

Gary Owen, My Darling

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ON JUNE 25, 1876, GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER and five troops of the Seventh Cavalry met a combined force of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors near the Little Bighorn River in Eastern Montana. They were surrounded and killed "to a man," history books solemnly intone. The bad news reached Philadelphia, which was wrapped in bunting for the nation's hundredth birthday. It was an unbelievable defeat. Grim tidings awaited Custer's parents in Monroe, Michigan, for with Custer were two brothers, a brother-in-law and a nephew. Custer's youngest brother, Boston, was afraid that he would miss out on the action. At the last minute, he hurried from the pack train to be with his brother.

For two nights the bodies lay in the moonlight, a pale and bloated "*Tableau on Last Stand Hill.*" Custer, shot in the head and the chest, sat between two soldiers. Nearby was his brother Tom, whose skull was smashed, and his adjutant, W. W. Cooke, one side of his long whiskers scalped. Boston was a little farther down the hill. To be sure, his last moments rivaled any of his dreams. Close to the river, in a deep ravine, lay the men who tried to escape near the end of the battle. Here the soldiers were quickly surrounded and butchered. They clawed their way up the steep sides, but to no avail. When it was over, the bodies tumbled to the bottom in a heap.

The corpses lay for two days in the sweltering summer sun before the burial parties arrived. The soil was hard, and there were few shovels. The men couldn't stop vomiting. They gave up, cut sage brush and scattered dirt to cover their friends, and returned to camp. A stench filled the air and few wanted to eat. In his diary a soldier wrote: "*Let us bury the dead and flee this rotting atmosphere.*"

To lovers of western history, Little Bighorn Battlefield is hallowed ground. The battle itself involved a relatively small number of participants, and it didn't drag on—as one participant said, it lasted just about as long as it took a hungry man to eat his lunch. It wasn't Antietam or Gettysburg. And yet, this battlefield attracts thousands of amateur historians and Custer fanatics. I guess I'm one of the many.

A few years ago, I was invited down to work at the battlefield. It was early spring when I drove down through Alberta to the eastern corner of Montana. In a day, one can cover a lot of history. I cross the Marias River, not far from where, on his way to rendezvous with Clark, Lewis killed an Indian. Then briefly I follow the Musselshell, along the same route as Chief Joseph when he fled toward Canada with the Nez Perce. By this time, the moccasins were thin and the children cried from the cold.

A spring blizzard is bearing down when I check into the Lariat Motel at midnight. A huge Grizzly with outstretched claws stands in the lobby, and the sign above the check-in counter reads "Welcome to Custer Country." The next morning, I drive up to the battlefield. It is easy to see from the highway. Tall firs mark the National Cemetery, and to the right is a large stone house built for the first superintendent. I have been here before, many times. Once, a Crow Indian, hair to his waist, was our guide. When I asked about the placement of the "Native American" teepees, he snickered at my political correctness. "You mean *Injun*?" Well, there'd been plenty of *Injuns* around on that afternoon of the twenty-fifth.

A granite obelisk stands atop a mass grave where the remains of the soldiers are buried, though there are fewer bones in the ground than there were men in the battle. Early photographs show human and horse bones all jumbled together, and the remains of the officers weren't retrieved until a year after the battle. Custer was picked up, packed up, and placed in a vault in Poughkeepsie until his burial at Westpoint. Wolves and coyotes do not distinguish rank, and I'd bet a paycheck that not all of Custer lies in that revered tomb.

I walk into the visitor center and meet the other volunteer, Bill Dunn, a big Texan and Little Bighorn buff. After we are introduced, he reaches out and grabs my hand, and says in a drawl, "I say! You're purty." Bill is a charmer, and I settle in for the fun.

We stay in adjoining apartments on the battlefield. Bill has thick glasses, a bum knee and a powerful snore that I hear every night through my bedroom wall. As a boy, he read every book he could find about the Little Bighorn. "I tell you," he says, "I would stay up into the wee hours reading those books. Then one day I put away the books and started looking at girls. All of a sudden, I was an old man—Imagine, seventy two years old! And I started to read *everything* again." After many inquiries, he was invited to return to the place that captivated his youth. He drives a black Cadillac and when he arrives at my door that first night wearing a mink coat and cowboy hat, I gasp in astonishment and run in to put on a dress. From then on, we are inseparable.

Sometimes we go for dinner in nearby Hardin. On our way there, Bill always puts in a tape of *Gary Owen*, the regimental song of the Seventh Cavalry and a favorite of Custer's. The phrase "Gary Owen" is used like

a Masonic handshake among Custer enthusiasts: they say it as a greeting or a farewell. Bill drums his fingers in rhythm on the steering wheel.

We walk up to the obelisk in the cold night and toast the General, and then go further along Custer Ridge. White grave markers are clustered in Horseholder's Draw, where the men tried to keep the horses calm while the battle unfolded around them. "Damn," says Bill, "it must have been hard to keep those horses down." One evening near midnight, we drive out to the Reno Entrenchment site. Bill puts in the soundtrack from "The Magnificent Seven," and the Cadillac glides slowly over the battlefield. Bill roars with laughter, and I giggle in delicious anticipation of getting caught. Sure enough, the following day, people in the valley report the spectral lights to the superintendent. He turns to us, and Bill confesses. We promise not to do that again. Afterwards, Bill walks by my desk and winks. We talk into the night about history, politics, good food, and opera. As the weeks go by, I start each morning by tapping on the wall, and he taps back. But this isn't a holiday romance in the Caribbean—I mean, it can't be—he's old enough to be my dad.

During the day, we assist with various tasks, volunteer things. Bill loves to talk, and he handles most of the visitors. The 1950's visitor center was not built with any archeological sensitivity in mind—it was plunked down a few yards from Last Stand Hill. To the right is the National Cemetery. At the end of the Indian Wars, forts were torn down all over the west. The graves were re-interred here. On my way to work, I pass by the Indian Scouts, Curley and White Swan. In the first row lie Captains Fetterman and Brown, who led their men into an ambush a few years before the Little Bighorn. Legend has it that at the end they pointed their guns at each other and fired at the count of three—no doubt a tricky thing to do. Indian Scouts, laundresses, babies, and soldiers who died at Normandy and Korea are all commingled together. It will be an interesting resurrection day.

In the early years, visitors took any souvenirs they could find. It is even rumored that one superintendent "salted" the field with cartridges, so the curious would not leave empty handed. Bill, however, has the prize—an 1873 Springfield Carbine that was issued to the Cavalry at Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, while Custer was there. His hands smooth the stock, and he carefully points out the cartouche on the side. With obvious pride he tells me, "Honey, this gun may have been a box away from glory." It is a Cavalry gun, lighter than a rifle and accurate at a distance. But the Indians crept up the ravines, within pistol range. And that was too close. As Bill puts it: "Six shots, shaking hands, and that was that."

On the battlefield, marble markers show where the soldiers fell. Some are far away, mysterious sentinels. The men here were either the first to die or the last to flee. Clusters of stones tell of last moments of panic. Men bunch together; then they die.

In the evening the battlefield is locked up. Security is tight enough to discourage souvenir hunters and drunken high school students. There are stories of ghosts who haunt the field at night, howling with their wounds. Who can blame them? Would you rest easily? Chief Gall's two children were killed during the first skirmish, and then, "It made my heart bad," he said. "After that I killed all my enemies with a hatchet." Thighs slit, testicles slashed, arms chopped, and faces smashed. For the initial survivors, it wasn't the time to play 'possum.

After dinner I'm usually at Bill's apartment. We watch his favorite film, *Vertigo*, for the fourth time, and I don't mind feigning interest. "You would have loved Ernie's—it was a fabulous place," he tells me as he pops olives into his mouth. And when Kim Novak sits down, he sighs, "Oh, those Hitchcock blondes."

We talk a lot about the battle and argue certain points. Despite extensive archaeology—when the battlefield was sifted like flour—there is the endless mystery of what actually happened. Our books are scattered and the maps unfurled on the tables. Along the counter are the rocks that he has picked up at various places on the battlefield. They are all carefully marked: Deep Ravine, Cedar Coulee, Medicine Tail Coulee. I warn Bill he'll be arrested for snitching them. He nods his head, "Yep, it'll happen, but not before I find a bullet. I know it's out there. The last one unturned, waiting for me."

Almost everyone has an opinion about Custer. A couple arrives from Colorado, and the husband tells Bill, "I wanna hear about the baby killer." Bill tries to be fair to both sides, but he weighs in privately, "By God, if Custer had showed up in *my* back yard, I would've shot him." The museum contains many of Custer's belongings that were donated by his widow, Elizabeth Bacon Custer. Libbie did everything she could to continue the legend of her fearless general. Few dared to say anything negative about her husband while she was still living, and Mrs. Custer lived a long time. When she died in 1933, at ninety two, she had buried most of her husband's detractors.

Here is Custer's Westpoint cadet uniform and the buckskin suit he wore on the Blackhills expedition that ultimately led to this reckoning. He wasn't a big man, and Bill says that most of the 7th Cavalry were "runty fellows, not big guys like me." They were a mixed lot, both experienced and new recruits, and many were born in Europe. Shock and terror filled their last moments, and I doubt they all cried for their mothers in English.

There are hundreds of books that debate what happened during that hot afternoon long ago. They range from *mea culpas* to radical theories about the last movements of the companies. Soon, there will be a new memorial to honor the Indians who fought to protect their families.

And though the Indian opponents were Sioux and Cheyenne, the

battlefield lies in the middle of a Crow Indian Reservation. How this came to be is a longer story, but it is apparent the white man won. Feral dogs roam the reserve, where, a few years ago, a child was attacked by a pack near Lodgegrass. Yards are littered with refuse and rusted cars. The nearest bank machine is in a casino.

There aren't a lot of visitors, but as summer approaches it becomes busier. Visitors take the road out to the Reno-Bentzen entrenchment sight, and halfway there they come across a draw where a small stream winds down to the Little Bighorn. This is Medicine Tail Coulee where Custer may have first tried to cross. Off to the side of this Rubicon is a shack sitting on the section of privately owned land that intersects the battlefield. The words "Navajo Souvenirs" are painted on the side in large black letters. Not far from here, the General waved his hat and shouted, "Hurrah, boys! We've got them!"

Bill tells me that he's always wanted to walk out to Reno crossing. I didn't take my late father back to Normandy, but I will get Bill across the Little Bighorn. I make some inquiries and arrange for us to ride horseback across the river at the exact place where Reno and his men fled. On my last day, we drive down to the valley where our horses are waiting. Bill smiles when I tell him he looks quite dashing on horseback, "kinda like Gary Cooper." On our way to the river, we stop and talk to an Indian who tells us a dirty joke about Custer, something about *balls* stuffed somewhere. Bill gets upset. He sidles up to me and whispers "Bastard" under his breath. I find his anger amusing and know that for a few moments he's irrational: it's a hundred and twenty-five years on—but an Indian is not going to criticize our General.

After the first skirmish disintegrated, Reno's men tried to cross the river in a panicked stampede. Thirty-seven men were killed as they tried to gain safety. Even today, the banks are steep and our horses struggle to climb to the other side. We stop at Bennie Hodgson's marker. After he was shot, he grabbed hold of one of the men's stirrups and horse and rider drew him across the river where he died. Reno insisted on going down to check on Hodgson's body while Custer struggled for survival farther down the ridge. It wasn't exactly fiddling while Rome burned, but disaster was imminent, and Reno was flustered. Bill says that "Reno didn't know if he was comin' or goin'."

I've always had a lot of sympathy for Reno, even though he wasn't well-liked: he was arrogant and an alcoholic. It must be said that, for him, all hell broke loose after the battle. Despite a sterling Civil War career, he became a scapegoat and an embarrassment. Elizabeth Custer called him a coward and blamed him for her husband's death. He died in poverty and disgrace, "a *broken man*" one would say in a Victorian whisper.

I would like to have been a fly on the wall in his death room. I bet he cursed his luck, Custer, and the whole mess! Perhaps his spirit roams the

casinos in his namesake city. There is liquor, there are pretty girls, and there are thousands who have barely survived their own debacles. They buy their chips and slide into defeat.

After we cross the river, Bill nudges his horse to the top of the steep ridge. I stay behind on the bank, too chicken to join him. It was no easy feat racing up those bluffs, scared out of your mind with arrows and bullets flying in all directions. I turn around and look toward the top of the ridge. There's Bill waving his hat back and forth like some shoot 'em up cowboy. My eyes start to water, and I wonder if he thought he'd ever get there, to the place where the young boy and old man meet.

He comes down off the hill and gallops toward me. He pulls along side and squeezes my hand, "Well, I know now what it was like, but I'm a hell of a lot slower, and no Indians are chasing me." We dismount on the other side of the Little Bighorn, and I reach down and choose a white rock off the riverbank. I hand it to Bill, another paper weight for his desk.

The next morning, I tap on Bill's door. He hollers "Come in!" We embrace and he pushes his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. "Well, you're off." He walks me to the car. I check my map, and Bill starts waddling up the hill through the cemetery, favoring his good knee. I drive real slow to catch a last glimpse, and there he is—can you see him—resting by the flagpole. I honk the horn and drive out the gate.

The night before he leaves for Houston, Bill calls, and we make arrangements to rendezvous at the battlefield that October. But the next day, while driving through South Dakota, he pulls off to the side of the road and dies of a heart attack.

By the time I find out, it is too late to say a proper goodbye, and he's scattered somewhere over Texas. That's it for me. Bill understood about the mystery, and I won't go back. I see his ashes as they blow across the plains, over sagebrush, dry creek beds, and dusty tracks. They gather and sweep upwards along the bluffs and rest on the Little Bighorn of our memories.