

the plains of philippi



The American Scene



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A brief commentary on the personality and career of George Armstrong Custer based upon sources in the library collection of the Thomas Gilcrease Institute.

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Copy and layout prepared for the *American Scene* by David C. Hunt.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the frontiers of the United States were expanding rapidly into an area of considerable conflict. The nation had just passed through a terrible war, and for many the warfare was to continue on the plains west of the Mississippi. Some who had distinguished themselves in the recent civil conflict were destined to achieve even greater renown in the Indian campaigns of the West. Many thus met their final hour in pursuit of the paths of military glory. George Armstrong Custer was one of them.

It is not the purpose of this article, however, to re-fight the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Neither is it to the point to trace all the movements of the Seventh Cavalry across the plains between the years of 1865 and 1876. Rather, the point here is to try to realize something of the personality of Custer, the man, and how this personality affected the course of his career. It is beyond the scope of so brief a report to probe too deeply into Custer's character; yet a survey

of contemporaneous documents, including some of his own writings, might tend to suggest that his untimely demise was well-nigh inevitable: that being the type of man he seems to have been was enough, perhaps, to insure his ultimate fate.

If one looks at Custer's career after his years at West Point, during the Civil War, and throughout his Indian campaigns on the western plains, one is tempted to observe that it was only a matter of time until his bold conduct—or as some would say, his "famous luck"—should fail him. Few of his military exploits were either so well planned or so strategically sound as might be supposed from the results. More often, he carried the day on the strength of his *elan* and his personality, alone. He was not like other generals—more prudent, less bold—who, if they lost a battle, could always come back to fight another day. His fantastic good fortune made many of his otherwise questionable tactical decisions to appear well conceived: after all, he did seem always to win.

It is difficult to make too many generalizations about Custer because he was an uncommon man with many facets to his personality. At times he could be, apparently, the most charming of gentlemen, inspiring loyalty in those who served him. But at other times he succeeded in arousing the strongest dislike in others. Although his bravery was seldom questioned, his recklessness led many to mistrust his judgment. He was thought to be too impetuous and impulsive for his own good or that of his men.

His strength of will and his determination gave him at times unbelievable physical endurance. Reported to have been able to stay in the saddle for hours without rest or refreshment, he expected those under his command to do the same. His admitted ambition drove him to perform at an extraordinary level, and he found it hard to understand why others could not maintain his pace.

At twenty-three, he was breveted brigadier-general and put in command of a group of Michigan volunteers in the Union Army. This made him not only the youngest general in the U. S. Army but probably one of the most incautious men in either army. Imbued with that sense of superiority over the foot soldier or artilleryman characteristic of the horse soldier of his day, Custer possessed that same pride that had identified the feudal knight of medieval Europe: that a man on horseback was a far better man than one on foot.

Cavalrymen of the last century represented a special breed that traveled in search of adventure, sought to exhibit their military prowess, and thrilled to the charge, sword in hand, knowing no fear. They had something as well, perhaps, of that famous *esprit de corps* that typified the daredevil fighter pilot during World War I—that same spirit that fired enthusiasm into all the ranks.

Custer seems to have had absolute faith in his Seventh Cavalry troopers, believing that they could subdue all the Indians on the frontier. As if powered by an electric bat-

tery, he carried his command forward, maintaining liberty of action for himself and his men right up to the day of his fateful encounter with the Sioux along the Little Horn River in Montana. Defensive tactics seem never to have entered his head. Instead, he preferred always to take the initiative and to prosecute his advantage relentlessly until the fighting spirit of his adversary was broken. This mystique of sheer will is what captured the admiration of so many of his followers. It was also that which offended many of his associates and led to their active dislike of the man.

Detail at right is from a painting by Charles Schreyvogel entitled *Custer's Demand*. Custer and his brother, Capt. Tom Custer, are featured as the central figures in this illustration.

Custer did not do well at the United States Military Academy at West Point. In the Class of 1861, he ranked 34th: the bottom of his group. This record does not give us any real indication of his intellectual powers, however, for he had a facility with words and could express himself quite well in his dispatches and published articles and reports.

The Gilcrease Library preserves a copy of his book, *My Life on the Plains*, which bears the autographed inscription: "For Earl of Duncan with the compliments of G. A. Custer, Hotel Brunswick N.Y. Dec. 31/75." This was written only six months before he met sudden defeat and death on the wind-swept northern prairies.

My Life on the Plains actually is a collection of earlier articles written by Custer over a two year period for *Galaxy* magazine, reprinted and published in book form in 1875. This narrative was responsible for much of the author's widespread popularity with the Eastern public of his day, and exhibits a certain amount of skill in writing as well as an awareness of the prevailing political climate of the time.





Protesting their return to reservation life, the Indians (above) are included in Schreyvogel's portrayal of an incident that occurred during Custer's campaign in Indian Territory in 1868-69.

Custer is very outspoken in his attacks upon American traders and Indian agents in this commentary and reveals some sympathy with regard to the Indians and their problems. He is clearly indignant about the corrupt management of Indian affairs on the western reserves by agents who, instead of feeding and clothing their charges, steal from them and grow rich on the proceeds from illicit traffic in government supplies. He also alludes to the fact that it is the inferior quality of such supplies that has made the Indians abandon reservation life, and that it is the agent, again, who is primarily responsible for providing the renegade bands with guns and ammunition of the same or in some cases superior type as that issued to U. S. government troops. Custer's protests went unheard for the most part, however, and his ideas for the control and protection of the Indians gained no favor in official circles in Washington.

There were always speculations that Custer cherished political ambitions in Congress. Some even mentioned the Presidency. He did make some interesting observations on the political scene that are timely even today. Referring to the practice of Congressional lobbying in general—and to the influence that commercial adventurers in particular exert upon their political friends with respect to the letting of government contracts—he calls the lobby the “third house of Congress” and adds:

True, its existence is neither provided for nor recognized by law; yet it exists nevertheless, and so powerful, although somewhat hidden, is its influence upon the other branches of Congress, that almost any measure it is interested in becomes law.

Custer was not always so serious as such excerpts might indicate. He was, in fact, known for his love of practical jokes. His sense of humor is aptly illustrated in yet another section of *My Life on the Plains* when he describes his own appearance one morning on awakening to the sounds of a surprise Indian attack on his camp. Taken

unawares before he had sufficient time to dress, he laughingly recalls that: “General Custer on this occasion appeared in a beautiful crimson robe (red flannel robe de nuit), very becoming to his complexion. His hair was worn au naturel, and permitted to fall carelessly over his shoulders. In his hand he carried gracefully a handsome Spencer rifle. It is unnecessary to add that he became the observed of all observers.”

Many of America's most celebrated military figures served with the Army of the West. Among them were fellow officers of George Custer, not a few of whom served under him in his various campaigns. Some, like Frederick William Benteen, first became associated with the young general as a part of the newly formed Seventh Cavalry at Fort Riley, Kansas, in 1865. Captain Benteen also played a part in the Little Big Horn debacle, and a collection of some forty-four of his private letters exists containing his recollections and opinions of Custer which are of particular interest today.

Written between the years 1891 and 1896 to Theodore W. Goldin, a former trooper with the Seventh Cavalry, these letters contain what amounts to a biting attack upon Custer's private and public or military life, as well as a good deal of camp gossip of questionable historical value. Goldin wrote several articles for the *Army Magazine* based upon information he gained from his correspondence with Benteen. Only the Benteen letters seem to have survived, Goldin's correspondence either having been lost or destroyed along with a diary which Benteen is supposed to have kept throughout his entire military career.



George Armstrong Custer: a photograph. Gilcrease library collection.

The Civil War was an ideal time for someone like George Custer to have begun his military career: a period when a soldier might not have to wait to climb the slow ladder of rank but could, on the strength of performance in the field, gain quick promotion. Educational and class barriers were of less importance than before and a man of ability could be expected to move ahead. Custer was assuredly such a man.

His decisive nature, his driving ambition, were right for the times. The war called for men of action—and action was Custer's forte. His friends in Washington undoubtedly were a help to him, but Custer alone must receive credit for his successes in the field, no matter how rash or how lucky he may have been. Uninhibited in battle, he was the one called upon when a job demanded boldness of purpose and quick action. Yet, it was just this set of qualities that contributed to his eventual destruction.

Throughout his military career, Custer's activist nature prompted him to take unnecessary risks and to lead countless offensive thrusts that were in the main successful, but often showed a marked disregard for tactical details or conditions affecting his own life or that of his men. A single incident might serve to illustrate the point. Ordered during the course of an engagement to charge the Confederate lines, Custer did not pause to first inspect the slope down which his men were to advance. Consequently, his contingent did not penetrate past the Union lines because the hill in question was soaked from recent rains and pockmarked with shell holes.

As Custer brought his troopers down the incline, they became hopelessly mired in mud, thrown cavalrymen, and riderless horses. To his credit, Custer did not lose control of the situation but ordered his men to fight on foot, which they did with some success. Custer was destined to get away with such hasty and improvised maneuvers for some time to come; but his lack of attention to immediate tactical details was one day to catch up with him.

On the day Robert E. Lee signed the surrender that ended the War between the States, Custer was with General Philip Sheridan at Appomattox Court House. Sheridan and Custer had come to be close friends during the preceding years of national strife, and Custer was to benefit greatly from this friendship in the future. Indeed, Sheridan's opinion of Custer was sufficiently high that he paid twenty dollars in gold for the table upon which Lee had signed the peace and later gave it to Mrs. Custer as a gift.

Given a new command over a group of volunteers in Louisiana after the war, Custer was predestined, it seems, to meet with trouble. His tendency to want to control or dominate not only individuals but also situations created friction between himself and his men, most of whom were not regular troops nor familiar with the sort of discipline demanded by their leader. The war may have been over, but Custer did not let the stern regulations of the war years lapse. Thus, it was not long before grumbling and finally insubordination began to manifest itself among the rank and file.

There appears to be some difference of opinion as to the cause of the mutiny which eventually resulted—or if, in fact, a mutiny actually occurred. It may be that the troops were more restless or spirited than mutinous; but whatever the case, Custer took exception to their behavior and at one point had ninety of his men arrested. A sergeant who was supposed to have been the chief instigator of the unrest was court martialled and sentenced to be executed along with a deserter from the company. Threats were voiced that a real mutiny would erupt were the sergeant shot.

With enviable bravado, Custer rode unarmed down the ranks of soldiers drawn up at the execution site. At the last moment, the sergeant was led away and only the hapless deserter was dispatched. The incident is included here because it illustrates in a most graphic manner the challenge that Custer offered to his men, and the lengths

to which he was willing to go to impress upon them that he would not give in to their pressures and demands. He was willing to risk everything, it appears, to prove that he could control the situation and that his troops would not carry out their muttered threats against him.

After gaining command of the Third Division, Custer accompanied it to its newly assigned post near Austin, Texas, where he soon was approached by leaders of Mexico's Army of Liberation with a proposition to assist them in their revolutionary aims. Benito Juarez offered him the sum of \$16,000 in gold and the rank of adjutant-general if he would lead a command of some thousand cavalymen from the United States against the forces of the emperor, Maximilian. General Ulysses S. Grant was willing to allow Custer a year's leave-of-absence from his regular duties, but President Andrew Johnson was reluctant to have U. S. troops embroiled in affairs south of the border. Thus, the only theatre of operation left open to the restless and intrepid Custer was that of the Great Plains to the north. Here it was that he gained the fame that has persisted, undiminished, down to the present day.

In the summer of 1867, George Custer was given orders to break the power of the Cheyenne and the Sioux who were raiding white settlements and stage offices all across Kansas. Up to this time the government had made little attempt to put an end to these continuing depredations because most of its military personnel had been engaged in fighting the Civil War. The war was over at last, however, and the Seventh Cavalry was assigned the task of putting down the Indian attacks.

Custer's men had spent a large part of the spring of 1867 chasing outlaws they rarely ever saw. The tactics of the Indians were unfamiliar to most of these men whose only previous experience in battle had been in the recent conflict between the states. Most were new to the plains region, and for almost six weeks the Seventh Cavalry sought to engage an enemy it could not find. During this



The scene reproduced above is taken from Charles Schreyvogel's painting entitled *Attack at Dawn*, one of ten oils by this artist in the Gilcrease collection. The work is shown in its entirety on pages 10 and 11 of the accompanying article.

time, Custer's hard, "by the book" discipline was not relaxed.

Under the very best of conditions, such an assignment would have been difficult for the unseasoned troopers. Custer himself was young and relatively new to the plains. Neither he nor the men of his command were the hard-nosed veterans of their later campaigns. The heat was unbearable, the food

nearly as bad, and scurvy and dysentery broke out with recurring frequency.

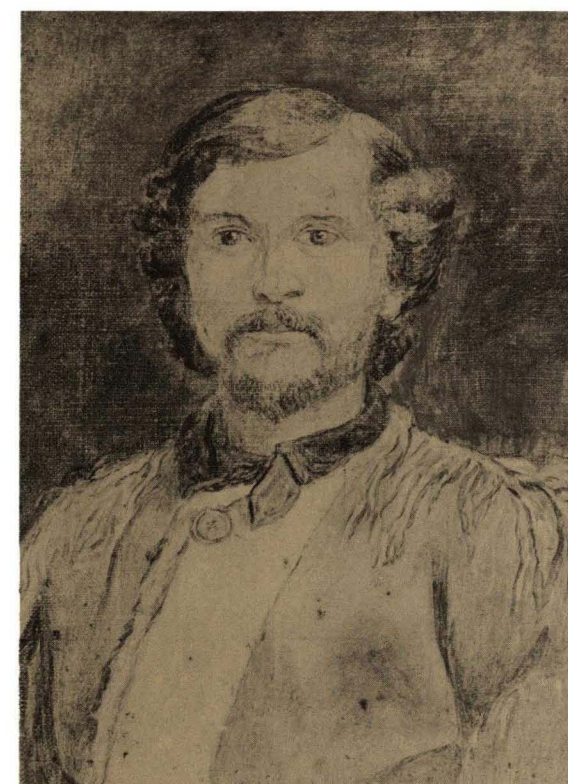
Still, Custer pushed the Seventh Cavalry, almost past the point of endurance in some cases; and from the beginning of his western campaigns, a trickle of deserters left the ranks. Many had only joined the army in the first place in order to travel westward, planning to desert to the mines in Colorado when the earliest opportunity presented itself. Conditions continued to be almost insupportable, and desertions increased ten-fold.

On the 7th of June, circumstances were bad enough that twelve men quit their posts in full view of their astounded officers. Custer gave immediate orders to pursue the deserters and "to bring in none alive." Seven of the twelve cavalymen were mounted and escaped. Three who were on foot were shot on the spot, while two others saved themselves from a similar fate by pretending already to be dead. The wounded later were taken to Fort Wallace where cholera had been raging for weeks.

Cholera was also a problem at Fort Hayes, and there were rumors that it was present at Fort Riley where Custer's wife, Elizabeth, waited for the general. Custer's orders from General Hancock were quite clear, nonetheless: the Seventh was to remain at Fort Wallace and keep the Indians in that vicinity engaged.

Custer then committed the same sort of error for which he had had three of his own men shot. Taking a small escort, he proceeded to Fort Hayes and then on to Fort Harker to obtain supplies to take back to Fort Wallace. Custer himself went on to Fort Riley to see if the reports of cholera at Riley were true, and to see after the health of his adoring wife. Frederick Benteen, remarking in a letter written to Theodore Goldin on January 19, 1896, says: "Lord! Col., we have known for 10 these many years that Custer disobeyed orders..."

The month following his unauthorized trip to Fort Riley, Custer was arrested and court martialled. Among the charges brought



The hastily sketched oil portrait of George Custer (above) is the work of William Cary who visited Fort Riley, Kansas, in 1865. It is among the rarest portraits of its kind extant.

against him at this time were disregard of orders, deserting his command, and ordering other deserters under his command to be chased down and shot.

To these and other charges—some seven in all—Custer pleaded not guilty. On November 8, 1867, however, he was convicted on all counts, suspended from both rank and command for one year, and required to forfeit all pay for that same period of time. Many commentators have remarked since, in view of the gravity of the charges brought against him, that the relatively light sentence passed upon Custer at this time was very likely due to the influence of friends "in high places" back in Washington.

The Battle of the Washita established Custer's reputation as an indefatigable Indian fighter; but in this battle were also sown the seeds of his eventual defeat. His name became widely known among the Indians from this time forward. Respected as a warrior and feared as a seemingly invincible leader of enemy forces, Custer earned, as well, the undying hatred of such chiefs as Satanta, Satank, Lone Wolf, and others who vowed their revenge upon him for his ruthless policing of the plains.

Many bands of Indians, dissatisfied with the beggarly existence they were forced to endure within the limits of their reservations, quit these areas to roam freely about. This was contrary to earlier treaty agreements with the U. S. Government, and Custer was directed to round up these wandering, usually hostile groups and induce them to return to their own lands. General Sheridan, preferring to harrass the Indians during the winter season when grass for their ponies was scarce and the people were less able to move about, ordered the Seventh Cavalry to locate the winter encampment of suspected runaways in the vicinity of what is now the Oklahoma-Texas border and force them to return to their reservation. Newly reinstated to his command and anxious, no doubt, to make a good account of himself, Custer determined to carry out this order. On November 23, 1868, he led his company forth in search of the hostile camp.

After a difficult march, advance scouts for the party came upon an Indian village along the banks of the Washita River. Trees hid part of the encampment from view and it could not be decided with certainty whether those within were Kiowa, Cheyenne, Arapaho, or indeed, friendly or unfriendly. Not knowing exactly of what tribe or number the Indians were, nevertheless, Custer led a dawn attack upon the unsuspecting village. Women and children were slain indiscriminately along with the startled warriors who attempted a defense of the besieged camp. Only later was it discovered that the village had been that of Black Kettle, a Cheyenne chief who had signed the Treaty of Medicine Lodge and was within the limits described by that agreement while encamped on the Washita.



Famous or infamous, the Battle of the Washita was a complete success for Custer, except for the lingering question of the "Elliot affair." This had to do with an incident that occurred during the course of the attack on Black Kettle's camp. During the progress of the fighting, there appeared an opening in the surrounded village through which a band of warriors escaped and disappeared downstream. A Major Elliot led a party of cavalrymen in hot pursuit, but failed to return when the contest was over.

Custer says in his book, *My Life on the Plains*, that "In spite of the most thorough search, there were still undiscovered Major Elliot and nineteen enlisted men, including the sergeant-major, for whose absence we were unable to satisfactorily account."

In direct disagreement with the general's report is that of Benteen, who later stated in a letter to Goldin dated October 11, 1894:

At the Washita we lost Major Elliot, Sergt. Major Kennedy—a fine young soldier, and 16 enlisted men, and damd if any search was made for them till a fortnight after; now, as ever, I want to get at who was to blame for not finding out then;—tisn't really worth while to know now, but I am not ready to subscribe to any effort on the public's opinion to convince me that Custer was a great man or a great warrior, au contraire, he was quite ordinary.

Whether or not Custer made a search for the missing men, one thing is apparent from reviewing the events of this day: that despite the dash and daring that carried him through this fight and brought him to the notice of the nation as one of its unbeatable champions, his methods of warfare were at best unsound and would almost certainly lead to his undoing.

The next few years for Custer were relatively quiet ones. Some of this time was spent in Kansas on light post duty or in entertaining friends and famous guests from the East. One of his most illustrious visitors during this period was the Grand Duke Alexis, son of Tsar Alexander of Russia, who with Buffalo Bill Cody and General Sheridan came west on a trip to hunt buffalo. During this brief respite, Custer also wrote many of the articles dealing with his adventures on the plains that were later incorporated into his book.

In 1871, the Seventh Cavalry was broken up and its members assigned to different areas in the south. It was not to be reunited until the spring of 1873 when ordered to proceed north to Dakota Territory to help guard the right of way of the Northern Pacific Railroad then under construction. The following summer of 1874, Custer found himself in command of Fort Abraham Lincoln where, again, his impetuous behavior precipitated another situation potentially dangerous not only to himself but the men and women of the post for whom he was responsible.

Indian raids on the mules corralled outside the limits of Fort Lincoln had increased in frequency. After one such attack, Custer led a band of his troopers in pursuit of the renegades, not giving a thought, apparently, to the possibility that he might be leading his men into a well prepared ambush. It need hardly be noted that the duties of a post commander did not include his absenting himself from his principal command to chase wild Indians across the countryside. Custer was gone from Fort Lincoln for the remainder of the day with nearly all his able bodied men, pursuing an enemy that might well have circled back and attacked the fort in his absence.

Custer's luck held, and nothing befell the post. This was but another instance of the kind of behavior that was soon to bring an end to his now celebrated career as well as the lives of 225 of his men at the Little Big Horn.



Detail from Schreyvogel's *Attack at Dawn*.
Gilcrease collection.

The rising of the Sioux and the Cheyenne in 1876 was the inevitable result of their continued unfavorable treatment at the hands of the whites. The Indians were not being provided for as agreed in the terms of the Treaty of 1868, and constant white encroachment upon their territory in the Black Hills went unnoticed by those in Washington. Americans were coming into Indian country in increasing numbers in search of gold as well as land. The situation was not long to be endured without protest from the pressured northern tribes.

Custer's part in the much debated Dakota campaign has been told so many times that we will not relate its particulars again, here, except where they provide us with clues to Custer's character and methods. Suffice to say that his incredible run of luck at last ran out. The Little Big Horn encounter proved to be his greatest, and final, engagement. Here he died with his immediate command, to the last man, and in so doing achieved undying fame and that place in history to which he so long aspired.

It may be that George Custer, if given the choice, would have preferred to die in the course of such a battle than to live longer and make less of a mark for himself. It does seem hard, now, to imagine what history would have said of him had he lived out his last days in a veterans' home. As he said of himself:

In years long numbered with the past, as I was verging on manhood, my every thought was ambitious—not to be wealthy, not to be learned, but to be great. I desired to link my name with acts and men in such a manner as to be a mark of honor, not only to the present but to future generations.

That he succeeded in realizing his ambitions was due as much, perhaps, to his relentless drive as to his daring tactics or his at times outright disregard of ordinary directives from his superiors. But then, Custer was an extraordinary man, or certainly believed himself to be; and his belief was shared by multitudes of Americans who read of his exploits in the newspapers and marveled at his victories on the western plains. The image

of himself which he held and projected upon the public, the government, and the press was something larger than life, perhaps. His death stunned a nation that worshipped its frontier heroes.

General Terry stated in a confidential telegram dispatched to Sheridan on July 6, 1876, that Custer disobeyed his orders issued before the outset of the Little Big Horn offensive which directed "that Custer with his whole regiment should move up the Rosebud till he should meet a trail which Reno had discovered a few days before, but that he should not follow it directly to the Little Big Horn; that he should send scouts over it and keep his main force further to the south so as to prevent the Indians from slipping between himself and the mountains."

Custer was to wait for the other columns under Terry, Gibbon, and Crook to arrive and to coordinate efforts with these columns in the scheduled advance upon the enemy.

"We calculated it would take Gibbon's column until the 26th (of June) to reach the mouth of the Little Big Horn," continues Terry, "and that the wide sweep which I had proposed Custer should make would require so much time that Gibbon would be able to cooperate with him in attacking any Indians that might be found on that stream."

The actual orders issued to Custer prior to the engagement are not at all clear, however, and are yet today a topic of debate among military historians. They read:

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 hence.

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 departmental commander places too much confidence in your zeal, energy, and ability to wish to impose upon you precise orders which might hamper your actions when nearly in contact with the enemy. He will, however, indicate 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 parting from them.

Whatever his reasons, Custer did not wait for the arrival of the supporting columns from the south and east, but instead urged his company forward towards an enemy he could neither see nor number. Uncertain as to the location of any body of hostile Indians, Custer disregarded what his advance scouts told him about a large village reported to lie beyond the place known as the Crow's Nest. He continued to advance, knowing

that his presence in the area had been detected and that he had lost that element of surprise upon which he so often relied.

Custer, Reno, and Benteen are shown in the illustration by Olaf Seltzer (below) with the famed Grey Horse Troop on the eve of the Seventh Cavalry's fateful encounter with the Sioux on the Little Big Horn.

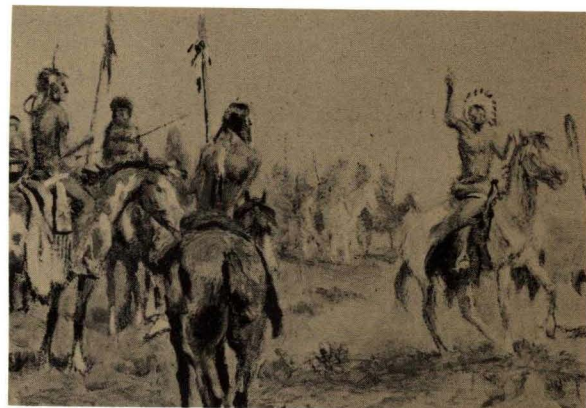


Custer may have planned to use the same strategy as that which had made the Battle of the Washita a success; but again he neglected to make a reconnaissance of the area to determine the size, strength, and position of possible enemy forces. Despite the advice of his guides who cautioned that the Indians were gathered in unprecedented numbers in the vicinity of the Little Big Horn, Custer divided his command into several parts and prepared to advance with a much reduced body of men upon an unknown enemy.

"That is all that I blame Custer for," wrote Benteen, "the scattering, as it were (two portions of his command, anyway) to the, well, four winds, before he knew anything about the exact or approximate position of the Indian village or the Indians."

The supply train was ordered to remain behind with a detachment of troopers to guard it. Benteen was directed to the southwest to look for hostile units, and Major Reno was sent ahead to lead an attack upon the village that Custer was not really sure existed. The plan seems to have been for Custer to attack the lower perimeter of the village while Reno was engaging the upper end. Reno's forces were quickly routed, however, and Custer's contingent never approached close enough to launch an attack.

Once, during the Civil War, Custer had remarked with respect to his division, that "No gun had ever been pointed at that Division but what they captured it." His confidence was misplaced at the Little Big Horn. The Indians rose up to meet him from out of the seemingly empty hills, surrounded his detachment and utterly overwhelmed it. Custer was thirty-six years of age when he died. With him died his brother Tom, winner of two medals of honor, another brother named Boston, a nephew by the name of Armstrong Reed, and a brother-in-law, James Calhoun.



Crazy Horse Exhorting his Sub-chiefs, by Olaf Seltzer. A detail.



Reno Routed, miniature oil by Olaf Seltzer. A detail.



Custer's Last Stand, another in Seltzer's miniature series. A detail.



Pictured above is Lt. James H. Bradley discovering the location of the Little Big Horn fight on June 27, 1876. Another in the series of historical episodes depicted by Montana artist, Olaf Seltzer, this picture does not show all that is reported to have met the eyes of those who sought to identify the remains of the Seventh Cavalry. Starkly empty, the scene is suggestive of the silence that must have prevailed over the battle site two days after General Terry's troops under Custer were annihilated by units of the warring Dakota tribes.

In the aftermath of the Custer disaster, the nation mourned its fallen heroes and loudly voiced its protests concerning the causes that had contributed to so dreadful a defeat at the hands of the Dakota Sioux. The fact that the United States at this time was in the midst of celebrating its Centennial Year with an exposition aimed at its industrial growth and development as a nation made it no easier for Americans to accept the defeat of their military forces on the frontier by nomadic savages.

Among the first to report Custer's death was a Crow Indian scout by the name of "Curley" who brought the news the following morning to those who waited aboard the river steamer, *Far West*. Under the command of Captain Grant Marsh, the *Far West* had been stationed at the mouth of the Rosebud River to await the outcome of the campaign. Under the guidance of General Terry, it later transported the straggling survivors of both Reno's and Benteen's detachments down river to Bismarck, North Dakota, whence the news of Custer's annihilation was flashed by telegraph to a shocked and disbelieving nation.

Lieutenant James H. Bradley, chief of scouts under General Gibbon, was the first white man to come upon the battle site two days later on June 27th, 1876. At the time of his arrival, most of the bodies lying nearer the deserted Sioux camp are reported to have been so badly mutilated that many were unrecognizable. Later that same day, Bradley, accompanied by Benteen, found and identified Custer's remains. His body had been stripped of all its clothing, but otherwise remained untouched.



The detail featured on the opposite page is from a portrait of Sioux chief, Sitting Bull, by artist Henry H. Cross. Principal leader of the Dakota tribes, Sitting Bull did not take part in the Little Big Horn Battle, but his opposition to U. S. Government policy brought about the military campaign of 1876. This portrait is supposedly painted from life some years after the events related in the foregoing text.

Among the letters that Custer wrote shortly before starting out on his ill-fated Dakota assignment was one sent to his friend the Shakespearean actor, Lawrence Barrett. Written from Custer's hotel room in St. Paul, Minnesota, on March 21, 1876, it relates some of his plans for the forthcoming Indian campaign. In his opening sentence, Custer replies to an earlier inquiry from Barrett concerning how he and Mrs. Custer are to reach their distant destination. He explains:

My dear Lawrence,

Fortunately Mrs. C & I will not be compelled to take the 200 miles by sled, the Northern Pacific having kindly volunteered to open their road and run us through by cars. I am very glad I hastened here, otherwise, I think the troops would have been rushed into a campaign in midwinter; as it is we will proceed more deliberately and I trust more successfully.

Not a single detail had been perfected or decided upon before my arrival. I am now waiting here expecting General Crook from Omaha with whom it is necessary to arrange combined movements. Everything is kept secret so far, although some newspaper reporters have been guessing more or less accurately.

Can tell you this much now and more perhaps in a few weeks, confidentially of course, and that is, I expect to engage in the most extensive campaign that has taken place since the Civil War. There will be more troops in the field than have been employed at any other time since I

have served on the plains. And our friend, Mr. S. B., had better put his house in order as his friends in the words of Babcock may visit him. I am glad to see the continued because deserved success of Julius Caesar. Present my regards to the noble Brutus and to Mrs. Caesar.

Let me hear from you—address me at Fort Lincoln.

You will next hear from me not from the plains of Phillippi but from those of Dakota, the home of Mr. S. B.

*Yours fraternally
Custer.*

The above quoted letter, with its abbreviated references to the wiley Sioux chief, Sitting Bull, is one of several Custer manuscripts in the Gilcrease files. Also included with this piece of correspondence is a telegram which Custer sent to Barrett, also from St. Paul, which states simply: "We start to meet Sitting Bull tomorrow. Will reach Lincoln Monday." Both these communiques were included in a larger collection of documents originally acquired by the late collector, Dr. Philip G. Cole of Tarrytown, New York, from his friend, E. A. Brininstool, author of several popular works on western historical subjects. Together with Dr. Cole's distinguished collection of art, books, and other manuscripts and reports on the western theme, these letters came to Tulsa at the time Thomas Gilcrease purchased Cole's collection from his widow in 1947.

Originally from Montana, Philip Cole amassed during his lifetime one of the largest collections of western Americana to be found intact to the present day. His extensive catalog of documents relating generally or specifically to the Custer story were of great help in compiling the foregoing article. With respect to the possible interests of the Gilcrease readership, these sources are included in the following bibliography. Not every reference listed was utilized in the preparation of this issue of the *American Scene*, but all deserve attention. All items listed are now a part of the Gilcrease Library's inventory of books and manuscripts.

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GEN CUSTER

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