

Hearing All American Voices: Interpreting the Little Bighorn

Mark Schock

The true nature of the events of June 25, 1876, continues to elude us. To this day Custer buffs, Native Americans, and professional historians alike debate what actually transpired beside a certain Montana river which witnessed so much bloodshed and so little clarity. Was it a horrible massacre, or a great victory? As a multi-racial and multi-ethnic nation, we have failed to reach any consensus. We cannot even agree if that meandering river should be called the Greasy Grass or the Little Bighorn.

How then do historians search for the particulars of the events that unfolded there? What tools and sources should be employed? Historians are especially fond of primary sources. In any military encounter there are at least two sides and usually at least two versions of the events. In this case one side, the white American, has left behind many written documents detailing a number of different versions of what transpired. There are official reports, personal correspondences, inquiry proceedings, and newspaper accounts. It is these sources which have been the backbone of most of the histories written. There are also oral accounts left by the Arikara and Crow scouts who participated in the battle on the side of the whites. These accounts have unfortunately, until recently, been largely dismissed or ignored.

The Lakota and Cheyenne accounts have also, until recently, been dismissed and ignored with rare exceptions to certain details. These accounts, being oral in nature and the product of a different cultural perspective from that of the American mainstream have been viewed with suspicion and incredulity. Are not these primary sources also worthy of the historian's attention? The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that these accounts, once correctly interpreted, are indeed potentially as valid as the usual primary sources employed by the historian and that along with those usual sources are essential to any comprehensive examination of Custer's last battle.

The practice of military historiography is fraught with peril. The stakes are high. National honor and prestige are involved, as well as the legacy and reputation of the individual military personnel involved, especially commanding officers. Reports and statistics compiled from military sources should be viewed with caution.

Less than two weeks before Custer's defeat on the Little Bighorn another famous Indian fighter, General George Crook, clashed with the Lakota and Cheyenne on Rosebud Creek. Crook officially reported his casualties as ten killed and twenty-one wounded. Though the true numbers are in dispute, it is generally believed that Chief Scout Frank Grouard's figures of twenty-eight killed and fifty-six wounded are more reliable. Crook claimed that his retention of the field of battle constituted victory, but the truth is that he subsequently retreated to his supply base and refused to advance again until reinforced, effectively removing his column from the rest of the campaign. Eminent Western historian, Robert Utley, offered this opinion of Crook at the Rosebud. "In truth, he had been badly worsted."²⁴

Just as a nation's military personnel are expected to uphold the finest traditions of their service, the historian writing military history is also expected to protect the reputations and honor of those who serve. The recent controversy over the death of pro- football player turned Army Ranger Pat Tillman in Afghanistan is a fitting example of how protective the military can be of its own reputation and to what lengths it will go to protect that reputation and the reputations and careers of its people.

²⁴ Robert Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891*, The Wars of the United States (New York: Macmillan, 1973; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977), 256.

Politics and politicians are prime players. Clausewitz's dictum that "war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument,"²⁵ certainly held true for early accounts of Custer's defeat. Republican President Ulysses S. Grant was running for reelection and "the Custer tragedy dropped as from heaven into the arms of Democrats struggling against Republican campaign orators seeking to clothe them in the bloody shirt of treason and disunion. The Little Bighorn disaster, laid on a backdrop of corruption in high places and scandalous frontier fraud, instantly became a pawn on the political chessboard."²⁶

Newspapers, a favorite primary source for historians, were unabashedly politically partisan in the nineteenth century. Newspaper accounts of Bighorn were hampered by the fact that only one reporter, Mark Kellogg, had accompanied Custer's command on the expedition. Kellogg, an assistant of *Bismarck Tribune* editor Clement A. Lounsbury, sent reports back to the *Tribune* to also be forwarded to the *New York Herald*. Kellogg perished alongside the soldiers he was covering.²⁷ Kellogg's last dispatch before the expedition set out proved prophetic, though probably not as he intended. "I go with Custer and will be at the death."²⁸

As news of the Seventh Cavalry's defeat spread to the East, Democratic newspaper editors launched vitriolic assaults on the Grant administration. On July 16 the *New York Herald* posited the question, "Who Slew Custer?" The *Herald* was ready with the answer. "The celebrated peace policy of General Grant, which feeds, clothes and takes care of their noncombatant force while the men are killing our troops-that is what killed Custer."²⁹

Southern newspapers joined their colleagues from the North in denouncing Grant. The *Galveston Daily News* declared, "The deplorable truth is that President Grant is chiefly responsible for the appalling miscarriages which have attended this disastrous campaign against the Sioux."³⁰ The *Raleigh News* laid "the blood of Custer, of Canby, and hundreds of United States soldiers" on the hands of the Grant administration.³¹

Western newspapers slammed Grant's Indian policy. The Yankton *Dakotaian* headline of July 7 screamed CUSTER AND HIS ENTIRE COMMAND SWEEPED OUT OF EXISTENCE BY THE WARDS OF THE NATION AND SPECIAL PETS OF EASTERN ORATORS.³² Some in the East agreed. In Connecticut, the *Hartford Daily Courant* crowed, "But when will the government deal with these ferocious Indian tribes as they deserve? When will a policy be adopted that shall prevent such murders as those of Canby and Custer, and give peace to our frontier settlers?"³³

Controversy and the need to find an explanation that would not offend public sensibilities raged within Army circles also. George Armstrong Custer and his President and Commander in Chief Ulysses Grant were not mutual admirers. Custer had written articles for the periodical *Galaxy* critical of Grant's Indian policy. He had testified before the Clymer committee

²⁵Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 87; quoted in Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002; Anchor Books, 2003), 7.

²⁶Robert M. Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy: Origin and Development of a Legend* (Pasadena, CA: Westernlore Press, 1962), 39.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 30-31.

²⁸Louise Barnett, *Touched by Fire: The Life, Death, and Mythic Afterlife of George Armstrong Custer* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996; Owl Books, 1997), 335.

²⁹Utley, *Custer*, 39.

³⁰*Galveston Daily News*, 16 July 1876, <http://www.newspaperarchive.com>, accessed February 24, 2009.

³¹Utley, *Custer*, 39.

³²*Ibid.*

³³*Hartford Daily Courant*, 6 July 1876, <http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com.proxy.wichita.edu/>, accessed February 22, 2009.

investigating Secretary of War William W. Belknap in the spring of 1876 and had linked Grant's brother, Orvil, with corruption in the War Department in that testimony.³⁴

At the conclusion of his testimony, Custer attempted on several occasions to meet with Grant and was repeatedly rebuffed. Grant did, however, order Custer to remain in Washington. Custer was originally designated to command the Dakota column of the planned three-pronged 1876 expedition against the Lakota and Cheyenne, and ignoring Grant's order to remain in Washington boarded a train to the West. When the train stopped in Chicago a member of General Philip Sheridan's staff arrested Custer on the order of the President. Furthermore, Grant had ordered that Custer be barred from participating in the Sioux expedition.³⁵

General Alfred Terry was given overall command of the Sioux expedition by Grant. Custer, considered being still technically under arrest, continued by train to St. Paul, Minnesota, to meet with Terry. Generals Sheridan and William T. Sherman, each being politically astute, refused to intercede for Custer with Grant. Custer turned to Terry and literally took to his knees to ask Terry to intercede with Grant. Grant, under attack from the Democratic press for ordering Custer's arrest, eventually relented, and Custer was allowed to accompany the expedition as commander of the Seventh Cavalry, not the Dakota column commander.³⁶

Still, Custer was extremely popular with the American people. Rumor and innuendo persist to this day that Custer's close friend James Gordon Bennett, the powerful Democratic editor of the *New York Herald*, was secretly encouraging Custer to seek the presidency himself on the Democrat ticket, evidencing his popular support.³⁷ Any effort to focus blame on him for the disaster could incite a public firestorm. Terry, himself now under attack from the press and Custer's adherents inside the Army, wrote two reports of the disaster. Terry's first "official" report of Custer's defeat, written at the battle site on June 27, only recounted Custer's movements leading to the battle. But on July 2, at the mouth of the Bighorn, Terry penned a confidential report to Sherman and Sheridan. In this report, Terry explained his plan to trap the hostiles between Custer's column and another under Colonel John Gibbon. He summed up this report by stating, "I feel that our plan must have been successful had it been carried out [by Custer]."³⁸ Terry had briefed Gibbon and Custer on his plan aboard the steamer *Far West* on June 21.³⁹

Sherman had received this confidential report prior to the official one because of the routes the two reports had traveled to reach him. Sherman then handed the confidential report to a man who claimed to be a messenger to be forwarded to the Secretary of War. The "messenger" was in fact a reporter for the *Philadelphia Enquirer*, and this report splashed across newspapers on July 7, two days before the "official" Terry report was printed in newspapers. Thus, while attempting to avoid a public firestorm, Terry was now in the center of a huge one. Democratic newspaper editors now focused their wrath on the hapless Terry.⁴⁰

Grant and a number of high level officers rushed to Terry's defense. Grant told the *New York Herald* that, "I regard Custer's Massacre as a sacrifice of troops, brought on by Custer himself, that was wholly unnecessary--wholly unnecessary."⁴¹ General Samuel D. Sturgis, the actual commander of the Seventh Cavalry, was absent from the expedition on a long tour of detached service and had lost his son in the battle. Sturgis commented that Custer "was a brave man, but also a very selfish man. He was insanely ambitious of glory ... tyrannical and had no regard for the soldiers under him."⁴²

³⁴ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975; Meridian, 1986), 397-403.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 403.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 404-405.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 399-400.

³⁸ Utley, *Custer*, 42.

³⁹ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 257.

⁴⁰ Utley, *Custer*, 43.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 45.

As the controversy continued to play out in the press, newspapers even sought the opinions of former Confederate officers. Ex-Confederate John McCausland, interviewed by Bennett's *New York Herald* stated that, "The only way to fight with cavalry is with a dash--to charge." Confederate General Thomas L. Rosser had opposed Custer in the Shenandoah campaign. Responding to charges of recklessness on Custer's part in the *Philadelphia Enquirer*, Rosser placed the blame on Major Marcus A. Reno. "I fail to see anything very rash in the planning of it, or recklessness in its attempted execution. On the contrary, I feel that Custer would have succeeded had Reno with all the reserve of seven companies passed through and joined Custer after the first repulse."⁴³

The search for a scapegoat would eventually focus on Reno. In an effort to clear his name and resurrect his floundering military career, Reno requested and was granted an official court of inquiry. The court convened in Chicago on January 13, 1879.⁴⁴

Custer had divided his command before attacking the village at the Little Bighorn. Captain Frederick Benteen with three companies was to sweep south of the village to prevent any Indians from escaping in that direction. Major Reno was to take three companies and attack the village from the south. Custer, with five companies was to parallel Reno's advance behind a ridge to the east and attack the village at the far end.⁴⁵

Reno attacked across the Little Bighorn into the village, but was repelled and his command retreated back across the river in disorder, eventually to a position now known as Reno Hill. There appears to be no doubt that Reno lost his nerve after being splashed with blood and brain matter when the Arikara scout Bloody Knife was killed at his side during the retreat.⁴⁶ But that was not what made Reno a prime scapegoat in the Custer debacle.

Benteen's contingent joined Reno's at Reno Hill late in the afternoon. Benteen showed Reno a note from Custer ordering Benteen to come join him and bring ammunition. Reno outranked Benteen, but he did not have the authority to overrule Custer's order.⁴⁷ Despite Custer's note, Reno and Benteen stayed on Reno Hill until relieved by Terry and Gibbon's column on June 27.⁴⁸ The fact that they made no attempt to reach Custer is what made Reno scapegoat fodder. Whether such an attempt would have been successful or would have only served to compound the disaster is still being debated today.

The Reno Court of Inquiry of 1879 was summed up by Rutgers University professor Louise Barnett this way in her biography of Custer, *Touched by Fire*:

It has commonly been held that after the Battle of the Little Bighorn the army closed ranks at the court proceedings to preclude criticism damaging to itself: Further scrutiny of the campaign-which had been a waste of time, money, and men- could only reinforce the public's antimilitary sentiments. In interviews with Walter Camp, the interpreter Frederic F. Gerard said that "the general understanding among all whom he talked with confidentially was that any officer who made himself obnoxious to the defense would incur the wrath of certain officers in pretty high authority."⁴⁹

⁴³ *Philadelphia Enquirer*, 11 July 1876, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.proxy.wichita.edu/>, accessed February 22, 2009.

⁴⁴ Barnett, 310.

⁴⁵ James Welch with Paul Stekler, *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1994; New York: Norton, 2007), 149.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴⁷ John S. Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed*, with a foreword by Robert M. Utley (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991; Bison Books, 1993), 308.

⁴⁸ Utley, *Custer*, 27.

⁴⁹ Barnett, 311. Gerard quote from, Walter Camp, *Custer in '76: Walter Camp's Notes on the Custer Fight*, ed. Kenneth Hammer (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 238.

Reno was officially cleared of any dereliction of duty by the inquiry.⁵⁰ Though the Army cleared him, Reno remains a favorite target of many in the popular mind as well as among scholars.

The nature of any nation's collective military memory demands some degree of protection for the reputation of that nation's military heroes. George Armstrong Custer was certainly no exception. As a man who fostered and won wide public acclaim, especially in the print press, he was also assured that the defense of his fame and reputation would be quick, if not sure. Quick, in that it would begin immediately upon his demise. Not sure, though, in that much of that defense would be based in myth and rumor, and also that his polarizing nature would leave room for many detractors.

So much myth, rumor, and renunciation would follow in the wake of that June day's events that preeminent historian of the American West Robert M. Utley would write a book dedicated not to the event or the man, but instead to the controversy surrounding both. In that work Utley wrote, "Before the professional historian even entered the picture, most of the common fallacies of the Little Bighorn had been introduced and had won widespread acceptance."⁵¹ Utley would single out the press for special mention. "To the press must be assigned a large share of the responsibility for spreading the errors, myths, and legends that clutter the history of the Little Bighorn."⁵²

The press was far from alone in distorting the historical record of the man and the event. Nineteenth century partisan politics, especially virulent in an election year, influenced the debate. In addition, the "official" Army record of correspondence and proceedings was significantly colored by attempts to deflect blame and responsibility, seemingly motivated by the desire to protect individual and institutional reputations.

The above cacophony of voices provided the majority of source material for most, if not all, histories of Custer's last battle for the first century after the event. Glaring in its absence is the voice of the Indian participants in those events. That voice is finally being heard, long after the actual participants themselves have died. Their memories were indeed recorded in the years following the battle. "Their statements were obtained by Army personnel, newspaper correspondents, anthropologists, historians, and others who were genuinely interested in our frontier."⁵³ Yet, their accounts were certainly under utilized, if not flatly ignored by white historians for most of a century. Why?

Utley, who made extensive use of Indian memories in his 1993 biography of Sitting Bull, *The Lance and the Shield*, provided us with a general overview of the difficulties white historians and readers have with Indian accounts.

Indian testimony is difficult to use. It is personal, episodic, and maddeningly detached from time and space, or sequence and topography. It also suffers from a language barrier often aggravated by incompetent interpreters, from the cultural gulf between questioner and respondent, and from assumptions of the interviewer not always in accord with reality.⁵⁴

As Utley points out, Indian accounts, especially of battle, are often individual in nature. Plains Indian warriors fought as individuals, not as members of companies, regiments, or columns. The Cheyenne historian, John Stands in Timber, explained the individual nature of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 312.

⁵¹ Utley, *Custer*, 29.

⁵² Ibid., 47.

⁵³ Richard G. Hardorff, ed., *Indian Views of the Custer Fight: A Source Book* (Spokane, WA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 2004; Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 12.

⁵⁴ Robert M. Utley, foreword to John S. Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991; Bison Books, 1993), x.

Cheyenne combat in his book, *Cheyenne Memories*: “The Cheyenne rule was for each member of a warrior band not to wait for orders or try to do like the rest. He should do all he could for himself, and fight privately.”⁵⁵ The Lakota and Cheyenne had no “official” reports or “official” spokespersons to prepare or present an “official” account of the battle.

The Indian combatants of the Custer fight were members of a warrior culture that allowed for the exaggeration of battlefield exploits. It must be understood that by the time most of their accounts were recorded by white interviewers they were virtual prisoners of war confined to government reservations, often garrisoned with soldiers.⁵⁶ Their accounts are those of individual human beings with individual personalities. Some accounts would be laced with braggadocio, while others, perhaps fearful of retribution, would be more inclined to tell a white interviewer whatever they thought the “white man” would want to hear. They may not have known that they had killed the famous Custer on the day of the battle. But by the time they surrendered they not only knew that they had defeated a white hero, they knew that much of white America was bent on vengeance.

Richard G. Hardorff is the author or editor of a number of books about Custer, the Little Bighorn battle, and the Plains Indians, including: *Indian Views of the Custer Fight*, *Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight*, *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight*, *Hokabey! A Good Day to Die and Camp, Custer and the Little Bighorn*.⁵⁷ Highlighting Lakota and Cheyenne interpretations of nineteenth century history, he described the difficulties with interviews of Native Americans. Such interviews “involved the interaction of three individuals: a narrator, a translator, and an interviewer. More often than not, these combined efforts were marred by the distortions of the narrator, the improficiencies of the interpreter, and the lack of objectivity of the interviewer.”⁵⁸

Utley would no doubt agree with Hardorff’s assessment of translation difficulties. He cited the “failure of white interrogator and red witness to achieve a meeting of the minds, especially when, as was usually the case, a third mind, that of an interpreter, intervened.”⁵⁹ As a result, many early historians of the battle were inclined to simply overlook these sources. Others attempted to incorporate these accounts, but in Utley’s opinion, “only a few, a very few indeed, have succeeded in doing more than make themselves look silly to all but the uninformed.”⁶⁰

Difficulties in translation could prove disastrous. It is commonly believed that in a meeting with Lieutenant William Philo Clark after his surrender, the words of Crazy Horse were misinterpreted by Frank Grouard. Grouard may have deliberately altered Crazy Horse’s intentions for motives involving inter-Lakota politics.⁶¹ Clark met with Crazy Horse to ask his assistance against Chief Joseph’s Nez Perce. Crazy Horse was not enthusiastic, but according to most accounts, replied that he would fight until there were no Nez Perce left. Grouard translated to Clark that Crazy Horse had said he would fight until there were no *white* men left. The misinterpretation, intentional or not, led to Crazy Horse being bayoneted by a soldier a few days later when Indian police, scouts, and troops attempted to arrest him. Crazy Horse died of his wound that night.⁶²

⁵⁵ John Stands in Timber and Margot Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories*, with assistance from Robert M. Utley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967; Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1972), 172.

⁵⁶ Hardorff, *Indian Views*, 12.

⁵⁷ Hardorff, *Indian Views*, back cover. Also Richard G. Hardorff, *Hokabey! A Good Day to Die: The Indian Casualties of the Custer Fight* (Spokane, WA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1993; Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), back cover.

⁵⁸ Hardorff, *Indian Views*, 11-12.

⁵⁹ Utley, *Custer*, 86.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Robert A. Clark, ed., *The Killing of Chief Crazy Horse*, with a commentary by Carroll Friswold (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1976; Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1988), 29.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 29-36.

Misinterpretation of Indian intentions took forms other than language. Private Charles Windolph, who spent the night of the battle on Reno Hill, wrote later about seeing “great fires and hear[ing] the steady rhythm of Indian tomtoms beating for their wild victory dances.”⁶³ Given that Windolph was a Prussian immigrant,⁶⁴ and that he now found himself surrounded and besieged, it is easy to understand his impressions. Nonetheless, Trooper Windolph’s impressions of what he heard that night were mistaken. According to the Cheyenne Wooden Leg, who was a young warrior that day, what Windolph actually heard were Lakota and Cheyenne women singing their mourning songs for their lost sons and husbands. “There was no dancing or celebrating in any of the camps that night. Too many people were in mourning. Too many Cheyenne and Sioux women had gashed their arms and legs to show their grief.”⁶⁵

There have been histories of the battle and its Indian participants written in recent years that have made extensive use of Indian accounts. Utley’s *Sitting Bull* biography makes use of interviews conducted by Stanley Vestal, pen name for Walter Stanley Campbell, of elderly Lakota living on reservations in the Dakotas in the 1920s and 1930s. Utley describes Vestal’s biography of *Sitting Bull* as a literary exercise while his is of a historical nature. Utley describes his methodology this way:

I have tried hard to look at *Sitting Bull* in terms of his cultural norms, not mine. Where whites drew false conclusions because of ignorance of his culture, I have sought to stress his perfectly rational underlying motives. Where I could not fathom his motives, I have tried to avoid pronouncing judgments according to my culture when his, if only I understood it better, might have supplied a logical explanation.⁶⁶

Given Utley’s previous work, indications are that he considered the Lakota whom Vestal interviewed with the same lens with which he viewed *Sitting Bull*. He used his extensive background knowledge and internal evidence to determine when and where their accounts fit into his narrative.

James Welch is part Blackfoot Indian and was born on the Blackfeet Reservation.⁶⁷ He is not a professional historian, but rather a “fiction writer and sometimes poet.”⁶⁸ His book, *Killing Custer*, grew from his collaboration with filmmaker Paul Stekler, for a PBS documentary about the battle. Welch’s sympathies lie with the Lakota and Cheyenne. He not only used the testimonials of the battles’ Indian participants, but also spoke with their descendants to uncover the stories that have been passed from generation to generation. As a Native American storyteller, he is cognizant of the importance of utilizing Native American points of view via oral histories for Indian culture and understanding of history. The Dakota (Eastern Sioux) historian Angela Cavender Wilson explained that importance with these words. “These stories, much more so than the written documents by non-Indians, provide detailed descriptions about our historical players ... Consequently, ours are not merely interesting stories or a simple dissemination of historical facts, but more importantly, they are transmissions of culture upon which our survival as a people depends.”⁶⁹

Welch is also able to uncover a rational explanation, as alluded to by Utley, for at least one supposed incongruity in the young Crow scout Curley’s account of the battle. Curley, who

⁶³ Welch, 289.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁶⁶ Utley, *Lance*, xv-xvi.

⁶⁷ Welch, 39.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁹ Angela Cavender Wilson, “Power of the Spoken Word: Native Oral Traditions in American Indian History,” in Donald L. Fixico, ed., *Rethinking American Indian History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 111.

was only seventeen years old on that day, claimed to have left Custer's side only after the Métis scout Mitch Boyer urged him to save himself when it became obvious that Custer's luck was not going to carry this day. Hiding in ravines and coulees until he had made his escape, Curley claimed to have found a pony standing over a dead Lakota warrior. Taking the pony and the Lakota's Winchester and red blanket he continued on to a ridge a safe distance away, from where he claimed to have watched much of the battle through binoculars.⁷⁰

Some of Curley's detractors have seized on the supposedly irrational claim that a warrior would have carried a blanket on such a blistering hot day. To meet this criticism, Welch quotes historian Mardell Plainfeather:

It was not unusual for Curley, or a Sioux, to have a blanket. In fact, Plains Indian people relied upon blankets for a variety of reasons and always had one on hand, no matter what the temperature was, especially in traveling. Blankets were used for saddle padding, for sudden rainstorms, for chilly summer nights, and for signaling the village as they returned home. During the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the Sioux waved blankets to frighten the horses of Custer's men.⁷¹

Welch asserts that much of the other information Curley supplied has been validated in recent years and quotes Utley to back up his assertion. "Curley's testimony is a prime example of the blind interviewer leading the seeing witness ... The results, distorted by the interviewers rather than Curley, have baffled students ever since and earned Curley low marks as a witness."⁷²

Dr. John S. Gray, who died in 1991,⁷³ is another example of one of those people who found themselves captivated by the events along the Little Bighorn in June of 1876. A retired physician and professor of physiology at Northwestern University,⁷⁴ he could not escape his fascination with Custer's last battle and the Métis scout Mitch Boyer who perished alongside the Seventh Cavalry's troopers that fateful day.⁷⁵ Gray's book, *Custer's Last Campaign* was the end product of that fascination.

Part I of the book is a narrative of Mitch Boyer's life up to his assignment as scout to the Seventh Cavalry on June 10, 1876.⁷⁶ Part II employs "the systematic use of time-motion analysis."⁷⁷ Gray explained this method in his *Preface*: "An essential element of time-motion analysis is speed of motion, which provides a feasibility check that exposes impossibilities. When an account contains blatant contradictions, one version usually proves feasible and the other impossible."⁷⁸

Gray used interviews with survivors of Reno's and Benteen's commands to construct events up until the time the Seventh separated. However, for most of his information pertaining to events after the columns lost sight of each other he relies primarily on the accounts of Custer's Crow and Arikara scouts. After tracking the troopers' movements between geographical

⁷⁰ Welch, 162.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷² Robert M. Utley, in foreword to John S. Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991; Bison Books, 1993), x; quoted in Welch, 164.

⁷³ Gray, back cover.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Utley foreword in Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed* x. John S. Gray, *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876* (Fort Collins, CO: The Old Army Press, 1976), preface.

⁷⁵ Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign*, xiii.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

landmarks at reasonable speeds “the interviews with Indian scouts suddenly blossomed into lucidity and contributed mightily.”⁷⁹

Along with Curley’s aforementioned account and those of other Crow scouts, Gray made use of Orin G. Libby’s 1912 interviews with nine of the forty Arikara scouts who accompanied the Seventh on the expedition.⁸⁰ Libby’s *Arikara Narrative* is itself a compelling and informative presentation of the Arikara’s view of Custer, his final battle, and their role in the Army’s 1876 expedition. The Arikara scouts met together at one of their number’s home on the Fort Berthold Reservation in 1912 to tell their stories. Each scout related his account in his own language. The stories were translated into English by Peter Beauchamp, an Arikara who had attended Hampton Institute, the forerunner to the Carlisle Indian School. Beauchamp read his written English account back to the scouts in Arikara to insure accuracy.⁸¹ As an Arikara educated in white schools Beauchamp may possibly have been able to translate Indian stories into syntax comprehensible to a white audience.

The Arikara scout Red Star’s assertion that Custer had told another scout, Bob-tailed Bull, that a victory against the hostiles would catapult him to the presidency was seized upon by white critics of Custer,⁸² thereby adding to the whole Custer controversy.⁸³ Bob-tailed Bull perished at the Little Bighorn.⁸⁴ Red Star’s assertion was not corroborated by the other scouts in the 1912 interviews, and if Custer did indeed say as much to Bob-tailed Bull, we can only speculate about his reasons for doing so.

An interesting addition to the Arikara lore of the battle is presented in John Stands in Timber’s *Cheyenne Memories*. Bob-tailed Bull’s horse was twice wounded in the battle but survived. The horse eluded the victorious Lakota and Cheyenne and made its lonely way all the way back to his owner’s village some 300 miles away. The Arikara honored the horse with the name Famous War Horse and a song. The Arikaras used the song to honor returning veterans of the two world wars.⁸⁵ Bob-tailed Bull’s Famous War Horse certainly deserves recognition alongside his much more famous contemporary, Captain Myles Keogh’s Commanche. Another interesting anecdote related in *Cheyenne Memories* deserves at least a brief mention. As previously addressed, Major Marcus Reno remains even today in many corners a target of scorn for failing to come to Custer’s aid. Coming from a totally different perspective, some Cheyenne wondered why Custer had not retreated to Reno’s position.⁸⁶

All of the above examples of Indian accounts are presented as an argument that the story of what happened beside that Montana river on June 25, 1876, cannot be complete without the inclusion of all participants’ points of view. As demonstrated, the availability of rich sources and new scholarship within the last half century has provided for a more complex, yet satisfying, understanding of the events at the Little Bighorn. Indian accounts of the events are just as important as the traditional white accounts to ascertaining the truth. The research into Native American testimonials has augmented the body of available evidence enormously and enriched our understanding of the Little Bighorn.

In 1926 the body of an unidentified cavalryman was given a ceremonial burial on the battlefield grounds during the battle’s semi-centennial celebration. A Lakota veteran of the battle

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Orin G. Libby, ed., *The Arikara Narrative of Custer’s Campaign and the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, with a foreword by Jerome A. Greene, with a preface by Dee Brown, with an introduction by D’Arcy McNickle. Originally published in 1920 under the title: *The Arikara narrative of the campaign against the hostile Dakotas, June, 1876*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), back cover.

⁸¹ D’Arcy McNickle introduction to Libby, 3.

⁸² Libby, 58.

⁸³ Jerome A. Greene foreword to Libby, ix.

⁸⁴ Libby, 102.

⁸⁵ Stands in Timber, 210.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 202-203.

attended the ceremony and was told through an interpreter that the whites considered the unidentified white soldier to be a hero. The old warrior asked to address the assembled crowd. Given permission to do so, he told the crowd that the Indians had lost brave men that day too. "After a short pause, he added reflectively that the families of these slain men had cried for the loss of their sons, brothers, and fathers, and that these slain Indians were also considered heroes among the Lakotas and the Cheyennes."⁸⁷ The Lakota and Cheyenne heroes of that day were not only Indian heroes, they were American heroes, and America owes them the honor of hearing their story as seen through their peoples' eyes.

⁸⁷ Hardorff, *Hokabey! A Good Day to Die*, 14.