

HOSTILES MASSACRED CUSTER AND COMMAND 49 YEARS AGO TODAY IN MEMORABLE BATTLE

Few Are Living Who Took Part in Stirring
Events Leading Up to Clash With Warring
Sioux in Little Big Horn Hills.

Column 1

Column 2

In the knolls above the Little Big Horn river near the present Crow Agency, 49 years ago today, Custer's command of 265 officers, soldiers and scouts was annihilated by the Sioux Indians and their allies in the most memorable battle in the long annals of Indian conflict.

The terrible disaster of that day has since been reviewed from many angles by soldiers of other commands who narrowly escaped the same fate, by scouts and others who bore the news back to civilization, by the very Indians who swooped down on Custer's little command. Still there are many mysteries to be cleared, many interesting details which from time to time are brought to light.

Although nearly a half century has gone by since the famous battle took place, there still remain a few people who had some part in the events on the Little Big Horn or whose lives have been closely associated with that of the famous general and ill-fated leader.

In the east, still lives Mrs. Elizabeth B. Custer, wife of the general and sharer with him of many of the hardships of army and frontier life. David Hilger, secretary of the Montana Historical society, has during the last year received several letters from Mrs. Custer who, in spite of her advanced years, is in very good life. Defender and historian of her husband's career, she continues to hold a lively interest in those who were associated with the events of the closing years of the general's life.

Cared for Custer's Horses.

In John Burkman, who for many years cared for Custer's blooded horses and hounds, Billings has a resident who knew many of the intimate details of Custer's daily life. Burkman saddled Custer's horse, the morning of the battle and was with the pack train which later joined Reno when he was besieged in the hills after the destruction of Custer's command.

Although he is 86 years old, Mr. Burkman is in good health and his memory of everything connected with Custer and the early days is excellent, although he will speak of them only to those who have his confidence. He still walks about the streets of Billings although his eyesight is beginning to fail to some extent.

There are a few others living who were either with Reno or Benteen in their desperate encounters or with Gibbons who came up the next day and

found the bodies of the slain soldiers and relieved the beleaguered troops of Reno and Benteen.

Peter Thompson, Carter county rancher, who treasures a congressional medal given for conspicuous service at the battle of the Little Big Horn, is one of these. He was in charge of some mules bringing up supplies to Custer and after making an effort to join him was finally compelled to seek refuge with Reno's command.

General Godfrey, who was an officer in Reno's command and who, in 1891, wrote for Century, the account of the battle which is generally regarded as the most authentic, is still living and recently wrote a revised account of the battle.

A few years ago, Curley, who brought the news of the so-called massacre to Captain Grant Marsh, commander of the Far West who had come up the Big Horn river, died at Crow Agency. He was generally heralded as the sole survivor of the massacre although his story of escaping after Custer was killed by wrapping himself in a Sioux blanket has been discredited by some.

He at least witnessed part of the battle as did four or five other Crow Indian scouts with Custer's command of whom White Man Runs Him is still living near Lodge Grass. Some of these scouts brought the first news of the disaster to General Gibbons who, coming from the north, was to have attacked the Indians with Custer on June 26.

Scores of "Survivors."

During the years since the battle, many men have appeared in nearly every section of the country who have claimed to be survivors of the battle. According to E. A. Brininstool, Los Angeles writer, who has made a thorough study of everything which has been written about the battle, there have been nearly as many claimants to the title as there were men killed on the fatal day. There is no reason to believe, however, that with the possible exception of the Indian scouts, that anyone in Custer's personal command that day escaped alive.

The campaign against the Sioux and Cheyennes who had invaded the Crow country was initiated with a three-fold plan of action. Terry and Gibbons were to come from the north along the Big Horn, supported by the steamer Far West. Custer, with the famous Seventh cavalry, was to strike from the east,

crossing the Rosebud and Wolf mountains while Crook who was stationed in Wyoming was to come up the Little Big Horn. Unknown to the others, however, Crook had been worsted by the Indians on the Rosebud river and was unable to carry out his part of the plan. Custer, as many thought, with the design to win all the glory himself, made a forced march and reached the Indian encampment a day ahead of the schedule.

Custer planned a similar enveloping movement in planning his own campaign, the morning of June 25. Benteen was to go to the south to get in touch with Crook if he were in the locality. Reno was to attack the south end of the Indian encampment while Custer was to strike the main blow several miles farther north.

The plan proved a failure. Benteen got too far to the south and only got back to join Reno after the latter was driven to the hills. Reno after crossing the river was attacked by the Indians and was obliged to retreat. After suffering severe losses, his command finally made a stand on some hills where they dug rifle pits and withstood a siege of a couple of days until, with the coming of Gibbons, the Indians abandoned the attack. McDougall, in command of the pack train, also joined forces with Reno.

Custer Was Last to Die.

There is still a dispute as to whether Custer got to the river and was then driven back to the knolls where he and his men died or whether he was attacked there before he reached the river. The Indians surrounded the little force and, in a series of attacks, gradually reduced their numbers.

From the positions in which the bodies were found, it was evident that some had died in an effort of the entire command to reach a better vantage point while some fell in sallies against the foe. Some bodies were found at a considerable distance from that of the main party but most in small groups were strewn over a comparatively small area. It is the tradition at least that Custer was one of the last to die. With him died, his brother Captain Tom Custer, his cousin Boston Custer, the correspondent, Mark Kellogg and Major Keogh, the second in command.

According to an account given by Red Horse, a Sioux chieftain, after the battle, the Indians dressed in the costumes taken from Custer's men and wore them in the attack on Reno. They also took rifles and cartridges from the bodies. An account of seeing a body of Indians in soldier's costume has been given by several members of both Reno's and Gibbon's command.

According to I. D. O'Donnell of this city, Mr. White, an early settler at Columbus, who was with Gibbon's command and was one of the first men to see the dead soldiers on the field of battle, often related about a band of Indians who they first took to be soldiers until they discovered their disguise. John Burkman also says that this band joined in the attack on Reno.

In a recent number of Adventure, Lone Eagle, a Sioux, tells of some of the tribal traditions about the battle and some of its principal actors. Part of his account is as follows:

2,500 Sioux Took Part.

"Another question often asked is the

number of Indians in the battle and how they were armed. There were about 500 tepees in the camp, which would figure out five to the tepee, about 2,500 Sioux; half of the warriors were mounted and had about an equal number of bows and guns. The guns contained a mixture of several makes of shell and percussion cap rifles. Among the men were also several old flint-locks, several of which were discarded or turned over to the younger braves after gaining possession of the Custer carbines and Colt revolvers, most of which were retaken by the United States government from the Indians after the Wounded Knee battle. Several of these Custer carbines and Colt revolvers are still owned by several Sioux.

"At home on my ranch in Montana I still have two Colt revolvers, a rifle, a broken sword, several brass uniform buttons, and a scalp which was taken from the battlefield on that eventful day in June, 1876, by my foster father.

"One statement that may be of interest to Adventure readers is that every trooper and civilian in Custer's band was scalped except one and that was General George A. Custer and two reasons were accountable for his scalp not being taken. First, his known courage and bravery was respected by the Indians and also that they were superstitious about taking long, curly, red hair.

"Another question often asked in connection with this battle is how many Indians were killed and what became of the dead warriors, as none were ever found the next day or so when Reno came to bury the soldiers' dead. There were about 700 Sioux and Cheyennes killed during the battle, who were all carried away and buried a day's journey from the Little Big Horn battleground. I have been shown the Indian burial place, but due to a promise given to the Indian who pointed it out to me, I can not tell any living person as long as the one who told me is this side of the Happy Hunting Ground.

One White Saw Battle.

"I can also verify the fact that at least one white man was witness to the Custer battle. His name was Fowler (renamed Ishta-tanka, Big Eye, by the Sioux) who had been a buffalo hunter and was captured along with another friend, then less than 21 years old, by the name of Walter J. Winnett, who was called Wamble Ishta, Eagle Eye, by the Sioux. These two white hunters were captured on the Yellowstone river in Montana in the fall of 1874. Fowler was considerably older than Winnett, being more than twice his age. The younger Winnett was out hunting with four Sioux when the battle took place and although Winnett heard the guns he did not arrive on the Custer field until the morning of the twenty-sixth. During the excitement among the Sioux, young (Eagle Eye) Winnett was forgotten in the hurried move to Canada

and made his escape out of the Indian country and is alive and well today, owner of a large stock ranch at Winnett, Fergus county, Montana, the city of Winnett being built on his ranch and named in his honor and he will verify any part of the statements here concerning him.

"However, the older buffalo hunter, Mr. Fowler (who like Winnett had married into the Sioux tribe) did not fare so fortunately as his young friend Winnett. After Winnett had made his escape, the Sioux, knowing that Fowler had witnessed the battle, was afraid he also would try to escape and rather than take any extra precaution, he was killed by Rain-in-the-Face (the Indian who fired one of the three shots that killed Custer) and Fowler, the only white man who witnessed the Custer fight, was buried somewhere in Montana, near the Alberta, Canada line." ***