



The Life of Silas Soule

"I refused to fire and swore that none but a coward would" - Silas Soule

A Man of Character and Resolve

A respected Union officer and gentleman, Captain Silas S. Soule proved his convictions by refusing to fire at the Sand Creek Massacre. This man of character, born in Maine to an abolitionist family, moved to Kansas in the late 1850's. The Soule family was one of the founding families of Lawrence, Kansas and very active in the Underground Railroad. Following the execution of famed abolitionist John Brown in 1859, Silas Soule traveled to Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, in an attempt to rescue two of Brown's followers. The rescue mission failed but Soule proved his courage and resourcefulness. Five years later at Sand Creek, his convictions would be tested again.



Captain Silas Soule
Photo courtesy of Denver Public Library

From Gold Seeker to Soldier

In 1860 Soule joined the rush to the Pike's Peak region in Colorado Territory, where he mined for gold and blacksmithed. With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, he left the gold fields for service in the Army and earned a commission as a lieutenant in Company K of the Colorado 1st Regiment of Volunteer (U.S.) Infantry.

The 1st Regiment was sent to New Mexico to stop an invading Confederate Army. The Armies clashed in March at Glorietta Pass, near Pecos, NM, and of the intense fighting, Soule "recalled fighting hand to hand over rocks, stumps and trees." The Coloradans, under the command of Colonel John Slough and Major John Chivington helped bring about a Union victory that saw the collapse of Confederate invasion.

After Glorietta Pass, the 1st Regiment was officially converted to a cavalry unit and stationed throughout Colorado Territory. Commanding Officer Colonel John Chivington promoted Soule to Captain and assigned him to Fort Lyon along the Santa Fe Trail.

In September 1864, Soule and his commanding officer, Major Edward Wynkoop, participated in the Smoky Hill peace talks with Cheyenne and Arapaho Peace Chiefs. Later, he traveled with Wynkoop and the Cheyenne and Arapaho Chiefs to Denver for a meeting at Camp Weld with Governor and ex-officio Superintendent of Indian Affairs John Evans and Chivington.

Taking a Stand

Soule's presence at both of these important peace meetings reinforced the decisions he made at Sand Creek on November 29, 1864, when he showed extraordinary courage in refusing to participate in the massacre of the peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho. During the attack, Soule and his company of soldiers refused to fight and in the days following the massacre, Soule wrote the chilling and explicit letter that is reproduced below. He was one of the first to testify against Chivington during the Army's investigation in January 1865.

In April of 1865, Silas Soule married Hersa Coberly and the couple made their home in Denver. Less than 80 days following his testimony to the military inquiry, Soule was shot and killed in the streets of Denver while performing his duties as Provost Marshal. His murderers, though known, were never brought to justice.

Fort Lyon, C.T.
December 14, 1864

Dear Ned:

Two days after you left here the 3rd Reg. with a Battalion of the 1st arrived here, having moved so secretly that we were not aware of their approach until they had Pickets around the post, allowing no one to pass out! They arrested Capt. Bent and John Vogle and placed guards around their houses. Then they declared their intention to massacre the friendly Indians camped on Sand Creek. Major Anthony gave all information, and eagerly joined in with Chivington and Co. and ordered Lieut. Cramer with his whole Co. to join the command. As soon as I knew of their movement I was indignant as you would have been were you here, and were you here, and went to Cannon's room, where a number of officers of the 1st and 3rd were congregated and told them that any man who would take part in the murders, knowing the circumstances as we did, was a low lived cowardly son of a bitch. Capt. J.J. Johnson and Lieut. Harding went to camp and reported to Chiv, Downing and the whole outfit what I had said, and you can bet hell was to pay in camp. Chiv and all hands swore they would hang me before they moved camp, but I stuck it out, and all the officers of the post, except Anthony backed me.

We arrived at Black Kettle and Left Hand's Camp at day light. Lieut. Wilson with Co.s "C", "E" & "G" were ordered to in advance to cut off their herd. He made a circle to the rear and formed a line 200 yds from the village, and opened fire. Poor old John Smith and Louderbeck ran out with white flags but they paid no attention to them, and they ran back into the tents. Anthony (indecipherable) with Co's "D" "K" & "G", to within one hundred yards and commenced firing. I refused to fire and swore that none but a coward would. For by this time hundreds of women and children were coming towards us and getting on their knees for mercy. Anthony shouted, "kill the sons of bitches" Smith and Louderbeck came to our command, although I am confident there were 200 shots fired at them, for I heard an officers say that Old Smith and any one who sympathized with the Indians, ought to be killed and now was a good time to do it. The Battery then came up in our rear, and opened on them. I took my comp'y across the Creek, and by this time the whole of the 3rd and the Batteries were firing into them and you can form some idea of the slaughter. When the Indians found that there was no hope for them they went for the Creek, and buried themselves in the Sand and got under the banks and some of the Bucks got their bows and a few rifles and defended themselves as well as they could. By this time there was no organization among our troops, they were a perfect mob - every man on his own hook. My Co. was the only one that kept their formation, and we did not fire a shot.

The massacre lasted six or eight hours, and a good many Indians escaped. I tell you Ned it was hard to see little children on their knees have their brains beat out by men professing to be civilized. One squaw was wounded and a fellow took a hatchet to finish her, she held her arms up to defend her, and he cut one arm off, and held the other with one hand and dashed the hatchet through her brain. One squaw with her two children, were on their knees begging for their lives of a dozen soldiers, within ten feet of them all, firing - when one succeeded in hitting the squaw in the thigh, when she took a knife and cut the throats of both children, and then killed herself. One old squaw hung herself in the lodge - there was not enough room for her to hang and she held up her knees and choked herself to death. Some tried to escape on the Prairie, but most of them were run down by horsemen. I saw two Indians hold one of another's hands, chased until they were exhausted, when they kneeled down, and clasped each other around the neck and were both shot together. They were all scalped, and as high as half a dozen taken from one head. They were all horribly mutilated. One woman was cut open and a child taken out of her, and scalped.

White Antelope, War Bonnet and a number of others had Ears and Privates cut off. Squaw's snatches were cut out for trophies. You would think it impossible for white men to butcher and mutilate human beings as they did there, but every word I have told you is the truth, which they do not deny. It was almost impossible to save any of them. Charly Autabee save John Smith and Winsers squaw. I saved little Charlie Bent. Geo. Bent was killed [George Bent was wounded but survived] Jack Smith was taken prisoner, and murdered the next day in his tent by one of Dunn's Co. "E". I understand the man received a horse for doing the job. They were going to murder Charlie Bent, but I run him into the Fort. They were going to kill Old Uncle John Smith, but Lt. Cannon and the boys of Ft. Lyon, interfered, and saved him. They would have murdered Old Bents family if Col. Tappan had not taken the matter in hand. Cramer went up with twenty (20) men, and they did not like to buck against so many of the 1st. Chivington has gone to Washington to be made General, I suppose, and get authority to raise a nine months Reg't to hunt Indians. He said Downing will have me cashiered if possible. If they do I want you to help me. I think they will try the same for Cramer for he has shot his mouth off a good deal, and did not shoot his pistol off in the Massacre. Joe has behaved first rate during this whole affair. Chivington reports five or six hundred killed, but there were not more than two hundred, about 140 women and children and 60 Bucks. A good many were out hunting buffalo. Our best Indians were killed. Black Kettle, One Eye, Minnemic and Left Hand. Geo. Pierce of Co. "F" was killed trying to save John Smith. There was one other of the 1st killed and nine of the 3rd all through their own fault. They would get up to the edge of the bank and look over, to get a shot at an Indian under them. When the women were killed the Bucks did not seem to try and get away, but fought desperately. Charly Autabee wished me to write all about it to you. He says he would have given anything if you could have been there. I suppose [Joe] Cramer has written to you, all the particulars, so I will write half. Your family is well. Billy Walker, Co. Tappan, Wilson (who was wounded in the arm) start for Denver in the morning. There is not news I can think of. I expect we will have a hell of a time with Indians this winter. We have (200) men at the post - Anthony in command. I think he will be dismissed when the facts are known in Washington. Give my regards to any friends you come across, and write as soon as possible.

Yours, SS
(signed) S.S. Soule