

# THE SIOUX WAR—WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CUSTER'S DISASTER.

FORT LINCOLN, D. T.,  
Sept. 20, 1878.

The column which left the Yellowstone on the 10th of September, under the command of Major Reno, reached Wolf's Point, on the Missouri River, on the afternoon of the 13th, without encountering any signs that would indicate the presence of an Indian force. Our sudden expedition to Wolf's Point was caused by a report that Long Dog with some 150 followers had crossed the Missouri and that the river bank for a mile was covered with Indians. On examination it turned out that Long Dog and his followers had crossed the river and endeavored to procure ammunition from the agent, Major Mitchell, who held a long conference with the chief, trying to persuade him to surrender. This he declined to do, stating that Sitting Bull was on his way to Fort Peck, and would compel the agent to issue ammunition to his warriors. Long Dog's party stated that at one time they were surrounded by the soldiers, and had to abandon their tepees and other property in order to escape. They were under the impression that the soldiers were in pursuit of them, although our column had no suspicion of their presence. On finding they could obtain no ammunition at the agency they continued their march, and are supposed to have gone into the Canadian dominions. Pursuit was impossible, as the Missouri at Wolf's Point is not fordable.

On the morning of the 15th General Terry arrived on board the steamer *John M. Chambers*, and, learning the exact state of affairs, answered officially that the campaign was at an end. Next morning the return march began. On Gen. Terry's arrival at Buford he received from General Sheridan a very complimentary dispatch, approving his course during the campaign.

Now that the campaign is over no time should be lost in clearing up the causes which led to the great disaster that will ever be remembered in our history. No confidence can be placed in the official report of the battle of the 25th of June. It is full of inaccuracies, and has been read with something approaching astonishment by the men who took part in the fight. If the public want to know the whole truth about the Custer massacre there must be a full and searching investigation where the witnesses will have to answer on their oath. If such investigation should be held startling revelations may be looked for. The story of Custer's fight and death is still unwritten. Your correspondent has gleaned some important facts which must compel further investigations, but the officers of the regiment will give no information unless they are compelled to do so. From the day the *Herald* correspondent arrived in the camp of the Seventh Cavalry he sedulously sought such information as would enable him to place this grave question in its true light and fix in a manner that should have no room for cavil or evasion the responsibility of the disaster that beset our arms on the 25th of June. The task was not an easy one. It was beset with difficulties that could not be met and overcome in the ordinary way. Men there were who could tell the whole truth, but they were soldiers; it was their duty to be silent; they were obliged to speak the official language; they were loyal to their regiment; there was a secret and they felt themselves bound in honor to be silent. It was also their interest. Was it not known that the men who had in life been the enemies of the dead Custer were more than ever his enemies now that he was dead? How, then, could a mere subaltern dare to express an opinion? He must speak official language or he must prepare to be jumped, that is, pounced upon at some unwary moment and treated with the full rigor of military law, driven from his profession and made a beggar upon the world after years of meritorious service. What wonder that men who know the whole truth refused to speak their own thoughts and merely echoed the official language. But little by little the truth came out; words spoken at every unguarded moment and dropped in the heat of argument, simple questions answered by officers and men,

and the whole joined together and connected has produced the conviction that there was blundering want of soldierly sympathy—a failure on the part of men to do their duty or lukewarmness in supporting General Custer—that might be called by an ugly name. The whole truth of the Custer massacre will never be known unless the American public demand a full and searching investigation, when every man who was in the fight on the 25th of June at the Little Big Horn will be compelled to tell what he knows. There is buried with the dead a terrible secret; but the witnesses still live, and the government can learn the whole truth if the government wants to know it. Then can be settled forever the question whether the massacre of the Little Big Horn must be charged to rashness of the dead or prudence of the living. The issue is a fair one and must not be evaded. Either Custer or the men who survived him must be made responsible for the lives lost on the Little Big Horn, and now, while the witnesses are alive, is the time to settle the question forever.

That Custer was justified in making the attack on the village will hardly be questioned by any officer who has had any experience of Indian fighting. On that point the opinion of officers of the Seventh Cavalry is unanimous. Even to-day they believe that had the 600 men who rode after Custer's flag come into contact, as a body, with the Indians, success would not have been doubtful for a moment. The question, therefore, hinges on the description of the troops in the actual fight, and this naturally involves the consideration of how far Custer's plans were carried out by his subordinate officers and what amount of co-operation he received at their hands. There is the story of the fight in the bottom, about which various versions are given even by those who happened to be engaged in it. An investigation would throw some curious light on the actions of prominent actors, and bring out in bold relief names that have scarcely been mentioned in connection with the fight or the rout, as one may choose to view it. According to the official report the three companies in the bottom under Major Reno were overwhelmed by a mass of Indians and compelled to take to the woods. A prominent actor in the fight assured me that when the skirmish line retired to the woods there were not fifty Indians actually engaged with Reno's command. It is extremely doubtful whether more than one man had been struck by a hostile bullet when the skirmish line retired to the woods. Nearly all the men were killed while getting their horses or on the way to the ford. There was a great deal of confusion, and the ride to the ford something like a stampede, with Reno at the head. Opinions are divided also as to whether the position at the point of woods in the bottom was tenable or not. One cool-headed man assured me that fifty men could have held it against 500 Indians.

The mass of Indians who moved into the bottom took no part in the fight against Reno's command. As they moved out from their village they caught sight of Custer on the bluffs and turned off to meet him and prevent him falling on their women and children. The story that they first overwhelmed Reno and then turned to Custer is pronounced a fiction. Some of Reno's command fought with great bravery, especially Captain French, who was the last man to cross the ford in the retreat. He remained behind his company, and at times was completely surrounded by Indians. Major Reno led the run to the bluffs, as he tells us in his official report, but there it is called a charge, though there were no Indians between the bluffs and the retreating cavalry to charge. When the retreat began from the skirmish line only one man is known to have been wounded.

The number of Indians actually engaged with troops at this point did not exceed sixty. All the men who were killed in this command fell while getting their horses and while they were retreating across the ford to the bluffs, except the wounded man, who was abandoned in the retreat. The handling of the troops on this occasion has been very severely criticised. On entering the bottom they were first deployed as skirmishers and then mounted and dismounted several times within a few minutes without any apparent cause. The sol-

diers were withdrawn from skirmish line after they had fired a few shots at the Indians, who were a long way off, and there was no defence of the woods worthy of the name. All this conspired to demoralize the troops and the manner in which the retreat was conducted caused it to degenerate into a stampede. There is a strong impression that had a tougher fight been made in the bottom the Indians could not have overwhelmed Custer with their whole force. It must be kept well in mind that the whole Indian force withdrew and concentrated to attack Custer as soon as Reno had retreated to the bluffs. The statement that the Indians remained in front of Reno's position firing dropping shots is absolutely contradicted by officers who were present. The Indians left Reno severely alone on his hill, and for an hour heavy firing was distinctly audible in the direction Custer had taken. According to Captain Benteen's own statement he arrived on the field at the moment when Reno's command were escaping up the heights, and immediately joined his forces with those of Major Reno. There were then six companies assembled on the hill, increased soon to seven by the arrival of Captain McDougall with the pack train; that is to say, there was a force more numerous than that with General Custer, and who can doubt that the dead hero's eyes were often turned backward along his trail watching for the cloud of dust that would tell him his troopers were coming like a whirlwind to his support.

But they came not, and no serious effort was made to reach him. When Reno's command took position on the hill the Indians disappeared and went over the range of lower hills that hid Custer and his gallant men from view of his seven companies that were drawn up upon the hill under Reno, with not an enemy in view; with not a soul to bar the way while the roll of the rifle volley across the hills told that Custer and his men were fighting for their lives.

In the official report furnished by Major Reno, it is stated that company D of the Seventh Cavalry was sent forward to open communication with General Custer. This statement is inaccurate. It is true that D Company, of its own accord and without orders, did move forward to the crest of the hill which hid Custer and the men who died with him from the rest of the command, but they did so only when tired with the inaction of Colonel Reno's command, while rifle volleys were telling that their comrades were being done to death. Yet 300 horsemen under Major Reno were standing on a hill not four miles away from where General Custer fell, with not an Indian opposing their advance. When D Company went forward without orders precious time had been lost, and the order sent after this company was delivered when the company was returning. Custer's force was then destroyed; but had the seven companies under Major Reno advanced when Captain Benteen's battalion came up there is no doubt that they could have arrived at Custer's battle field in time to take part in the fight.

If Reno thought it possible for one company to open communication with General Custer, why did he not try to join with his seven companies? Why was the mass of horsemen kept idle on the hill for a space of time calculated at two hours, not hurled into the fight when they first arrived? What were seven companies of cavalry doing gathered upon a hill when four miles away their comrades were fighting desperately for their lives? When some members of D company reached the summit of a range of low hills, which hid Custer's command from the view of Major Reno's forces, they saw some two miles away crowds of Indians on a hill, which is now thought to be the hill on which Custer died. The Indians were riding hither and thither, and on the plains masses of mounted men were swaying back and forth and straggling shots were fired from time to time. It was the end of the tragedy. The last victims were being offered up. From this it is clear that if seven companies had advanced at a gallop to where the firing was heard, instead of halting an hour or two on the hill, they could have arrived in ample time to have co-operated with Custer. There was nothing to prevent them doing so. The fifty or sixty Indians who had stampeded Major Reno's command

had gone to take part in the fight against Custer, and Major Reno and his command were left absolutely free until Custer's men had been massacred, when the whole Indian force returned to attack the men who had been standing idle for two hours while these same Indians slaughtered their comrades. How this came to pass and who is the responsible person must be answered by a searching investigation.

Captain Benteen also, who in defense of the hill won golden opinions for his great courage and coolness, will have, unfortunately, to explain why his battalion failed to appear at an early hour on the battle field. He had returned to the main trail and was following in Custer's wake before the fight began and could not at any time have been during the fight more than seven or eight miles distant from where Custer fell. About seven miles from Custer's battle field Captain Benteen watered his horses at a pool in the road. While the battalion was halted Boston Custer rode up, spoke with several officers and then rode on to the front. He was found dead by General Custer's side. About two miles from this pool of water Captain Benteen received Custer's last written order—"Hurry up. Big village. Bring up the packs." That order was practically ignored. Captain Benteen and his battalion walked at the ordinary marching pace until the point was reached where Reno's retreating men were seen, then, in combined force, halted for two hours and took no further part in the battle until the Indians came back and attacked them. No effort was made to join Custer or to follow up the Indians, who withdrew from Major Reno's front to go to attack Custer. The same Indians who fought Major Reno in the bottom took part in the fight against Custer, and had the companies advanced when they assembled on the hill they could also have taken part in the fight and Custer might be living to-day. Why Major Reno's command failed to move to the assistance of the General remains to be explained. A searching investigation would bring to light other and equally startling revelations with regard to the conduct of some of the prominent actors in the fight of the 25th of June, and justice to the living as well as to the dead demands that such investigation should be ordered by the government.—*New York Herald*.

## Report of the Committee of the Governors' Grasshopper Convention, at Omaha, Oct. 25 and 26, 1876.

Prof. Riley read the following:  
COMMITTEE REPORT.

Your committee, appointed to draft resolutions expressive of the views of the conference, would respectfully report as follows:

The Rocky Mountain locust or grasshopper, by its migrations from Territory to Territory and from State to State, destroying millions of dollars' worth of the hard earnings of the western farmers, crippling the progress of the border States, and retarding the settlement of the Territories, has become a national plague. Its injuries are of such magnitude that no effort should be left untied that will be likely to diminish or avert them.

The work to be done is of a two-fold nature—State and national. From the writings of those who have given the subject careful attention, and from our own past experience, it is quite manifest that the pest in question is not a native south of the 44th parallel or east of the 100th meridian, but that it occasionally overruns the country south and east of these lines, from the extreme northwest.

There are, therefore, two pressing questions which demand our attention.

1. The best means of fighting the plague as it occurs in the States to which it migrates, but in which it is not indigenous.

2. The thorough investigation into its habits in its native home with a view of preventing, if possible, its migrations therefrom.

Toward the elucidation and settlement of the first we have the dear-bought experience of the past few years, and there has already been a large amount of valuable information obtained and published in the address of Gov. Pillsbury, in the report of the special Minnesota

commission, appointed in 1875, in the two last entomological reports made to the State of Missouri, by its State entomologist, and in the writings of Prof. Thomas and others. We, therefore, recommend the passage of the following resolutions:

*Resolved*, That, as much valuable and practical advice has already been published, a committee of three be appointed to collect and issue in pamphlet form, as soon as possible, all the more practical means, based on experience, that we now have any knowledge of, toward the destruction of the insect, whether as it pours down upon us in the winged condition, or as it hatches out in our midst.

*Resolved*, That the official report of the proceedings of this conference shall form the prelude to this pamphlet, and that the following recommendations and statement of our views as to the possibility of contending with the locust shall form a part of said pamphlet:

We, the Governors of Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri and Dakota Territory, having met in conference for the purpose of consulting in reference to the locusts, and having exchanged opinions with one another, and with men of long western experience, as well as scientific men; and having discussed the facts gathered from all parts of the west visited by these pests, and the various remedies tried and suggested, feel fully warranted in making the following statements to the people of our respective States and Territories:

1. That, although it is highly probable that locusts will occasionally visit portions of our territory, unless the National Government finds some means of destroying them in their native haunts, yet it is evident that the late series of visitation is unprecedented, and will not be likely to recur for some years to come.

2. It is well known that in most of the States, and especially in the Eastern States along mountain ranges, locusts have repeatedly ravaged the country during the past century, and often to an extent compared to which our own losses sink into insignificance. We have also no certainty that any particular section of country will be permanently afflicted by, or that any State or Territory will be always exempt from, the injury of locusts.

3. That we have prepared an appeal to Congress on your behalf, requesting it to order a thorough investigation of this subject to see if it is possible to exterminate this pest, and feel confident that the request will be granted.

4. That our consultation with each other and with those who have tested the matter has resulted in the firm conviction that by proper efforts, concerted action, and a vigorous and determined warfare against them, the young grasshoppers, which may be hatched out next year, or any subsequent year, can be successfully fought and our crops saved; that we are not without remedy, but we may protect our crops against them if we will but make use of the means within our reach. We say this not simply for the purpose of encouraging our agriculturists, although this is one great object we have in view, but also, because we are thoroughly satisfied of its truth. And in order to aid you as far as possible, we have drawn up the following statement of the methods which may be adopted to destroy them, and to protect your crops against them.

Further, in order to meet the emergency that threatens next Spring, particular stress should be laid on the best means of coping with the eggs and unfledged young that will hatch from them in the spring of 1877. Among these we deem as most feasible and best calculated to produce good results, a judicious bounty system; and, as that recommended by Prof. Riley, in his eighth report, is based on the valuable experience gained in 1875, and correctly states the principles that should govern such legislation, we recommend the following:

*Resolved*, That in our opinion it will be wise and politic for the legislatures of each of the States and Territories, most deeply interested in the locust question, to enact a State bounty law, offering a bounty of — per bushel for the collection and destruction of the eggs, and of — per bushel for the destruction of the unfledged insects, that the principles laid down by Prof. Riley for such a law should be kept in view; and that we will use our influence to obtain such a law in our respective States.