

as recorded in my book NEW SOURCES OF INDIAN HISTORY (University of Oklahoma Press) show that Indians in those campaigns killed five soldiers for every Indian killed, and wounded four soldiers for every Indian wounded. Our army rarely had ammunition or time for target practice, and a great many of their recruits were city boys. And a large percentage of Custer's troopers on that fatal day had never been in a fight before. Whereas most of the Indians who took part were, like White Bull, veterans with many exploits to their credit, and many coups to their credit, gained in hand-to-hand conflict. There are scores of recorded deeds of this nature by Sioux and Cheyenne Indians. Their young men thirsted for such honors, and often took dreadful risks to obtain them.

I do not believe that the Northern Cheyennes regarded Custer as their great enemy. It was the Southern Cheyennes who hated Custer. And the two branches of the tribe had been separated since 1826. The northern Cheyennes had so intermarried with the Sioux that the other group called them Cheyenne Sioux, and when they Northern bands were sent to Oklahoma, there was a lot of hard feeling between them. True there were some Southern Cheyennes at the Little Big Horn fight. I knew some of them 50 years ago, but none ever claimed that his tribesman killed Custer. Nor would anybody have protected Custer's body, if they hated him so. They failed to scalp him because his hair had been cut short, as was the case with a good many other dead soldiers, not only in this fight but in others on the record.

Lt. Bradley's report of Custer's appearance (it has been suggested before) may have been intended to soften the blow to Mrs. Custer, for whom everyone felt a well deserved regard. At any rate the location of his wounds are just what White Bull described.

White Bull surrendered in 1876. Soon thereafter a missionary taught him to write Sioux, and he recorded his exploits in a ledger, illustrated with pictures. So his records dated back almost to the year Custer died. These coups would be recounted and witnesses named at any suitable public occasion, and no warrior could get away with tall tales about his brave deeds. His jealous rivals would be sure to see to that. It was white men, like Ned Buntline, who told outrageous lies, as of Buffalo Bill's exploits, knowing that, back east, nobody could check him. I knew White Bull for years, and worked with him from sun to sun, month after month, for two whole summers on the history of his people on Sitting Bull, and on his own life (see my book WARPAT). His talks were attended by many old men who had taken part in the same events, and who would, when he or I requested, add their comments. I also worked with other old Sioux and Cheyennes on other reservations, and none of them ever suggested that White Bull was unreliable. It is easy enough, when doing live research, to test a man's accuracy and honesty without his suspecting it. I never caught White Bull out. He did not claim that he killed Custer, only that he had killed the soldier whom others identified as Long Hair (Custer). He had never seen Custer to know him before the battle. But I was unable to find anyone who believed the men who identified the body as Custer's to be dishonest characters. They had nothing to gain by giving White Bull the credit.

Custer, in my opinion, has been unfairly criticized. He may have been an eager beaver, over-confident, ambitious--traits that would have brought him praise had he succeeded. But it must not be forgotten that he had, not only to destroy the camp, but to capture the Indians--or risk courtmartial. Only a few weeks before Colonel Reynolds, who captured Two Moon's camp, had been courtmartialled for letting the Cheyennes escape. Finally, if Custer's men had been armed with the Civil War seven-shot Spencer, there might have been no defeat and so nothing for us to argue about. But as it is, everybody can form his own opinion in the light of his own knowledge and understanding, and all of us have a whale of a good time.

You have my permission to run this copy in your column. But please don't expect me to continue the debate. I have too many commitments just now--including catching some king salmon here in British Columbia, where I am spending my vacation. My biggest so far is 23 pounds.

Cordially,

STANLEY VESAL