

Winner of The West
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OLD QUERY IS ONCE MORE AROUSED BY VETERANS WIDOW

"Many Have Tried to Prove That There Was A White Soldier Survivor Of the Battle Known as the Custer Massacre"

What do you think of the Following Story?

The following letters and stories are submitted for your careful reading and comment. They were received by us recently and we have decided to publish the story just as it reached us. We realize that this idea of proving that there might have been a survivor of the Custer massacre has been tried over and over again and to no avail, however it has always proved informing as well as interesting to delve into these various stories. Hence we submit for your comment the following. We do not in any way wish to be quoted on any of the following as we are only serving as an intermediate in the case, and do not claim authority of any facts or statements made herein.

We were first in receipt of the following letter in part:

Oshkosh Wis
March 22, 1939

Winner of the West
St. Joseph Mo.

Dear Editor:

Your name and address has been given to me by Mr. A.E. Brinstool, Hollywood, Calif., who states that you assist people in obtaining pensions. While that is not my real reason for writing you, yet it amounts to the same thing.

My former husband, Frank Finkel, of Dayton, Wash. was an actual survivor of the Custer massacre and I have a great desire to prove this. I know from correspondence with Mr. Brinstool and other authorities on the subject that there has been, perhaps ninety and nine others who have made similar claims, but when their stories were run down they proved to be without foundation.

Mr. Finkel was a retired farmer in good circumstances, one of the pioneers in Dayton, where he lived for over fifty years. His story first came out in the Walla Walla Bulletin about 1920. They gave it the whole front page with a picture of the home and Mr. Finkel.

Mr. Arthur Kannenberg of the Oshkosh Museum became interested in the story when it came out in the Oshkosh paper and he has been working with me in an effort to dig up some concrete evidence to corroborate the story. I have turned over to him all papers, newspaper clippings, photos, etc., and he has them on file in the museum. He brought me a copy of the Blue Book magazine for Sept., 1933, the other day, which has another story in it of the Custer fight, as told by Chief Joseph White Bull; he said that one trooper escaped on a gray horse. The Indian in the story in the American Legion magazine said that a trooper escaped on a white horse.

When I asked Mr. Finkel if his horse was white, he said, "No, it was a roan." Now in the heat of a fight, one Indian might call a roan white, or gray, for a roan is light colored in the Spring. However, Mr. Finkel's answer showed that he was telling nothing but the truth, and would not take advantage of the 'white horse' story to give weight to his own.

Mr. Finkel was seventy-six when he passed on and his memory seemed to be good. I cannot imagine where the hitch is that the war department can find no record (unreadable) was in error in giving the name of Frank

Hall is the one under which he enlisted. Under the circumstances it seems hardly possible that you can help me, unless you can suggest some method of procedure for further investigation. However, I am writing you hoping that you can help me in some way.

I enclose the clipping from the Oshkosh paper which gives part of the story in detail. I believe it says that he wandered around two or three days, or three or four, before he found the hut in the woods. As I recall it now I only remember him telling of only one night which he spent in the open when the Indians found him lying in the grass. Now, he was a staid, old farmer, read nothing but the daily papers; never read novels or went to movies. I would as soon think of a wooden Indian concocting such a story as he, simply because his mind did not run that way. He was a good citizen and a goof farmer and his elder son, Ben Finkel of Mohler, Idaho was re-elected to serve in the Idaho legislature this year.

Yours very truly
Mrs. Henry Billmeyer

Following is the clipping Mrs. Hermie C. Billmeyer enclosed with her letter:

Mrs. Henry Billmeyer, 1006--6 South Main Street, a resident of Oshkosh since 1933, read with much interest the recent news stories in The Northwestern, containing information about General Custer's last stand against the Indians, June 25, 1876.

She pursued the story from Washington, D.C. printed Tuesday, which told of an old diary written by one of the soldiers who died in the massacre, and she found pleasure, also, in reading Supt. C.C. Bishop's report of his visit to the famous battlefield, published Wednesday.

Hers was more than a casual interest, for in her possession she has newspaper clippings which bear out a claim which, to all indications, contradicts what history says of the battle.

History says that there was no white soldier who survived; the accepted version is that Custer and all his men died in that 'last stand' against a superior force of Indians.

Mrs. Billmeyer firmly believes that Frank Finkel, her former husband, now deceased, fought in that battle, and 'lived to tell about it' because his wounded horse dashed frantically through the Indian lines and carried him out of reach of pursuers.

Believes Story True

Could this be true? History says otherwise, maintaining that Custer's entire force was wiped out. Mrs. Billmeyer is certain that Frank Finkel told the truth. He had a reputation for honesty, and his story was believed without question by residents of Dayton, Wash. where he lived after his army service and where he died in 1930.

Before he died, Frank Finkel told his story to interviewers and appeared as speaker at a Kiwanis meeting. His facts were always the same; he never bragged or exaggerated on what he considered was his "true" story.

Those who knew Frank Finkel readily believed his claim that he was the lone survivor of the Custer massacre, but beyond that there has been no official proof. However, there are certain developments which, indirectly at least, give support in the Finkel story. Among these are:

Rain-in-the-Face, Red Cloud and Crazy Horse, Indian Chiefs who fought in the battle, in statements at various times, all asserted that one trooper, severely wounded, got through the lines.

The American Legion magazine of April, 1927, printed a story of the West, including a description of Custer's battle, in which an Indian participant was quoted: "One enlisted man on a white horse escaped....this trooper somehow managed to ride through the encircling attackers and dash up the stream.'. He was pursued for a distance, and the chase abandoned. The Indians were of the opinion he committed suicide later, believing that capture was inevitable.

Admitted by Indians

It seems to be a common agreement among Indian historians that a white man escaped through their lines, but there is no information as to what happened to him afterward.

Frank Finkel could not prove his story with official records, for several reasons: He had enlisted under age, and therefore had to use an assumed name. "Frank Hall." Army records have not contained information to support the story.

Frank Finkel never received his army discharge. He asked for it when he got to Fort Benton, some time after the battle, and was denied it because he could not produce two witnesses to attest his service in the army. Those who knew him in the army were dead.

He was close-mouthed about his adventure, and the story might never have come out, except one time he interrupted a debate about Custer's battle, giving an opinion of his own. Someone asked, "What do you know about it?" and he replied, "I was there." That remark led to further inquiry and drew the story from him.

Finkel's first wife never knew the story. He never told her. The story might also have escaped notice of his second wife said Mrs. Billmeyer, except that she discovered an old clipping which told of his participation in the battle, as had been told years ago in the debate. She inquired about the story and gained the full information.

Ran Away From Home

Frank Finkel and a chum ran away from home in Ohio, according to the story, and enlisted in the army. Finkel was in Custer's organization sent to the plains to fight the Indians.

In the height of the battle, a bullet struck the butt of his gun, sending a splinter of wood against his forehead, just over the eyes, cutting a deep gash. The blood flowed into his eyes and nearly blinded him. He carried that scar in later years, and called attention to it when he told his story of what happened.

At almost the same moment he was hurt, another bullet struck his horse in the flank, making the animal frantic with pain. The horse galloped wildly away and there was nothing for Frank Finkel to do but to bend low and hang on.

As he rode through the ranks of the Indians, he was struck twice by bullets. One of them smashed one of his feet, creating an injury that crippled his foot permanently. The other bullet struck him in the side and progressed through his body, finally lodging in his abdomen. This bullet, Mrs. Billmeyer said, was removed in later years, when its irritation bothered him.

Outdistanced Indians

The Indians chased him, but his fright-crazed horse outdistanced pursuers and he was able to reach the hills and go into hiding. He made a tourniquet out of a blanket to stop the flow of blood. After hiding for four days with practically no food and no water, the escaped trooper approached a cabin in the woods.

When he asked for aid he was curtly refused and told to be on his way.

He pleaded he was so weak he could not go on, and as he slumped in his saddle the cabin occupant came forward with a gun to investigate. Mr. Finkel said he was helped into the hut, where there was another man in bed, ill.

The man in bed gave instructions on how to treat the wound in Mr. Finkels foot, and when all other methods failed, the flow of blood was stopped by pouring hot pitch on the open sore. The two men in the cabin were uncommunicative. The told nothing about themselves, but the armed man was called, "Bill."

Here is another angle of mystery for the story: Were these men trappers or were they outlaws hiding out? Mr. Finkel never found out. He was permitted to stay there to recuperate. When he was nearly well, and could hobble about, the man in the other bed died. Mr. Finkel and the remaining occupant dug a grave on a knoll.

Carved Initials on Stone

Desiring to honor the dead, Mr. Finkel suggested that they erect a cross. He asked the dead man's name, and the companion replied, "It's none of your damned business!" They finally compromised when the man said the initials were G.W. Mr. Finkel laboriously carved these initials on a stone, and placed that as a marker.

Mrs. Billmeyer hopes that someday someone will report the finding of a stone in Montana, with the initials "B.W." on it. She feels such a discovery would be proof of an important part of Mr. Finkel's story.

Later, Mr. Finkel, guided in the right direction by "Bill," set out for Fort Benton. He boarded a boat bound downriver, and when he reached Bismarck, N.D., he saw a newspaper, and learned for the first time that

Custer's soldiers had been wiped out in the battle, and that it was considered no one survived.

He went to St. Louis and then proceeded west to Dayton, Wash., where he lived for fifty years. He was considered one of the pioneers of that community and respected by all.

Following our receipt of the above letter and clipping we wrote to Mrs. Billmeyer for any additional information she might have as to the service of Mr. Frank Finkel. In reply we received the following letter, in part, from Mrs. Billmeyer which we now submit to you for your comment.

Oshkosh, Wis
April 11, 1930 

Winner of the West
V.E. Wing, Editor
St. Joseph, Mo.

Dear Editor,

The trouble is that I have no service record of Mr. Finkels connection with the army; I have only his story as he told it to me, and the newspaper clipping gives the most of it.

John F. Finerty in his book, "War Path and Bivouac," gives a list of men under Custer who were killed in that battle. This list was compiled from the official documents at military headquarters and it shows a "Sergeant Finkel." When I asked Mr. Finkel if he was a sergeant he said, "No, I was a private but sometimes served as a corporal." Here was another beautiful chance to give weight to his story, but his answer was a further evidence that he was only telling the facts as they really were. Finnerty was war correspondent for the Chicago Times and Mr. Kannenberg and I tried to trace him. We wrote the Chicago Times, only to find that he had passed on, but left a widow, a son and a daughter. I finally got in communication with the son, John F. Finerty, who was one of Tom Mooney's attorneys. He could tell us nothing, but he said his father was very meticulous and he felt sure his father must have copied the name as he found it. However, the government records show it was an August Finkle or Finckle who was a sergeant.

I think it would be fine to have the story published in your paper. It would be of interest to your readers, and it might bring some comment from some of them. I have thought that someday someone would run across that grave with the stone marked, "G.W."

I had a card from Mr. Brininstool after I had mailed my previous letter, saying that Mr. Webb had passed on. However you answered it so it served its purpose.

Mr. Kannenberg and I have both been in correspondence with Captain Luce, retired, of the 7th Cavalry. He is at Fort Bliss at the present time, but he was unable to locate any record of Frank Finkel or Frank Hall, the name he is supposed to have been enlisted under. The only way I can think of to run down his record would be to look up the records, if this were possible of the man in Troop C, 7th Cavalry, who were missing and not accounted for after. His memory must have been at fault in regard to the name under which he enlisted.

The last letter Mr. Kannenberg had from Captain Luce, he said that he had some personal papers and documents bearing on the 7th Cavalry, which he would look over and see if he could locate any record of Finkel. Mr. Kannenberg was writing him again today. Captain Luce is writing or bringing up to date, a history of the 7th Cavalry.

Will just say in closing that I appreciate greatly the interest and attention you are giving this matter.

Sincerely

Mrs. Hermie C. Billmeyer

In closing let us remind you that the above article is submitted for your reading and your comments. We would appreciate hearing anything you might know concerning a party as Frank Finkle."