

Custer

Seth Bull

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Miss Marcia A. Thomas
Route 2, Box 110
Yorktown, Indiana

Dear Miss Thomas:

Thanks so much for your trouble in sending me the article about Custer's Last Stand. It is evidently somewhat fictionized and written for a popular audience. I have not found the stories written by newspaper correspondents about interviews with Indians very reliable.

The number of persons who know how to make friends with old-time Indians and gain their confidence and get the true story from them is very limited. Indians, like most minority groups, are cautious with strangers, and some of them will resent being questioned and have their revenge by giving the questioner a false story. The Indian's chief goal in life is to acquire prestige, and unless he feels the person to whom he talks is a man whose company gives him prestige, he is not likely to take what is said very seriously.

Moreover a newspaper reporter who wanders in from New York, perfectly ignorant of Indian customs, language, standards, and expressions; and who brings along, in all likelihood, an interpreter in whom the old man has no confidence, cannot get a true story. Indians, moreover, are polite people, and are likely to say whatever they think a strange questioner would like to hear. The only way to get the truth from them is to be a long-time friend and a long-time associate of Indians, so that their ways and thought and expression and standards and customs are perfectly familiar.

Some day when I have time, I should like to go through all the yarns that white men have published as statements from old Indians, and show how they misinterpreted nearly everything that was said. For example, one chief stated that when Reno attacked the Sioux camp he was in the council tipi. He said, "I ran out and talked in all directions." The white man who recorded this said that the chief was hysterical. Of course the council tipi was at the center of the camp circle, and it was the invariable custom for a man making an announcement from the council tipi to step outside and face, in turn, each of the four directions,