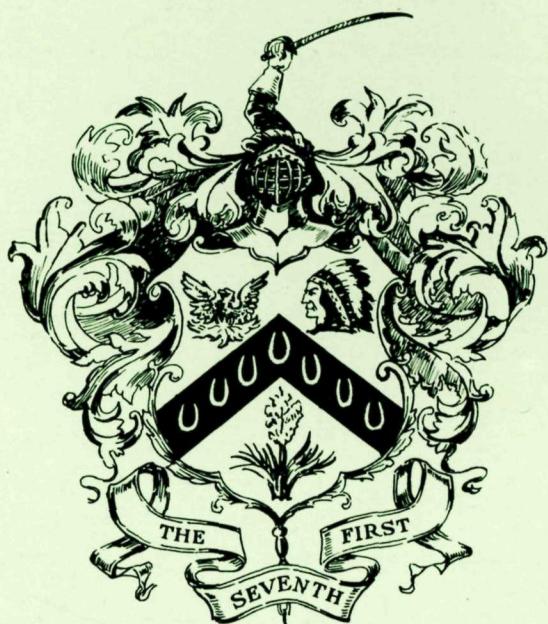


Custer

BATTLEFIELD





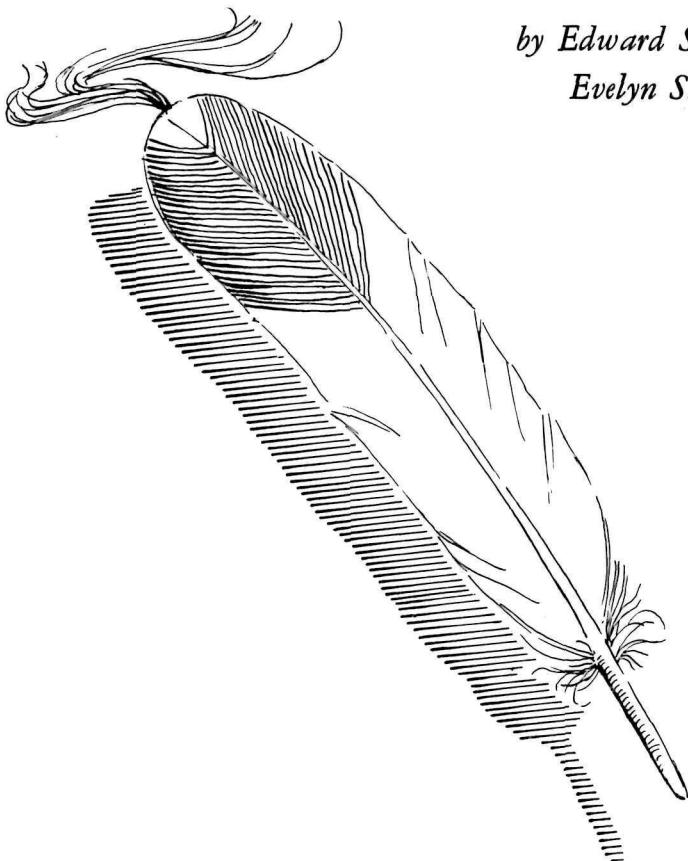
Seventh Cavalry Regimental Coat of Arms.

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CUSTER BATTLEFIELD

National Monument · Montana

*by Edward S. and
Evelyn S. Luce*



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
HISTORICAL HANDBOOK SERIES NO. 1

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Stewart L. Udall, *Secretary*

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Conrad L. Wirth, *Director*

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"General Custer's Last Battle," painted by Elk Eber. The original is on exhibition in the Karl May Museum, Dresden, Germany. This painting is fairly accurate in details. The absence of sabers or swords agrees with factual data. The soldiers were equipped with Springfield carbines and Colt or Remington revolvers; and perhaps one-third of the Indian warriors used firearms.



THE BATTLE of the Little Bighorn River, on June 25–26, 1876, was one of the last important instances of violent resistance by the American Indians to the advance of white settlement. This fight was the principal one in the war whereby the Northern Cheyenne and several tribes of Sioux, described as hostile, were subdued.

The battle consisted of two entirely separate actions. The first, in the valley, was fought under the leadership of Major Reno, whose troops retreated before an overwhelming number of Indians and took refuge on the bluffs across the river where, joined by Captain Benteen's force, they defended themselves until the foe withdrew. In the other action fought nearly 5 miles away, in the vicinity of what is now the monument headquarters, five troops of the Seventh Cavalry under Custer's personal command were overwhelmed by the savage fury of the attacking horde. This was "Custer's Last Battle."

Causes of Warfare

The continued expansion of the white men west of the Mississippi River forced the Plains Indians on restricted reservations. Good grazing and hunting lands had been allotted to them, only to be taken away when avaricious white settlers and fortune hunters demanded the land for other uses.

The treaty of 1868, signed at Fort Laramie, Wyo., provided that a large area be set aside as a permanent home for Sioux and Cheyenne Indians. This area, known as the Great Sioux Reservation, included the Black Hills, which were abundant with game, and was for the exclusive use of the Indians. The treaty also specified that the Indians retain certain hunting privileges within defined limits outside the reservation.

In 1874 General Custer and the Seventh Cavalry were sent from Fort Lincoln, in Dakota Territory, with a scientific expedition into the Black Hills, principally to explore the area and to secure military information. While exploring the country, rumors of gold in the hills were confirmed



*Maj. Gen. George A. Custer about 1865. The wide
hat, sailor's shirt, and red cravat were of his own
design. (Photograph by Brady.)*

by prospectors who accompanied the military force.

The immediate effect of the circulation of news of the gold discovery by Custer's Black Hills expedition was the invasion of the region by hordes of miners. Since the hills lay within the Great Sioux Reservation, the Federal Government was bound by treaty stipulation to prevent the migration of its citizens to the area. Because of actual and potential values of the Black Hills to the Indians, would-be intruders could expect anything but gentle treatment. The magnetic attraction of gold, however, was too powerful for either fears of physical dangers or personal hardships to counteract. Nor did respect for the sanctity of treaty obligations serve as an effective deterrent. Hence, the white adventurers were ready to brave the hardships of a Dakota winter in an isolated wilderness infested by semihostile Indians and possible military eviction.

From the viewpoint of the whites, the conflict was caused by the hostility of certain Indians who made raids on the white settlements and refused to reside on the reservations. From the Indian point of view, the conflict was due to the repeated encroachment upon their lands by frontiersmen, often in violation of treaty stipulations. The rations issued the Indians at the reservations did not always seem sufficient to meet their wants, and they were angered particularly by the invasion of their reservations by gold seekers who, in defiance of Government orders and despite the eviction of some of their numbers by the military, persisted in going into the Black Hills.

The Expedition Against the Indians

The immediate cause of the campaign of 1876 was the Government's order of December 3, 1875, directing that all Sioux be notified "that unless they shall remove within the bounds of their reservations (and remain there) before the 31st of January next, they shall be deemed hostile and treated accordingly by the military force." It was practically impossible for the Indians to comply with this order because of the limited time allowed and the extreme winter weather at that time. Inasmuch as the Indians failed to comply, on February 7, 1876, the Secretary of the Interior and the General of the Army gave Lt. Gen. P. H. Sheridan authority to commence operations against the hostile Indians.

The plan of this campaign was to march into the hostile Indian territory with three separate expeditions from different directions. In the spring of 1876, a military force under the command of Brig. Gen. George Crook moved northwest from Fort Fetterman, Wyo. Gen. Alfred H. Terry, Commander, Department of the Dakota, and in charge of the operations to the north, organized two separate columns. Gen. John Gibbon, with a force of cavalry from Fort Ellis, Mont., and infantry from Fort Shaw, Mont., started in April and moved slowly east down the Yellowstone River. General Terry started from Fort Abraham Lincoln,



Permanent camp in Custer Valley. Taken during the Black Hills Expedition, in 1874, by Illingworth. (Courtesy of the National Archives.)

Dakota Territory, on May 17, 1876, with two companies of the Seventeenth United States Infantry, one company of the Sixth United States Infantry, and the entire Seventh United States Cavalry, numbering in all about 925 men. Gen. George A. Custer and his Seventh United States Cavalry headed the column as it left the fort at the beginning of the westward march.

Slowly this column made its way to the mouth of the Powder River on the Yellowstone. Here, near the present site of Terry, Mont., a base of supply was established and left under guard of the infantry troops. All wagons were abandoned, and from there the supplies were carried by pack mule. The Seventh Cavalry continued up the Yellowstone, arriving at the mouth of the Rosebud Creek about noon on June 21.

General Gibbon's column, under General Terry's instructions, had previously moved down the Yellowstone River as far as the Tongue River, where Miles City, Mont., is now located, but had returned to camp at the mouth of the Rosebud, now Rosebud, Mont., awaiting the approach of the column from the east. Early on June 21, Terry ordered Gibbon's column to begin the march up the Yellowstone again while General Gibbon remained behind for a conference with the other officers.

The steamer *Far West*, loaded with supplies, was at the Rosebud too. Terry had used the boat for his headquarters and as a means of keeping in contact with both columns. On the afternoon of June 21, Gibbon, Custer, and certain subordinate officers went on board with Terry to discuss future movements. After all available information was considered, General Terry outlined the plan to be followed. General Gibbon's troops were to go back up the Yellowstone, cross to its south side, and march up the Bighorn River and then up the Little Bighorn River. The steamer *Far West* would follow these streams as far as it could go. General Custer would lead his Seventh Cavalry up Rosebud Creek, following a broad Indian trail reported by Maj. Marcus A. Reno and his scouting troops. The objective was to get the Indians between the two forces and compel them to fight, should they be inclined to run away from a pitched battle, as Indians were reputed to do.

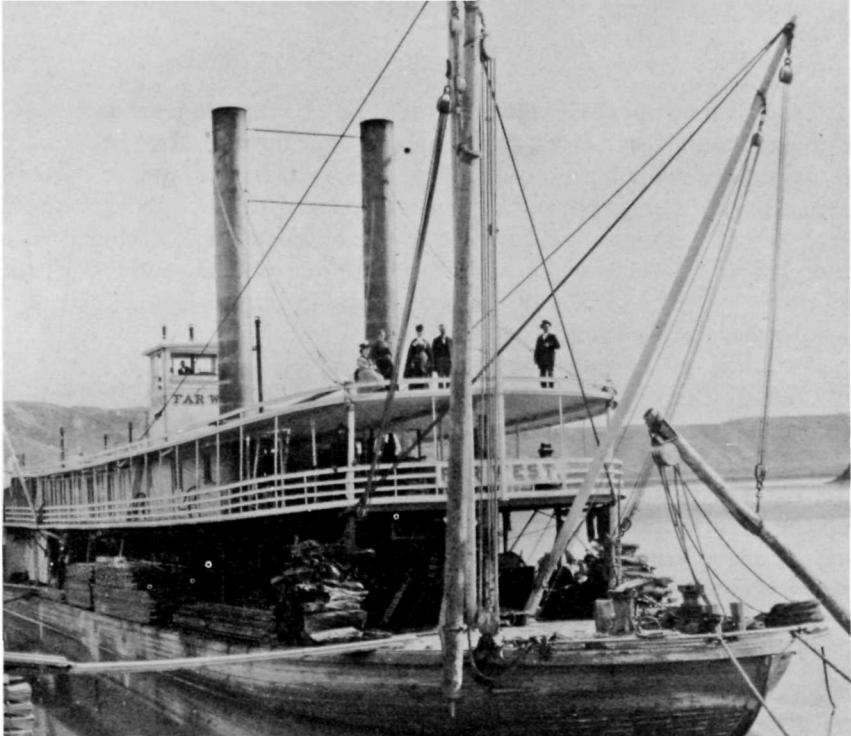
Custer's men spent the morning of June 22 preparing for departure. The pack mules were laden with boxes of ammunition; food rations for 15 days, principally hard bread, coffee, sugar, and bacon; and, at Custer's suggestion, an extra supply of salt was packed in the event, through necessity, they should be compelled to live on horse meat. Each man was supplied with 100 rounds of carbine ammunition and 24 rounds of pistol ammunition to be carried on his person and in his saddle bags. He also was to carry on his horse 12 pounds of oats.

By noon, all preparations were completed, and at the sound of "Forward" the regiment moved out of camp. They passed in review before Generals Terry, Gibbon, and their own commander, Custer; then began their march up the Rosebud Creek. Terry and Gibbon on board the *Far West* proceeded to overtake Gibbon's column which had started up the Yellowstone the preceding day.

A view of Fort Lincoln, Dakota Territory, from which General Custer and his command operated from 1873 until the ill-fated battle in 1876. (Photographed in June 1877 by Frank Jay Haynes and used with the permission of Haynes Inc., Yellowstone National Park, Wyo.)

Group of Seventh Cavalry officers and ladies taken at Fort Lincoln shortly before the regiment left for the Little Bighorn campaign. The third officer from the left is General Custer, while Mrs. Custer is the first lady from the left on the lower step. (Photograph by D. F. Barry.)





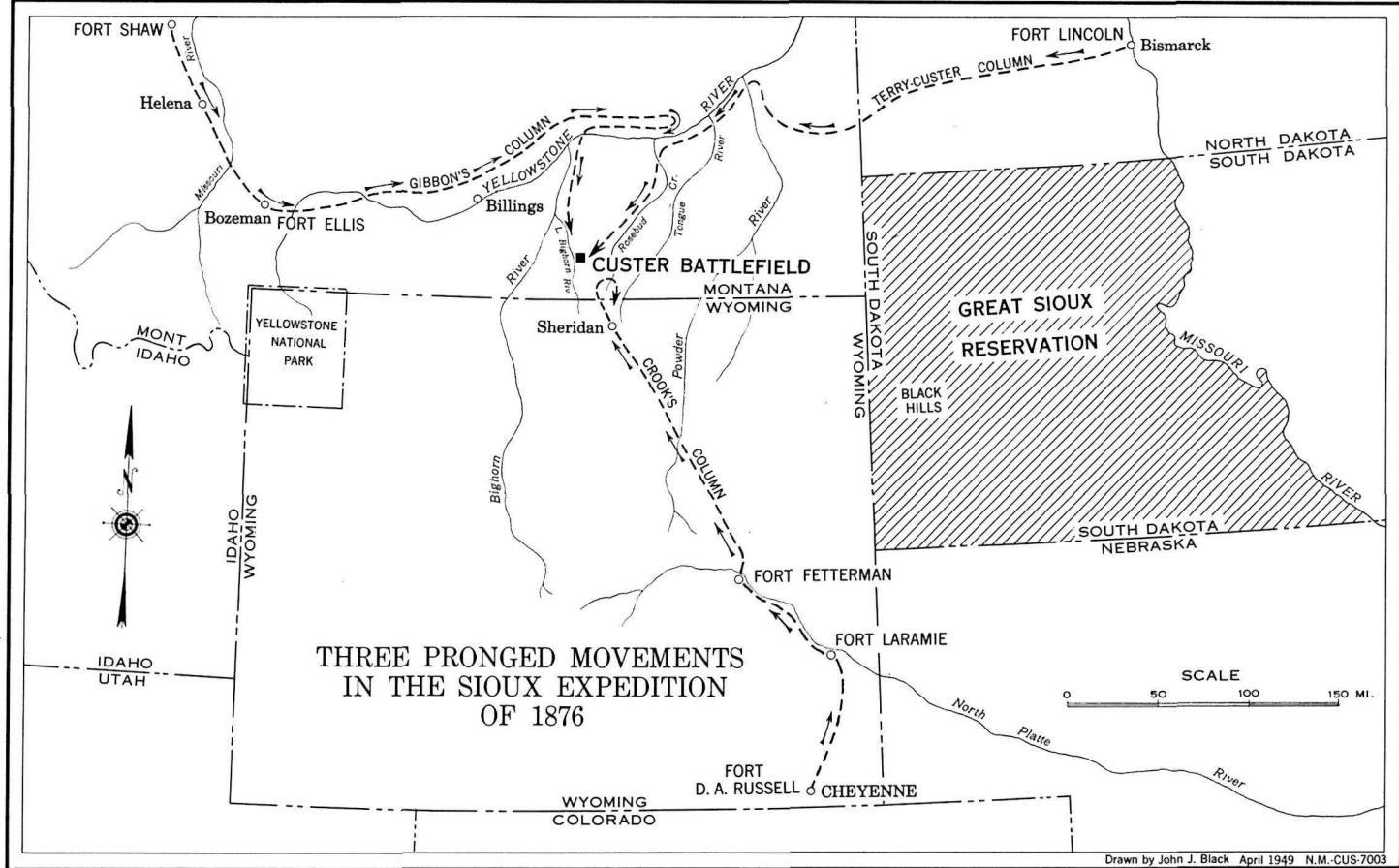
Steamer "Far West," General Terry's headquarters during the campaign of 1876. This boat carried the wounded in Reno's command back to Fort Lincoln. (Courtesy Haynes Inc., Yellowstone National Park, Wyo.)

Indian Movements and Their First Conflict With the Troops

The first 1876 clash between Indian warriors and soldiers was on March 17. Early that morning about half of General Crook's forces, under Colonel Reynolds, attacked a Northern Cheyenne camp on the west side of Powder River near what is now Moorhead, Mont. The Indians fled, while the soldiers burned the vacated tepees.

During that spring a number of tribes moved about in the region south of the Yellowstone River and between the Powder River and Rosebud Creek. At times they drifted together, but in doing so they found the encampment became so large that difficulties were experienced in obtaining a sufficient supply of food; also the enormous pony herds cropped off the grass too quickly. Small groups of Indians kept in contact with their reservations, obtaining what supplies they could from reservation Indians. With the coming of warm weather, other agency Indians joined the wandering tribes.

On June 17, General Crook's troops attacked a combined body of Sioux and Cheyennes, this time on the upper Rosebud Creek, about 20 miles east and south of the present site of the Custer Battlefield. Crook was forced to retreat toward his base in Wyoming, and the Indians then moved toward the Little Bighorn River arriving there on June 24.





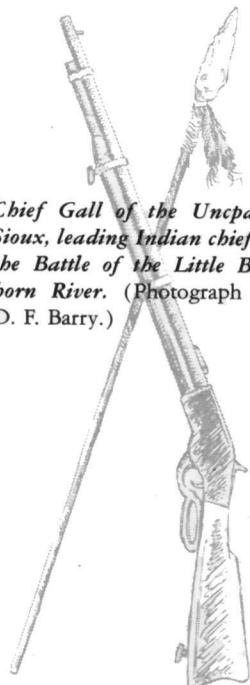
Sitting Bull, Uncpapa Medicine Man. While not a fighting chief, he exercised a strong influence over the Indians. (Courtesy of the National Archives.)

It is often difficult to establish exact numbers of Indians involved in different engagements. Estimates of the number in this concentration, which was an unusually large one, vary greatly. It may have included between 12,000 and 15,000 Indians, probably as many as 5,000 being warriors. Although there were scattered bands from other tribes, and quite a few were Northern Cheyenne, under Chiefs Two Moon and White Bull, the most were Teton Sioux—Ogallala, under Chiefs Crazy Horse, Low Dog, and Big Road; Uncpapa, under Medicine Man Sitting Bull and Chiefs Gall, Crow King, and Black Moon; Minneconjous, under Chief Hump; and Sans-Arc, under Chief Spotted Eagle.

The camp extended about 3 miles along the west bank of the river, immediately west and south of the present monument headquarters, in the direction of Garryowen. On the extreme south rim of the camp were the Uncpapas, and at the opposite end were the Northern Cheyennes. Between them were the tribal camp circles of the other tribes and bands.

Custer's Troops Take to the Trail

General Custer had started up the Rosebud Creek with about 600 soldiers, 44 Indian Scouts, and 20 or more packers, guides, and civilians. They moved cautiously along the creek, crossing it several times as they sought the most advantageous marching and camping ground. The



Chief Gall of the Uncpapa Sioux, leading Indian chief at the Battle of the Little Big-born River. (Photograph by D. F. Barry.)





Custer's Crow Indian scouts visit Custer Battlefield. From left to right are White-Man-Runs-Him, Hairy Mocassin, Curley, and Goes Ahead. (Photograph by Wanamaker about 1916.)

afternoon of the third day, June 24, the scouts reported that the Indian trail they were following turned abruptly to the right and went westward toward the Little Bighorn River Valley. They were then only about 8 miles from where the Indians had defeated Crook's forces on June 17, but having received no communication from General Crook, they had no knowledge of the battle. After darkness set in and the men and horses had rested, Custer broke camp and continued to follow the trail. During the night the cavalrymen moved several miles nearer the high divide between the Little Bighorn and Rosebud Valleys. Then they halted to await daylight so that a more careful reconnaissance of the surrounding country might be made.

At daybreak, from a high point on the divide, the scouts observed smoke in the Little Bighorn Valley, implying that the Indians were encamped there. This information was carried to Custer, but by the time he reached the point a haze, caused by the brilliance of the sun, obscured the view. Evidently, Custer was not entirely convinced as to the location of the Indians. On returning to camp, he was informed that the Indians had discovered their presence. He then called a conference of officers and to them he stated that his plan had been to rest a day in the hills and to make the attack early on the morning of the 26th as was previously outlined by General Terry. Their discovery by the Indians, however, altered the plan, and it now seemed urgent to attack at once. A delay until the next day might result in the escape of the Indians.

Custer Divides His Command, and Reno Engages the Indians

About noon on June 25, Custer divided his command into three battalions. These were divided as follows: Three companies (A, G, and M) under the command of Maj. Marcus A. Reno, three (H, D, and K) under Capt. Frederick W. Benteen, and five (C, E, F, I, and L) under his (Custer's) immediate command, with the last company (B) protecting the pack train which was to follow the column as closely as possible. Benteen was sent immediately to make a scout to the left of the trail, while Custer and Reno followed on opposite banks of a small creek toward the Little Bighorn Valley.

About 2 miles from the Little Bighorn River, portions of the Indian encampment were viewed lying on the west bank of the river and extending farther downstream. Reno was told to move on down, cross the river, and charge this camp. Custer turned to the right, evidently planning to support Reno's attack in the river bottom by suddenly appearing in the lower end of the Indian camp and attacking their flank and rear.

At about 2:30 p. m., Major Reno crossed the Little Bighorn River to its west side and advanced down the valley toward the Indian camps. He had not gone far when it became evident that there were a great many more tepees and Indians in the valley than had been observed from the hills prior to his separation from Custer. Bluffs and the foliage of tall cottonwood trees had hidden the camps from their view.

Capt. Frederick W. Benteen, Seventh United States Cavalry. (Photograph by D. F. Barry.)



Maj. Marcus A. Reno, Seventh United States Cavalry. (Photograph by D. F. Barry.)



The Indian warriors swarmed into the open view as Reno and his men rode down the valley. Shortly after the battle between Reno's troops and the Indians began, Reno had his men dismount and deploy in a skirmish line to fight on foot. This move tended to check the onrush of the Indians. After almost half an hour, the increasing number of Indians forced the soldiers into a timber thicket. A defensive stand was made here until Reno ordered his men to mount and retreat to the bluffs.

The retreat of the soldiers became a panicky flight, with every man for himself, while the Indians continued their attack until the troops crossed the river. About a third of the whites dropped out, either having been killed, wounded, or forced to seek cover in the brush. The others crossed the river and reached the top of the hill on the east side. Here they took a defensive position. Few Indians followed them beyond the river.

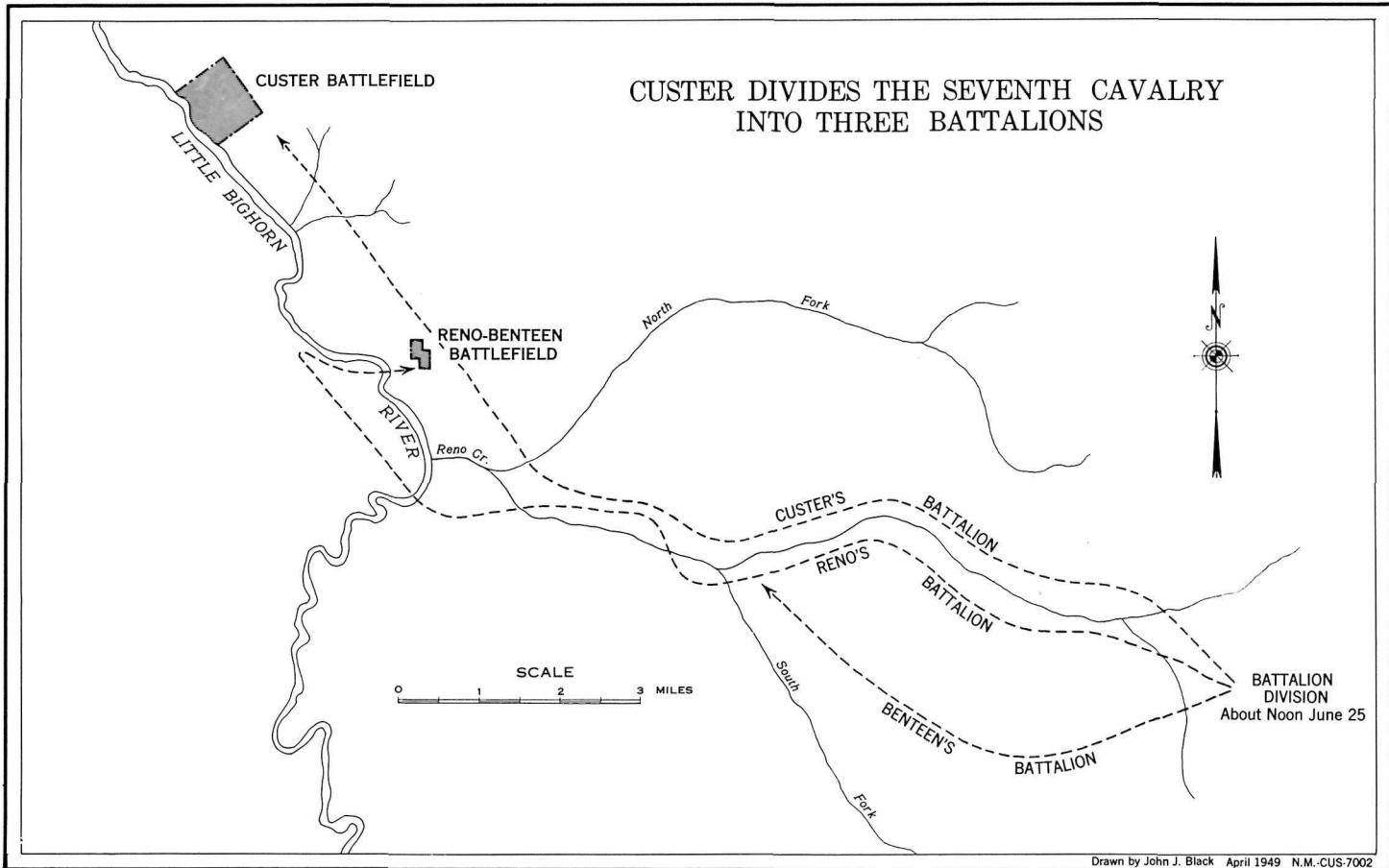
Custer's Last Battle

Much has been written about the Custer phase of the battle, but very few facts can definitely be stated. Custer's route, after he was last seen with Company E (Gray Horse Company) on a high promontory overlooking the river bottom where Reno was engaging the Indians, is still shrouded in mystery. As he looked down from the bluffs at the battle between Reno's troops and the Indians, he was seen by some of these troops to wave his hat as in encouragement.

During the time Custer disappeared from the bluffs and descended for a short distance, probably down the deep ravine near Medicine Tail Coulee, Reno had started his retreat from his position on the river flat to seek higher ground for defensive purposes. Perhaps about the time Reno left the river bottom, Custer and his troops reached a point across the Little Bighorn River from the main Indian camp. The attack against Reno's troops had eased off, and the mass of Indians immediately started after the Custer column. There were only about 225 cavalrymen against warriors numbering possibly up to 5,000. This was more than the small body of troopers could withstand, and the cavalrymen were gradually pushed to the positions now indicated by the silent white markers that dot Custer Hill.

Custer and his two-hundred-odd troopers on this hill fought one of the bloodiest battles with the Indians in the annals of American history. Many of the horses that had brought these troopers nearly 1,000 miles were shot to make breastworks against the deadly bullets and arrows from the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors.

It is thought that not long after the Indians began to show a strong force in Custer's front, he turned his column to the left and advanced in the direction of the Indian village to the junction of two ravines just below a spring. Here he probably dismounted two companies, under





Scene of Reno's engagement. 1. Reno's advance. 2. Line of battle. 3. Retreat to the bluffs. (Photograph by K. F. Roahen, Billings, Mont.)

command of Keogh and Calhoun, to fight on foot. It is quite possible that the companies advanced to a knoll, now marked by Crittenden's marker, while the remaining three mounted companies continued along the ridge to Custer Hill.

The line occupied by Custer's battalion was the first considerable ridge back of the river. His front was extended about three-fourths of a mile. Most of the Indian village was in view. A few hundred yards from his line was another, but lower, ridge, the further slope of which was not commanded by his line. It was from here that the Indians, under Crazy Horse, from the lower part of the encampment, part of whom were Cheyennes, moved on Custer and cut off all access to the village. Gall and his warriors had been the first to meet Custer.

Many of the participants on both sides were on foot and doing much fighting from prone positions on the ground. The warriors outnumbered Custer's men possibly as much as 20 to 1. The horde of Indians were wriggling along gullies and hiding behind knolls on all sides of the troops. One need only to walk over the battlefield today and observe the terrain to understand how well they could hide themselves from the fire of the soldiers.

The only accounts of the battle have come from the Indians, since there were no surviving whites; but, because of the circumstances, much of what happened may never be solved conclusively. The fighting may have lasted about an hour, although the exact duration will never be known. The Indians managed to start the troopers' horses into a stampede, and many were caught by the Indian women in the valley. Some of these horses carried extra ammunition in their saddlebags. It is thought that Custer's men had some of the extra ammunition in their possession before the stampede occurred, but the loss may have seriously affected others.

The horse stampede was followed quickly by a concerted attack by the Indians which was so successful and so swiftly carried out that not a Custer trooper remained alive. The Indians stated that not one prisoner was taken alive and that they were not trying to capture any of them as prisoners. They also stated that there was no final charge on horseback such as often has been represented in writings and paintings. The only semblance to such culminating action was a "charge" by the mounted Indians youths and old men in a rush to seize plunder from the dead bodies of Custer's men.

Reno Battle Renewed by the Indians

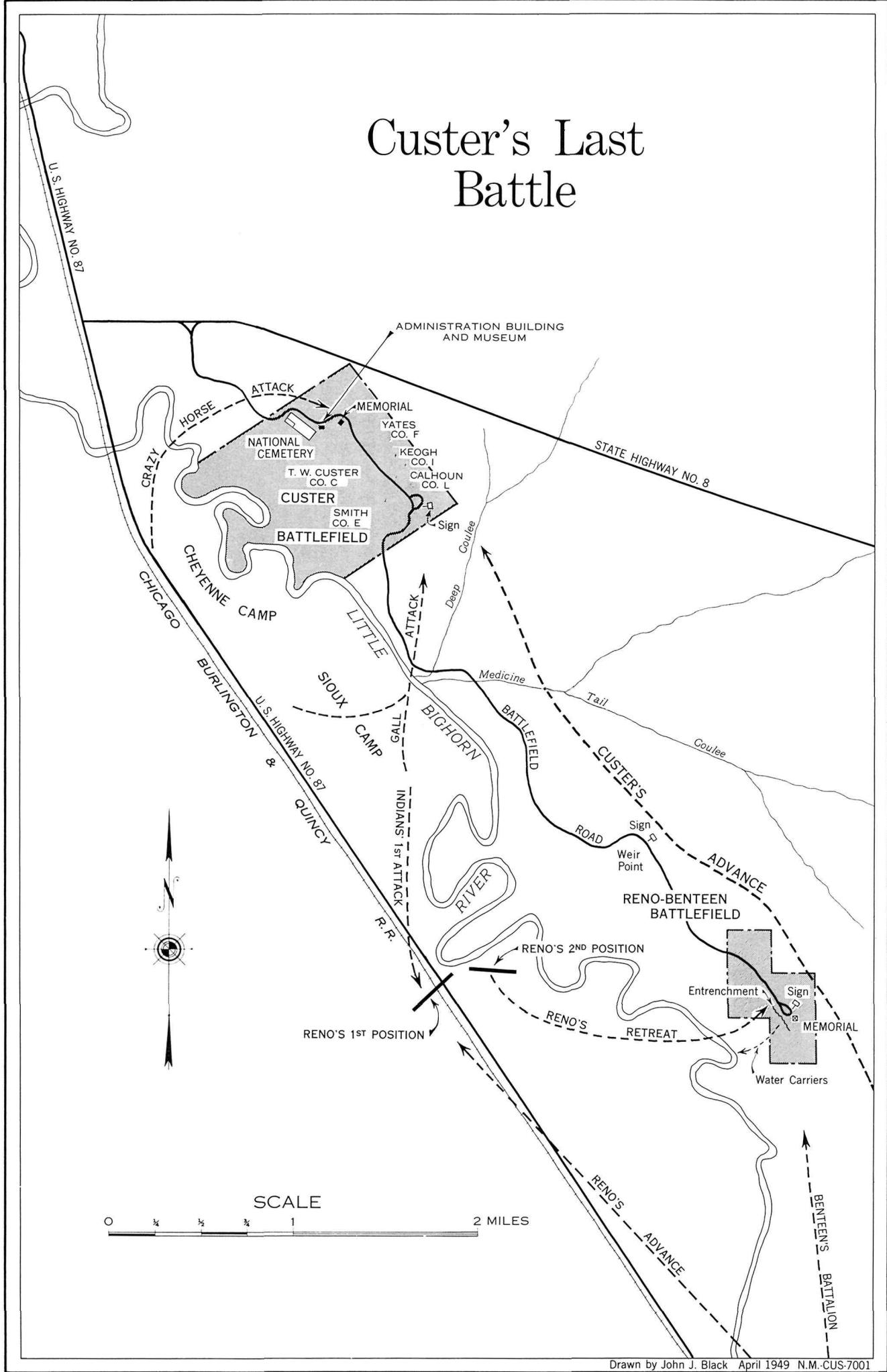
After Reno's retreat to the bluffs and the Indians' retirement to the north to fight Custer, the roll for Reno's command was called. There were absent 3 officers and more than 40 men, including a few civilians. How many were wounded, hiding, or killed no one knew. The troopers with Reno had numbered 112, as well as 20 or more Arikara scouts, 3 or 4 Crow scouts, 3 white scouts, and 1 Negro listed as an interpreter.

Benteen with his three companies had seen no action as yet, for he had swung to the left to scout the country as ordered. Finding that the bluffs were almost impassable and that his horses were fast wearing out, he swung back to the trail. About 3 o'clock a messenger from Custer met him. Sergeant Kanipe, of Company C, brought orders to Captain McDougall to hurry up the pack train. The sergeant was smiling, and,

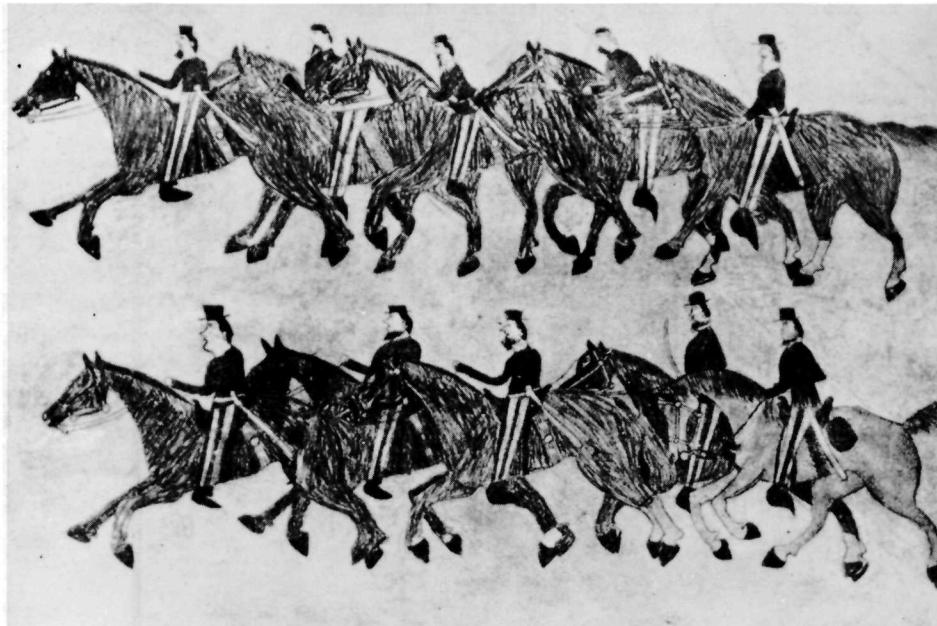
"Sioux Fighting Custer's Battalion." Drawn by the Sioux Chief Red-Horse. (From the Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution.)



Custer's Last Battle



as he passed on his way to the pack train, he called out "We've got 'em boys." Soon after, another messenger arrived, Trumpeter Martin of Company H, on duty as orderly trumpeter to Custer. He bore a hastily scrawled message from Lieutenant Cooke, Custer's Adjutant. "Benteen—Come on—Big village—Be quick—Bring packs. W. W. Cooke. P. S. Bring pacs." Indicating how urgently Custer then wanted his reserve ammunition, Cooke had added the postscript, "Bring pacs." Martin had been fired upon during his ride, and his horse was wounded; but he also was elated, telling Benteen that the Indians were "skedaddling" and that Custer was charging the village. Increasing the gait, Benteen pushed forward and joined forces with Reno, whose command was depleted and unnerved as they had just gained their defensive position on the high



bluffs. An hour or so after Benteen arrived at this point, Captain McDougall came up with his company and the train of pack mules.

Officers immediately conferred on what action to take. Reno's retreat had done considerable damage to the morale of the remaining men. Benteen's men felt more confident, naturally, as they had not engaged the Indians.

While the combined command was being organized, heavy and continuous firing was heard from down the river, evidently from the Custer engagement. Believing that Custer's troops might need assistance, Captain Weir started with Company D in the direction of the firing. Captain Benteen and the other two companies of his battalion followed Weir, and soon the remaining troops prepared to follow. When Weir reached a high point about a mile and a half to the northeast (now referred to

as Weir Point) he saw a field of action several miles beyond. Indians were moving about on the field and appeared to be shooting at the ground. Owing to the distance, nothing else was distinguishable. This later was found to be Custer's battlefield, and perhaps at that time Custer and all his men were dead.

When the Indians observed the troops' approach from the distance, they began a frantic ride to cut them off. Soon warriors were near at hand, and it was necessary to dismount and prepare to fight on foot. Lines were thrown out and a stand made at this point. However, there were difficulties back of the line. It was impossible to bring up the wounded, and the pack mules had become scattered. Considering the advantages of the first position over the one now commanded and also

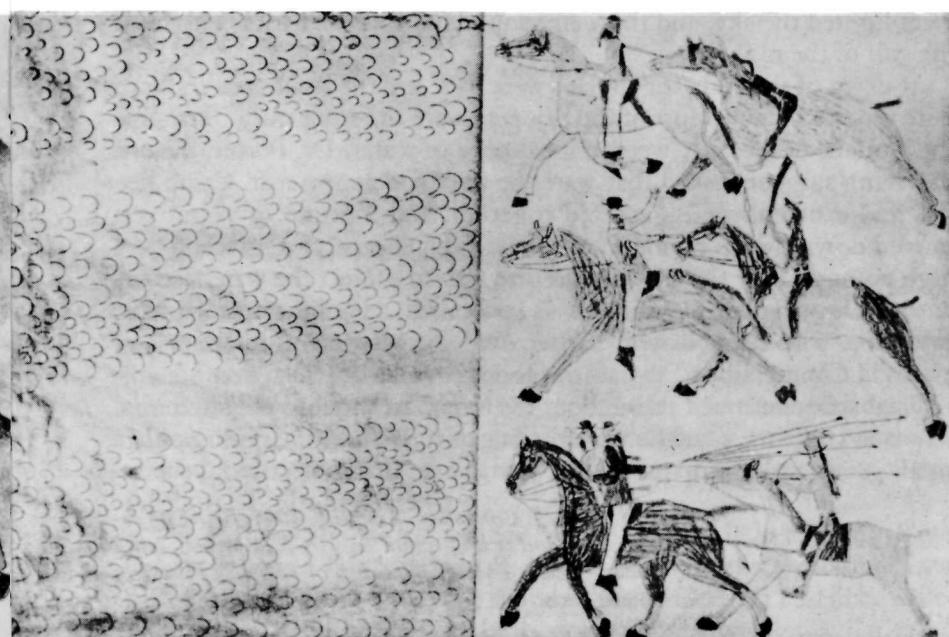
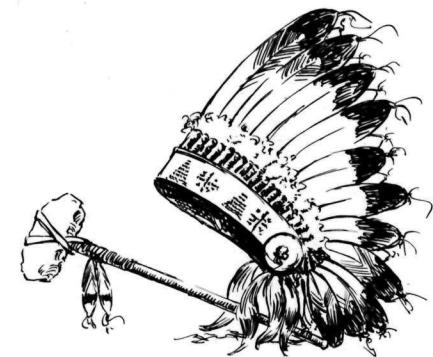


Illustration above—"Sioux Charging Soldiers." Drawn by the Sioux Chief Red-Horse. This represents the retreat of Reno's battalion from the valley. (From the Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution.)

Illustration to left (p. 18)—"Soldiers Charging Indian Camp." Drawn by the Sioux Chief Red-Horse. (From the Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution.)



in an effort to bring all the forces into a more compact body, orders were given to withdraw. No sooner had this operation been completed, than Indians appeared from everywhere. Lines were thrown out for defense, and heavy firing continued until dark, when the warriors withdrew to the valley.

During the night an effort was made to prepare for the return of the Indians which was expected with the coming daylight. The three or four spades and shovels were used to dig rifle pits and trenches. Some men waited their turn for the shovels, while others used knives, tin cups, or mess kits to dig protections for themselves. Ammunition cases and hardtack boxes were piled up for barricades. Occasionally, men would wander to the packs to obtain hardtack or raw bacon to allay their hunger. Meanwhile, a wild celebration was in progress in the Indian encampment. Fires lighted the sky, and the weird sounds of Indian chants penetrated the still of the night.

At dawn of the 26th, the Indians were back and the battle was resumed with renewed vigor. Most of the troopers were suffering from thirst, and the wounded especially were in great need of water. Dr. Porter, the one surviving surgeon, asked that water be obtained at any cost. Camp kettles and canteens were gathered together, and a group of volunteers moved down a deep ravine to the river. Four sharpshooters stood on a high point to draw the Indians' fire and also to protect the water carriers with their own fire. The move was successful, and the wounded were cared for. The 19 men who participated in this operation were later awarded Congressional Medals of Honor for this heroic action.

The battle continued throughout the forenoon and into the afternoon. It was at this time that the warriors began to withdraw, leaving only a small group to keep up occasional firing. Late in the afternoon, the In-

Grave of Lt. John J. Crittenden, Twentieth United States Infantry. He was attached to the Seventh Cavalry for duty and killed with Custer's troops. Photograph taken in 1877. (Courtesy of the National Archives.)



dians fired the grass in the valley, and when the cloud of smoke lifted the troops watched with relief the departure of the entire Indian encampment. The long procession of ponies and tepee pole travois went slowly trailing off toward the Bighorn Mountains, and before darkness enveloped them the last of the Indians had disappeared from sight.

About a dozen of the men who had been left behind by Reno's force during the flight from the valley on the afternoon of the 25th had hidden in the brush to prevent detection by the Indians. Some were able to gain the bluffs on the night of the 25th, but several were trapped until the night of the 26th, after the Indians moved off. During the 2 days, Reno and Benteen had lost 32 men killed and 44 wounded.

Apparently, all the Indians had departed, but the soldiers moved with great caution to avoid possible ambush by concealed warriors. The horses and mules were watered for the first time since before the battle started. A few men made fires for coffee, and the position on the bluff was moved slightly and strengthened.

The March of Generals Terry and Gibbon and Their Arrival at the Battleground

The troops of Generals Terry and Gibbon, numbering about 450 men, left the mouth of the Rosebud Creek on June 21, proceeded up the Yellowstone River, and crossed to its south side just below the mouth of the Bighorn River. On the night of the 24th they camped on lower Tullock Creek. The 25th, the day of Custer's battle, they traversed the arid hills along the Bighorn River in an effort to get to the mouth of the Little Bighorn River.

On Monday the 26th, near the mouth of the Little Bighorn River, these troops had sign talk with three Crow Indians who had been scouts with Custer. The Indians told them all the white men had been killed. None of the men fully believed this story. The entire command marched up the Little Bighorn Valley, continually noting Indians farther up the valley and on the bluffs to the right, some riding singly and others in groups. That evening camp was made near the present site of Crow Agency, Mont.

On the morning of the 27th no Indians were seen by the troops and, following breakfast, the march southward began. Lieutenant Bradley, with a detail, was sent on special scout duty to the east side of the river. After the main column of troops had marched south up the valley about 3 miles, an officer saw men and animals moving on a hill 3 miles to the east across the valley. An officer, with a few men, was detailed to get closer to this group to identify them. They proved to be a detachment which had been sent by Reno. The story was told of the disappearance of Custer and his battalion.

While this conference was in progress, Lieutenant Bradley and his

Benteen.
Come on. Big Village.
Be quick. Bring Packs.
P.S. Bring Packs.
W.W. Cooke.

Benteen

Custer
Come on, Big
Village. Be quick
Bring pack.

W.W. Cooke

Bring pack.

Custer's last message, written by Custer's Adjutant, Lt. W. W. Cooke on a sheet torn from his field dispatch book. At the top and right of the message is a "translation" written by Captain Benteen. The original message is in the U. S. Military Academy Library, West Point, N. Y. (Reproduced by courtesy of the U. S. Military Academy Library, West Point.)



*Trumpeter John Martin who carried Custer's last message to Captain Benteen.
(Photograph by D. F. Barry in 1906.)*

scouting party returned. He brought the first official news of the tragic loss. On July 27, 1876, in the *Helena Weekly Herald*, Bradley made the following statement of what he had found:

"Of the 206 bodies buried on the field, there were very few that 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 disfigurement it appeared to me rather the result of a blow than of a knife"

Immediate action was taken to care properly for the wounded men in Reno's command. They were transferred before the day ended from the Reno defense area on the hills to the valley where Generals Terry and Gibbon had set up camp, and the men began work making litters on which to transport them.

On the 27th, a group under the supervision of Captain Benteen was sent to Custer's Battlefield to make a survey of the field. Early the next day the Seventh Cavalry proceeded to the battlefield to locate, count, and bury the bodies of their comrades. Four officers and 14 enlisted men were found to be missing, but none was found alive. Accounts vary as to what percent of the bodies were scalped or mutilated. Much of the clothing and personal belongings was missing. It is known that General Custer's body, though stripped of clothing, was neither scalped nor mutilated. He had been struck twice by bullets, either one of which could have been fatal. The burials were made in shallow graves and properly marked wherever identification was possible.

Previous to the arrival of the soldiers, the Indians had carried away and cared for most of their own dead. The exact place of their burials is not known. The loss of the Indians has never been satisfactorily determined. Published figures vary from 30 to 300.

The Return to Bismarck—Comanche Saved!

On the night of June 28, the entire command began its movement down the Little Bighorn Valley to the site where the steamer *Far West* was moored to the river bank. The progress was so tedious and slow that only 4½ miles were covered, making the first camp just west of the Custer Battlefield. Most of the next day was spent in destroying the enormous amount of camp equipment and supplies left behind by the Indians.

Transporting the wounded on hand litters proved so unsatisfactory that mule litters were constructed and used with more ease. Although the march, which began again the evening of the 29th, was intended to be only a short one, information was received that the steamer *Far West* was at the mouth of the Little Bighorn, and it was decided to push on to that point. By 2 o'clock on the morning of the 30th, all the wounded were safely on board the boat.

The *Far West* immediately moved down to the mouth of the Bighorn River where it was necessary to wait 2 days to ferry General Gibbon's troops across the Yellowstone. On July 3, the steamer started down the river and on to the Missouri. Captain Marsh made the journey of over 700 miles to Fort Abraham Lincoln in 54 hours, a record never equaled again by packet boats on the Missouri River.

One lone survivor who had served under Custer's immediate command was found amid the havoc on the battlefield. This was Comanche, Captain Keogh's horse. Wounded in seven places, Comanche was also carried to Fort Abraham Lincoln and was nursed back to health and placed on the retired list by regimental order. No person was allowed to ride or work the horse, which was saddled, bridled, and paraded at every ceremony of the regiment. At the age of 30 years, Comanche died at Fort Riley, Kans., where the regiment was then stationed. The horse's body was prepared by Prof. L. L. Dyche, of the University of Kansas, and is now displayed in the Dyche Museum at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kans.

The Tragic Story Released

The *Far West* landed its precious cargo at Bismarck at 11 p. m., July 5, 1876, and within a few minutes the news of the battle and its details were being given to the world. The most difficult task was to break the news to the families of those who had been killed. Mrs. Custer expressed the feeling of herself and others when she wrote in *Boots and Saddles* (1885), "This battle wrecked the lives of twenty-six women at Fort Lincoln, and orphaned children of officers and soldiers joined their cry to that of their bereaved mothers."

To send out news of the battle, J. M. Carnahan, the telegraph operator at Bismarck, took his seat at the telegraph key and for 22 hours he hardly moved from his chair. Upon completion of this message, he remained another 60-odd hours at the key without rest or sleep sending newspaper dispatches throughout the country.

News of the shocking disaster was heralded under big headlines by the press of the day. It brought repercussions from many parts of the country. Investigations were demanded as to the causes of the tragedy. Accusations and insinuations concerning the blame for what had happened led from Fort Abraham Lincoln to Washington. President Grant regarded the defeat as a "sacrifice of troops" by Custer. Others condemned Reno and Benteen. Some of the mystery occasioned by the battle on that fateful date in 1876 remains unsolved.

For the surviving troops there was little rest until the Indians, so completely victorious on the Little Bighorn, were subdued. As the "hostiles" dispersed, some were pursued and finally dealt a crushing blow in the Battle of Slim Buttes. Others escaped and, with Sitting Bull, took refuge across the international boundary in Canada, until they were induced

to return peaceably and take up reservation life which had seemed so distasteful. Except for the Battle of Wounded Knee Creek in 1890, there were no further armed conflicts with the Sioux, who accepted the advance of the frontier settlements.

One year after the battle, during the summer of 1877, Company I, Seventh Cavalry, under the command of Capt. Michael V. Sheridan, returned to the battlefield. The bodies of 11 officers and 2 civilians were exhumed and shipped to the homes of the relatives of the deceased. General Custer's remains were sent to the post cemetery at the United States Military Academy, West Point, N. Y., and reburied October 10, 1877.

The remaining bodies, with the exception of Lieut. John J. Crittenden, were carefully reburied in one large grave on top of Custer Hill, within the enclosure on which a large granite memorial now stands. Lieutenant Crittenden's body, upon request of his relatives, remained buried on the battlefield until 1931, when it was exhumed and buried within the national cemetery grounds.



Capt. Myles W. Keogh and troopers of Company I were killed here. Photograph taken in 1877.



Comanche, "the only living thing found on Custer Battlefield." This photograph was taken at Fort Lincoln, 1877, about 1 year after the battle. Blacksmith Korn is holding the bridle and Capt. H. J. Nowlan, Seventh Cavalry, is in the background. (Photograph by courtesy Haynes, Inc., Yellowstone National Park, Wyo.)



Early view of the Custer Battlefield taken before 1890. (Courtesy of the National Archives.)

Gen. George Armstrong Custer

The Custer Battlefield has been named after Brevet Major General Custer, the commander of the Seventh Cavalry, who, with more than 225 of his troopers, lost his life on this battlefield.

Custer was born in New Rumley, Harrison County, Ohio, December 5, 1839, the son of Emanuel and Maria Ward Fitzpatrick Custer. He spent much of his early life with his half sister, Lydia Reed, at her home in Monroe, Mich., where he attended school. At the age of 15 he met Elizabeth Bacon. Less than 10 years after their first meeting Elizabeth Bacon and George A. Custer were married.

In June 1857, Custer entered the United States Military Academy, West Point, N. Y. His many boyish pranks and escapades won him demerits that brought his rating near the bottom of his class. Following his graduation in June 1861, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Second United States Cavalry.

War had broken out between the States, and Custer joined his regiment in time to take part with his troop at the First Battle of Manassas. He was little more than 21 years of age, but there was an indefinable something about his vivacious personality that attracted the attention of his superiors. His conspicuous courage and zeal brought him many coveted honors and rewards.

During the war he was several times breveted for gallant and meritorious services at the battles of Gettysburg, Yellow Tavern, Winchester, and Fisher's Hill. His final brevet was that of major general, for outstanding services during the campaign ending in the surrender of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. He had been commissioned a

brigadier general at the age of 23 and only 2 years later became a major general of the Union Army. Official records of the War Department show that Custer is the youngest brigadier general and major general in the history of the United States Army. With his rapid promotions, came both friends and enemies. Among his most loyal followers were those of the Michigan Cavalry Brigade, whom he had led at the Battle of Gettysburg. The following year, when Custer was transferred to command of the Third Cavalry Division, many Michigan men sought, through petition, to join Custer in his new command. At Appomattox, he was designated to receive the flag of truce from the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. Later, in presenting Mrs. Custer with the table on which the terms of General Lee's surrender had been signed, General Sheridan said ". . . there is scarcely an individual in our service who has contributed more to bring about this desirable result than your very gallant husband."

After the Union Army was disbanded in 1866, the regular army was increased by several regiments. General Custer was assigned to the new Seventh Cavalry as its lieutenant colonel, and the regiment then took the field against hostile Indian bands that were raiding and pillaging white settlements in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Indian Territory. His victory at the Battle of the Washita, November 27, 1868, over Black Kettle's band of Cheyenne Indians, augmented with other Kiowa and Comanche tribes, was effective in discouraging further Indian depredations.

First Custer memorial constructed in 1879. It was made of cord wood and filled in the center with horse bones. (Photograph by L. A. Huffman.)



Custer and his scouts on the Yellowstone Expedition of 1873. Bloody Knife, Custer's favorite scout, is seated on Custer's right. He was killed with Reno's battalion just before they retreated from the valley, June 25, 1876.



The winter of 1872, the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia came to the United States on a good-will tour. In plans for the official welcome, Custer was chosen to escort him about the West and to participate in a buffalo hunt. The Duke was delighted not only with the hunt but with Custer, whom he saw for the first time in the picturesque buckskin hunting attire which he always wore on the plains.

Custer was a man of diversified interests. When military duties did not demand his attention, he spent his time reading, writing, hunting, and mounting the trophies of the chase, or participating in social affairs with his wife and friends. His published writings and the publicity given his activities made him a beau ideal among Indian fighters. Although in the shaping of western history he found himself pitted against the Indians, he was not unaware of their problems. In *My Life on the Plains* (1874), he wrote, "If I were an Indian, I often think that I would greatly prefer to cast my lot among those of my people who adhered to the free open plains, rather than submit to the confined limits of a reservation there to be the recipient of the blessed benefits of civilization, with its vices thrown in without stint or measure."

The Seventh Cavalry's record under General Custer well illustrates the important part played by the United States Army in the advance of frontier settlements. Stationed at remote army posts and isolated canton-

ments, they were called on to guard emigrants and freighters, mail stages, and telegraph lines. Sometimes they undertook exploring expeditions into little known regions, and sometimes they protected scientific expeditions into new territory. They shielded surveyors laying out the route for railroads, and the construction crews who built the roads. Sometimes they evicted white trespassers from Indian reservations, and sometimes they risked their lives in campaigns against the Indians.

Guide to the Area

The principal feature of Custer Battlefield National Monument is the battlefield, marked by the memorial which stands over the grave of most of the slain victims of this battle. This memorial is about one-half mile beyond the main entrance to the area. From near this fenced, granite

General and Mrs. Custer in their library at Fort Lincoln. This photograph was taken about 1875.



A social evening at the Custer home in Fort Lincoln. General Custer stands beside Mrs. Custer who is seated at the piano. Tom Custer is the first man in the rear and to General Custer's left, "Autie" Reed, Custer's nephew, is standing in the doorway, and Boston Custer is seated on the extreme left. This photograph was taken about 1874.



shaft is obtained an excellent view of the field over which occurred the final stages of Custer's last battle. White markers, scattered over the hill-sides, show as nearly as possible where the dead were found after their struggle was over.

Just below the memorial is a small group of markers indicating the sites where General Custer and those nearest him in battle were found. Two brothers of the general, Capt. Thomas Ward Custer and Boston Custer, with their nephew "Autie" Reed, were also found in this group.

A road from the memorial leads along the ridge from which can be seen the rough terrain over which the men fought. Groups of markers to the right on the slope toward the river tell the story of how Companies C and E fought to their death. A number of bodies were found in deep ravines near the river. Some markers cannot be seen, for they are concealed by the rolling contour of the slope. Beyond these markers and across the river is the location of the Indian encampment at the time of the battle.

On the left side of the ridge are the markers for Companies F and I. Each of these markers designates a site where a man was found and where he was first buried. All the bodies have been removed from the field to the single grave beneath the memorial.

About one-half mile from the memorial, on a loop road to the left, is an interpretive sign at the position where Company L made its last stand. Lieutenant Calhoun, a brother-in-law of General Custer, was in command of this company. According to those who buried the soldiers on June 28, 1876, the bodies of these men showed the most clearly drawn skirmish line on the battlefield.

Just beyond the loop road at Calhoun Hill, the road turning to the right leads to the Reno-Benteen Battlefield entrenchments, 4 miles to the southeast. In a short distance, this road leaves Custer's Battlefield and passes over Indian reservation range land. This is a graded road which is good in dry weather. However, not being surfaced, it must be closed during inclement weather. Those driving to the Reno-Benteen Battlefield must return by the same route. The round-trip is approximately 10 miles.

After leaving Custer's Battlefield, this road drops down very near to the Little Bighorn River. It was at this point, which was about the center of the Indian encampment, that the Sioux Chief Gall crossed to make his first attack on Custer's battalion. They met Custer about three-fourths of a mile northeast of this ford.

In about 2 miles, the road is cut through the high point from which Captain Weir and his company viewed Custer's Battlefield on the afternoon of June 25. It is the farthest point any of Reno's or Benteen's men reached before being forced back. A descriptive sign marks this position.

A mile and a half farther is the Seventh Cavalry Memorial on the Reno-Benteen Battlefield. An interpretive sign describes the action in this vicinity. This location affords a very fine view of the valley where

Main entrance to Custer Battlefield National Monument. (Courtesy K. F. Roahen, Billings, Mont.)



Custer Hill, showing the memorial and the site where General Custer and 51 of his gallant troopers were found by General Terry's troops on June 27, 1876. (Courtesy K. F. Roahen, Billings, Mont.)



Looking west from Calhoun Hill toward Custer Hill. The white markers show where the men of Companies I and L were annihilated and the approximate location where the horse Comanche, was found. (Courtesy K. F. Roahen, Billings, Mont.)



Major Reno's battalion fought and of their retreat route up the bluffs.

For those who plan to see both battlefields, it would be well to make the trip to the Reno-Benteen Battlefield and reconstruct the battalion movements on the return trip so that the story may be studied in the correct order of events.

The museum is located just below the memorial and may be visited before or after viewing the battlefields. Here a graphic story of the battle is told by the use of maps, photographs, dioramas, and artifacts.

The national cemetery, located to the rear of the administration building, is of interest to many visitors. Within the national cemetery are buried many who died in other Indian battles. Among those of historical interest are Capt. (Bvt. Lt. Col.) William Judd Fetterman and his command of 3 officers, 76 enlisted men, and 4 civilians who were slain in the Old Fort Phil Kearny Fight, commonly known as the "Fetterman Massacre," December 21, 1866. The Fetterman Fight of 1866 and the Custer Fight of 1876 are analogous, in that both commands were killed with no survivors to tell the story. Others buried here are those slain at the Wagon Box Fight, August 2, 1867; the Hayfield Fight near Fort C. F. Smith, Mont., August 1, 1867; Battle of the Big Hole, Mont., August 9, 1877; the Battle of Bear Paw Mountain, Mont., September 30, 1877; and other battles and skirmishes of lesser importance.

In addition to those who died in Indian battles, burials of later wars are currently being made in the national cemetery. Those who have served honorably in any branch of the armed services of the United States hold burial privileges.

How To Reach the Monument

Custer Battlefield National Monument is located in southeastern Montana, about 15 miles south of the town of Hardin. It is reached from U. S. No. 87 by motorists traveling across the country, as well as from

Seventh Cavalry Memorial on the Reno-Benteen entrenchment position. (Courtesy K. F. Roahen, Billings, Mont.)



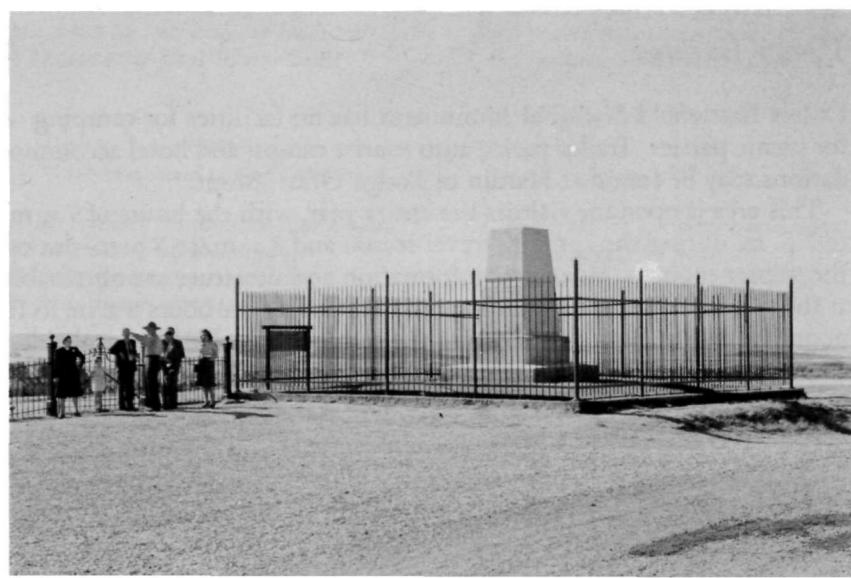
Montana State Highway No. 8, which begins just outside the battlefield and continues east and south to Broadus, Mont. It joins U. S. No. 212 leading into the northern end of the Black Hills at Belle Fourche, S. Dak.

Those who desire to travel by train may use the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy lines to Crow Agency, Mont., which is 3½ miles from the battlefield site. The American Bus Lines operate through Crow Agency on U. S. No. 87. There is no public transportation between Crow Agency and the battlefield.

View of the museum and national cemetery as seen from Custer Hill. The stone at the far right stands where Custer's body was found.



Memorial which stands over the grave of those slain in the Battle of the Little Bighorn River.



The Monument

By Executive order, in 1886, the Custer Battlefield and the cemetery were proclaimed the National Cemetery of Custer's Battlefield Reservation. The name was changed to Custer Battlefield National Monument in 1946. The monument, containing 765.34 acres, includes, in addition to the cemetery, that portion of the battlefield where the most severe fighting occurred, the ridge where Custer and his men died, and the scene of the Reno-Benteen engagement.

Administration

Custer Battlefield National Monument is a part of the National Park System belonging to the people of the United States and administered by the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior. It is under the immediate supervision of a superintendent. Communications should be addressed to the Superintendent, Custer Battlefield National Monument, Crow Agency, Mont.

Related Areas

A few other battlefields of the Indian wars, which were a part of the history of the West, have been set aside under Federal ownership for administration by the National Park Service. Also in Montana is Big Hole Battlefield National Monument, where on August 9–10, 1877, the nontreaty Nez Perce Indians, under Chief Joseph and other chiefs, overcame the disadvantage of a surprise attack by troops under Colonel Gibbon. At Lava Beds National Monument, in California, are preserved the natural trenches and fortifications used by the Modocs who, in 1873, under Captain Jack, desperately resisted the efforts of troops ordered to return them to their reservation. Fort Laramie National Monument, in Wyoming, includes the site of one of the most prominent military outposts in the West.

Visitor Facilities

Custer Battlefield National Monument has no facilities for camping or for picnic parties. Trailer parks, auto tourist camps, and hotel accommodations may be found at Hardin or Lodge Grass, Mont.

This area is open for visitors the entire year, with the hours of 7 a. m. to 7 p. m. during the summer travel season and 8 a. m. to 5 p. m. during the winter months. Historical information and literature are obtainable at the museum and administration building during the hours 8 a. m. to 12 noon and 1 p. m. to 5 p. m. During the summer months, historical aides, or guides, are in attendance to conduct trips, give talks, and supply information to the public.



GARRY OWEN

REGIMENTAL BATTLE SONG OF SEVENTH U. S. CAVALRY



Lively

Chorus

Garry Owen, regimental battle song of the Seventh United States Cavalry.

I

*We are the pride of the Army,
And a regiment of great renown.
Our name's on the pages of history
From sixty-six on down.
If you think we stop or falter
While into the fray we're goin'.
Just watch the step, with our heads erect
When our band plays "Garry Owen."*

II

*We know no fear when stern duty
Calls us far away from home.
Our country's flag shall safely o'er us wave
No matter where we roam,
'Tis the Gallant Seventh Cavalry,
It matters not where we're goin'.
Such you'll surely say, as we march away,
And our band plays "Garry Owen."*

CHORUS

(Second strain of Garry Owen)

*In the Fighting Seventh's the place for me,
It's the cream of all the cavalry;
No other regiment ever can claim
Its pride, honor, glory and undying fame.*



III

*Then hurrah for our brave commanders!
Who lead us into the fight,
We'll do or die in our country's cause.
And battle for the right.
And when the war is o'er,
And to our homes we're goin'.
Just watch the step, with our heads erect,
When the band plays "Garry Owen."*

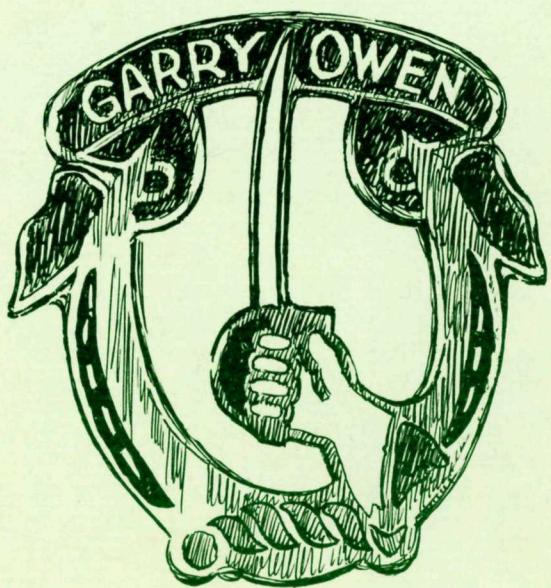


The National Park System, of which Custer Battlefield National Monument is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of its people.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
HISTORICAL HANDBOOK SERIES

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- Fort Laramie
- Fort McHenry
- Fort Necessity
- Fort Pulaski
- Fort Raleigh
- Fort Sumter
- George Washington Birthplace
- Gettysburg
- Guilford Courthouse
- Hopewell Village
- Independence
- Jamestown, Virginia
- Kings Mountain
- The Lincoln Museum and the House Where Lincoln Died
- Manassas (Bull Run)
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- Scotts Bluff
- Shiloh
- Statue of Liberty
- Vanderbilt Mansion
- Vicksburg
- Yorktown



Seventh Cavalry regimental insigne.