

Historians are still speculating about what happened to the yellow metal coins

Custer's cavalrymen carried in their pockets on the eve of their fateful battle



Chief Sitting Bull directed his warriors in the bloody victory over Custer. Did they get the lost pay roll?

Where Is Custer's Gold?

By D. D. DOTSON



Gen. George A. Custer withheld his cavalrymen's wages until they had begun their march that ended in a massacre.

WHEN cavalrymen of Gen. George A. Custer's contingent left Fort Abraham Lincoln on May 17, 1876, on their ill fated expedition against the recalcitrant Sioux, Cheyennes and other confederated tribes of the northern Great Plains, they had some back pay coming.

Just how much has never been definitely established. At least one month's pay was due. Many authorities insist the men had several months' pay coming.

Evidence indicates that Custer himself insisted that the soldiers' pay be held until they had started out of the fort. So they were paid (in gold) at the end of the first day's march. Custer reasoned that, if they were paid before they started, many men wouldn't be in condition for the trip. Bismarck with its saloons and dance halls was just across the Missouri River from the fort.

Since there was no place en route where they could have spent this money, it's assumed they carried it with them.

A few might have sent it back to the fort by messenger for safekeeping. But such foresight was hardly characteristic of the men in Custer's outfit.

Like service men of today, troopers attached to western outposts of that era favored poker, blackjack and dice as standard off-duty pastimes. Many historians agree that Custer's precautions in the interest of sobriety were probably thwarted when a trader named James Coleman set up a bar in a tent during the last days of the march.

The troops were encamped at the mouth of the Powder River. Officers and men were quick to take advantage of their first opportunity to spend their pay—for whisky, at the temporary bar.

These activities may have caused the money to change hands at a drastic rate but it seems probable that a large portion of the pay roll gold remained in the pockets of Custer's 225 officers and men when they went into battle on that dusty June day in 1876.

What became of this gold? The question will probably never be answered fully but an Indian tale recently brought to light gives rise to interesting speculation. The descendant of one of the Indians who took part in the Custer massacre, who now resides near Cheyenne Indian agency headquarters in South Dakota, gives the following account:

After the battle the Indians stripped the dead cavalrymen of all their clothing and equipment. This was hurriedly assembled in a single large pile and divided. The loot included carbines, pistols, knives, articles of clothing and miscellaneous personal items.

In the confusion and excitement small articles considered useless were left scattered on the ground. Among these were scores of small, yellow metal objects resembling round, thin stones.

One of the squaws began picking them up, perhaps thinking they'd make attractive ornaments. She may even have had a vague idea about their monetary value.

A feedbag taken from a dead cavalry horse soon held a great many of the strange baubles, so many that it was "a heap heavy."

Immediately following division of the spoils on the advice of Chief Sitting Bull, the Indians seem to have left the area, most of them in three or more large groups. Some broke up into small parties, often singly and by twos and threes. They apparently realized that victory might be temporary and wanted to hurry back to their home camps, pretending to know nothing about the fight. They had compelling reasons for fearing prompt reprisals from the United States government.

The squaw with the sack of gold, finding it too heavy to carry, tied it on her pony. With her buck, she started the long trek home.

During the second or third day of the trip the buck suddenly stopped, turned, and peered intently toward the northwest.

A cloud of dust appeared on the horizon. The squaw inquired, "Buffalo?"

Shaking his head, the buck grunted, "Pony soldiers." (The Indians' term for cavalrymen.)

The scouts seen by the squaw and her buck may have been from Colonel Gibbon's Montana command, since a party of his scouts had arrived on the battlefield two days after the massacre.

Regardless of their origin, the sight of these troopers frightened the squaw and her buck into sudden action. Fearing capture with this incriminating evidence, they hastily buried the gold. How much was in the sack? Individual soldiers may have carried from \$10 to \$50, possibly more. On the basis of the total of 225 men in the expedition, the sum could have ranged from \$2,000 to \$10,000, depending on how much was drawn off by Coleman's mobile hard liquor bar.

Where did they bury it? It may have been cached in the bottom of a coulee, in the side of a cutbank, or in a buffalo wallow, out on the flat prairie, or at the base of some scoria butte.

How far from the battlefield? It could have been 100 miles or more away. The route taken by the fleeing couple probably led to the southwest, since it seems that the Cheyenne country was their destination. But, even if this was the case, uneven terrain or their wish to elude detection may have prompted them to alter their course.

All of which leaves one chance in a million that the treasure will ever be found. So residents of the area aren't necessarily thinking of ore deposits when they opine, "There's gold in them thar hills."