realize fully the desperate situation we were in, and what was expected of him - which was to keep up a constant fire and make every shot tell.

As we emerged from the thicket the war-whoop burst forth from a thousand throats! It was a race for life! The Indians pressed in closely on each side of the column, firing into the troopers, while the troopers in turn answered the fire. It was a hand-to-hand conflict, both Indians and troopers striving to pull each other from their horses....I saw six or seven of our men in the act of falling from their horses after being shot....

> Before I had ridden two hundred yards, my horse crumpled under me, stricken by an Indian bullet, and I was left dismounted in the midst of the Indians....[88]

---

88. A Trooper With Custer, pp. 60-65. O'Neill saved himself by hiding in the timber, where he met Lieut. DeRudio on foot. After several narrow escapes they were able to join the survivors on the hill at night.

Said William Slaper of "M" Troop of the same general events:

> ...In a short time word came to retreat back to the horses in the timber. We got there as quickly as we knew how. In this excitement, some of the horseholders released their animals before the riders arrived, and consequently they were placed afoot which made it exceedingly critical for them. It was said that before Reno gave the order to mount and retreat, he rode up to Capt. French and shouted, "Well, Tom, what do you think of this?" Capt. French replied, "I think we had better get out of this." Reno there upon gave the order, although I did not hear it....I could hear nothing but the continual roar of Indian rifles, the sharp, resonant bang-bang of cavalry carbines, mingled with the whoops of savages and the shouts of my comrades.
>
> ...I cannot say that the retreat from the river bottom - and further on - had a very military appearance, but I can say that I saw nothing disorganized about it, although so many had gone on ahead of me and were so far in advance that what they did, or in what order they retreated, I cannot say with positive certainty....
>
> ...I believe one reason why so many of the men escaped was because of the intense dust which was raised by the horses and ponies of the combatants. It hung in dense clouds, and was almost impossible to see fifty feet in any direction.
>
> ...Had Reno not made that move out of the river bottom when he did - just in the nick of time - we could all have shared the fate of Custer and his men....[89]

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89. A Trooper With Custer, pp. 30-35.

Trooper William Morris, also of "M" Troop, answered

Brady's version directly in a letter which is printed in the Appendix of Indian Fights and Fighters. He also made similar comments later in correspondence with Robert Bruce, Major A. B. Ostrander, and E. A. Brininstool, which Dustin makes much use of. In his 1904 letter he adds certain facts to the recitals given:

> Reno, very properly, gave the command "Battalion halt - prepare to fight on foot - dismount'." He directed French to send ten men from the right of his troops to skirmish the woods, before the "numbers four" proceeded there with the horses. We immediately deployed as skirmishers and opened fire. The odds were at least thirty to one, as our line of fours out did not exceed seven officers and ninety men....In less time than it takes to relate it, the Indians were on three sides of us. We were ordered to lie down, and every man I could see, except Reno and French, were fighting lying down. Reno walked along the line giving instructions to the men, while French was calling his men's attention to his own marksmanship with an infantry long-tom that he carried.
>
> ...We were perfectly cool, determined, and doing good execution and expected to hear Custer attack. We had been fighting lying down about fifteen minutes when one of our men came from the timber and reported that they were killing our horses in the rear....Reno then made his only error; he gave the command, "Retreat to your horses, men!" French immediately corrected the mistake with the command, "Steady, men - fall back, slowly; face the enemy and continue your fire." "M" troop fell back slowly and in perfect order, held the Indians in check until "A" and "G" had mounted. Several of their horses had been shot, and their riders, consequently, very much disturbed.
>
> ...Corporal Scollen and private Sommers fell in the charge from the timber to the ford. It was a charge and not a retreat, and it was led by Reno....
>
> In view of the conflict between the foregoing and the statements contained in your article, I ask you to investigate the matter further, with a view to correcting the false impression that your readers must have concerning Reno and his command. In conclusion, I ask you "how in God's name" you could expect Reno, with one hundred and twenty men, to ride through upwards

> of three thousand armed Sioux, and then be of assistance to Custer or anyone else? I say we were sent into that valley and caught in an ambush like rats in a trap. That if we had remained ten minutes longer, there would have been not one left to tell the tale. That the much abused Reno did charge out of the timber, and that we who survive owe our lives to that identical charge which he led. We, at least, give him credit for saving what he did of his command.[90]

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90. C. T. Brady, Appendix B, pp. 401-405. Trooper Morris was severely wounded going up the hill, and spent the siege in the improvised "hospital".

With such evidence from the enlisted men of all three troops involved, it is unnecessary to go into lengthy quotation from the officers actually in the valley. We will merely add pertinent excerpts from the 1879 testimony of Moylan, Wallace, Varnum, Hare, and DeRudio. They will be condensed into one final comment:

> Captain Moylan: "The object of leaving the timber was, if possible, to save the command ....If we had stayed 30 minutes longer in the timber unsupported, I doubt whether we would have gotten out as many as we did....Major Reno gave his orders during the advance to the bottom as cooly as any man under the circumstances. During the afternoon of the 25th he seemed perfectly cool....I saw nothing in Major Reno which betrayed evidence of cowardice....In my judgment if he had continued to charge down that valley, he would have been there yet...."
>
> Lieutenant Wallace: "Major Reno's conduct was all that could be expected of anyone. The troops could not have been handled any better.... If we had remained in the timber, all would have been killed....I can recall no act of Major Reno's during those two days that exhibited any lack of courage as an officer or soldier that I can find fault with, nor any lack of military skill."
>
> Lieutenant Varnum: "As to Major Reno's conduct - certainly there was no sign of cowardice or anything of that sort....We could not have united with Custer except by going through the village to him, or his coming to us. Neither force could have done that...."

> Lieutenant Hare: "There were probably a thousand Indians opposing Reno in the bottom. If all the Indians had followed us they would have got us all....I can only estimate his conduct by the way it turned out. I think his action saved what was left of the regiment....If Reno had continued to advance mounted, I don't think he would have got a man through. The column would not have lasted five minutes. His dismounting and deploying was all that saved us....I saw no evidence of cowardice on Reno's part...."
>
> Lieutenant DeRudio: "I saw no indication of cowardice on Reno's part, nor any want of skill in handling and disposition of men. When he halted and dismounted I said 'Good for you,' because I saw that if we had gone five hundred yards further we would have been butchered...."[91]

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91. A Trooper with Custer, pp. 99-103; Cf. Fred Dustin, pp. 108-137 passim. A contemporary account of the testimony can be found by checking the Army and Navy Journal references given in Note 72.

"Coward...pitiful indecision...practically no loss... no reason to be unduly alarmed...Reno calls this a charge, and he led it" - how arrogantly fatuous it all sounds when placed beside the word of men who were actually in the valley. That this part of the Legend has been fully accepted for years, not only by fireside tacticians in the civilian ranks but by men of military prominence as well, makes us look - from 1876 onward - like a whole nation of Colonel Blimps.

Only the unintentional irony of a Brady footnote is needed to make the picture complete:

> It is painful to call attention to these facts [Reno's "hatred" of Custer, cowardice, courts-martial, drunkenness, etc.], especially as Major Reno has since died; but the name and fame of a greater than he have been assailed for his misconduct, and in defense of Custer it is absolutely necessary that Reno's character and services should be thoroughly understood....92

92. C. T. Brady, Note, p. 232f. I have not even bothered with the story of Reno "throwing away his pistols," even though Godfrey countenanced it and embellished them with ivory-handles. Brady has evidence in his very own book (See p. 272) that it was not so, and that the Benteen family still had the very pistol, as Reno and Benteen exchanged sidearms later in the summer of 1876.

"Another good story ruined by a damned eyewitness!"

For an account of the siege on the hill, and the relief by Terry and Gibbon, we might as well again turn to Shannon Garst's historical fairy tale for receptive young minds. But the fact is too important to relegate to a footnote that the conversation he records between Reno and Terry - and most of his other "quotes" - are absolutely, beyond any question or defense, his own inventions. If it is to be pleaded that he merely uses an author's license in rearranging facts, the answer is that he is posing as a children's historian, not a writer of fiction. If fiction was what is intended - and it is nowhere else borne out in the text - then like Elbridge Brooks, Ernest Haycox, and dozens of other honest novelists, he should clearly so label it.

He is in the best traditions of the Custer Legend, but by 1944 his fictions are inexcusable:

> As white-haired Benteen galloped up, a disheveled Reno ran out and seized the bridle rein of his foam-flecked horse. Reno was wild-eyed. His hat was gone and he wore a bandana handkerchief about his head.
>
> "For God's sake, help me, Benteen!" he cried. "I've lost all but ninety of my men. The Indians have us surrounded."
>
> Benteen looked around, taking in the situation which did not look so desperate. Several groups of Indians were deployed about along the river, shooting now and then. But there was no hard fighting going on.

However, heavy firing could be heard to the north.

...Still the heavy firing continued to the north and still Reno and Benteen did nothing.

Distraught officers came up to the two who were in command and cried, "What are we doing here? Why don't we go to Custer's aid?"

"In the name of all that's soldierly, why are we clustered here like a bunch of scared squaws?" someone else cried.

Then a heavy volley was heard, followed by silence and two more volleys. The soldiers looked at each other. This was plainly a signal for help.

Captain Weit pleaded and wept with Reno, who only threw his hands in the air and strode away.

Weir signaled to his orderly to come with him. The two, with one troop, made way to the bluff where they had seen Custer wave his hat in jaunty farewell...They could see great swarms of Indians in continuous action.

Their troop had gained the ridge without being molested yet it would have been suicidal folly for that lone troop to go charging down.... Then suddenly Indians on horseback came charging over the hill. There was nothing for Weir and his men to do but go galloping back to Reno, who quickly ordered his troops to return to the top of the bluff.

... Early the next morning Reno's men saw a cloud of dust coming in the east. Soon they saw the blue uniforms of Terry's and Gibbon's men. A glad cry rose from the throats of the Reno command.

"What happened to Custer?" was Terry's first question.

"I-I was going to ask you the same thing," Reno stammered.

The two men looked at each other blankly.

"But you were to re-enforce him," Terry shot the words out accusingly.

"But I was attacked. We were surrounded here until the Indians got word of your approach. Then they pulled out." Reno's excuse sounded hollow.

Benteen sat by wordlessly. He did not choose to speak up and tell of the order - the desperately urgent order he had got from Custer....

"Have you seen nothing - heard nothing?" Terry demanded.

"While we were engaged with the Indians there was heavy firing to the north. Late in the afternoon the firing ceased. Shortly afterward the Indians swarmed upon us from all directions."

Terry's face turned white. "Follow me,"

was all he said.

The troops galloped to the north. When they came to the valley where Weir and one troop had looked down upon the fighting, each man involuntarily reined in his horse and removed his hat, placing it over his heart....#93

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93. Shannon Garst, pp. 159-162.

It is probably unnecessary to point out the fact, at this stage of the study of the Legend, but Terry knew nothing of Custer's "plan" until he arrived at the battlefield. He most definitely did not accuse of Reno of failure to re-enforce Custer, ever. And his own definite plan, agreed upon in the June 21st conference, had been disregarded - a mild word - by Custer. But again we have contemporary accounts, written while the battle was fresh in everyone's mind.

Lieutenant Gibson to his wife, July 4, 1876:

> ...Reno had made a charge and had been repulsed, and driven back, his three troops came riding back to us in disorder....We then joined our three companies with Reno's, put ourselves in position on a hill, and waited for McDougall to come up with the packs; and just before he reached us the Indians commenced to swarm around us like devils, thousands of them, all with modern rifles, while we were using old carbines, so we were put immediately on the defensive. We heard Custer's command fighting about five miles off in our front, and we tried repeatedly, but in vain, to join him. It was impossible as we could neither abandon our wounded men, nor the packs of the whole command. Reno ordered Weir to take his company and try to make connection with Custer, but he returned saying he could find no sign of Custer's command and that there were enough Indians there to eat up his company a hundred times over.
>
> Then our whole eight companies A, B, C, D, G, K, H and M went up to the highest point we could find, and with field glasses tried to locate Custer, but could see absolutely nothing, and finally concluded that he had gone to the timbers about six miles off and fortified

himself. We found our present position hard to defend so we moved back to where we made our first stand. The Indians fought us until late that night. Of course no one dared close an eye, and at three o'clock in the morning, June twenty-sixth they opened fire on us again, harder then ever and all day long....In all this time we had heard nothing of Custer so we concluded he had gone with General Terry....

About eight o'clock on the morning of the twenty-seventh we saw clouds of dust arising about five miles in our front. We watched it steadily with glasses and soon saw a column advancing. Then the question arose as whether they were Indians or soldiers. Some thought one way and some the other, so Reno sent some scouts out to ascertain, and in about half an hour they returned and said it was Terry with Gibbon's command....

Had Gibbon's command not come the Indians would not have left us, and it would only have been a question of time for them to get us all, for our ammunition would have given out, likewise our provisions....[94]

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94. With Custer's Cavalry, pp. 268-272.

Captain Benteen, in a letter to his wife, same date, says:

I must tell you now what we did - when I found Reno's command we halted for the packs to come up - and then moved along the line of bluffs towards the direction Custer was supposed to have gone. Weir's company was sent out to communicate with Custer but it was driven back. We then showed our full force with Guidons flying, that Custer might see us - but we could see nothing of him, couldn't hear much firing, but we could see an immense body of Indians coming to attack us from both sides of the river....[95]

---

95. I Fought With Custer, p. 189.

It has since been agreed that Weir's forward movement was on his own initiative, and not on orders as understood by Gibson and Benteen at the time. The accepted version is that he went to Reno and demanded immediate action, but was over-

ruled by Reno and Benteen until the packs could come up. Storming and swearing, he then mounted with his orderly and started alone. However, his second in command of "D" Troop, Lieutenant Edgerly, believed he was acting on orders and mounting the men moved after him.

Windolph fills in the details for us:

> Reno and Benteen and two or three of the officers held a little conference, and we saw Lieutenant Hare, who had charge of Reno's Indian scouts, suddenly mount Godfrey's horse and head back down our trail to the southward. Maybe it was fifteen or twenty minutes, or possibly a half hour, before he came up at a trot with several pack mules, loaded with ammunition boxes. The rest of the dozen ammunition mules slowly dribbled in, and before long the pack train itself came up....
>
> It was now maybe 4:30 and the sun was still fairly high in the sky. We troopers didn't know what was going on, but I remember that Captain Weir suddenly rode off to the north alone, and a minute later, Lieutenant Edgerly, second in command of "D" followed with the whole troop. The pack mules were coming up about this time and there was a lot of speculating going on. As I recall, Reno had seven wounded men, some of them in pretty bad shape....
>
> It's pretty hard to estimate time under such circumstances, but as I've tried to reconstruct the situation over the years, I believe it must have been about 5 o'clock when Reno and Benteen ordered the whole outfit to move northward, in the general direction Captain Weir and his troop "D" had taken a good half hour before. The wounded men who could mount were put on horses, but the others were carried in blankets by details of six troopers on foot. It was slow and painful work, and I've always figured that most of the officers thought it was a questionable move.
>
> We'd gone less than a mile when we got in sight of Weir's troop. Way off to the north you could see what looked to be groups of mounted Indians. There was plenty of firing going on.
>
> Pretty soon it looked as if the Indian masses were coming towards us. It didn't take long to realize that this was true. Here we were stretched out all over hell's half acre, a troop on this hill knob, another in a little

> valley and over there a third troop. Behind, at a slow walk, came the pack trains, the wounded men and the rear guard.
>
> Reno and Benteen both sensed the danger and ordered a withdrawal. The advance troops were dismounted and fought as skirmishers. Soon the Indians were pressing hard, and it was only the good luck and the hard courage of Lieutenant Godfrey's troop, fighting stubbornly on foot, that kept disaster from overtaking us. We were able to regain Reno's Hill while Troop "K" kept the Indians back until the men, retreating slowly, got close enough to the hilltop to make a dash for it....96

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96. I Fought With Custer, pp. 98-99.

It should be noted that some writers, like Garst, don't even give Reno credit for this forward movement. Others, like Frazier Hunt, deprecate it for its slowness "as a snail might crawl over the rolling hills", and then come up with the suggestion - based on shrewd hindsight - that the mule train and the injured should have been left under the rear guard and

> ....Reno and Benteen, with the 230 effective men of their own troops, taking along at a gallop five or six of the fastest ammunition mules, could form a flying wedge that could strike the hostiles a blow on the flank that would dismay them, and unquestionably relieve the pressure on Custer.97

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97. Custer, Last of the Cavaliers, p. 192f.

This is some improvement on General Kidd, who was also not there:

> ...Who will say that, if Reno had taken up the march immediately with the seven troops that he then had with him, in the direction of the sound of that firing, there would not have been a different story to tell of the Battle of the Little Big Horn?98

98. J. H. Kidd, p. 114f..

No one present, except possibly Weir, seems to have questioned that a forward move toward Custer's supposed whereabouts was made as quickly as possible, or that it would have been possible to separate from the packs and the wounded. There is, of course, also a fine point of semantics involved: When Reno ceased forward movement in the valley because of the numbers of Indians it constituted "cowardice"; when the violently pro-Custer Weir did the same for the same reason "there was nothing for him to do but go galloping back to Reno."

Again as a final comment there is the 1879 testimony of Hare, the acting adjutant, and Benteen:

> Lieutenant Hare: "I can't think that Major Reno lost much time in moving in Custer's direction; I went to the pack-train and then to Capt. Weir....and when returning from Capt. Weir, met Reno advancing. He could not have moved to where I met him if he had lost much time. His column moved altogether and about a mile or so. I reported to Major Reno that Capt. Weir had ceased his forward movement because the whole country was covered with Indians; at least 1500 in sight, and the country was favorable for the concealment of a larger force."
>
> Captain Benteen: "...A movement could have been made down the river in the direction Custer had gone but we would all have been there yet."99

99. Fred Dustin, p. 142-143. For a full and carefully analytical account of the fight on the hills, see Chapter XXIII, pp. 139-148.

More "myths after Custer."

It should be pointed out that Reno was also charged

later with proposing to save the force on the hill by abandoning the packs and the wounded. That he did not is obvious, but to the "experts" flailing blindly around in frantic efforts to avoid the inevitable conclusion that Custer sprung his own trap, Reno was damned if he didn't and damned if he did.

The only remaining matter is that of Reno's personal conduct and leadership on the hill. The word of three men present will give us sufficient evidence for an honest, objective conclusion as which is fact and which fancy. It is said that he surrendered all command to Benteen and was personally "yellow." First turning to Lieutenant Gibson's letter:

> ...Say nothing about what I am about to tell you, but if it hadn't been for Benteen every one of us would have been massacred. Reno did not know which end he was standing on, and Benteen just took the management of affairs in his own hands, and it was very fortunate for us that he did....[100]

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100. With Custer's Cavalry, p. 272.

Gibson, however, was a longtime "Benteen man" who idolized his indomitable troop commander. Trooper Slaper, who equally admired Captain French, pays high tribute to Reno's conduct during the same period - and moreover was with him in the valley. Says Slaper:

> I must say that I had to admire Major Reno during the entire fighting on the hill. I also saw him twice in the river bottom, and he did not seem to be at all ruffled. To a man in such a responsible position it must have been a trying time, without the support in sight which Custer had promised him. Our ammunition had been nearly

> exhausted during the fighting in the bottom, and had we not retreated to the hill, we certainly would have been wiped out in a very few minutes.
>
> I observed Reno several times during the fighting on the bluffs, and can well remember his walking about among the men through the night. He would tap a man with his boot and remark, "Don't go to sleep, boys." I cannot understand why he was not shot down while walking about, as none of the troopers were able to make a move without drawing the fire of the Indians. I know it encouraged his fellow officers as well as the troopers. I have read articles pertaining to this part of the Little Big Horn in which it was stated that Reno was drunk. This I brand as a lie. At no time did I observe the least indication of drunkenness on the man, nor see him use any liquor....[101]

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101. A Trooper with Custer, p. 42f.

Captain MacDougall, who commanded the battalion containing the pack train and the rear guard, was not, as far as any material in print would show, a "Custer man," a "Benteen man", and certainly not a "Reno man." He testified in 1879:

> As to Major Reno's conduct.....He seemed perfectly cool....During the fighting the afternoon of the 26th when the firing was heavy...Reno asked me to walk around the lines with him....The balls were flying around and the men in the trenches firing....He was perfectly cool then. He had no enthusiasm, but was as brave as any man there....I think Major Reno would make as stubborn fight as any man, but I don't think he could encourage men like others. Men are different; some are dashing and others have a quiet way of going through. I think he did as well as anyone could do. I thought that when he asked me to walk around with him that he had plenty of nerve.[102]

---

102. Fred Dustin, p. 137.

The conclusion: Reno was a brave man, with the kind of good solid "guts" to impress an equally brave trooper

recalling events nearly 60 years after the battle - during which time Reno had been constantly vilified, lied about, and sneered at. But as a personality he was colorless, leaving much to be desired in inspiring leadership by his officers - particularly when placed in contrast to the lion-hearted Benteen.

Reno, caught unexpectedly in the spotlight, performed his duties as a commander with high credit, but played the role poorly. The intrepid Benteen, miscast as the menace, played his sudden change of character with great zest. The dazzling Custer set the stage for a one-man show, and then missed his own cues. And certain claques on unpaid admissions refused not only to accept the change in program, but also the reason for the change. Hence, The Custer Legend.

THE LAST STAND

If it is understandable by now how Custer's personality and often dramatized actions before the battle gave rise to so much fictitious history, it is even more understandable how the dramatic setting of "The Last Stand" generated myths by the thousands. After Trumpeter Martin turned back with his message to Benteen no white man ever again saw Custer or any of his men alive. He had ridden once to the bluffs to look down in the valley, and Lieutenant DeRudio, at least, had recognized him. From then on stories of his actual route and final actions are all supposition, all theory, all guess.

Mrs. Yates and Brady talk of the "troopers in line,

their officers in position", "each in the place to which tactics would have assigned them" - but only imagination so rearranged the bodies. Benteen, who was the first officer of the seventh to reach the site (actual discoverer of bodies was Lieutenant Bradley, chief of Gibbon's scouts), stated descriptively: "There was no line on the battlefield. You can take a handful of corn and scatter it over a floor and make such lines." Moreover, in stripping the dead, the Indians undoubtedly dragged many from the position in which they fell. They were "bunched" and that was about all that could be said.

Keogh and Calhoun seemed able to have formed their troops for defense, but the rest showed no sign of organization. The evidence of the battlefield is clearly inconclusive as to direction of advance or retreat. To illustrate, once on the bluffs, the only place Custer could reach the river was at a dry watercourse called Medicine Tail Coulee. From the time of the battle on, Godfrey and most others have assumed that Custer went <u>down</u> the coulee from the northeast, was turned back at the ford - with a loss of men - and then swung due north to Monument Hill, where the final stand was made.

But Dr. Charles Kuhlman of Billings, Montana, covering exactly the same ground - and with the same evidence available - has reached a conclusion entirely opposite. He believes that Custer went <u>up</u> the coulee, made a northeasterly circuit - then west - to the hill; and that the bodies found near the ford were odd men fleeing south <u>after</u> the final

stand. And he makes an equally good - or better - case for it, completely contradicting all present theories of the battle.[103]

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103. See Custer and the Gall Saga. Accepting Dr. Kuhlman's theory not only exonerates Reno and Benteen - but Custer as well - of any intentional betrayal or cowardice. This is certainly an attractive point in its favor, but only a minor one. Dr. Kuhlman supports his thesis brilliantly, buttressing it well with cogent analyses of Indian testimony, the terrain, the hostiles' psychology, and sound tactics under given conditions. If Captain Luce's recent discovery of a hitherto unknown dismounted skirmish line tends to support Kuhlman, the theory may win wide acceptance.

When such things are possible, it would be wisest to disregard the myths of the Last Stand entirely - as the majority are capable of neither proof nor disproof. Some, however, are so persistent even to this day that they must be treated with. Moreover, by odd chance - or a startling commentary on the general public's love of truth and justice - these (with a single exception) are of the few we can explode beyond question.

It is no accident that those to be considered fit aptly into dime novel phraseology. They are:

(1) The Indians Better Armed Than the Troops, or The Real Cause for the White Man's Defeat.

(2) The Revenge of Rain-in-the-Face, or The Fiend Who Ate Tom Custer's Heart. (There is also in existence a pirated edition reading "General Custer's Heart.")

(3) The Unspeakable Desecration of the Dead and Prisoners Most Foully Tortured, or The Truth Most Callously Mutilated by Certain New York Newspapers with No Respect for

the Feelings of the Bereaved.

(4) Curley, the Young Crow Scout, or The Only True "Only True Survivor" of Custer's Last Stand. (A sequel to The Bolt for the Powder, or Custer Deserted by his Cowardly Indian Scouts.)

(5) Who Cut Custer's Hair, or Why Was the General's Body Left Untouched? (This by an earlier Gaston B. Means.)

And finally, one which must not be treated facetiously for it deals with the real - and never identified - hero of the Last Stand, a man who deserves as magnificent a monument as Custer's, engraved with the simple tribute of the valorous Cheyenne: THE BRAVEST MAN.

Or by his usual description (6) "The Man on the White-Faced Horse."

Every man in the Custer fight from Reno to Godfrey agrees that the Indians were equipped with repeating rifles whose range exceeded that of the cavalry carbine, and that many carried modern revolvers as well. However, as Fred Dustin has aptly pointed out, statements such as that by Lieutenant Varnum - "the Indians rode alongside of the column pumping Winchesters into it" - have been misinterpreted to mean that <u>all</u> of the Indians were so armed.

Instead of all the Indians being "armed with the latest patterns of repeating rifles and revolvers" with a "super-abundance of ammunition" a very few had such guns and these were handled by the older, battle-tried warriors, best able to use them to advantage. Many of the younger men were not armed - in the modern sense - at all. An Ogallala Sioux,

Eagle Bear, who fought in the fight when he was sixteen told Frazier Hunt in 1938:

> I with the other young men were out with the horses when we first heard the firing. I rushed back on my favorite pony and picked up my pistol and bow and arrows. Only a few of the young warriors had guns. I was lucky; I had a pistol, as well as my bow and arrows.[104]

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104. I Fought with Custer, p. 218.

P. E. Byrne, estimating the number of warriors against Custer as 2500, believes that not more than 1000 "at the outside" were supplied with firearms, and he cites George Bird Grinnell in confirmation:

> "When the fight began about half the Indians had guns and the remainder bows, for which, however, they had many arrows. The guns were of many sorts - muzzle-loaders, Spencer carbines, old-fashioned Henry rifles, and old Sharps military rifles. The Sharps were probably the best guns they had except those recently captured from the soldiers."[105]

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105. George Bird Grinnell, The Fighting Cheyennes (New York, 1915) as quoted in P. E. Byrne, Note, p. 181.

> After the greatest effort, only half of Sitting Bull's warriors were able to obtain firearms, and of these the majority had old flintlocks, condemned muskets, muzzle-loaders and smooth bores. There was plenty of propaganda claiming that the Indians were even better armed than the troops - a fantastic yarn: read the reports of the guns turned in when Indians surrendered. Granted that they may have hidden some, would men who were well-armed with repeating rifles have retained the wretched old-fashioned guns that they did turn in? Those weapons were mostly so old-fashioned that they belonged in the museum....The gun which Sitting Bull presented to his "brother" Frank Grouard was a Hawkins rifle - forty years out of date! Fixed ammunition was so hard to get that the Indians all learned to save and reload empty cartridge

shells....[106]

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106. Stanley Vestal, Sitting Bull, Champion of the Sioux, p. 148. Cf. Fred Dustin, p. 161. When Crazy Horse's band surrendered in 1877 there were only 117 guns "mostly Winchesters and carbines" for more than 300 warriors - and this proportion is generally accepted as a good approximation of armament of the Indians at the Little Big Horn.

It must be stressed, however, that this does not mean that reports of the Cavalry's Springfield carbines breaking down under fire were untrue, or of troopers having to extract the spent cartridges with knives. The extent of this occurring has been tremendously exaggerated, but the importance has certainly been not. If a trooper fired his carbine 10,000 times and it only misfired once for an easily correctable reason, that is not a reflection on the quality of the firearm: But if that once was when he was fighting for life against a charge of equally courageous Indians armed with bow-and-arrow that once was enough. It still remained a good gun - and beyond question the majority of carbines taken by the Indians in Custer's fight were serviceable - but the man who had it misfire only once was dead.

In this respect, Reno's report of July 11, 1876, to the Chief of the Ordinance, General S. V. Benet, is extremely pertinent. Reno reported an expediture of 38,030 rounds of carbine ammunition and 2,854 of pistols and said in part:

> I have the honor to report that in the engagement of the 25th and 26th of June 1876...out of 380 carbines in my command six were rendered unserviceable in the following manner (there were more rendered unserviceable by being struck by bullets): failure of the breech block to close, and leaving a space between the head of the cartridge and the end of the block, and when the

> piece was discharged and the block thrown open, the head of the cartridge was pulled off and the cylinder remained in the chamber, whence with the means at hand it was impossible to extract it....
>
> ...An Indian scout, who was with that portion of the regiment Custer took into battle... says that from his hiding place he could see the men sitting down under fire and working at their guns....I also desire to call attention to the fact that my loss would have been less had I been provided with some instrument similar to the trowel-bayonet, and I am sure had an opponent of that arm been present on the night of June 25th he would have given his right arm for 50 bayonets. I had but 3 spades and three axes, and with them loosened ground, which the men threw into piles in front of them with tin cups and such other articles as could in any way serve the same purposes.[107]

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107. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 26 (August 19, 1876). The only italics are mine. This should be read with an editorial in the same magazine for September 16th, which makes the surprising comment: "...We all thought that Reno had done well his part of the bad business. But the Chief of Ordnance has, from his palatial offices in Washington, preferred charges against that officer for giving aid and comfort to the enemy by saying in his report that the Indians were better armed than the troops...." (Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 88.)

But the fact still remains that some of the Indians did have repeating rifles while none were of regular issue to the troops - although Sheridan's cavalry were using them in the Civil war, some thirteen years before. Since no one would admit furnishing them to the hostiles, this led to a bitter Army suggestion of the day that the Winchester Arms Company ought "to prosecute the Indians for infringement of patent, since they must be manufacturing them themselves."

And it must be pointed out that the Custer disaster, and Reno's report did bring action. When the reorganized 7th Cavalry started on its 1877 expedition, 12 men of each

troop were armed with long range rifles, as well as the normal complement of carbines and revolvers. In addition, every man carried a sabre and an intrenching tool, and comfortable "prairie belts" - holding 40 to 50 cartridges - had replaced the old unwieldy cartridge pouch. The government had learned a bitter lesson.[108]

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108. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 732 (June 23, 1877).

By now "The revenge of Rain-in-the-Face" ought by all standards of history been buried deep beyond disinterment under a mountain of invalidating fact. Yet on July 12, 1948, we find a Mr. George C. Appell of Water Mill, N. Y. - in a letter showing him to be well informed on Custer history - writing the editors of LIFE Magazine:

> ...Still another brother, Tom, a troop commander and holder of two medals of honor, was eliminated and had his heart cut out and used as a lacrosse puck in that evening's festivities ....[109]

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109. LIFE, July 12, 1948, p. 6.

This is the same old Rain-in-the-Face myth, with athletic embellishments and no direct charge as who did the mutilation. The more common version is that Rain-in-the-Face, in revenge for his arrest by Captain Yates and Tom Custer some years earlier, fulfilled a blood oath, killed Tom Custer, and ripping his heart out ate it. This was even given credence by Mrs. Custer,[110] and improved on by the

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110. Boots and Saddles, p. 204 (1913 edition).

gentle, but doddering, old poet Henry W. Longfellow. In his poem, "The Revenge of Rain-in-the Face," Longfellow switched the unpleasant compliment from Captain Tom Custer to General George A. Custer.

But both have been positively disproved so often it is tiresome to trace it out. Dr. H. R. Porter, the only one of the command's surgeons who survived the battle, stated positively during his lifetime that there was not the slightest evidence to support the charge, and since part of his duties was to examine the bodies on the field for identification - and in so doing he identified Tom Custer - that settles the matter. And in addition, D. F. Barry, the famous frontier photographer and personal friend of Rain-in-the-Face (Barry got him his appointment as an Indian policeman which he held to his death), stated flatly at the time of his death in 1905:

> "I was sorry to hear of the death of Rain-in-the-Face. He was a great Indian, and he has been grossly maligned in some respects. It has been so widely published that it is hardly possible to contradict it now, that Rain-in-the-Face killed Tom Custer and then cut his heart out.
>
> "I investigated that story, and did it early, and found that it was not true. Rain-in-the-Face has often talked with me about that report. It has worried him that the public should accept it as true. Now that he is dead, we may look for a recurrence of the libel on the old chief. He was a great warrior and a typical Sioux. He has killed many white men, no doubt, but the story of his cutting Tom Custer's heart out should not be allowed to go undisputed. There are several men living who are ready to prove what I say."[111]

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111. I Fought with Custer, p. 30f. Cf. P. E. Byrne, p. 132ff; Fred Dustin, p. 163, 185; etc., etc. The only "real proof" in existence dates from an 1894 "interview"

when Rain-in-the-Face was appearing in a wild west show at Coney Island, in which the men responsible admit getting him thoroughly drunk and prompting him over the rough spots. It was reprinted by C. T. Brady but was even then thoroughly discredited.

There was no question, however, that Tom Custer's body was terribly mutilated - almost beyond recognition - and Slaper remarks that the arrows "bristled in it." Windolph has similar remarks. The truth was terrible enough, but the newspaper accounts - with no thought for the feelings of the relatives of the dead - made it ghastly beyond all excuse, adding a carnival of eviscerating detail on the torture of men taken alive.

They had almost immediate refutation from a man who knew. Lieutenant James H. Bradley, chief of Gibbon's scouts, was the first man to discover the massacre, and he stated definitely in a letter of July 25, 1876, to the Helena (Montana) Herald:

> "Of the 206 bodies buried on the field, there were very few I did not see, and beyond scalping, in possibly a majority of cases, there was little mutilation. Many of the bodies were not even scalped, and in the comparatively few cases of disfiguration it appeared to me as the result of a blow with a knife, hatchet or war-club to finish a wounded man, rather than deliberate mutilation. Many of Custer's men must have been disabled with wounds during the fight, and after the savages gained possession of the field, all such would probably be mainly killed in the manner indicated. The bodies were nearly all stripped, but it is an error to say that Kellog, the correspondent, was the only one that escaped this treatment. I saw several entirely clothed - half a dozen at least - who, with Kellog, appeared to owe their immunity to the fact that they had fallen some distance from the field of battle, so that the Indians had not cared to go to them, or had overlooked them when the plundering took place.

> "The real mutilation occurred in the case of Reno's men who had fallen near the village. These had been visited by the squaws and children, and in some of the instances the bodies were frightfully butchered. Fortunately, not many were exposed to such a fate. Custer's field was some distance from the village, which probably explains the exemption of those who had fallen there."[112]

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112. A Trooper with Custer, p. 172f. Brininstool does not indicate whether the italics are his or Bradley's. Bradley also refutes the Rain-in-the-Face myth. (See p.169.)

Nevertheless, James Gordon Bennett's sensation-mongering New York Herald unnecessarily revived the rumors when the bodies were disinterred for formal burial in 1877. The work was in charge of Col. Michael V. Sheridan, brother of the General, and six lines were taken from his report and distorted by the Herald in a story the Army and Navy Journal bitterly characterized, "as cruel and inconsiderate specimen of journalistic rumoring as can be imagined."

The Journal referred its readers to a letter of Mr. R. N. Price to the Philadelphia Telegraph denying any truth to the Herald's sensation. Price went from Philadelphia to the battlefield "on behalf of the family of Lieut. Benjamin H. Hodgson killed under Reno to take charge of the remains," and his letter corroborated Bradley:

> "...There seems to be a widespread belief that the heads of the killed were in most cases hammered and beaten in, and the bodies horribly mutilated. This is erroneous. The cases of mutilation were fewer than could be expected under the circumstances, and smashed skulls were the exception, only occurring where the bodies lay within reach of squaws. Neither Gen. Custer nor Lieut. Hodgson were mutilated or disfigured in any way, the latter falling where he was covered by Col. Reno's and Col. Benteen's fire."[113]

113. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 811 (July 28, 1877).

That leaves us only the lurid tales of torture, and that we can destroy with a single reference. From "Camp on Yellowstone, July 26, 1876" General Alfred H. Terry himself wrote this letter to the Helena (Montana) Herald, of which this is the full text:

> Please publish the fact that there is not the slightest evidence that any one belonging to General Custer's command was captured alive and tortured by the Sioux. On the contrary, everything leads to the belief that every officer and man was killed while gallantly fighting. I deem it proper to make this statement to contradict the harrowing accounts given in some papers in regard to tortured prisoners.
>
> Alfred H. Terry, Brigadier General.[114]

114. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 22 (August 19, 1876). The item is headed "False Report," and I consider it the final word.

In the years following the battle, the "only true survivors" of Custer's Last Stand have exceeded the entire number of troops and civilians in the Dakota Column, let alone the 7th Cavalry. All have been disclosed as mentally irresponsible, publicity seekers, or plain damned outright fakes, until now the list has been narrowed down to the Only True "only true survivor" - Curley, the Crow Scout.

Curley was actually in the battle, was actually assigned to Custer's immediate command, and beyond all question was the last to see him or his men alive. But he left the field before the final action, and eventually made his

way to the supply steamboat Far West, where he tried to inform Captain Grant Marsh and the military men present of the disaster. Since he did not speak English, and no interpreter was then present, his pantomime of the battle was incorrectly construed.

When he was properly interviewed a short time later through an interpreter, his story was too modest, too uneventful, and too lacking in sensation to please the white "historians", and they doctored it fantastically to suit their own preconceived notions. As a result, Curley was unfairly termed a liar by both the Sioux and his own people, although he was of good reputation.

The embellished versions of his "escape" still cling to us, mainly in the form favored by LIFE'S "Letters to the Editors." Correspondent George C. Appell, already mentioned says:

> "One man not on Lieutenant Cook's roster got away, as far as most historians and authorities on the massacre can ascertain. He was Curley, a Mountain Crow scout, who threw a blanket over his head to look like a Sioux. He rode in rings mingling with the Sioux, and gradually reached the combat. Afterwards he escaped in the same way and rode as far as the fork of the Big Horn and Little Big Horn, where the supply steamer was waiting, and told the first story of the massacre. He added, and later repeated often, that he had offered George Custer the use of a blanket for a like escape, and that Custer refused."

But correspondent Robert W. Bullock of Union, N. J., has a better version:

> "...I think you will find that an Indian scout of the Crow tribe named Curley survived by cutting open the stomach of a fallen horse and hiding in it."[115]

115. LIFE, July 12, 1948, pp. 6-8.

Neither are correct. The true facts have been known to "most historians and authorities" since at least 1928, when Thomas B. Marquis published his life of T. H. LaForge who spent his lifetime among the Crows as an interpreter (Memoirs of a White Crow Indian. New York, 1928). LaForge saw Curley immediately after the battle, and acted as interpreter for Lieutenant Bradley in an interview, shortly thereafter. This part of LaForge's story says:

> I interpreted for Lieutenant Bradley when he interviewed Curly both spellings are common , several days after the Custer battle had occurred. He was spoken of then as the 'sole survivor' of the disaster. But he himself did not lay claims to that kind of distinction. On the contrary, again and again during the long examination of him by Bradley, the young scout said, 'I was not in the fight.' When gazed upon and congratulated by visitors he declared, "I did nothing wonderful; I was not in it." He told us that when the engagement opened he was behind the other Crows. He hurried away to a distance of about a mile, paused there, and looked for a brief time on the conflict. Soon he got still farther away, stopping on a hill to take another look. He saw some horses running away loose over the hills. He turned back far enough to capture two of the animals....
>
> Romantic writers seized upon Curly as a subject suited to their fanciful literary purposes. In spite of himself, he was treated as a hero. He took no special pains to deny the written stories of his unique cunning. He could not read, he could speak only a little English, and it is likely he knew of no reason why he should make any special denial....[116]

116. Thomas B. Marquis, Memoirs of a White Crow Indian, pp. 250-251, as quoted in Fred Dustin, p. 164.

This is conclusive in itself, but there also exists

an authoritative interview with Curley less than six years after the battle, and therefore, historically speaking, almost contemporary. The only possible basis for contention is that LaForge was also the interpreter here, but since he would have no basis to misinterpret - and his known character and reputation would refute such a charge anyway - the coincidence in inconsequential.

The interview was conducted by Lieut. Charles F. Roe, Adjutant of the 2nd Cavalry, at Fort Custer, M. T., on March 8, 1882. Under the date of March 10th he sent it to the Army and Navy Journal, where it was printed in full. What makes the interview of Roe authoritative, as stacked against conflicting interviews supposedly obtained by eastern newspaper correspondents of the same general time, is not only his known integrity as an officer, but also his relation to the events. Roe led Gibbon's advance that relieved Reno, and after Lieutenant Bradley was one of the first on the battle site.

His note to the editor said, "The manner of expression is his Curley's , no effort being made to change it in anyway. The remarks in brackets are mine." With LaForge's clear account for comparison the following parts are important:

> ...Then Gen. Custer told four of the scouts to go on ahead; I (Curley) was one of them....About a mile from Little Horn the command separated, part went down Ash Creek. The other part I was with came along down the ridge east side of Little Horn. Mitch Boyer and four scouts went down the ridge, and while going down the ridge could see the Indians going from the village to fight Reno; when scouts got near a deep

cooley they went off ridge, down towards Little Horn, and Custer with command kept on ridge.... The four Crow scouts commenced firing into the village. While riding on the ridge the command rode two-by-two, and Mitch Boyer (half-breed interpreter - R.) told me the two men at the head were brothers (Gen. Custer and his brother).

The White Horses were the first company. They came down ravine to its mouth, and one man on a gray horse with stripes on his arm rode down into the river, went across, and rode into the village very fast, right into the Indians; acted like a man that wanted to die....The Sioux commenced the firing and the troops fired back, remaining mounted; that is, only the front part of the line fired; the line (or column - R.) was stretched up deep cooley, and away back on side of ridge. The Sioux were not surprised but acted like they knew they were coming. The troops then turned from the mouth of cooley... the men in the lead motioning with their hands to go northeast, when the companies broke from the main column as if to meet on the main ridge again; while the companies were moving, the Indians crossed the river at the mouth of cooley and further below...and all along the river below Custer. They rode right up to the command, firing all the time, plenty of them. The troops fought on the ridge, firing into the Indians as they came across the river and up the slopes....

The Sioux got after the Crows and ran them away back to pack train, this side of Ash Creek, half a mile from Little Horn. The Sioux got all around Custer's command....

After getting to the pack train I (Curley) left the other scouts and came back to one of the ridges behind where Custer was fighting, a little higher ridge. I took out my glasses and saw there was no one moving, no firing, and the troops all appeared to be killed. There were Indians all around me. I remained there a little while, saw the Indians fighting Reno, who had gone on to the hill. Reno's command moved out of timber (west side of Little Horn) and was running back same time Crows were running back (on East side of Little Horn) driven by the Sioux. I could see them (Reno's men) running while Crows were running. When I got back to hill in rear of Custer, I could see Reno's men coming up on top of hill and saw them firing. Reno's men ran from timber about same time Custer's command turned north from deep cooley, and same time Crows ran back.

I (Curley) think it was about two hours from time command turned from deep cooley until I

> came back and they were all killed....I could see from where I was the Sioux moving around among the dead bodies, picking up things, some on foot and some mounted.
>
> ...When I left the ridge the sun was nearly down, then I went down the ridge on the east side, and went down through the bad lands on east side of Big Horn River, and came to the Yellowstone, opposite Fort Pease (about fifty miles from Custer Hill - R.). There I found Terry's trail; followed it, and finding I could not overtake the command (Terry) I went to the Boat, which was coming up the Big Horn, and got on it....[117]

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117. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 19, p. 761 (March 25, 1882). The letter is headed "The Custer Massacre, Narrative of Curley, A Crow Scout." This letter was addressed to the editor of the Journal and - as far as my research can determine - never printed. My complete MS. on it is in the files of the Montana Historical Society, and I have furnished copies to Fred Dustin and Capt. E. S. Luce, superintendent of the Custer National Monument. Its existence was unknown to either of them, and Mr. Dustin supports my belief that it is not only completely "new" but absolutely authoritative as to Curley's actual movements.

Curley, then, by his own frank admission left the Custer command at the same time Reno was driven from the timber, and seems to indicate clearly that the fight on Custer Hill was over before Reno even got out of the valley and Benteen came up - although he tells elsewhere in the story of hearing firing behind the ridge to which he returned. His story clearly supports others as to the appalling rapidity with which Custer was overwhelmed - but no blanket for Custer, no riding in rings, no masquerade, and certainly no "Jonah and the Whale", Montana version.

Not only another hero story ruined by an eyewitness, but ruined by the hero himself.

The sequel to the Curley myth, that the Indian scouts

(usually all identified as "Crows") "bolted" and "didn't stop skedaddling till they reached Powder River, 170 miles away" can be quickly discredited. Dustin, who has made a particularly careful study of their actual movements, has brought out the following:

There were 42 Indian scouts with the command as it prepared for battle - 29 Arikara ("Ree"), 4 Dakota, 2 Blackfeet (actually halfbreed), and the great half-breed Mitch Bouyer with 6 Crows. Three Rees with Reno, and Bouyer with Custer, were killed in the battle, and one Ree and one Crow were critically wounded - over 10% casualties. And while several withdrew with a captured pony herd just before the Sioux closed the siege lines on Reno, at least 8 were still present at the end of the fight. Indian or White, it was no record to be ashamed of - particularly when it is considered that their superior mobility and knowledge of the territory could have allowed every single one to escape alive.[118]

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118. Fred Dustin, pp. 90, 110, 128-134 passim.

The silliest, most inconsequential controversy of all has to do with the length of Custer's hair. Even as late as the 1920's, young North Dakota boys who had gazed in awe at the battle relics in the State Historical Museum at Bismarck, tinkled furtively on the box grand piano that once graced Fort Lincoln, stood subdued before the glassed-in regimental colors, and stopped spellbound before the magnificent Indian regalia knew the significance of the length of Custer's hair.

They might be privileged to trace out the lines of

the old fort on the Mandan side, standing on the very ground where the last review was held, or kicking old cartridge cases and perhaps a horseshoe from the hard prairie sod, ignoring them, and going home to forget it all - save the importance of General Custer's hair.

Old Indian veterans of New Ulm and Sully's Hill, Canyon Creek, and Bear Paw Mountain rheumatically walked the streets of their own home towns, or rocked in the sun on neighbors' porches - and people not so old who talked familarly of Grant Marsh of the Far West, of buffalo watering where buildings stood, of Ree scouts and blue-clad troopers clattering past in the morning sun, of personal acquaintance with great Dacotah warriors - they were all snubbed as only a schoolboy can ignore an adult.

But General Custer's hair - that was different! Everybody knew that if he hadn't of cut his hair, the Indians would have fled without a fight at his coming. They didn't mean to fight "Long Hair" (only effete Easterners said "Yellow Hair"); they killed him by mistake. And once they'd killed him they didn't even scalp him, they were so scared. You can bet that there'd a been a different story out there in Montana that day if Custer had had his long yellow hair!

Not only the "Murat of the U. S. Army," but the Samson, too. Apparently Custer's hair was more important than his tactics, or the immense reach of Sitting Bull's encampment on the Greasy Grass.

Again it is the LIFE subscribers who most recently have revived the question - and by artificial respiration at

that. One personally thanks the editors for mentioning that Custer had a haircut, perhaps because he is a barber himself with an eye to all favorable publicity. (Though such a testimonial certainly has its drawbacks). But Mrs. A. B. Conway of Mineral Wells, Texas, has reason to be in disagreement. She states:

> Sirs: Custer's hair was long at the time of the massacre and he was not scalped.
> In my possession I have an affidavit signed by an old Indian scout, Bob Nixon, in Ranger, Tex., May 18, 1927 in which he states that after the battle he was one of the first to arrive at the scene and that the general's head, both arms and legs had been severed from his body but were all together and that his long dark hair was still on his head.[119]

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119. LIFE, July 12, 1948, p. 8.

Bob Nixon may well have been with the regiment - but not as a scout for they are all known - and may have found a body in such condition. But nearly three generations have taken the word of Custer's wife as to the color of his hair. And Van de Water, who wrote his book while Varnum was still alive, states that Varnum and Custer had cropped their hair tight with horse clippers the night before the expedition left Fort Lincoln.[120]

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120. Glory-Hunter, p. 301. Certainly this demonstrates the heights of idiocy to which matters of the Custer controversy have risen when a formal note of reference is necessary to prove that a man did or did not cut his hair between the dates of such-and-such. But the man's partisans have laid so much stress on this, and equally insignificant points of dispute, it is actually needed.

As to the dismemberment of Custer's body, and its

general condition, that we can flatten out and roll up for good. Lieutenant Bradley's testimony is again in clear denial on the point, but the word of a man still living is also available. It was Benteen who identified Custer (ironically enough); and Sergeant Windolph, proud in his new chevrons earned and presented in the field, held Benteen's horse.

> Custer was lying a trifle to the southeast of the top of the knoll - where the monument is today. I stood six feet away holding Captain Benteen's horse while he identified the General. His body had not been touched, save for a single bullet hole in the left temple, near the ear, and a hole in his left breast. He looked almost as if he had been peacefully sleeping....[120]

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120. I Fought with Custer, p. 110.

There were other tales of course. The Rees of Fort Berthold and Fort Lincoln always believed that Custer had killed himself, and the untouched condition of his body lent weight to the supposition, for the Plains Indians respected suicides as men touched by the Great Spirit. But the black powder of the day always left vicious burns at close distances, and there were no such marks on Custer's wounds.

On an opposite tangent, the hopeful conjecture arose from the first that Custer was so treated out of respect for his unequalled bravery, and that conjecture has been treated as fact. But scalping and mutilation of an enemy was an almost ritualistic treatment of a brave and fallen foe, and with equal sense its omission could be distorted - if any were so inclined - into a reflection on Custer's bravery.

The preponderant testimony is that none of the Sioux knew Custer well enough to recognize him (the Cheyenne, remembering the slaughter of their wives and children at Washita, may have). And in the end, more likely than not, failure to scalp him - and some of his men (See Note 112, above) - was mere oversight in the flush of unparalleled triumph: An oversight which must have been keenly regretted in later years.[121]

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121. The attitude was probably similar to that held by Paints Brown, a ranker in the Sioux forces of Sitting Bull, toward the farfamed horse "Comanche." He mentions seeing Comanche move slowly out of the fight, and thinking nothing of it. But later "knowing how much store the whites seemed to set by him, old Paints was evidently sorry they had not finished him off when they had the chance." See Bruce Nelson, Land of the Dacotahs (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1946), p. 179.

Whether Custer died last of all as invariably pictured - Leonidas among his Spartans - it decidedly a moot point. Two Moons told Hamlin Garland in 1898:

> ...We shoot, we ride fast, we shoot again. Soldiers drop, and horses fall on them. Soldiers in line drop, but one man rides up and down the line - all the time shouting. He rode a sorrel horse, with white face and white forelegs. I don't know who he was. He was a brave man.
>
> Indians keep swirling round and round, and the soldiers kill only a few. Many soldiers fell. At last all horses killed but five. Once in a while some man would break out and run toward the river, but he would fall. At last about a hundred men and five horsemen stood on the hill all bunched together. All along the bugler kept blowing his commands. He was very brave too. Then a chief was killed. I hear it was Long Hair, I don't know; and then the five horsemen and the bunch of men, maybe so forty, started toward the river. The man on the sorrel horse led them, shouting all the time. He wore a buckskin shirt and had long black hair and mustache.

> He fought hard with a big knife. His men were all covered with white dust. I couldn't tell whether they were officers or not. One man all alone ran down toward the river, then round up over the hill. I thought he was going to escape, but a Sioux fired and hit him in the head. He was the last man. He wore braid on his arms.
>
> ...Most of them we left just where they fell. We came to the man with the big mustache; he lay down the hills towards the river. The Indians did not take his buckskin shirt. The Sioux said, "That is the big chief. That is Long Hair." I don't know. I had never seen him. The man on the white-faced horse was the bravest man.[122]

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122. Hamlin Garland, "General Custer's Last Fight as Seen by Two Moon," McClure's Magazine, May, 1898, as reprinted in I Fought With Custer, p. 213f. Even the Cheyennes who claimed to have killed Custer place the site within a few feet of the Monument on the hill and he was stripped; all efforts to connect him with the man who led the last charge have failed because of the location, the black hair, the horse, and a hundred similar contradictions. The man with the "braid" on his arms, however, is generally accepted as being First Sergeant James Butler of Calhoun's Troop L - found a mile-and-a-half from the hill, toward Reno. Although even in his case there are obvious discrepancies from Two Moons' account. (For the points in Butler's case see Fred Dustin, p. 186.)

If Mrs. Conway's Bob Nixon was actually at the scene at all, there is just the remotest possibility that he was looking at the body of "the man on the white-faced horse" - the real hero of the Last Stand. Two Moons talked to Hamlin Garland twenty-two years after the battle, but the mystery of the "Hero in Buckskin" was known and discussed as early as 1877.

In August of that year the St. Paul Pioneer Press related identically the same story, attributing it to Red Horse, a sub-chief of the Minneconjou Sioux, who had recently surrendered at his agency. Then, too, the description could

be fitted satisfactorily to no one of Custer's officers, according to what was known of how they looked and dressed the day of the battle. The Pioneer Press finally came up with an ingenious solution: The Indians were confused as to which part of the battle; they really were referring to Reno's fight, and the hero was Captain French, the only officer in Reno's battalion wearing buckskin.

And French had black hair and a big mustache. But the theory fell of its own weight. French's hair was cut short, and he had ridden a grey horse in the fight - not the "famed sorrel with four white feet." And Red Horse had been as positive as Two Moons in the details of the charge. The mystery still remained.[123]

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123. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 15, p. 94 (September 15, 1877).

And the mystery still remains. The direction taken by the last futile charge might seem to indicate Lieutenant A. E. Smith, for his troop was found clustered in a depression due south of the monument - and Smith had a heavy mustache and dark hair. But Smith was the "Grey Horse Troop," and he was one of the officers in the group about Custer, all presumably properly identified.

The mustache and the hair also fitted young Lieutenant Van W. Reilly - only eight months an officer and but five with the Seventh - but Reilly, too, was in the group by the monument. Last there was Lieutenant H. M. Harrington - black mustache, black-haired - and never identified among

the unknown dead.

Harrington was second in command of Tom Custer's troop - and "C" Troop was one of three mounted on sorrel horses. Whether or not he was wearing buckskin is not known - but it is believed not. Yet, in the heat of battle, even an Indian might mistake an army shirt covered with "thick white dust" for buckskin.

Garland, or the editors of McClure's, footnoted the interview with Two Moons with a suggestion that the man might have been "a scout." But the fearless Crow half-breed, Mitch Bouyer, was the only scout killed with Custer's battalion, and though ideally a man to lead a forlorn hope and undeniably black-haired, he had no mustache. Mark Kellogg, the newspaper correspondent, was found still booted and clothed toward the river, but at that point resemblance ceases. And there yet remains Dr. George E. Lord, the surgeon. He was a first lieutenant in the medical corps (as distinguished from civilians hired as "contract surgeons") and of long western experience - and the necessary mustache. He held rank, and he was probably capable enough to command - but no trace of him has ever been found.

It is fascinating speculation, albeit profitless. Of all the myths of the Last Stand, here is the one with the most solid basis in truth, and forever the most disconcerting. All the main facts in hand but one - and that one hopelessly beyond proof or disproof. "The man on the white-faced horse," "the hero in buckskin," "The Bravest Man," the real hero of Custer's Last Stand - and forever unknown.

II

This, then, is the Custer Legend, a thing apart from history and of little enough acquaintance with fact. Custer, darling of fortune, humiliated by vindictive superiors, betrayed by treason-ridden subordinates, driven by destiny, dying Wodan-like among the exulting Frost Giants. It sounds like second-rate Wagner, written with an eye to the peanut gallery.

And so, actually, it was; the second-rate Wagner responsible is still well enough known, although his full contribution to the Custer Legend is not. But first it must be strongly reiterated how little the Legend has in common with the actual fame and career of George A. Custer. Through factors both of his own making and others beyond all human control, he was dead: And after that he was little more than a convenient hall-tree on which to hang the raiment of a glory hastily patched together by others.

But before discussing the three individuals most concerned with propagating the Legend, some extenuating circumstances must be considered. Custer served his country in peculiar times - times that set off both his fine points and his flaws in bold relief. From the Civil War he rightly emerged a figure of renown; but postwar service overemphasized his weaknesses, and others as well as himself suffered the consequences. The scope of operations, as well as the hardships of the frontier, played an important part.

From April 1861 until May 1865, the Union Army had officially mustered 2,772,408 troops. Even counting bounty-

jumpers, short-term enlistments, and deserters it was a tremendous military organization - matched even against modern-day standards. The total strength of the Federal forces under Grant's command at the war's end was 1,000,516. But by October 1867 the Volunteers had all been mustered out and the Regular Army was at a maximum strength of just under 57,000, and by the time of the Battle of the Little Big Horn its authorized strength had long been fixed by Congress at 25,000.

Such rapid constriction inevitably worked great hardship on many deserving career men, political influence was brought into every conceivable use, and brevet or volunteer rank was bitterly flaunted in every regiment - often the last valuable possession of proud but near penniless men. As a result, army dispatches were full of colonels and generals whose Regular rank might still be only that of a First Lieutenant on retirement.

Promotion was on a strict seniority basis, and "few died and none resigned" - although the casualty rate via the court-martial route was high. Compulsory retirement of officers was not even discussed until 1880, and non-commissioned officers and enlisted men - even after years of service - were cut loose with nothing but a curt recommendation of character.

Benteen, a Captain when the Seventh was activated in 1866, only reached Major by 1893. Gibson, a First Lieutenant at the Little Big Horn, when retired in broken health from the long years of frontier hardship in 1893, was still a

Captain. The only way to break the rigid rule of promotion was by a special act of Congress, increasing the organization of the retired list by one particular file in one particular rank.

Ironically, even as the news of the disaster sped East, Custer reached the position of senior Lieutenant Colonel of the Cavalry arm through just such an act, and stood first in line for the next Colonelcy vacated.[124]

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124. Col. W. H. Emory of the 5th Cavalry was retired as brigadier general, by a special law authorizing the President to increase the number of retired officers in that rank by one. Wesley Merritt then became Colonel of the 5th, Major Elmer Otis became Lieut.-Col. of the 9th, and Capt. George B. Sanford Major of the 1st. On news of Custer's death, Otis became Lieut-Col. of the 7th. See Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 752 (July 1, 1876).

In fact, so rigid were Army regulations, and so constricted in red tape, that such special acts were a considerable part of any business accomplished by Congress in any session - often merely to correct errors in the records, or relieve the War Department bureaus from a specific dilemma.

It made for a strange army in many ways. Joseph Tilford, senior Major of the Seventh, while acting quartermaster at Belen, New Mexico, in 1862, lost his papers. He was swiftly exonerated by his superiors, but was only discharged of his liability by HR 2048 in 1876 - fourteen years afterward.

And Captain French, while under orders at Camp Ruhlen, D. T., to await call as a witness at the Reno Court of

Inquiry in 1879, got slightly drunk, "lost through willful misconduct a horse, property of the U. S.," and was found guilty by a general court martial of violating the "15th, 38th and 65th Articles of War" - and sentenced to be dismissed from the service.

His sentence was commuted to suspension from rank, on half pay, for a year, and he was shortly afterward retired for wounds and disabilities acquired in frontier service - but a man testified by all to be one of the finest officers of the regiment had been inexcusably humiliated after a brilliant record in the Civil War and against the Indians. And for a broken down cavalry nag at that.

It all made for unnecessary tensions and frictions, petty intrigues, political maneuvering, rumors, slanders, charges and counter-charges, and an interminable jockeying for advantage in every arm, in every regiment, at every post. Mrs. Custer has left us a vivid description of what the system meant - and did - to career officers:

> ...Until after a colonelcy is reached everything advances by grades. Death, dismissal, resignation, and retiring from illness or from age are the causes that make vacancies. The bride tenderly reared could not reconcile herself to the calm calculation of officers who sat down to go over the list of those who ranked them, and to estimate how many years it would take for those in the way to be removed, either by Divine Providence or by dismissal. With finger on the Army Register they disposed of one after another in something after this fashion: Such a one "will 'hand in his chips' soon if he don't leave John Barleycorn alone." Such and such a one "is going under from disease contracted during the war, or from an old wound." A third "has had a fortune left him, and he will 'light out' for civil life soon." Still another "begins to totter with age and imbecility, and

> can't sit a horse any longer; he will be retired shortly." Of another who was constantly being tried it was said, "Some court-martial will get him yet and send him flying."

And of the news of the death of an officer at some other post

> ...The officers said, if they liked him, "Poor fellow! I'm sorry he's gone;" but the inevitable question that followed was, "Whom will it promote?" The Army Register was at once in requisition, and the file looked up.[125]

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125. Following the Guidon, p. 282-283.

Custer was both the target and the instigator of attempts at the "old Army game" of forcing a brother officer into premature dismissal or retirement. His side of the story has been often retold, but the other is less known. To cite a specific example, he made a definite effort to "get" Major Lewis Merrill of his own regiment - senior to Reno - for reasons not now at all clear, since he already ranked him.

While acting against the Klu Klux Klan in South Carolina, Merrill had accepted $21,400 in rewards from the carpetbag legislature for his work, which he claimed he had the right to do, as "he did not think it improper to take the rewards of the state simply because he was an officer." He was called before the House Military Affairs Committee on July 3, 1876, and Custer was invited to testify; but did not. The ethical question certainly appears clear enough by today's standards, but Merrill was fully exonerated.

Incredibly, however, it was not on this highly vulnerable point that Custer spread tales about Merrill, but

rather on an unrelated rumor that he had accepted a bribe in 1870 - one which was officially discredited by the General of the Army, Sherman. And Merrill attacked Custer bitterly in public print:

> ...Some years ago the slander was covertly, under seal of confidence and with cowardly purpose that it should do its mischief unknown to me, put in circulation at Fort Leavenworth when I was not there by General George A. Custer. That knowledge of it did by a lucky chance come to me a few weeks later. That I immediately demanded an official investigation, which was refused on the ground that the author of the vile tale had placed nothing on official record; that I at once renewed my demand for investigation, demanding it strongly as a legal right, and was met by a second refusal; that so soon thereafter as a sudden change of station permitted, I demanded through the proper authority that General Custer should not any longer be allowed to balk an inquiry by working in the dark, but should be compelled to make it a matter of such official record as would obviate the objections made to instituting an investigation; that thereupon and after much delay, instead of the official action demanded, he wrote me a private and pretendedly friendly letter in which he ignored all notice of my demands for investigation, though well knowing of them and the reasons for refusal, and sympathizingly repeated the story as if he were now for the first time telling it, and felt it my due that I should have notice of it first of all; that finally after eight months of effort, he was driven to take the course which to a man of honorable instincts would from the first have needed no fingerpost; that then when the person (another dropped officer of the Army) whom he at last gave as authority was officially inquired of in regard to it, he first evaded and finally wholly shirked out of willingness to father the slander or the responsibility to establish it as a fact....[126]

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126. See Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 628f. (May 6, 1876). Merrill was in the East at the time on detached service with the Philadelphia Centennial Commission, and his letter was sent to both the New York Times and the "Journal." He was criticized later for attacking a "dead man," but this was not so at the time; Custer was still in Washington when he first made his charges, and in St. Paul when they were

printed. He is supposed to have said that he would answer them when he returned from the Sioux Expedition. An attack on Merrill's South Carolina activities would have, at least, seemed to have had justification - but to attack him on a discredited bribe story apparently unrelated shows how little Custer heeded or understood the dangers of hearsay evidence.

Aside from the names involved, it could have been a dozen other typical Army quarrels of the period. It was a strange army indeed: a thousand personal dissensions of every nature, and still what Lord Wolsey termed, "man for man, the finest in the world." And Custer shows up prominently as an example of what brought about both.

Always remembering that to Mrs. Custer her husband's presence heralded the Second Coming, Boots and Saddles, Following the Guidon, and Tenting on the Plains should be carefully read for a clear picture of the bitter disappointments, the heartbreak, and the mere everyday inconveniences that routine could make unbearable when on duty on the frontier.

It was something to be endured by all, but more than one officer of stronger temperment than Custer sought means to palliate it. Drink was an accepted means, and the court-martial records of the period show a high mortality rate for that reason. Custer, who neither drank nor smoked, found different means in his flamboyant love of blooded dogs and horses, his personal press-agentry in articles for magazines like Galaxy, and above all his constant efforts to make an independent fortune - for his wife's sake even more than his own.

But he was not a financier, and he was invariably poorly advised by those passing for such. Much has come down

to us only as rumors - sums as high as $30,000 plunged into worthless Colorado mining ventures, and maneuvering on margin in Wall Street. One such attempt we have some specific figures on, as seven years after his death one of his promissory notes - endorsed by Ben Holliday, the western stage-line magnate - was a subject of litigation in the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia.

The transactions are obscure and the details unimportant, but the following facts are a little startling: Dealing through the brokers Emil and Frank Justh, in the six or seven months preceding February 10, 1876, Custer brought stocks on margin to the aggregate of $389,983, made a total profit of $552, and ended with net losses of $8578.[127]

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127. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 20, p. 1146 (July 21, 1883). The item is headed "General Custer in Wall Street." It also shows that his estate was able to pay less than 10 cents on the dollar on the claim.

Among the bulls and the bears his cause was as hopeless as among the victorious hostiles at the Little Big Horn. There seems little reason to doubt that he was almost financially bankrupt when he left Fort Lincoln, May 10, 1876.

And certainly there is no question where sympathies must lie at the picture of the ramrod cavalryman of the Plains moving about New York, among the greater and lesser robber barons of the age. They might lionize him socially, but they always made him feel the presence of his worn Army overcoat and of his wife's lack of stylish costume. And these same men, whose outright stealing was shaded only by

the barest outline of the law, were constantly agitating for further reducing the size and maintenance costs of the frontier Army. It must have been pure gall and wormwood to one of his excessive sensitiveness and personal background.

Yes, there were certainly extenuating circumstances for a legitimate Custer Legend.

But for the Legend as we have shown it exists there was little excuse. In the main, it can fairly be said to be the work of three individuals: Mrs. Custer, his first biographer Frederick Whittaker, and his eminent military apologist E. S. Godfrey.

THE GALLANT WIDOW

Elizabeth Bacon Custer was a woman of real beauty, considerable literary attainment, and strong character. Elderly residents of Monroe still testify as to her great charm and magnificent poise. Her presence on the lecture platform was magnetic, and her writings fully equal to the best dealing with the late frontier. When George Armstrong Custer won Elizabeth Bacon he scored a victory more important to his fame than any of his military attainments.

Her life was dedicated to her husband's memory, and in the soul-shaking grief of her bereavement she grasped wildly at any supposition or rumor that might erase what she feared was a stain on her hero's spotless name. To her, he was always Galahad on a white horse, and in their personal relationship he certainly so appeared.

This has always been an obstacle to partisans and

critics alike, for so very few seem to realize that it was perfectly possible that Custer - when with his wife - was exactly as she pictures him; and at the same time - in his dealings with others and in the field - quite another figure indeed. Like the Lake Erie on whose shores he was raised, he had great depths and muddly shoals in disconcerting contiguousness.

Mrs. Custer was still alive for the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of the Little Big Horn and, naturally, treated with great deference for the gallant woman she was. She outlived her husband by almost fifty-seven years, dying in New York in 1933.

She well deserved a separate legend of her own, but her presence was in many ways a detriment to the natural workings of history. Anyone who questioned her theories of the battle, or of her husband's godlike character, was suspect of attacking her as well - and per se a cad, undermining everything fine that a sentimental public preferred to believe was fact. It was merely unwise to question the tales of Truthful George and Honest Abe, but to attempt to be objective about Custer, the Martyr, was downright physically dangerous while his wife still lived.

If her stories of garrison life were valuable, her theories of what actually happened that June 25, 1876, are so emotional and so based on hearsay as to be very nearly worthless. But they had an odd, and wholly unintended, result. One of them, her re-editing of Godfrey's Century article for a 1921 pamphlet, finally caused the Custer

historian Fred Dustin to take to print, and eventually to bring out his monumental study The Custer Tragedy.[128]

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128. The pamphlet was Fred Dustin, The Custer Fight: Some Criticisms of Gen. E. S. Godfrey's "Custer's Last Battle," in the CENTURY Magazine for January, 1892; and of Mrs. Custer's Pamphlet of 1921 (Hollywood, 1936; Privately Printed). This was circulated in manuscript for several years before its publication, and its reception among Custer scholars - principally E. A. Brininstool and R. S. Ellison - led Dustin to bring out in 1939 The Custer Tragedy, which I have cited frequently in this paper.

Her contribution to impartial history was largely negative, but her contribution to the Custer Legend almost immeasurable. It was, as summed up by Frederick Van de Water:

> Elizabeth Bacon Custer's fifty-odd years of glorification of have enshrined her husband in the folk-lore of America. She proclaimed him hero, and since she was his widow, men who thought otherwise held their peace. She outlived them all.[129]

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129. Glory-Hunter, p. 361. That she was strengthened by allies equally invulnerable to refutation should be obvious. Mrs. Yates' paper (as edited by General Miles and Mary E. Burt and who knows who else) I have quoted. And when Cyrus Townsend Brady was attempting to be impartial in his 1904 study he was subjected to a letter from one of Custer's sisters - unnamed, but presumably Margaret Calhoun Custer, widow of Lieut. Calhoun, killed in the Last Stand - begging him not to take the position that Custer had disobeyed his orders. (See C. T. Brady, Appendix A, Note, p. 396.) However, none of the other surviving relatives were gifted with Mrs. Custer's attainments as a writer, and consequently of little individual influence.

Nevertheless, however emotional and naturally biased her views, Elizabeth Custer's motives were always of the highest, and her actions on an equal plane. Even though she was left nearly destitute, as hinted at above, everything she did in his behalf was honorably inspired and completely

beyond mercenary motive. The same can not be said of the individual responsible for ninety-of-a-hundred myths and misstatements on Custer in print: Frederick Whittaker.

"MAJOR RENO'S ACCUSER"

Frederick Whittaker was a garrulous, flamboyant figure of the post-Civil War era who eternally gloried in two self-bestowed patents of nobility: "General Custer's Biographer" and "Major Reno's Accuser." Born in London in 1838, he came to America about 1850, and served throughout the Civil War with the 6th New York Volunteer Cavalry. A second lieutenant, he acquitted himself creditably in many actions, and came out a Brevet Captain - a fact which he never for an instant allowed anyone to forget.

After the war, he resumed his work as chief fictioneer in the stable of Erastus Beadle, famed publisher of blood-thirsty dime novels. Two titles are sufficient to show Captain Whittaker's style, and qualifications for historical biography: "The Death's Head Rangers: a Tale of the Lone Star State" - still quoted as a classic of its kind - and "Double Death, or, The Spy Queen of Wyoming."

In time he graduated to the more sedate pages of The Galaxy and the Army and Navy Journal - at one time under the same ownership. His Galaxy articles were of a type of "Archer and Prine," "Mohamet as a Soldier and Poet," "Weather Wisdom," etc. But one is important in its clues to his personality. In 1873 he produced "The Martyr of Balaklava" violently disputing all existing theories of the tactics of the Light

Brigade. It is revealing in that it shows how seriously he took himself as an expert military analyst, and the delight he took in Gothic mystery, for he even romanticized himself with the nom de plume of "Launce Poyntz."

How well he actually knew Custer is open to great question. It has been erroneously assumed even by a man like Van de Water that Whittaker accompanied Custer when Lee's first flag of surrender was accepted, but this is not so. Custer was accompanied by a Whittaker, but it was Lieut.-Col. Whittaker of the 1st Connecticut - a regiment in Custer's Third Cavalry Division - not Frederick Whittaker, "Brevet Captain 6th N. Y. Veteran Cavalry."

Nevertheless he was a zealous admirer of Custer both during the war and afterward, and he followed his western career with extreme interest. And on news of the Last Stand, he burst into song with the only reasonably good Custer poem written, "Custer's Last Charge" - which is not meant to imply that it had great literary merit.[130]

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130. But he did catch the rhythm of mounted riders in his lines: "Dead? Is it possible? He, the bold rider, Custer, our hero, the first in the fight, Charming the bullets of yore to fly wider, Shunning our battle-king's ringlets of light!" etc. For a fair judgment it should be compared with Will Carleton's "The Heart and the Sword;" Leavitt Hunt's "The Last Charge;" Longfellow's "The Revenge of Rain-in-the-Face;" or Ella Wheeler Wilcox's interminable epic "Custer." If Whittaker and Longfellow were matched on their Custer poems alone, Longfellow would have no place in American Literature.

He was an obvious choice for Custer articles, and in September, 1876, Galaxy published his first tribute to his hero. In it he modestly compares Custer to Raphael, Don John

of Austria, the Admirable Crichton, Henry V of England, the Black Prince, Alexander, Titus, Byron, Shelley, and Joseph Rodman Drake - all "beloved of the gods" and none "outliving their fortune." Then mentioning others who did "outlive their fortune" he thunders home his point with a flourish of trumpets, and loud alarums:

"...To Custer alone was it given to join a romantic life of perfect success to a death of perfect heroism; to unite the splendors of Austerlitz and Thermopylae; to charge like Murat; to die like Leonidas...etc." But his comment on the campaign - especially on Reno - are the only matters that give his article any interest today, in view of his subsequent actions.

In it he makes two statements worth singling out:

> ...We who are wise after the fact can see it; but it is hard to say on whom the blame of the losses which followed should be fairly laid, except it be on the commander of the whole column. Terry *sic* committed the fatal error of dividing his forces; for which, however, it is difficult to judge him severely when we remember how scant were his means of information of the real strength of the enemy....

And in comparing Washita to the Little Big Horn

> ...At Washita there were three different camps, and nearly as many at the Little Big Horn; but "Custer's Luck" caused him to strike only the camp at the end of the line, which he destroyed by surprise; and he had the further advantage of keeping the others all in his front much demoralized. At the Little Horn he struck the very centre of a line of lodges several miles long, and the enemy was waiting for him. Reno, whose attack on one flank of the line most resembled the Washita attack, had not the force to make it effective; but he managed to escape after a severe mauling. Custer's attack, even had he known what was before him, had not a chance of success....[131]

131. Frederick Whittaker, "General George A. Custer," Galaxy, Vol. 22, pp. 370-371 (September 1876). Even as mild a statement as this, and similar material in "The Galaxy Miscellany & Advertiser" - presumably also by Whittaker - was accompanied by an editorial note, in part: "...As this hastily written account based upon early newspaper dispatches reflected upon Brevet Colonel Reno, U. S. A., major of the Seventh Cavalry, it is due to Colonel Reno to say that the editor...has thus far seen no reason to reflect upon his action in the engagement....We wish to save an officer who has deservedly won so high a reputation in the military service as Colonel Reno from even the possibility of misconception." (See Note, p. 371).

Except that the criticism of Terry is that now commonly made of Custer, the statements are quite in line with the facts. Had Whittaker remained as judicial there would have been no false Custer Legend of any consequence. However, even as the Galaxy article reached the public, Whittaker had received the first of his much-vaunted accolades, as the following Army and Navy Journal item discloses:

> Messrs. Sheldon & Co., publishers of the writings of General Custer will shortly publish a biography of that deceased officer, the proceeds of which, after paying expenses, will be devoted to the benefit of Mrs. Custer. The work has been entrusted to Bvt. Capt. Frederick Whittaker, lately of the staff of the Army and Navy Journal. With a view to render this history as complete as possible, this gentleman requests that all who can furnish any information, personal anecdotes, etc. concerning General Custer at any time of his career will send the same to him, care of SHELDON & CO., 8 Murray St., New York, promising to acknowledge the same with thanks and use them in the memoir.[132]

132. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 836 (August 5, 1876).

The book was obviously designed to cash in on the current publicity of the battle - helped by a play for sympathy

in aiding the widow - and never intended to be definitive or necessarily authoritative. The methods of obtaining the material, as outlined, also support the theory that this was to be a "quickie" - comparable in our own times to the "MacArthur the Magnificent" books brought out between Pearl Harbor and the fall of Bataan, and so embarrassing now to so many people. (Particularly General MacArthur).

Moreover, the methods show up especially important in view of Whittaker's soon-to-be stated claims of "having spent months of patient research." Most significant of all is the complete absence of proof in any form that Whittaker, up to the Reno Inquiry, ever got as far West as Chicago. Yet even today his word is accepted as authoritative on any number of complex matters concerning the battle.

Between the time of the Galaxy article and the appearance of the biography, supposition and slander had already thrown out their roots. The anti-administration papers, like the New York World, played up any angle of the disaster which would embarrass President Grant, and sensation-seeking papers, like the Herald which had so often found Custer apt feature copy, filled their columns with any material which would serve to increase circulation. It was not a chapter in American journalistic history to make a modern newsman proud.

Persons having not even a remote relation to the actual battle were cited as authorities. The Confederate general T. L. Rosser from the first savagely attacked Reno on the first news of the battle, and not even a calm letter from

the great cavalry leader General Averill silenced him for an instant,[133] Buffalo Bill, in Philadelphia after just making

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133. Since Averill's letter to the N. Y. Herald was written on July 12, 1876 -- and news of the battle did not reach Fort Lincoln until July 5th, and the East by telegraph the next day - it can be seen how much thought was given to Rosser's charges. Averill, who had done Indian fighting as well as being the only Union cavalryman to defeat Nathan B. Forrest, said in part: "In behalf of a gallant soldier who cannot now know of any public criticism, nor be in position to repel it, I ask leave to say a word...The undertaking to criticize an action by those not experienced in Indian warfare when there is but a vague understanding of the plan and a total ignorance of topography would seem an extraordinary venture....It was merely a question of time with either Custer or Reno...as for assisting or supporting each other, after becoming engaged with 2 miles of Indians between them, it was entirely out of the question....In any case Reno is not to be held responsible. I have known both Custer and Reno from youth, and had plenty of opportunity to appreciate their superb qualities as cavalry leaders, both having served in my command in Virginia....Let us hope that Americans may not be mistaken in their generous attitude that the dead are always right...." Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 13, p. 823 (July 29, 1876). For an idea of how impartial newspaper opinion was see Fred Dustin, pp. 205-206.

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such an outstanding record as Crook's chief of scouts he had been summarily dismissed, told the Press, "...Reno stood inactive when only a ridge separated him from Custer....Reno is to blame and I told him so." Rosser and Cody at least knew something of the Plains, but this was not at all necessary in order to be given great prominence. Many a two-bit nonenity, never heard of before or again, was quoted in final front-page judgment of Grant, Sherman, Terry, and Reno.

And in this healthy atmosphere for clear-headed and impartial analysis, one of Custer's avowedly uncritical worshipers sat down in Mt. Vernon, N. Y., and settled offhand points of dispute Custer scholars even now approach with great

caution. But dime novels in cloth covers and high-grade paper are still dime novels. After a "very thorough and careful examination" of "accessible facts", Whittaker's A Popular Life of General George A. Custer was in the hands of the public the first week in December, 1876.

It is not likely that Whittaker himself at that time considered his "popular life" a final word on Custer's career, and the battle which was immediately termed a "massacre." But since he soon came to do so, there is in that no excuse for his future conduct. In fact, a gracious note of praise and thanks from Mrs. Custer, a commendatory word or two from persons of like views, and he quickly reached the position that not only his book but he himself spoke ex cathedra on every question or objection.

Judged solely on its means of compilation of facts and original purpose it is a creditable piece of work, even today our only source for the bulk of material pertaining directly to Custer's life. But valid fact is too often intertwined with imagination, and in too many places gives way entirely to it. The vital flaw in Whittaker's work at its best can be aptly demonstrated by a matter wholly unrelated to the Last Stand - and consequently more revealing of method and less excuseable.

The unadorned fact of the incident is this: On May 22, 1862, McClellan's army found the way to Richmond blocked by the Chickahominy River. Lieut. Custer, acting under orders from General J. G. Barnard, chief of the engineers, made a

valuable reconnaissance across the stream, proved it fordable, and also saw an opportunity to cut off a Confederate picket line. General Barnard made his report to McClellan, calling attention to Custer's work and what he had observed as to the enemy's weak position. McClellan, to whom Custer was already known, questioned him closely and was impressed enough to ask Custer to join his staff as a Captain. The following morning, Captain Custer was assigned a force of two cavalry troops and one infantry company, crossed the Chickahominy at dawn, and won his first victory.

Told in that manner alone it reflects high credit on Custer, and indicates where his meteoric rise to a General's rank began, and that it was soundly based in military ability. But his dime novelist biographer was constitutionally incapable of such a recitation. Instead we find added touches - reminiscent of Beadle & Co.:

> Custer, being on staff duty, happened to be around and Barnard beckoned to him to come with him, not knowing who he was at the time. Both passed through the picket line, and went down the river...and finally the two found themselves alone on the margin of the stream, the dark flow of which gave no revelation of its depths, nor the nature of its bottom. Turning to his young subordinate General Barnard said, "Jump in!"....The young officer waded the stream in momentary expectation of being fired at by the enemy's pickets on the other bank. All around him was quite unknown. There was every reason to suppose that riflemen were in the bushes beyond, and Custer was in open river, perfectly exposed. He had drawn his revolver and held it above the water, which rose to his armpits in the middle of the stream; and his feet sunk several inches into the soft, sticky, black mud of the bottom. General Barnard in his report calls it "firm bottoms," but it will be noticed that the general did not wade it himself....

Arrived at the other side, Custer peered through the bushes and cautiously ascended the bank, being rewarded for his explorations by a distinct view of the enemy's picket fires, some distance off, and by the sight of their nearest sentry lazily pacing his post, quite unconscious of the proximity of any foe. By this time Barnard ...began to make silent signals to him to come back, but the young fellow never heeded them till he had carefully examined the whole of the enemy's position, and had found that their main picket post was so situated in the midst of a bend of the river that it might easily be cut off by a bold dash....

...The general and his young subordinate mounted and rode up to the house, where they found McClellan about to ride out with his staff ...Here Custer fell back while Barnard went on. In these army matters, the reader must always remember the credit assigned to an officer or soldier is almost always in proportion to his rank....In this case Custer had made the risky reconnaissance, but as Barnard was the chief engineer it would all go to Barnard's credit. So the boy thought, at least. He was only a humble second lieutenant, and the riotous life he had led at Washington the previous winter, with the sudden shock of revelation and repentance produced by his sister's solemn warnings and prayers, had tended to sober and subdue him.... he had led an anusually wicked life....Moreover he had spent most of his money, was hard up, shabby in his dress, and that moment was all covered with the black mud of the Chickahominy. He felt very keenly the contrast between his own forlorn appearance and that of the neat and handsome staff of McClellan....General Barnard rode by McClellan's side...and finally it came out that the general had not gone himself, but sent in some young officer, really could not say who - had seen him lounging near headquarters - guessed he was somewhere near - would the general like to see him?

Certainly the general would like to see him...where was he? Word was passed...from a stately chief of staff, covered with buttons, through a still more gorgeous aid-de-camp, thence to another and another....At last he was found and brought up, dirty and muddy with unkempt hair, coat not brushed but all creased from being slept in, trousers far from guiltless of rags, boots more russet than black with red reflections, cap once blue now purple from many rains and suns. Such was the figure that presented itself before McClellan....

> Then it was the McClellan broke the silence abruptly, "Do you know, you're just the young man I've been looking for, Mr. Custer. How would you like to come on my staff?" 134

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134. Whittaker's Life, pp. 108-114.

Horatio Alger and the correspondence school advertisements do it better, but they make no pretense of writing history. Unfortunately for Brevet Captain Whittaker, 6th N. Y. Veteran Cavalry, General J. C. Barnard was still alive when his book appeared. And in an excoriating letter of June 12, 1877, he took both biographer and biography to stern task. It is a lengthy letter, but the point of Whittaker's history by embellishment and insinuation is so clearly demonstrated by it, much of it should be quoted. Quickly getting down to cases General Barnard begins:

> ...It is somewhat characteristic of a style of 'historical writing'- of which this book is a type, that even official statements of those whose statements is the sole source of information on the subject are disregarded. [Refers to his reports, etc. on day Custer waded the Chickahominy]....The sole object was to find as to depth and character of the bottom. Custer drew no "revolver" - the stream did not rise "to his armpits" - and the enormous depth of "several inches of soft, sticky black mud" is in its very phraseology, a creation of the historian.
>
> My official report is very brief and very explicit. "He waded across without any difficulty (the depth being almost four feet); and a few days afterward, emboldened by this experiment, he caused the length of the stream to be waded from the bridge for a half mile below. The attack and capture of the enemy's pickets by him and Lieut. Bowen was founded on these reconnaissances to which the successful results are due." In this there is entire and full credit to Custer, both for what he did under my orders and under my eye (and I repeat, as my instrument), and what he subsequently did of his own promptings.

As to the occasion in hand. I simply venture to state in opposition to so trustworthy and conscientious an historian "that Custer did not ascend to the opposite bank," did not "peer through the bushes to the other side," and was not "rewarded by a distinct view of the enemy's picket fires;" had not "carefully examined the whole of the enemy's position;" had not "found their main picket post to be so situated in the midst of a bend of the river that it might easily be cut off, etc., etc." To "spin yarns" is quite a harmless doing compared with using "whole cloth" of this fabric for "history."

What follows, page 112 and 113, is mostly pure invention, libellous on me in its substance, and utterly at variance with fact.

"The general and his young subordinate mounted and rode up to the house, where they found McClellan about to ride out with his staff, etc., etc. Here Custer fell back and Barnard went on." And then follows some profound and touching reflections concerning "those Army matters" by which it seems Custer "made the risk" and "it would all go to Barnard's credit." The sensational and truly apropos allusions just here to his (Custer's) "riotous life", his "repentance produced by his sister's solemn warnings and prayers" carried to a climax of bathos that he "had spent most of his money, was hard up, shabby in his dress, and at that moment was all covered with the black mud of the Chickahominy" certainly entitle the "historian" to a high place -- in his line.

The "general and his young subordinate" did not "ride up to the house," for there was none, the headquarters being (as the author has once stated) not at "Widow Gaines' house" but in the field, near Cold Harbor. They did not "find McClellan about to ride out with his staff." He was seated in the open air of his camp with several of his officers....

Custer did not "fall back;" he accompanied me to the presence of Gen. McClellan (to whom, as I have before observed, he was known), and whatever report was made was made by us in common... and, finally, Custer was not "covered with the black mud of the Chickahominy;" his lower garments were wet and that was all.

The subsequent baseless injurious statement that I "by McClellan's side made my ("his") report as if ignoring Custer" (which, however, I had a perfect right to do), that "the commander listened, asked a few questions, and finally it came out that the General had not gone himself, but sent some young officer - really couldn't say

> who - had seen him lounging near headquarters - guessed he was somewhere near, etc. etc."
>
> The "cloth" such stuff as this is made of is indeed "whole" enveloping a libel as wanton and complete as itself.
>
> ..."History," either of a great war or of an individual who has played a brilliant part in that war, and who laid down his life on the battlefield, is indeed a grave thing. Those who survive have some claims, however. They who suffer from the spatterings of libellers who attempt to magnify their heroes by recklessly defaming others are better off than those whose future history is to be read in pages like these I have been noticing.
>
> It was not my fortune to see much of Gen. Custer subsequent to the events alluded to. I never had cause to imagine that he indulged so foolish a belief as that I withheld him any credit due (my reports show I do not); nor to doubt that he recognized the really valuable service I rendered him on this occasion.[135]
>
> J. G. Barnard, Bvt. Maj. Gen. etc.

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135. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 738 (June 23, 1877).

Those damned eyewitnesses again.

Barnard's letter would seemed to have put a total quietus on any man caught over-correcting history, but Whittaker immediately displayed one of his most irritating attributes, a love of long contentious letters - often with as little fact to go on as his dime novels. He at once replied to General Barnard, explaining that he had gone to see the general personally and had been referred to the official report and certain other material, but

> ...These, however, were very meagre. They referred to an incident which was the turning point of Custer's life as a mere trifle, and were avowedly founded on the very confused recollection of a veteran officer as to an event trifling to him but very important to Custer. Had I been content with such a one-sided version of the story I should deserve censure as a historian. As it was, I supplemented Gen. Barnard's

recollection with other information, and the result is the story as it stands, in the main perfectly true. I may seem exaggerated to Gen. Barnard, but then he does not profess to have known much of Custer, his antecedents, or his feelings. If I had not, I should not have written his life, and the general must remember that it was Custer's life, not Barnard's, that I was writing.

One statement with which the general quarrels is about the "soft, sticky black mud of the bottom" of the Chickahominy. Permit me to say that I have been there as well as Gen. Barnard, and know from experience that there is such mud almost anywhere along its course. As to the minor particulars of the affair, I leave my careful statement, founded on various information to stand against the memory of the general.[136]

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136. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 755 (June 30, 1877). The italics are mine.

Regrettably, Custer was just approaching this very incident in his "War Memoirs" for Galaxy, when he was killed, or we might be able to forever damn Whittaker from his own mouth. In works like My Life on the Plains, Custer might go out of his way to bring in a needless slur on General Hazen, but his war reminiscences suffer only from an over-adornment of style - not fact. The only statement Custer has left on the Chickahominy incident is that he served on the staff of General W. F. ("Baldy") Smith "...until the army found its advance to Richmond obstructed by the treacherous and tortuous windings of the Chickahominy, a stream which, however chargeable with some of the misfortunes of the Army of the Potomac, was almost literally a stepping-stone for my personal advancement."[137]

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137. G. A. Custer, "War Memoirs," Galaxy, Vol. 22,

p. 455 (October, 1876).

Whittaker's "other information" and "various information" - "in the main perfectly true," however, keeps elaborating on Custer's memory in incidents occurring during his life, and on the details of the final battle gets utterly out of hand. On the basis of "various information" he pilloried Reno, openly slandered Grant, publicly belittled Terry, and attempted to libel Benteen. But the tough-minded Benteen proved another matter: He toed Whittaker away like a yapping cur, and continued his unswerving course of conscious rectitude.

Fred Dustin speaks of Whittaker's "seventy-five myths on twenty-five pages," but a full count would show him guilty of too much Christian forbearance. The Barnard incident could not possibly be clearer, and it is but one of a hundred dealing with the Civil War services of Custer. Once into Custer's career on the Plains, Whittaker works up real enthusiasm for his task, to his own satisfaction managing to "explain" the 1866 mutiny and the 1867 court-martial, excuse the abandonment of Ellito at Washita, present a "true" account of the Yellowstone and Black Hills expeditions - and in passing slur or smear Hancock, Sully, Sturgis, Hazen, and Stanley.

Crook - and the scapegoat of the Fort Fetterman expeditions, J. J. Reynolds - he reserves for special treatment. Reynolds' action of March 16, 1876, he compares unreasonably to Washita - ignoring the fact that the brilliant Oglalla

strategist Crazy Horse was very much alive in the Powder River action, while Black Kettle was shot in his sleep at Washita; and considerations of topography involved. Moreover, he draws almost his entire information from stories printed in the New York Tribune, not necessarily a reliable source.

"Almost everyone," dogmatically asserts Whittaker, sitting comfortably in Mt. Vernon, N. Y., two thousand miles away, "was to blame for only one thing - want of energy." And he sums up matters to his own satisfaction:

> But the real trouble seems to have been simple enough - a want of heart, an excessive caution in every one, especially the leader. When Custer went after Indians, he himself was always in the advance, and looking out for his enemy. At the Washita we have found him with the advanced scouts on all occasions, and watching the enemy himself. Here, on the other hand, we see neither Crook nor Reynolds out in front, the night wasted in idle waiting, and the battle commenced at 9 o'clock with the result of everybody falling just a little short of his work.
>
> The Powder River fight which, under Custer, would probably have ended in the complete destruction of the band of Crazy Horse, ended merely in burning some of his property....[138]

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138. Whittaker's Life, p. 543. All the italics are his.

The reasoning is obvious: If Crook's defeats of 1876 can be shown due to a "want of energy," then Custer's debacle on the Little Big Horn - with a total of 266 killed and 56 wounded against the Crook's total of 14 killed and 31 wounded - can be excused by an excess of it. And finally it is explained,

> ...Crook had gained his reputation by a

> pursuit and extermination of small scattered bands of Apaches in Arizona....Besides this, Crook was getting older, and having been made a brigadier was not so likely to work as Custer, who was still only a lieutenant-colonel, thanks to the seniority rule....[139]

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139. Whittaker's Life, p. 545. Crook was then a palsied 48.

But it is in two of the final chapters - "Custer and Grant" and "The Last Battle" - that Whittaker gains an immortal place as an historian: A place inadequately occupied at present by Gaston B. Means, certain friends of the late Dr. Goebbels, and the editor of Pravda. Here we find where most of the myths of the Custer Legend have their printed genesis. It is true that Whittaker draws liberally on newspaper accounts, but it is equally true that only the including of them in his biography has preserved them in all their pristine untruth these seventy-odd years. He is a primary source of misinformation for Cyrus T. Brady, for General Kidd, for Frazier Hunt, and for Shannon Garst - all of whom have been quoted at length in this paper.

Taking first the chapter "Custer and Grant" some of the more egregrious myths apparent - often conveniently italicized by the author of "The Death's Head Rangers" himself - can be noted for an overall citation.

The Indian-fighter of the Plains: "Custer had never yet met with a single disaster while in command of an important expedition, and he had been blessed with more complete success in his Indian expeditions than any other officer in the regular army." (Italicized in original.)

Custer and Clymer: "...Someone suggested that General Custer knew something about corruption on the part of the ex-secretary Belknap ; he had been heard by someone to say that he heard something on the subject, and so forth. On this vague information the sapient Chairman telegraphed a summons to Custer...and so started a train of circumstances which was to end in the untimely death of the best cavalry chief on the American continent." (Sioux Indians not included.)

Custer, Clymer and Sitting Bull: "...Custer has been blamed by his enemies, when the real party to blame was the officious chairman who persisted in calling him. On Clymer's shoulders, moreover, rests the responsibility of deferring Custer's departure after Sitting Bull a whole month. Had he gone in April...Custer might be alive now." (Italics and reasoning Whittaker's.)

Custer and Grant: "... Grant made up his mind that Custer had turned against him in his period of trial....Custer heard of this, through private sources, and knew that the President's impression as to his testimony was quite unfounded." (Pause for scene change) "...Then the President sent out word that he refused to see Colonel Custer, and Custer sat down and wrote his quiet, manly letter, honest and proud, sad and dignified....It was useless. Grant refused to see him." (Italics and melodrama the Brevet Captain's.)

Custer, Clymer and Grant: "Two men were to blame for all the trouble: meddling, officious Heister Clymer... obstinate, implacable Grant...who was actually willing to imperil the whole fate of the Sioux campaign and permit

hundreds of lives to be lost, to gain his revenge on Custer ....Grant well knew in his heart that Custer alone was fit to command." (All Whittaker; all hooey.)[140]

140. Whittaker's Life, pp. 545-562 passim.

The chapter "The Last Battle" is packed with highly significant quotations from "an officer's present during the whole campaign, whose name we at present withhold," "an officer present with the expedition who examined the ground, but whose name we prefer to withhold for the present," and "this officer told the story personally to Mrs. Custer afterwards" etc. etc. etc. The officer is never named at any place in the book. Custer writers now are virtually certain that Captain Weir was Whittaker's source, but that provides no excuse whatever for slanderous accusations on anonymous authority.

If it was Weir, Whittaker might better have stated so, for Weir was an officer in the fight (although not in the valley action with Reno), and he had a long and honorable record both in the Civil War and on the frontier. An Albion man, he left the University of Michigan to become a Second Lieutenant of the 3rd Michigan Cavalry on October 13, 1861, served throughout the war and was breveted a Lieut.-Colonel of the Volunteers. He joined the Seventh as a First Lieutenant at its organization, and was always a "Custer man."

However, while Weir's accusations openly attributed to Weir would have given Whittaker's theories real weight,

they would also have subjected Weir and Whittaker to open refutation by men who were trying to protect Custer's reputation and Mrs. Custer's feelings. Beyond any question, whatever an open debate would have proved about Reno or Benteen, it most definitely would have established the fact that Custer had disobeyed his orders deliberately, had sent needlessly tired men and worn-out horses into a trap, and had not only authored his own destruction but also that of 225 men under him.

There were very good reasons for Whittaker's "officer present" to remain anonymous, and for Whittaker to keep him so. It would not only have disgraced his hero - but at the best temporarily - but also have spoiled the sale of his book. And once breveted "General Custer's Biographer", Frederick Whittaker had no desire to resume his former rank as merely the author of "Double Death, or, The Spy-Queen of Wyoming; and other Stories."

"The Last Battle" need not be exhaustively analyzed, only certain key myths noted. He devotes great effort to going over Terry's written order with a microscope, interpreting to suit his own notions - not those of the men actually present at the conference of war where the plans were drawn. He then scrutinizes Reno's official report and comes up with the conclusion that Reno is accusing Custer unfairly by saying:

> I think (after the great number of Indians there were in the village) that the following reasons obtained for the misfortune; his rapid marching for two days and one night before the fight, his attacking in the daytime at 12 m., and

> when they were on the qui vive, instead of early in the morning, and lastly, his unfortunate division of the regiment into three commands.[141]

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141. Reno's Report as quoted in Whittaker's Life, p. 578.

You are referred to part I of this paper for the true answer, but Whittaker justifies and explains everything by saying, "Custer was a peculiar man. He fought in a peculiar way, and needed to have men under him usee to his rapid energetic style, and who understood him." (His italics, of course).

The rest of the chapter is overloaded with similar sophistry, and insinuating phrases - often italicized - like, "...is it any wonder Reno's battalion was beaten, when they are ready to succumb to squaws, old men, and boys?", "it took Benteen two hours and a half to cover a distance of three miles," "both admit by their testimony that they disobeyed orders," "the reasons were, Reno's incapacity and Benteen's disobedience," and "down they went, slaughtered in position, man after man dropping in his place."

He also brings in the pretty little story of Curley and his Sioux blanket - adding the touch of Curley washing off his Crow warpaint and letting his hair down like a Sioux, and then finally utterly discredits his book, his sources of information, and himself as "a historian" by the most incredible blunder of all. For a full page-and-a-half he paints a vivid picture of the last minutes of action on Monument Hill of Custer fighting with his sabre until at

last shot down by that arch-villain of them all: Rain-in-the-Face.

Custer and his sabre - here we not only have the start of a myth, but also the authority for a hundred bar-room lithographs of "Custer's Last Stand." Custer "fighting like a tiger with his sabre" - and every sabre in the regiment at Fort Lincoln. It is a very poor try. Whittaker might at least have run an old film backward and given us a mysterious arm swathed in white samite rising from the Little Big Horn to hurl the brand Excalibur at an astonished Sir Bedivere. Certainly this cannot be laid to any "officer present with the expedition." But it does do high credit to the tutelage of Erastus C. Beadle.

And finally, in an epilogue, Whittaker leaves his "facts" to the world to judge whether he is "not right in these conclusions:"

> 1. Had Reno fought as Custer fought and had Benteen obeyed Custer's orders, the battle of the Little Big Horn might have proved Custer's last and greatest Indian victory.
>
> 2. Had not President Grant, moved by private revenge, displaced Custer from the command of the Fort Lincoln column, Custer would be alive today and the Indian war settled.[142]

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142. Whittaker's Life, pp. 606-607. It should be reiterated that none of the italics quoted from the "Life" are mine; all are Whittaker's.

It should not be thought that "the world" judged Whittaker's theories favorably at the time. In fact, the opposite was more the rule than the exception. The Nation generously called it "a very good book, but...repellantly

large and heavy," and states with true impartiality in its review of the battle account:

> ...So Captain Whittaker tells the story, with earnestness and great conviction, and we leave it as he tells it with but two additional remarks - that he makes a strong prima facie case, but that he is such an admirer and panegyrist of Custer that his advocacy is to be regarded with caution....[143]

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143. "Whittaker's 'Life of Custer'," The Nation, Vol. 24, p. 180 (March 22, 1877).

The Army and Navy Journal, who had given Whittaker much advance publicity as a former staff member, was less restrained. Two passages from the long review are pertinent here:

> There is much in the book we can heartily praise, and enough that calls for grave censure.... Before the official reports of the General and Lt.-General of the Army have been made, this rash writer furiously arraigns, tries, convicts, and sentences the President, Major Reno, and Captain Benteen for indirectly causing the death of General Custer....Since the above appeared in print Gen. Sherman and Lt.-General Sheridan... have in their report to the War Department, after months of careful consideration of all facts and much evidence not made public, unequivocally commended Reno as a brave and discreet soldier who had plainly performed his whole duty, and plainly ascribed the disastrous termination of Custer's fight to the unfortunate division of his command....

And also

> ...Capt. Whittaker has an absolute faith in his hero, and a firm conviction that any opposition to him or to his plans is of necessity to be ascribed to stupidity or malice. To indiscriminately laud your hero is undoubtedly the easiest way of writing biography, and there is much excuse for it in the case of a work hastily rushed into print to catch the fleeting tide of popular interest. It is questionable, however, whether the subject of eulogy gains or loses most by such partisanship, and we could have wished to see Gen.

> Custer's career considered in a more judicial and calm spirit....
>
> How far Grant, Custer, Reno or Benteen is responsible for the terrible misfortune we have yet to learn. Nor would this information affect our opinion that George Armstrong Custer was a most gallant soldier, a superb cavalry leader, a true comrade, a warmhearted generous man, a faithful friend....None would sooner deprecate the attempt to raise a memorial shaft to one soldier upon the fragments of another's reputation, than the man who sleeps quietly in a hero's grave in the land of the Dacotahs.[144]

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144. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 314 (December 23, 1876).

But next to writing dime novels, Frederick Whittaker liked to write letters - long contentious, argumentative letters, sparkling with the fool's gold of self-esteem but assaying less than an ounce of worthwhile fact to the ton of parenthetical phrases. He answered with a letter longer than the review itself, and demolished himself the last excuse that could be made for his errors on the basis of haste and incomplete information.

Handsomely granting every man a right to his own opinions, he then begins the pertinent part of his claims:

> ...I do, however, wish to clear the Custer biography from the charge of "reckless" partisanship, and especially from being "regardless of facts"....To the Army, through you, I desire to say this: Whatever may be the errors in haste in other parts of the "Life of Custer" in the chapters entitled "Grant and Custer" and "The Last Battle" there are no such errors. They were purposely kept back till the whole book was in type with the object of utilizing every scrap of information, however small, that could be gleaned of events transpiring so recently, and one of them so far away. They were written and rewritten, corrected again and again with the object of getting at the facts whatever they might be, and whoever might be struck by them. I wrote them, on

> the best evidence available, after long and patient research, after hearing both sides of the questions, not only one....
>
> When I wrote the chapter on "Grant and Custer" I limited myself to as cold an account possible of the whole trouble between the two men, letting the telegrams which I verified from their originals speak for themselves, my only labor being to arrange them in chronological order. Those telegrams to and from the General of the Army and others left no opinion possible to an unbiased mind but the one arrived at, and nothing but the assumption that such telegrams are forgeries can invalidate that part of the argument....

Then with high praise for his own unbiased state of mind and absolute accuracy, he shows himself - like Frederick in "The Pirates of Penzance" - an unwilling slave to duty:

> ...With regard to the correctness of my conclusions on given data as to the last battle, they can only be determined by a careful examination of the evidence, as careful as I gave to it for weeks and months during which my attention was devoted to finding out the bottom facts of the case, which I can see may be perfectly consistent with the highest official reports....
>
> Of personal animosity against the officers criticized in the last part of the book I have none. Could I have avoided telling what I have, I would have done so, but duty left me no alternative but to speak out.145

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145. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 347 (January 6, 1877).

The "Journal's" editorial comment in the same issue must be included, for it strikes at the very heart of all Custer controversies.

> We fail however to see in the "patient research" of a few months or a conscientious desire on the author's part to "tell the truth as he sees it," any good reason for making charges affecting the reputation of officers who do not deserve to be publicly branded without an opportunity for public defense....Nothing but the most

absolute demonstration accompanied by the proof would justify such statements as he has made, and this he has not given. Hence our criticism. The reports of anonymous newspaper correspondents, and an ex parte statement of the conclusions drawn from letters, of which we have not so much as the names of the writers, is not proof on which to base criticism affecting character and reputation.[146]

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146. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 345 (January 6, 1877).

By an interesting coincidence, the same day the above exchange took place, Benteen was penning one of his very few comments on the battle and Whittaker - or much else for that matter - ever to get into print. It is a truculent, hard-hitting letter that in effect tells Whittaker, and any one else who holds the same opinions, to spread the slander if he wishes and go to hell with it; History will vindicate Benteen and his conduct, if vindication is required; and if not, history can go to hell, too.

Dated "Fort Rice, D. T., Jan. 6, 1877" it says:

> In the issue of your paper of Dec. 23, I see that you review the complete life of General G. A. Custer, by Brevet Capt. Frederick Whittaker, 6th N. Y. Cavalry.
>
> I desire to thank you for the sensible remarks therein contained - "1st: Had Reno fought as Custer fought, and Benteen obeyed Custer's orders, the battle of the Little Big Horn might have proved Custer's last and greatest Indian victory." I put right here, without fear of contradiction; yes, and his first Indian victory too! "The Battle of Washita" is comprised in this grand total. (I do not mean to include Custer's war record in this assertion). I have been with Gen. Custer since the organization of the 7th Cavalry, and claim to know whereof I speak; nor do I desire to get into a controversy about his merits - or otherwise - as seen from my standpoint, as now I cannot, or would not, say what I would and did while General

Custer was alive. I say here, that Colonel Reno and I thought during the siege of June 25th and 26th at the Little Big Horn that he, Reno, was the abandoned party, and spoke of it as another "Major Elliot affiar;" thinking that General Custer had retreated to the mouth of the river where the steamboat was supposed to be, and that Reno's command was left to its fate. I am accused of disobeying Custer's orders. Nothing is further from the truth, and I do not think the matter of sufficient importance to attempt to vindicate myself, but can rest contentedly under the ban when I have the consoling belief that the contrary is so well-known by all my military superiors and subordinates.

You spoke rightly when you denominated Whittaker a "rash writer," for in a letter to me he acknowledges his information has been obtained from what I can demonstrate to be most questionable authority. I have not attempted to defend myself on such insinuations, because the game is not worth the candle. I have a child - a ten-year-old boy; if he learns from his father's daily life what his character is, as he must, will it make much difference to him in after years, in stumbling across Whittaker's book, to see his father quoted as having neglected the first duty of a soldier? No, sir; as I hope to demonstrate to him by daily life that the assertion was altogether without foundation, and I have no idea that any pain will ever be caused him, should he in after life not find the contrary confirmed by weightier evidence than in Whittaker's book.

There was a slight undercurrent in the 7th Cavalry which you, as a public organ, might know, and which knowledge may throw some light on matters which Mr. O'Kelly, the Herald reporter, wrote, and from which Whittaker obtained his cue, viz: Colonel Reno's official report of the battle of the Little Big Horn brought not with it the need of satisfaction which I believe the writer wished, but his mentioning me specially was an invidiousness of which he thought not. Most certainly Col. Reno asked me not for counsel in preparing his report. However, the report when received by the regiment drew from one officer the exclamation in public, "But he doesn't mention me!" (calling out his own name). From that moment on can be said, the Society for Mutual Admiration was organized in the regiment, and assiduously did they work - Colonel Reno being the chief objective point, I the second from being unfortunate enough to have been specially mentioned by Colonel R. in his official report.

The meetings of the society have been held in secret; no 1st class men were contributing members; none of them can bear the test of light and truth; but still they don't want their light hidden under a bushel, and they have succeeded in getting vile slanders into public printed, through the greatest organ this country has, and yet they are not happy! Now, through Whittaker, the story goes into history (?).

I can say with Othello:

"And little of this great world can I speak,
More than pertains to feats of broil and battle;
And therefore little shall I grace my cause
In speaking of myself; yet, by your gracious patience,
I will a " - a portion of a-" round unvarnish'd tale deliver
Of my whole career." ----

And you, sir, can do with it what you will.

F. W. Benteen, Bvt. Col. U. S. A.[147]

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147. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 378 (January 20, 1877). This is another item completely overlooked by all Custer students.

But whatever his published preferance for the sabre, Whittaker made his greatest charges with the pen, thundering up the glacis and through the sally-ports like a knight-errant (the pun is intended) of old - only all to frequently leaving it to others to notice that he had left his horse behind. It goes without saying that his reply to Benteen is interminable, but again certain excerpts must be given because they show how whittaker's repeatedly damned himself and his 'historical' methods with his own mouth. First portraying Benteen as slandering a dead man, he states at last

...There is no question I think that Colonel Benteen wishes to convey in these words

> that General Custer unnecessarily abandoned Major Elliot to his fate, and further that the Indians defeated Custer in the battle of Washita. Sheridan's reports of 1868, etc. are cited, but no direct answer made to the charge ...Whether Benteen's conduct of June 25, 1876, will bear the same tests as those applied to Custer's in 1868, time will tell.
>
> ...In no letter to Colonel Benteen have I ever acknowledged the source of my information to be such as he can possibly show to be questionable. He wrote me first a short note, stating that he had seen a review of my book in the Herald, and that he proposed to send me his version of the battle to show wherein I misrepresented him. In answering his note I admitted the difficulty of procuring any direct information and expressed the earnest hope that he might be able to adduce some facts that would compel me to alter my opinion of his conduct at that fatal battle. A few days later I received the promised "version" from Colonel Benteen which was a mere amplification of the letter in last week's "Journal."....148

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148. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 395 (January 27, 1877). In this case the italics are mine; it is a habit hard to avoid in studying much of Whittaker.

Whatever his brave front, Whittaker nevertheless approached the formidable Benteen with great caution from then on, although he abated his letter writing to the public press not a whit (no pun intended this time). Only one more exchange of the letters on his book written directly to the Army and Navy Journal will be given, but they, too, bring out points too important to pass over.

An undated letter signed "H---" was incorrect on criticizing Whittaker for checking Monroe, Michigan, instead of New Rumly, Ohio - Custer's birthplace - for early facts on his life, but was correct on the following:

> ...To quote from Capt. Whittaker's communication in the "Journal" of Jan. 6: "By a chain

> of circumstances over which he had no control, he Custer was drawn much against his will into the midst of a political contest the most acrimonious that has been known in our national history since the Civil War." Did not Capt. Whittaker in his laborious research discover a telegram sent to the Hon. Heister Clymer early in the Belknap investigation, in substance as follows? "An investigation into the post traderships upon the Upper Missouri will reveal a state of things quite as bad as at Fort Sill. Signed, G. A. Custer." What then comes of the much prated theory of reluctance to visit the city of Washington? Did not the telegram alone cause the summons before the committee of which the Hon. Heister Clymer was chairman? Was not that telegram clearly officious and unmilitary?....149

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149. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 498 (March 10, 1877). I have given the telegram in part I of this text.

Whittaker - whose "various information" and unnamed "officers present" allowed him to slander others without restraint - took the correspondent "H----" to severe task for not signing his name, wholly innocent of any irony. And his answer revealed, in very small part

> ...Assuming that the telegram really passed, which evidence in my possession leads me to doubt, I see nothing in the message more than the natural disgust of an honorable officer against the theft and bribery which he was compelled to see around him, unpunished....150

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150. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 14, p. 531 (March 24, 1877).

The "various and other information" from "officers present whose names of the present I shall withhold" had now graduated into "evidence in my possession." Even when caught in an honest error, Whittaker was not capable of admitting it - could not, in truth, for his edifice was not

even built upon sand, but mud, and in a flood of unadorned fact it collapsed.

Nothing more is seen of him in the correspondence columns of the Army and Navy Journal. There were too many military men to balk at theories of Indian warfare drawn from the library of Beadle & Co. There were too many readers whose knowledge of the rules of historical evidence embarrassed him. From then on he withdrew to the more friendly pages of the N. Y. Herald where peasants and other low-born rabble were less likely to dispute a gentleman's word with vulgar demands for facts.

Three significant events had happened. First, Captain Weir had died suddenly on December 9, 1876, while on recruiting duty in New York City. The cause was said to be "congestion of the brain," although what precisely was meant is not clear. Second, Reno, while in command of Fort Abercrombie, D. T., was court-martialed and suspended from rank for two years. The charge specified "scandalous conduct toward the wife of another officer of the garrison during his absence." The sentence of "dismissal from the service" was miligated by the secretary of War, in view of Reno's long and honorable record. Third, the sales of Whittaker's "Life" were falling off.

Whittaker now began to state openly that Weir had furnished him his evidence against Reno, and talked openly of a court-martial for cowardice. Since there were legal points involved - one obvious one being that Whittaker had no proper status to prefer charges - this was soon changed to a demand

for a public investigation. General Rosser and others added fuel to the flame, and after a year had aroused much violent public opinion against Reno.

This was dramatized by one of the many phoney interviews with Sitting Bull, then under Canadian protection north of the line. It seems clear that the correspondent of the N. Y. Herald actually went to Fort Walsh, Canada, and talked to Sitting Bull through the local Northwest Mounted police superintendent, since at the time a joint commission was trying to arrange his return to the Sioux Agencies. It was published on November 16, 1877, and "proved" that Reno was responsible for the defeat the Little Big Horn.

The N. Y. World, outraged at the scoop, thereupon published their exclusive "interview," two days late. According to the World, the old chief spoke fluent French, and therefore their correspondent spoke directly to him, without an interpreter. This was an even more distorted version of Custer's death. That Sitting Bull may well have spoken to neither - and most decidedly not in "excellent French" - now seems entirely likely. He spoke only the Dacotah dialects of which literal translation word-for-word was extremely difficult.

Nevertheless, this was the capsheaf to all the Indian "testimony" and Whittaker made the most of it in his many allegations. Finally, May 18, 1878, in a letter to the Territorial Delegate from Wyoming, W. W. Cortlett, he demanded an official congressional investigation of Reno's conduct - in his capacity as "General Custer's Biographer."

The reasons he gave were:

> First: Information coming to me from participants in the battle, written and oral, is to the effect that gross cowardice was displayed by Major Marcus A. Reno, 7th U. S. Cavalry, second in command that day; and that owing to such cowardice the orders of Lt. Col. Custer, commanding officer to said Reno, to execute a certain attack were not carried out....
>
> That after Major Reno's cowardly flight, he was joined by Capt. F. W. Benteen...and that he remained idle with this force while his superior officer was fighting against the whole force of the Indians, the battle being within his knowledge, the sound of firing audible from his position, and his forces out of immediate danger from the enemy.
>
> That the consequences of this second exhibition of cowardice and incompetency was the massacre of Lt. Col. Custer and five companies of the 7th U. S. Cavalry.

The second dealt with the fact that charges could be proved only by persons in the U. S. service who could be ordered to testify only by Congress, hence the need of a Congressional Investigation.

> Third: The only official report of the battle now extant is the report written by Major Reno...false and libellous to the memory of the late Lt. Col. Custer in that it represents the defeat...as owing to the division by Custer... into 3 detachments...and to ignorance of the enemy's force - all serious charges against the capability of said Custer as an officer; whereas the defeat was really owing to the cowardice and disobedience of said Reno and to the willful neglect of said Reno and Capt. Benteen to join battle with the Indians in support of their commanding officer when they might have done so, and it was their plain duty to do so.

The Fourth is to the effect that the welfare of the Army requires that blame should be officially established "to the end the Service may not deteriorate by the retention of cowards."

> Fifth: Justice to an officer of the previously unstained record of Lieut.-Col. Custer demands that the accusation under which his memory now rests, in the only official account of the Battle of the Little Big Horn now extant, should be proved or disproved.

In concluding he then makes a statement highly important in light of what took place when he appeared at the Reno Court of Inquiry.

> I have given you as briefly as I can my reasons for asking this investigation, and the fact I am confident of being able to prove. My witnesses will be all the living officers of the 7th U. S. Cavalry who were present at the battle of June 25, including Major Reno and Capt. Benteen - myself to prove the statement of an officer since deceased, made me a few days before his death....151

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151. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 15, p. 747 (June 22, 1878). The Journal quotes the Herald.

Reno, on hearing of the Cortlett letter, addressed one of his own to the head of the House Military Affairs Committee, H. B. Banning, stating that he was in Washington for the very purpose of asking an investigation to clear himself - strangely referring to Whittaker as an "irresponsible source." Congress, however, adjourned without any action, and Reno appealed direct to President Hayes. Hayes then ordered the famous Reno Court of Inquiry to meet in Chicago on January 6, 1879 "for the purpose of inquiring into Major Reno's conduct at the Battle of the Little Big Horn."

If the partisan press had had its way there would have been no need whatsoever for judicial investigation. The Cleveland Leader, to cite a paper outside of New York, was typical:

> ...Reno's disobedience of orders in not continuing his charge through the Sioux camp, and his cowardice in retreating from his impregnable position in the woods before he lost a man, because the Sioux shook their blankets at him and threatened a charge, is now thought to be the chief cause of the Custer disaster, and if an impartial investigation was made of Reno's conduct he would be found to be responsible for the fate of Custer and his men.[152]

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152. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 16, p. 101 (September 21, 1877).

The slanderers, Whittaker always in the forefront, had done their work well. And if the dime-novelist's actions were only irritating up to the point of the climax of all the hysteria, innuendo, unsupported rumor, and open lies, they were soon to be revealed as absolutely nauseous. It grows increasingly hard not to dislike Frederick Whittaker intensely as matters progress.

For the moment, however, he was almost a hero. The Herald, with very little prodding from him, came out with this on December 28, 1878, a week before the court was to assemble:

> ...One of the officers commanding a company...under Reno...was Bvt. Lt. Col. Thos. B. Weir, who died in New York City in December of the same year, and who is said to have made and sworn to a statement before his death in which he claimed to have been in full view of the Custer fight...and that he so reported to Reno and urged that help be given their comrades. The statement adds, it is said, that Reno flatly refused to make the movement as urged, and was openly accused at the time of cowardice by his own officers.
>
> ...This sworn statement was placed, before Colonel Weir's death in the hands of a well-known New York ex-officer of the Volunteers, who is widely known as an admirer and biographer of the late General Custer, and who solemnly promised

> Colonel Weir not to rest until the matter was officially investigated, and not to let the contents of this statement become publicly known until an investigation was ordered.153

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153. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 16, p. 367 (January 4, 1879).

Naturally people were greatly puzzled by the identity of the person to whom Captain Weir had made his statement, although we can safely guess that he was not only an admirer of the "late General Custer" but also the very much living Brevet Capt. Frederick Whittaker. Papers like the Herald were positive that the "Weir Affidavit" would clinch their long campaign of cant and libel against Major Reno - thereby clearing Custer's name and increasing circulation revenue.

But here and there a doubting voice was raised. The Chicago Times had a story at startling variance with the Herald:

> The officers attached to Gen. Sheridan's staff express no opinion regarding the charge of cowardice against Major Reno. They believe, however, that the court will be able to elicit a vast amount of highly interesting testimony relating to the fight in which Custer and his band met with extermination. Other officers of the Army, temporarily sojourning here, are more outspoken in their views of the case. Some of them do not scruple to say that the inquiry will result in tarnishing the lustre of General Custer's name and renown as a warrior. They are of the opinion that it will be shown that Custer, by a hot-headed haste to achieve all the glory for himself, and by a virtual disobedience of orders, brought about the awful disaster which appalled the nation and the world. This, they think, will be one of the results of the inquiry, not that Custer's conduct is under investigation, but because in showing what Reno did or did not do to avert the calamity, it will also be shown in what degree Custer alone was responsible for his

own lamented fate....[154]

154. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 16, p. 407 (January 18, 1879).

The testimony proved a blow to the Whittakerites. Every officer called except Godfrey testified under oath that Reno had showed no cowardice in leadership or in personal actions. The testimony bore out definitely that his actions had saved what remained of the regiment. Godfrey's euphemistic charge of "nervous timidity" tended to discredit him, rather than Reno.

Many still say of the Reno Court, with Frazier Hunt: "With a few exceptions it is proper to say that, by and large, it became more a whitewash than a serious attempt to get at the bottom of the tragedy. At all costs the honor of the regiment and of the army had to be sustained. Of the officers called only Lieutenant Godfrey permitted himself to be critical of Reno."[155]

155. I Fought With Custer, p. 177.

Since Hunt presents no proof, but only an opinion, we must form a judgment on what actually transpired. It should be remembered that even at this time Reno was under suspension from rank and pay. His conduct at Fort Abercrombie had destroyed what little personal popularity he had ever had among the officers, although the picture of the paunchy tired little major as a threat to every lady in the regiment is now almost laughable. But it was not so considered at the time,

and every married man had his wife to consider, and every bachelor officer that he was testifying about a cad and a bounder.

There was no obligation to whitewash Reno. If the true facts of the Little Big Horn were adverse to him, at the time it was only one more black mark against a self-disgraced man - and half the press of the country would have cheered any coloring of evidence that militated against him. On the other hand, coloring it to protect him, as Hunt implies, would bring greater discredit to the service - not sustain the honor of the regiment. If Reno was the only reason the regiment was whipped by the Indians, the regiment's honor would be cleansed by public exposal of his guilt.

And there is yet the problem that every man was speaking under oath. If the actual facts of the battle sustained the charges against Reno as urged by Whittaker and Rosser, the only way men who took part in it could whitewash Reno would be to lie under oath. Perjury today is not a common thing, and witnesses once sworn feel themselves under a tremendous obligation. With the commissioned and non-commissioned men of the frontier Army, honor was often literally their only possession of value - and certainly it would not be risked merely to save the feelings of a man in Reno's personal predicament.

But last of all it is almost impossible to read the daily news accounts and be convinced of a whitewash. Each

witness was examined and re-examined by a man whose sympathies were with Custer, not Reno. The Recorder, 1st Lieut. Jesse M. Lee, 9th Infantry, repeatedly demonstrated that he disapproved the way the evidence was pointing, and did everything possible to bring out contrary proof. One illustration will show what is meant:

> ...The Recorder asked witness if at the time of the fight he entertained a good opinion of Gen. Custer and was in accord with him. Col. Benteen said that his opinion was as good as it ever had been, and he was as much in accord with Gen. Custer as he ever had been. Mr. Gilbert objected to further interrogations of this kind. Recorder Lee said it appeared to be the tendency of the testimony to show that Gen. Custer was an incompetent officer; that he had no definite plan of battle; that his massacre was due to that fact, and that Major Reno was thereby exonerated. He desired to elicit the facts regarding the feeling between Col. Benteen and Gen. Custer in order to mitigate this tendency.[156]

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156. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 16, p. 473 (February 8, 1879).

Custer's rights were more than well-protected at the Reno Court of Inquiry, and in the final analysis it doesn't seem "proper" at all of critics like Hunt to discredit its findings for Reno as a "whitewash." Reno was exonerated on much the same line Recorder Lee objected to, and it is very close to the verdict of history.

But Whittaker has been left hanging in the air, anticipating his great moment of triumph when "his" investigation should prove out his slanderous charges and his book break all sales records. Then comes a sudden thudding anticlimax. The "Journal's" account tells it to the point:

> Fred Whittaker on the 27th day of January handed into the Reno Court a paper signed "Major Reno's Accuser," in which he asked that he might be allowed to question the witnesses. The Recorder said that - though he didn't consider himself in the light of a prosecutor - he thought he was conducting the examination thoroughly, and he also felt that he was able to continue the management of the case himself. Mr. Gilbert (Reno's counsel) did not object to the questions being put, but he did object to Captain Whittaker, not otherwise interested in the investigation than that of "a sensation," to be allowed to examine witnesses.....[157]

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157. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 16, p. 473 (February 8, 1879).

That was all there was to it, no third act unmasking of the real villain, no melodramatic producing of The Papers, no Weir Affidavit - and nothing more said about it. Posters all over the countryside advertising two little Eva's and real bloodhounds - and then the show is canceled without notice.

To deprive a meglomaniac, such as Whittaker had shown himself to be, of his supreme moment there had to be an exceptionally strong reason. And there was. In the Philadelphia Sunday Times for March 16, 1879, there appeared a story by Robert Newton Price - believed to be the same man who took charge of Lieut. Hodgson's body, and refuted wild tales of great mutilation when the dead were disinterred in 1877. It was titled in the Army and Navy Journal, "The Secret of the Reno Trial," with comments by their Washington correspondent.

The important part is self-explanatory:

> Mr. Price in his article gives us some

idea of the man Whittaker, who has tried to make a hero of himself and to turn an honest penny for himself at the same time by getting subscriptions to his life of Custer, "only four dollars and twenty-five cents each." "On the publication of this valuable biography," says Mr. Price, "sympathy seemed to wane and the ordinary advertising schemes seemed so futile, so recourse must be had to something startling.

"About this time Col. Wier [sic] of the 7th Cavalry was detailed on recruiting service and stationed in New York. Wier's only weakness was that of many other wholesouled men - too craving an appetite for exhilarating stimulants, and through it Whittaker found his opportunity. As it had become pretty generally understood that Custer's mistake had been a fatal one for him in more senses than one, his 'biographer' concluded to follow Josh Billings' advice as to the proper method of making a correction - 'by cussing sumbody else fur it.' Wier died suddenly, and immediately after his demise there began to appear from time to time, throughout the press of the entire country, insinuations against Reno and Benteen. Hints soon became definite charges and Custer was promoted from hero to martyr; even the subscription limitation on the circulation of the book was less rigorously enforced. Whittaker returned to the attack nobly and was again equal to the emergency."

Now, after Col. Wier was dead, Whittaker professed to have an affidavit made by the dead officer setting forth that Custer was overwhelmed and his command massacred because of the treachery of both Reno and Benteen. On the meeting of the Court of Inquiry Whittaker was asked to produce the affidavit. "But," says Mr. Price, "he declined. Two reasons effectively influenced its suppression: The first and merely nominal one was that Wier never made the affidavit alleged; and the second and material drawback was the presence of Captain Charles Braden, late of the 7th, now retired because of wounds received in the Yellowstone fight of 1873. This gentleman was in Chicago to testify that he had been a guest at the same hotel in New York with Wier some time before and up to within a few days of the latter's death, and that Wier had frequently complained that Whittaker was constantly pestering him to sign a paper which stated that Reno failed to assist Custer when he could have done it, and was therefore responsible for the massacre. He Weir further expressed not only his intention of not doing it, but expressed his opinion of the self-sacrificing patriot who made

the proposal in the strongest and most emphatic eloquence of a trooper."[158]

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158. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 16, p. 581f. (March 22, 1879) The misspelling is used throughout on Weir's name.

The implication is quite clear that Whittaker promoted the whole Reno investigation to bolster up the sagging sales of his Custer biography, or as the "Journal" states baldly "to blast the reputation of deserving men in order to make money out of a worthless book." This is most likely too extreme a view, as Whittaker was hardly such an important figure that investigation of the Last Stand could not have occurred without him. But that, for his part, he forced the Inquiry for such reasons is reasonable. And the widely heralded "Weir affidavit" was never presented at all - even though the "well-known New York ex-officer of the Volunteers" had so "solemnly promised" Colonel Weir.

"Major Reno's Accuser" was neatly hoist by his own petard. And though he declaimed as he left the Inquiry that "as the biographer of the late Gen. Custer he deemed it his duty to promise to the people of the United States that he would see that Congress right the reputation of Gen. Custer," he stalks out of the scene of the Custer Legend. In 1884 he was again in fine fettle disputing an editorial claim of the New York Tribune that dime novels caused juvenile delinquency. (Note the date). Beyond that there is only silence - the utter relief of silence.

But in the end, the libels put in motion by Whittaker got Reno anyway. He resumed his rank and pay at Fort Meade

in the Black Hills in May 1879, was court-martialed for the second time in November 1879, and dismissed from the Army in March 1880. However, the true case is scarcely that simple, and it has been grossly misinterpreted.

Col. S. D. Sturgis, who had resumed active command of the 7th upon Custer's death, had a beautiful daughter Ella, with aspirations to be an actress and not above being pleased with attentions of many admirers. Reno's barely merited reputation as a menace to womanhood was now well-rooted in the regimental mind. So, when on the evening of November 10th, he looked at Ella Sturgis through a window, Colonel Sturgis found quick means for a court-martial charge.

Since Miss Sturgis was fully clothed and seated with her mother, Major Reno was in the presence of at least three other officers, and one of them at least testified also to looking at General's daughter, it was a little difficult to prove him a peeping Tom. Instead, Ella Sturgis told the court - with more than a hint of Del Sarte in her dramatic testimony - that she feared Reno would shoot her when she discovered him, because of some fancied grudge against her father. It was an accusation rather difficult to fit into the Army's rigid regulations for legal proceedings.

In order to give the court-martial some semblance of legality, however, Reno was tried on three different charges - none concerning the Ella Sturgis incident. On "Conduct Unbecoming an officer and a gentleman" he was charged with (1) On October 26th striking Lieut. Nicholson with a

billiard cue; (2) On August 8th getting drunk in a billiard room and smashing a window and "several times, wantonly and in a serious manner, did knock money out of the hand of the saloon keeper"; and (3) During the absence of the post trader W. T. Fanshawe he had visited his residence "while in a disgusting condition of intoxication" on August 3rd.

The same Lt. Nicholson testified as to (3) that several of them took supper with Fanshawe and his wife, that all had several drinks, Reno fell asleep in his chair and was taken home to his quarters. Fanshawe himself testified similarly adding: "Reno did not insult myself or my family." As to (1) everyone agreed that Nicholson (who later became a general) had started the fight, and that Reno had hit him with the cue only on repeated provocation; and finally that (2) was "a quiet spree," - although that was definitely a matter of relative opinions.

If it was not a frame-up to soothe Col. Sturgis' affronted dignity, it was at least a farce. And when Sturgis telegraphed December 9th to the St. Paul Pioneer-Press, "In your issue of the 4th my evidence before the court martial is given incorrectly; in fact all the evidence has been garbled before leaving Deadwood;" the Press commented: "It is perhaps because the evidence has been garbled that so little has appeared which seems to afford any reasonable ground for the charges against Reno, or for the solemn and expensive forms of a Court-martial."[159]

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159. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 17, p. 380 (December 20, 1879).

However, the uncomfortable members eventually found Reno "guilty" - with a recommendation for leniency by the majority of the court. The endorsements of General Terry and General Sherman are not only self-explanatory but revealing as well:

> (Terry) ...Such being the view taken of the case by these members of the court the finding upon this charge should not have been guilty, with a recommendation to mercy, but it should have been not guilty to the charge.
>
> The sentence is manifestly excessive as a punishment for the acts of which Major Reno was found guilty under the first charge and its specifications, but as I have no power to modify it, and as my disapproval of it would put an end to the case, leaving Major Reno without any punishment whatever, I formally approve. I join, however, in the recommendation of a majority of the members of the court that it be modified....
>
> (Sherman) In view of the recommendation... it is respectfully recommended that the sentence of the court be modified at suspension from command for the space of one year with loss of half pay, and that during the time of suspension Major Reno be confined to the limits of the post where the headquarters of his regiment may be, and that he be reduced five files in the list of majors in the cavalry.[160]

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160. Army-Navy Journal, Vol. 17, p. 664 (March 20, 1880). The full case is summed up on p. 623f. (March 27, 1880). Italics are mine.

Both believed their recommendations would be accepted, but it was not to be. Hayes first offered Reno a chance to resign, which Reno correctly refused in view of the circumstances. The matter then hung fire until March 16, 1880, when the President - concluding "that in giving the Major an opportunity to resign he did all he could do without doing great violence to public opinion" - approved the sentence. Major Reno ceased to be an officer of the U. S. Army. One

of the most vicious and unwarranted slander campaigns had run its course. Brevet Captain Frederick Whittaker, 6th N. Y. Veteran Cavalry, "General Custer's Biographer" and "Major Reno's Accuser" - the man who could have won the Battle of the Little Big Horn (had it been fought in Mt. Vernon, N. Y.) - had produced his greatest dime novel.

And some people still accept it as history.

THE MAN WHO KNEW CUSTER.

But if Captain Whittaker was an earlier, mendacious version of Major Hoople - saved always from utter, complete exposure by the bumbling course of fate - there was nothing of the sort about another captain: E. S. Godfrey.

Godfrey came from West Point just after the Civil War to join the 7th Cavalry on its initial organization, and eventually rose to the rank of brigadier general of the regulars. His frontier service began at once, and stretched very nearly from Washita in 1868 to Wounded Knee in 1890. He distinguished himself in his first action for his exceptional coolness under fire, and in time became known throughout the Army for his courage and ability.

He served on the Yellowstone expedition with distinction, and was noted at the Little Big Horn for dismounting his troop to fight on foot in the rearguard action that saved Captain Weir when Reno made his advance along the hills to try and locate Custer. On Weir's death, Godfrey became a captain in the Seventh and a troop commander. He was an admirer, but not necessarily a partisan, of Benteen's; and in

the beginning he disliked Custer as heartily as he despised Reno.

As noted, at the Reno Court of Inquiry, he was the only officer to criticize Reno's conduct. Later his writings were much full of statements that he "had told them at Chicago what he thought of Reno," but at the time his testimony was rather evasive. He came up with the damning euphemism "nervous timidity" when asked pointblank if at such-and-such a point during the action on Reno's Hill, Reno had shown cowardice. It was the place for a direct charge, openly stated in exact words, for the man he later damned after his death was being investigated by an official court convened for exactly that purpose.

His testimony at the 1879 Court went about as follows:

> Godfrey said: "I was going to the pack-train, we started across together. The Indians set up a heavy firing on us, and Maj. Reno dodged and said, 'I'm damned if I want to be killed by Indians. I have gone through too many battles.' He said it in a laughing way.
>
> The question was asked him by Reno's counsel: "When Reno dodged that bullet, he said in a laughing way that he did not care to be killed ...by Indians as he had gone through many battles?" Godfrey answered, "Yes."
>
> Question: "Did that indicate any fear?"
>
> Answer: "Not fear; I thought it was nervous timidity."161

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161. Fred Gustin, Note 3, p. 138.

If Godfrey had anything more than that with which to unmask Reno as a coward, he passed up his finest opportunity to so testify under oath. Historically, it leaves but two conclusions possible: Either every officer at the Reno Court

except Godfrey was mistaken, or falsifying under oath, or Godfrey was mistaken. More likely, Godfrey, "a bantam fighting cock" with the heart of a lion, found anything but a flamboyant demonstration of courage insufficient to his standards.

In the years after the battle he collected as much material bearing on it as he could find, presenting papers on it at post lyceums and the sort. And as he possessed a clear crisp style of exposition he began to write much for Army publications on the subject of tactics, dismounted fire, frontier warfare, etcetera. It helped to gain him needed recognition in his line, and he was eventually chosen for the general staff school at Fort Leavenworth.

The Custer controversy had pretty well died down by the time of Wounded Knee in 1890. Reno had been exonerated, dismissed, and was a year dead at the time of the punitive action on the Pine Ridge Agency against the "Ghost Dancers." However, since it was the 7th Cavalry which did what little actual combat that occurred, there was loose talk of "Custer at last revenged." Consequently, public interest was revived in the affair at the Little Big Horn, and Captain Godfrey prepared an article on it for the Century magazine.

It was published in January, 1892, and established Godfrey as THE Custer Authority. There were many errors of simple fact, expected in such articles, and some appended comments by Col. James B. Fry - all making as bad a case possible for the now dead scapegoat Reno. In addition, Godfrey, in summing up, directly attributed Custer's defeat

to "Reno's panic route from the valley."

And despite any opposing argument from officers of the expedition yet living, Godfrey's every word and line was accepted as absolutely authoritative, absolutely incapable of correction or improvement. Did Custer disobey his orders? Captain Godfrey, who was not present at the council of war between Terry, Gibbon and Custer - and admittedly unconversant as to any known plan at the time of the battle - said No! That settled it.

Could Major Reno have completed his charge through the valley, or remained in the timber dismounted, and saved Custer? Captain Godfrey, who was with Benteen and never in the valley at all, said Yes! And that settled that, too. Was it possible that Custer's route was unknown to Reno in the valley? The map prepared by Godfrey for the Century was gotten out, and used as a final authority - from which there was no appeal. This in the face of a dozen manifest inaccuracies as to place-names and terrain, due to the carelessness of either Godfrey or his engraver - or both.

Did anybody arise to raise questions as to any point whatsoever of Godfrey's theories, he could be withered by a "Captain Godfrey was in the battle; where were you?" There was no answer. Godfrey alone of the 7th Cavalry officers actually in the fight published an article in a magazine of national prominence and circulation. In the military journals others might quibble, but in the public periodicals and the public mind Godfrey was THE Custer writer.

And it cannot be said that Godfrey found it unpleasant. Some of his letters in print are as poor specimens of historical reasoning as any of Frederick Whittaker's. He seems to have been consulted on every work on Custer to appear from the time of his 1892 "Custer's Last Battle" to his death in 1932. And matters which were once only opinion on his part, hardened into absolute fact. The farther he got from the battle, the more infallible he came to regard his own memory.

In time, this all had an interesting and important result for the Custer Legend. His prominence as a Custer authority naturally brought him into orbit of the gracious widow, and Godfrey who had disliked Custer alive came to be a staunch - and often illogical - defender of him dead. Thus the seeker after fact had two irremovable obstacles in his way. If he unearthed facts beyond disproof to the detriment of Custer, he could not get them published. For he was now not only insulting the gallant presence of Mrs. Custer as well as her husband's lustrous name, he was also insulting that fine old Indian fighter General E. S. Godfrey.

"And anyway, granting that the general might be getting old and did make a mistake or two in his article, what kind of a pipsqueak are you to pit your military ability against a general officer of the 'Old Army'?" Or (if not a civilian) "What do you young punks from San Juan Hill or Samar or Belleau Wood know about campaigning on the old frontier with one-shot carbines and short rations and screaming Sioux?" - and so on.

Finally, in 1921, Mrs. Custer and Godfrey joined forces. The Century article was reprinted in pamphlet form in anticipation of the coming Fiftieth Anniversary of the battle. In it, Godfrey's original errors - honest and wholly understandable - were "adjusted" from the perspective of half-a-century so as to show Custer in absolutely the best light possible and the long-since-disgraced Reno in the worse. And, as we have said, it was the known inaccuracies of this 1921 pamphlet that brought Dustin into the field.[171]

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171. See Fred Dustin, The Custer Fight.

Significantly, it was not until 1934 after Mrs. Custer and General Godfrey had both passed away that Van de Water's Glory-Hunter appeared, the first serious objective attempt to portray Custer apart from his Legend; and many others have since followed. At last, as the South Dakota historian Doane Robinson put it, "the conspiracy of silence" had been broken.

The gallant unseeing widow, the upright, tough-fibred battle veteran, and the self-sacrificing biographer - only trying to make an honest penny out of a "historical work" turned out between dime novels - these three combined to wreck irretrievably one man's life and career, and to turn another's honest reputation from the field of history into that of folk-lore. More than any other circumstance or factor, Elizabeth B. Custer, General E. S. Godfrey, and Frederick Whittaker - "late Brevet Captain 6th N. Y. Veteran Cavalry" - established that collection of myths called "The

Custer Legend."

III

The future of the Custer Legend can be predicted with reasonable accuracy. The pendulum has been on its back-swing already twenty years or more, and in the end the Legend will not only be wholly discredited but a man's deserved reputation and rightful place in American history will be damaged as well. Because, in the name of a dead man, shortsighted and fanatical admirers belittled other men's accomplishments, character, and reputations to enhance that of General Custer, Custer will in turn be so treated. And because the normal processes of history were deliberately inhibited, the reaction will be savage beyond all historical justification.

To illustrate, the controversy has even penetrated to the pages of Surgery, Gynecology and Obstetrics, and learned medical men of the highest fame pass odd moments studying and dissecting the emotional dynamics of the Hero of the Little Big Horn. Paul R. Hawley, late Major General of the Medical Corps and the Veterans Administration, for example, traces everything back to the 1867 cholera epidemic at Fort Riley.

Answering his own question, "Did cholera defeat Custer?" he reasons, Yes! It was news of the cholera epidemic at Fort Riley that caused Custer to leave his command without orders, and ride to the fort to make sure that his wife was all right. It was this action that caused him to be court-martialed - and from this humiliation his ego never fully recovered.

"The giant had been stabbed in the back by pygmies. His pride had been severely wounded, and the wound festered, leaving an ugly scar. This scar could be made less...disfiguring only by repolishing his reputation to a brilliance that would blind the public to the defect." Hence the debacle of the Little Big Horn, according to Dr. Hawley.

But, on the other hand, the famed psychiatrist Karl Menninger openly diagnoses Custer as a "psychoneurotic." In World War II, flatly announces Dr. Menninger, Custer would have been discharged for that reason, and never allowed to serve in battle. "Neurotic generals" may be brilliantly successful, but are too often as dangerous to their own side as the enemy. And, most bitter irony of all, one of the reasons on which he bases his conclusion is that Custer "in all his Indian battles" slaughtered Indian women and children "habitually."[172]

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172. "The General Was Neurotic," TIME, Vol. 50, p. 90f. (August 18, 1947).

The extravagant lies are coming home; the myth-makers' misstatements are being taken seriously - and used to damn their godlike hero. Poor Custer and his three Indian battles, in one of which - Washita - he killed women and children! Scarcely "habitually." But then, exactly who was it kept alive the myth of his "many" Indian victories, his "outstanding" success on the Plains, his "easily foremost" reputation? It was the Frederick Whittakers, the J. H. Kidds, the Frazier Hunts, and the Shannon Garsts - certainly

it was not Dr. Menninger nor Major General Hawley. History is patient only so long, then it kicks back.

In such manner will history soon cast off the Custer Legend, perhaps by the 75th anniversary of the battle in 1951, although it will inevitably linger long in the recesses of the American Mind beyond the reach of the light of fact. When that is done, the personal name and military reputation of George Armstrong Custer will fight vainly to remain at only absolute zero. And many, many books will be embarrassing by their very presence on the library shelves.

Then slowly, but certainly, with the unprejudiced facts no longer fouled with myth and canard, students will turn again to this dashing figure - but this time to the brilliant cavalryman of the stormy '60's, the "Boy General" of the Civil War, the "Murat of the U. S. Army." In passing, his true services to the frontier - his peaceable settling of the southern plains Indians in 1869, his work on the Yellowstone and his opening of the Black Hills - these will be recognized, and the rest charitably forgotten. The fungous will at last be scaled clean of the tree.

In the final evaluation of history, undoubtedly we shall return very nearly to the brief, calm, fair contemporary appraisal of <u>The Nation</u>. With slander and supposition already rampant all about, and the litter of battle still scarring the slopes of the Little Big Horn, and the last mortally wounded man but a week dead, the following appeared in the July 13th issue:

> ...Though he had had much experience in Indian fighting ever since the close of the war, it will hardly be thought disgraceful that he allowed himself to be entrapped. His personal bravery was very exceptional, and his successes, especially in the last year of the war when he was our model executive cavalry officer, were so great and so uniform that to dare and to do naturally came to seem to him one....[173]

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173. The Nation, Vol. 23, p. 17 (July 13, 1876).

And that statement, as succinct as this paper is long, is the true summation of the life of General George A. Custer.

Anything else is the Custer Legend.

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APPENDICES

It seems that it is absolutely impossible to write any kind of a paper on the Custer controversy and avoid having to include at least one appendix. This thesis in that respect is no exception. However, the following items seem to have a definite bearing on matters discussed in the text, and should be available for immediate reference.

I. General Terry's final order to Custer. II. The whereabouts of all officers on the rolls of the 7th Cavalry June 25, 1876 - this because regimental officers no place near the battle are sometimes cited as conclusive proof on matters which they had no immediate knowledge of. III. The petition signed by 235 enlisted survivors of the battle, July 4, 1876, that Reno be promoted to Lieut.-Col. and Benteen to Major for their "bravery, coolness, and decision" which "saved the lives of every man now living." IV. My personal theory of the battle, properly no part whatever of the text, but which is as sound as most. Buried back here, no one has to read it if he does not care to do so.

I should also include the findings of the 1879 Reno Court of Inquiry, but the document is too lengthy, and likewise in readily available in full in books which can be found in either the College or the Michigan State Library. Specifically two following: Fred Dustin, The Custer Tragedy, pp. 209-211; and Frazier and Robert Hunt, I Fought With Custer, pp. 178-181.

The same can be said for the lists of dead and wounded in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. These can be found in Appendices II & III of Dustin's work, and if it wished to check them against a contemporary report you are referred to the Army and Navy Journal, Vol. 13, pp. 785-786 (July 15, 1876). Frazier and Robert Hunt have also collected much material of great value which should be studied closely for a clearer understanding of both Custer, the man, and his famed Last Stand.

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Appendix I

Here, for the millionth-odd time, is Custer's final written order from General Terry. In reading it, however, it must always be remembered that this was not a recommendation from one officer to another of equal rank, nor even merely an order from a superior to a subordinate. This was a field order covering a definite plan of action worked out a formal conference of war at which Custer was present in person, and in which he took part. Regardless of what personal conclusion is reached as to its strictness or latitude, in cannot be divorced from the conference of which it was a result.

Headquarters Department of Dakota,
(in the Field)
Camp at Mouth of Rosebud River,
Montana, June 22, 1876

Colonel: The brigadier general commanding directs that as soon as your regiment can be made ready for the march, you proceed up the Rosebud in pursuit of the Indians whose trail was discovered by Major Reno a few days since. It is, of course, impossible to give you any definite instructions in regard to this movement; and were it not impossible to do so, the department commander places too much confidence in your zeal, energy and ability to wish to impose upon you precise orders, which might hamper your action when nearly in contact with the enemy. He will, however, indicate to you his own views of what your action should be, and he desires that you should conform to them unless you shall see sufficient reason for departing from them. He thinks that you should proceed up the Rosebud until you ascertain definitely the direction in which the trail above spoken of leads. Should it be found (as it appears to be almost certain it will be found) to turn toward the Little Horn, he thinks that you should still proceed southward, perhaps as far as the headwaters of the Tongue, and then turn toward the Little Horn, feeling constantly, however, to your left, so as to preclude the possibility of the escape of the Indians to the south or southeast passing around your left flank.

The column of Colonel Gibbon is now in motion for the mouth of the Big Horn. As soon as it reaches that point it will cross the Yellowstone and move up at least as far as the forks of the Little and Big Horns. Of course its future movements must be controlled by circumstances as they arise; but it is hoped that the Indians, if upon the Little Horn, may be so nearly enclosed by the two columns that their escape

will be impossible. The department commander desires that on your way up the Rosebud you should thoroughly examine the upper part of Tullock's Creek; and that you should endeavor to send a scout through to Colonel Gibbon's column with the information of the result of your examination. The lower part of this creek will be examined by a detachment from Colonel Gibbon's command.

The supply-steamer will be pushed up the Big Horn as far as the forks, if the river is found to be navigable for that distance; and the department commander (who will accompany the column of Colonel Gibbon) desires you to report to him there not later than the expiration of the time for which your troops are rationed, unless in the meantime you receive further orders.

Very respectfully,
your obedient servant,

Ed. W. Smith

Captain, Eighteenth Infantry, A.A.A.G.

Lieut. Col. G.A. Custer,
Seventh Cavalry.

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Appendix II

The roll of 7th Cavalry officers on May 17, 1876, the day the Dakota Column left Fort Lincoln, is important for a clear understanding of many later accounts of the battle. At least 13 of the regiment's 41 officers were on detached duty at the time, leaving the unit actually under-officered. And of the 28 actually with the column one, First Lieut. Henry J. Nowlan, remained with Terry as acting field quartermaster.

The 27 actually in the battle are designated as to battalion, commander, and whether or not killed in the action either in the valley, on the hill, or under Custer. The whereabouts of those not with the column are given as closely as can be done through a careful study of the abstracts of Army orders given in the Army and Navy Journal.

Officers of the 7th Cavalry

Colonel: S.D. Sturgis.

Lieut. Colonel: George A. Custer*#1

Majors: Joseph G. Tilford, Lewis Merril, Marcus A. Reno#2

Captains: F.W. Benteen#3, Myles W. Keogh*1, M.V. Sheridan, George W. Yates*1, Thomas Weir3, J.E. Tourtellotte, Thomas H. French2, Owen Hale, Charles B. Illsley, Lyles Moylan2, Thomas Custer*1, T.M. McDougall#4

First Lieuts.: Henry J. Nowlan5, James M. Bell, W.W. Cooke*1, Henry Jackson, Algernon E. Smith*1, Edwards S. Godfrey3, Donald McIntosh*2, Edward G. Mathey4, James Calhoun*1, Francis M. Gibson3, James E. Porter*1, William T. Craycroft, Charles C. DeRudio2

Second Lieuts.: Charles Braden, Benjamin H. Hodgson*2, Winfield S. Edgerly3, Charles W. Larned, Andrew H. Nave, George D. Wallace2, Charles A. Varnum2, H.M. Harrington*1, Luther R. Hare2, James G. Sturgis*1, William Van W. Reilly*1

In addition 2nd Lieut. John J. Crittenden, 20th Infantry accompanied the regiment, because of the shortage of officers, and was killed with Custer.

* Killed, June 25, 1876
\# Commanding a battalion
1 With Custer
2 With Reno
3 With Benteen
4 With packtrain
5 With Terry

The presence of the thirteen not with the column is accounted for in the following manner:

Col. S.D. Sturgis -- Supt. of the Army Mounted Recruiting Service and head of the Army Retirement Board in St. Louis, Mo.

Major Joseph G. Tilford -- On leave. Granted a month's leave of absence effective at the end of the summer field operations, 1875, and on November 13, 1875, given an extension of 11 months.

Major Lewis Merrill -- On special duty with the Commission of the International Exhibition of 1876, by order of President Grant.

Capt. John E. Tourtellotte -- On special duty as aid-de-camp to General of the Army W.T. Sherman.

Capt. Owen Hale -- Detailed a member of a general court-martial at St. Louis on April 6, 1876, and on May 27th ordered to remain to act as recorder to the Army Retirement Board headed by Col. Sturgis.

Capt. Charles B. Illsley -- On special duty as aid-de-camp to Major General John Pope,

Capt. Michael V. Sheridan -- On special duty as aid-de-camp to Lieut. General Philip Sheridan.

1st Lieut. James M. Bell -- On leave. Ordered to rejoin the regiment on July 12, 1876.

1st Lieut. Henry Jackson -- On duty at the Signal Headquarters of the Army. Ordered to rejoin regiment on July 12, 1876.

1st Lieut. William T. Craycroft -- Ordered to temporary duty in St. Paul, Minn., May 27, 1876, and ordered same date to report for examination by the Army Retirement Board in Washington, D.C. (Retired on surgeon's certificate of disability, June 28, 1878).

2nd Lieut. Charles Braden -- Ordered May 27, 1876, to the Army Retirement Board in Washington, D.C. (Retired on June 28, 1878, for wounds received on the 1873 Yellowstone expedition).

2nd Lieut. Charles W. Larned -- Detailed a member of general court-martial at West Point, N.Y., on March 25, 1876.

Ordered to rejoin regiment on July 15, 1876. (Resigned his regimental commission August 14, 1876, to become a professor at West Point).

2nd Lieut. Andrew H. Nave -- On leave of absence on surgeon's certificate of disability. No record of when he rejoined the regiment, but was on duty in 1877.

There are certain accounts in which some of the officers named above are cited as authority, because they were of the 7th Cavalry. Certainly they would be in better position to receive first-hand accounts of the battle than most, but it must be emphasized that none of the thirteen were in the battle or even with the Fort Lincoln column.

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Appendix III

One of the most embarrassing documents in existence for those who like to feel that history gives them an unqualified support in placing the entire blame for the disaster at the Little Big Horn on Reno's "cowardice" is the petition signed by 235 of his enlisted men requesting his promotion to Custer's rank and position. It cannot easily be explained away. One writer who seems to wish it was not in existence, speaks of "the strange and touching letter" and considers it an "important sidelight on the feelings of the troopers, before the fear and excitement of the battle had died out" - leaving an unpleasant hint that men who were actually in the battle were not as qualified to judge the conduct of their officers as well as those great distances away in time or space.

Another deprecates it by saying that the first sergeants "could get the men to sign anything." But considering the unsurpassed quality and courage of the topkicks of the Indian-fighting Army, and their cold dislike for inefficient officers, this in itself is a high though unintended compliment. Since the exact numbers of enlisted men and officers going into the battle is not yet known, and scouts and civilians are usually included in causality lists, figures are hard to come by. But approximately 315 non-coms and enlisted men survived the battle, of which about 52 were seriously wounded enough to be evacuated by steamboat to Fort Lincoln, 900 miles downriver. Of some 263 men still on duty, then, July 4, 1876, 235 signed the following recommendation for a man the Custer Legend would have us believe was "as yellow as they come."

It would seem to be a pretty final word of what the men in the ranks actually thought at the time - 10 days after the battle - of "Reno's incapacity and Benteen's disobedience."

Camp near Big Horn on
Yellowstone River,
July 4th, 1876

To his
Excellency the President
and the honorable Representatives
of the United States.

Gentlemen:

We the enlisted men the survivors of the battle on the heights of Little Horn River, on the 25th and 26th of June 1876, of the 7th Regiment of Cavalry who subscribe our names

to this petition, most earnestly solicit the President and Representatives of our Country, that the vacancies among the Commissioned Officers of our Regiment, made by the slaughter of our brave, heroic, now lamented Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer, and the other noble dead Commissioned officers of our Regiment who fell close by him on the bloody field, daring the savage demons to the last, be filled by the Officers of the Regiment only. That Major M.A. Reno be our Lieutenant Colonel vice Custer, killed; Captain F.W. Benteen our Major vice Reno, promoted. The other vacancies to be filled by officers of the Regiment by seniority. Your petitioners know this to be contrary to the established rule of promotion, but prayerfully solicit a deviation from the usual rule in this case, as it will be conferring a bravely fought for and a justly merited promotion on officers who by their bravery, coolness and decision on the 25th and 26th of June 1876, saved the lives of every man now living of the 7th Cavalry who participated in the battle, one of the most bloody on record and one that would have ended with the loss of life of every officer and enlisted man on the field only for the position taken by Major Reno, which we held with bitter tenacity against fearful odds to the last.

To support this assertion - had our position been taken 100 yards back from the brink of the heights overlooking the river we would have been entirely cut off from water; and from behind those heights the Indian demons would have swarmed in hundreds picking off our men by detail, and before midnight June 26th not an officer or enlisted man of our regiment would have been left to tell of our dreadful fate as we then would have been completely surrounded.

With prayerful hope that our petitions be granted, we have the honor to foward it through our Commanding Officer.

Very respectfully

(236 signatures).

* * *

Moving through channels the petition reached General of the Army W.T. Sherman a month later. He did not present it to President Grant, but instead gave it the following endorsement:

Headquarters of the Army
of the United States
Washington, D.C.
August 5, 1876.

The judicious and skilful conduct of Major Reno and Captain Benteen is appreciated, but the promotions caused by General Custer's death have been made by the President and

confirmed by the Senate; therefore this petition cannot be granted. When the Sioux campaign is over I shall be most happy to recognize the valuable services of both officers and men by grant favors or recommending actual promotion.

Promotion on the field of battle was Napoleon's favorite method of stimulating his officers and soldiers to deeds of heroism, but it is impossible in our service because commissions can only be granted by the President on the advice and consent of the Senate, and except in original vacancies, promotion in a regiment is generally if not always made on the rule of seniority.

W.T. Sherman,
General.

* * *

It has occurred to me that this petition was drawn up principally to further Captain Benteen's promotion, rather than Reno's, but their most vociferous critics or admirers have never so suggested. Moreover, to follow out the idea, if Reno was yellow and Benteen solely responsible for saving the remnants of the regiment (another commonly advanced theory) the enlisted men would certainly have been under no obligation to ask Reno's promotion. They were, in fact, asking that the Official Regulations and the laws of the United States be set aside to give two officers what they felt to be highly merited promotion. In such a case, if it had been Benteen alone they meant to recommend, a petition citing his name alone would have had every bit as much chance of success, and their opinion of Reno's personal conduct and military ability would have been made unequivocally plain.

# # # # #

Appendix IV

Here, stated very briefly, is my personal theory on the controversial aspects of the Battle of the Little Big Horn based on an objective study of all the major pro- and anti-Custer accounts in print. It is, I believe, not only fair and reasonable to all involved, but fully backed up by any clear-minded examination of the actual evidence. It represents conclusions I have reached after at least ten years consideration and discussion with others.

- E.K.B.

* * *

It is not necessary to possess a detailed map for an understanding of this theory of the Battle of the Little Big Horn; any map of Montana showing the principal watercourses will do. By reference to such a map it will be seen that the Big Horn and Rosebud Rivers are both tributaries of the Yellowstone, rising to flow northward to the main stream. At their mouths they are about 55 miles apart, but the headwaters of their smaller streams rise in the same height of land, due southeast of the Custer Battlefield. Rosebud Creek and Reno Creek (flowing into the Little Big Horn, thence to the Big Horn) have their origin within two or three miles of each other.

The watercourses actually involved thus form a crude circle on the map of Montana. Custer, starting at the mouth of the Rosebud was to work upward (to the South), roughly a third of the circle. Gibbon, with a large infantry contingent, was to march up the Yellowstone to the Big Horn, then up the Big Horn to the Little Big Horn, roughly two-thirds of the circle. Since Custer not only had the shorter distance, but also a mounted force, he was to so conduct his marches in distance, direction, and speed as to coordinate with Gibbon's slower moving force. As a result, it was planned that at some time on the 26th of June, 1876 - probably in the evening - the circle from the mouth of the Rosebud would have been completed and both forces at opposite ends of the valley of the Little Big Horn for a concerted attack on the Indian encampment believed to be there.

Gibbon, accompanied by the overall commander Terry, carried out his plan to the letter - arriving in the valley the evening of the 26th and marching over the exact site of the battle the morning of the 27th. Therefore, his actions are no longer of consequence to us.

Custer, however, by forced marchesand by taking a direct line of march, arrived at the divide between the Rosebud and Reno Creek shortly after midnight of June 24th. Here

he informed his officers that the command would remain concealed all day in order to scout the country and prepare for an attack on the 26th. So far Custer had violated his orders by his swift, direct march (and by failing to scout Tulloch's Creek - see Appendix I), but had not yet upset the plan of action. It was only his noontime attack on the 25th which actually accomplished this.

Therefore, Custer's purpose can be reasonably guessed at as something like this: By hiding in the divide for a day his men and animals would be rested, and he would have full information for a dawn attack the morning of the 26th. This, as he well knew, would be at least 12 hours before Gibbon was in position, but technically within the spirit of his orders. With a sweeping surprise attack (as at Washita) he would destroy the Indian village in short order, and be in possession of the field and a wholly independent victory when Gibbon and Terry actually arrived. His instructions could easily be construed to cover such a case, he would actually have delayed attacking until the day specified, and his triumph would have made criticism of other violations mere cavilling.

With this plan in mind, he refused to believe reports from his Indian scouts as to the proximity of the village and its size. He apparently was already convinced in his own mind that the encampment lay further down toward the Yellowstone, perhaps about at the forks of the Little Big Horn and the Big Horn. As to size, he was positive the scouts were exaggerating as no Indian encampment of that scope had ever been heard of - and at any rate with 600 mounted troops in a dawn attack felt positive that he could gain by surprise any advantage he gave away in numbers.

Early the morning of the 25th, he moved the regiment some ten miles down the divide to a sheltered position in a coulee. Here, apparently (granting all the above), he proposed to remain for the day - as the men were ordered to make as little noise as possible, build no fires, and no bugle calls were given. However, as he was returning from a personal scout, word was brought that Indians had actually been seen by the command, one had been shot, and others were in contact. Therefore concluding that concealment was useless, that he was discovered, and that "they might try to escape" he started his premature movement.

Having completely disregarded the reports of his scouts he was moving to an attack for which he had no intelligence on which to base a plan, and therefore actually had none at all, hoping to improvise to meet any unexpected conditions. He then made his famous division into battalions, giving Reno and Benteen no orders for concerted action or reuniting because he had none in his own mind. Then - again because he absolutely

refused to accept the intelligence of his scouts when it conflicted with his preconceived ideas - he sent Benteen in his useless movement to the left. If this was to be a third prong against the village, it shows his utter, deliberate ignorance of the terrain, as Benteen would be completely sealed off by high country from the valley of the Little Big Horn.

Custer then moved on with his own battalions, and the one under Reno, down the creek leading to the Little Big Horn. First, he ordered Reno to one side of the stream, then called him back again with his men, so the force moved as a unit. It was at this point that the "lone tepee" was sighted, and he believed himself in immediate contact with the village. Thereupon he gave Reno the long puzzled-over order "to attack, and you will be supported by the whole outfit." Obviously, Custer was moving in as a single force, Reno was to be the advance only, and the direction of the full attack was to be down the bottom of the valley. This is particularly borne out by the presence with Reno, as he opened the action, of Capt. Keogh - who commanded at least two of the troops directly under Custer - and Lieut. Cooke. Cooke as adjutant had the important responsibility of relaying Custer's orders, and therefore would not have started with Reno had he not understood that all the battalions were moving in together.

And such was probably Custer's actual intention when he issued the order. But it must always be kept in mind that he was improvising - not acting from a predetermined plan - and that he did not believe that the village was where it was in truth, nor that it could possibly be of the reach reported to him. Therefore, ignorant by his own choice of the topography, as he reached the gentle slopes leading to the heights overlooking the valley, he swung the main force quickly to the right. His purpose obviously was to make a short dash along the ridge and come thundering down on the flank, or below, his "small" Indian village: an intended movement of a mile or two to be climaxed by a charge from the bluffs. He sent no word to Reno, because he expected to reunite with him almost at once in the center of the Indian lines. It would still be a brief, swift, explosive action and the triumph to be his would still placate Terry and Gibbon for disregarding the overall plan.

But the rest is history (to coin a phrase). His scouts were right and he was wrong. The one mile along the bluffs stretched into three or more before a descent was found suitable to mounted men, and then before him - miles both way - came the heart-chilling sight of the greatest Indian encampment in history. Reno, his intended advance, was already overwhelmed in the valley and cutting through the hill. Benteen, whom he ordered back from his "valley chasing" to be in on "the kill" joined Reno, and the packs soon followed.

But his improvisation, his disregard of his intelligence, and his lack of plan had already cut off Custer. Before Benteen joined Reno he was in desperate action, by the time of the arrival of the packs his force was overwhelmed, and shortly after the last man of his immediate command was dead. Whatever his true intention in regard to Terry's orders, he had chosen to ignore his intelligence, had failed to follow out even an improvised plan of battle, had separated his force into units with no plan whatever for reuniting, and was wiped out with half the regiment in some thirty minutes.

No one betrayed anyone. No one was cowardly. No subordinate was inefficient or disobeyed orders. A premature attack was launched with deliberate disregard of topography, location of the encampment, effective numbers of the Indians' forces, and the regiment was defeated in detail.

A commander unconsciously depending on the existence of a great force on which he could fall back if need be - but from which he completely cut himself off - deliberately placed his command in a position where he felt necessitated to drive into a trap. A personally brave soldier died needlessly from his own mistakes, and with him 225 men.

And had not misguided friends interfered his death would have wiped the slate clean, and this would be all there was to the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

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The following is not intended to be a comprehensive Custer bibliography, nor even a complete listing of all the material examined in preparation this paper, which would run literally into hundreds of entries. Such a listing could be justified only by an attempt to supplement doubtful validity of the research by an excess of references, an action I consider the meticulousness and the accuracy of the study leaves unneeded. Moreover, voluminous bibliographies are the hallmark of more than one wholly inaccurate work on General Custer; they have proved themselves to be poor substitutes for integrity. Occasional works of great general value - but only of indirect bearing on the subject under discussion - I have given a full bibliographical entry in the notes of the text. The carefully selected chief sources listed below were those most pertinent and valuable to my thesis.

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