

CUSTER SURVIVOR

*The End of a Myth
the Beginning of a Legend*

JOHN KOSTER

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One long sword escaped, though; his pony ran off with him and went past our lodges. They told me about it at Chicago. I saw the man there, and I remembered hearing the squaws tell about it after the fight.

—Rain-in-the-Face, Sioux Chief

Preface

Custer's Last Stand, the Battle of the Little Big Horn, on June 25, 1876, is the most famous small military engagement in American history, partly because the U.S. Department of the Army reported that there were no survivors, a contributing factor that lends much to the mythology that has enveloped the event.

But military battlefield records are often incomplete. The chaos of battle, and the destruction the human body frequently experienced in the intensity of battle which often disallowed identification, assured that reality. That reality is no more evident than was in the record-keeping relative to the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

Contrary to the popular myth, there was a survivor. His survival is confirmed by forensic evidence, much of it revealed in this work for the first time. In a case of inheritance or criminal proceeding, such evidence would make his identity a foregone conclusion.

Flying in the face of a myth supported by unquestioning adherents might be construed by some to be a daunting task, for there is no more difficult obstacle to overcome than that of the closed mind. But in an open society such as ours there are many who are always looking for new answers to old problems and old, unanswered questions.

The evidence presented here does, indeed, answer that old, unanswered question: Was there a survivor of the five companies with George Armstrong Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn? The answer in this book is very positive. Yes, there was a survivor, the Second Sergeant of Company C.

Introduction

As long as wars have been fought, there have been war frauds, those counterparts of heroes who step forward to claim unearned glory. They said they were shadowy assassins in the Phoenix program in South Vietnam, flyers belonging to the Lafayette Escadrille in World War I, escaped POWs, and anything and everything else that could be brandished as a credential of bravery and toughness. Most were men who had done nothing to merit their country's gratitude, either not serving at all or compiling a record of dysfunctionality in the military. Some had genuinely earned medals but wanted to burnish their war records even more.⁽ⁱ⁾ The desire for "stolen valor" has not even spared the privileged: a number of politicians have been exposed as falsifiers of their military records, and a well-known historian was found to have regaled his college classes with stories of his exploits in the Vietnam War—although he spent the war in a library at West Point. No doubt for every man who had been revealed as an imposter, many escape public exposure, retailing their phony wares only to friends and family.

The Battle of the Little Big Horn was tailor-made for such fraudulent battle claims. Notorious from the time a stunned world heard the news, the clash between the Army and the Sioux and other

Plains Indians was a traumatic national event that changed nothing historically but delivered a blow to the self-confident psyche of a nation celebrating its first centennial. Since Custer's force had been killed to the last man, there was no Army survivor to report on its final moments, a condition that led to endless dispute over every aspect of Custer's Last Stand. Eyewitness accounts of the American Indians who had fought there were discounted by white Americans as unreliable or impossible to make sense of. Differences of language and culture seemed insurmountable in that day and age. Moreover, many of the warriors who later settled on reservations thought it would be politic to deny any knowledge of, or responsibility for, the deaths of United States soldiers.

Given the lack of certain knowledge of Custer's final movements after the five companies under his command had separated from the rest of the regiment, it was inevitable that men would come forward to claim the unique role of sole survivor, a position that no one else could easily challenge. In the quarter-century after the battle, and well into the twentieth century, such claimants were plentiful: Theodore Roosevelt said that he had met or heard of fifty such, while the distinguished Western historian, Brian Dippie, collected over seventy such stories. Others have reported even higher totals. But unlike the majority of the men who have appropriated a false role in the Vietnam War, the "sole survivors" were laying claim to a battle that had quickly become renowned.

Transported by railroad to Billings, Montana, tourists made the remote battlefield a popular attraction: anniversary commemorations were quickly established, and battle buffs subjected every detail of the clash to intense scrutiny. Whereas many modern-day frauds have found their unsubstantiated claims readily believed, the sole survivors quickly encountered skepticism. Each had his brief moment of publicity before his story was rejected and the tale-teller returned to deserved obscurity. This has not been the case with Frank Finkle.^[ii] His story persisted because it was more believable. For Dippie, Finkel had "perhaps the soundest case ever advanced by a 'Sole Survivor'." Because he maintained that he had simply outrun the Indians, he gained "in credibility what he lost in drama."^[iii] Dippie believed that the earlier historian, Charles Kuhlman, had found Finkel's story per-

suasive because it fitted so nearly into his own hypothesis about the battle. Nevertheless, when Dippie revisited the issue of sole survivors in an essay published in 1981, he cautioned that dismissing all such claims “is a bit premature.”^[iv]

There are many issues at play in a determination of Finkel’s claim to sole survivor status. First of all, it has been viewed by many with disbelief because of inconsistency of identity. After all, the Finckle who enlisted in 1872 used the first name of August and the birthplace of Berlin, Prussia. And Frank Finkel’s second wife, Hermie, always said that her husband had enlisted under the name Frank Hall.

Contesting any accepted historical “fact” requires a researcher who can see the situation in a new light and who then goes on not only to reinterpret it but to discover new evidence. Long familiar with the part of the country where the battle took place, John Koster had a sudden illumination about Frank Finkel based on a detail about a horse—a dead Seventh Cavalry horse found at the confluence of the Rosebud and Yellowstone Rivers that had always intrigued battle buffs. In then-Lieutenant Edward Godfrey’s first account of seeing this animal (1892), no mention was made of its color. Only much later did Godfrey reveal that it had been a sorrel, a color that identified it as belonging to Tom Custer’s C Company. This was Finkel’s company as well. The mysterious dead horse was thus the right color and was in the right place to be seen as the horse Finkel said carried him away from the battle and which he later shot.

Two other clues contributed to the story: Rain-in-the-Face, a warrior indisputably at the battle, had said that one cavalryman escaped, and Charles Windolph had been unable to find his good friend Finckle’s body when he expressly looked for it on the battlefield—although Daniel Kanipe said that he had seen Finckle’s body. How to choose between these opposed accounts? Eyewitness testimony is notoriously contradictory: forensic evidence needed to be uncovered to make the strongest case.

The test, one might say, is history, or rather, the process necessary to assemble the pieces of what occurred into a coherent narrative that could take its place in the history of the battle of the Little Big Horn. As skillfully unraveled and then reconstituted by Koster, Frank

Finkel's story has been stripped of the misleading material generated by Finkel's own attempt to bolster his credentials when he enlisted, and by his second wife's misguided version of his past. These distortions have led many to dismiss Finkel as merely another fraud, albeit one who did not seem to fit the pattern of other sole survivors. With the falsehoods removed and hiatuses filled in by Koster's painstaking investigation, Finkel's story now makes sense: in Koster's reconstruction of his subject's life, the Frank Finkel who asserted in 1920 that he had survived the Last Stand, and the August Finckle who enlisted in the army in 1872 were one and the same. The real American-born and German-speaking Finkel, only eighteen, plausibly adopted the persona of a twenty-seven year old German-born Prussian officer as a means of enhancing his status. But Prussian records indicate that there was no suitable August Finckle to be found in German birth or American immigration records. Two American-born August Finckles unearthed by Koster lived and died in their native states without any military status.

As for the parts of the story that can never be verified—Finkel's sojourn in the wilderness and subsequent wanderings—lack of evidence neither supports nor discredits his narrative. He did not specify what his injuries were, so we have no basis for assuming that he was “gut-shot” and hence doomed because he describes one bullet wound as “in the side.” A bullet could have punctured the skin without penetrating any organ, as its quick closure would indicate.

Eventually returning home after his ordeal at the Little Big Horn, and no doubt fearful of being prosecuted as a deserter, Frank Finkel spent the next forty-four years as a solid citizen of Dayton, Washington, a family man and prosperous landowner. Some of the publicity about imposter survivors may have reached him, along with their subsequent unmasking, but he seems to have had no need of fortune and no desire for fame. When he did speak out publicly in 1920, it appears to have been impulsively at first rather than planned. He never embellished or romanticized the battle as other “sole survivors” and journalists did, nor did he seek either publicity or money.

Over the years a view of the battle has reified among battle buffs, precluding any substantive alteration. But in dismissing the idea that all sole survivor stories must be fake, they forget that one

accepted story of an almost-survivor very similar to Finkel's: that of the cavalryman who, according to his Indian pursuers, would have gotten away had he not suddenly put his pistol to his own head.^(v)

Research uncovers records, but it takes patience and imagination to fashion the data into a plausible factual account. Like any proposed revision of a story enshrined by time and tradition, Koster's telling needed to account for those parts of the story that didn't fit while bringing a new perspective to a well-known claim. This has been his achievement: he focused on forensics, hunting down Frank Finkel's signature on his first wife's will and comparing it to the enlistment signature of "August Finckle." A number of experts have now agreed that the signatures are most likely those of the same person. To resolve the identity problem, Koster contacted Germany where no records supported the existence of "August Finckle." He brought his own Germanic thoroughness to the pursuit of every detail of the story and every myth that has grown up around it. Because of his effort, we can be more certain than at any time in the past that there was indeed a sole survivor of the Last Stand and that his name was Frank Finkel.

—Professor Louise Barnett,
Professor of American Studies and English,
Rutgers University
Author of *Touched By Fire*

Notes

- ⁽ⁱ⁾A huge number of such cases have been collected by B.J. Burkett and Glenna Whitley in *Stolen Valor: How The Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History*, (Dalla, Verity Press, 1998)
- ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾I will use "Finkle" throughout except for explicit references to August Finckle. "Finckle" was the spelling used by the man we now know as Finkel when he married for the first time. But late nineteenth century records show that the spelling eventually stabilized as "Finkel." This kind of orthographic instability is not unusual for the time.
- ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾Brian W. Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy Of An American Myth*, Missoula, University of Montana Publications in History, 1976, 86-87.
- ^(iv)"Why Would They Live?" Thoughts on Frank Finkel and Friends in *Custer And His Times*, ed. Paul A. Hutton (El Paso: Little Big Horn Associates, 1981) n 225. Dippie's essay, pp. 209-228, provides a good review of the sole survivor literature.

^(v)Walter M. Camp, "Interview With Foolish Elk," September 22, 1908, *Custer In '76: Notes On The Custer Fight*, ed. Kenneth Hammer, new ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 199. "He saw no man get away but had heard four different eye witnesses tell of one soldier who rode through the Indians on a very swift white horse which they could not catch. They told that after chasing him for a mile or two the soldier drew his pistol and killed himself. This they could not understand, because the man's horse was swifter than theirs and was continually getting farther away from the pursuers."

Part One

The Man Who was Frank Finkel

CHAPTER ONE

Drums in the Night

June 24, 1876

The valley of the Little Big Horn River shook to the pounding of drums and the falsetto quavering wail of Lakota warriors, augmented by the melodious full-voice singing of the Cheyenne and the giggling of girls. Just one week before these Indians, once ill-fed at their government agencies with beef and bacon that was often rancid, coffee mixed with dirt and flour hardened to plaster-of-Paris, had defeated a large force of pursuing soldiers and enemy Indians at the Rosebud River, and sent the Army back to lick its wounds. Now it was time to dance.

With the drums beating, the singing, the girls flirting, and the testosterone surging, it must have seemed surrealistic and other-worldly to a young man, the present world and the Rosebud forgotten.

“My mind was occupied mostly by such thoughts as regularly are uppermost in the minds of young men,” said Wooden Leg, a Cheyenne. “I was eighteen years old, and I liked girls. It seemed that

peace and happiness was prevailing all over the world, that nowhere was any man planning to lift his hand against his fellow man.”⁽¹⁾

Lakota and Cheyenne dances were ladies' choice: the girls, working in gaggles, cleared the dance floor of sagebrush and weeds and then roamed in blushing, giggling groups, teasing young men by throwing berries at them and asking them to the dance. The purpose was courtship. Both tribes had a dread of incest, and a camp the size of the one on the Little Big Horn was a splendid opportunity for girls to find marriageable men. Shy by themselves, but bold in groups, the girls joked with the young men and asked them to the dance, while their mothers often worked to provide food during the intervals. The mothers were also involved in courtship: “fort marriages” to transient soldiers generally left the girls abandoned with half-breed children, and the Lakota and Cheyenne esteemed chastity and found outright prostitution repugnant.

Once in awhile, the Lakota girls would hold a “virgin dance” where those girls who were virgins, or claimed to be, would promenade in a graceful, upright prance and any boy who claimed otherwise had the chance to throw dirt on the virgin imposter. If the boy told the truth, the embarrassed girl dropped down several clicks in the marriage market but remained unpunished. If he was a liar—you could tell by looking at both sets of eyes—the girl and her friends swarmed over him and beat him up.

The courtship dance at the Little Big Horn was a rousing celebration, most of the people in the vast camp of Lakota and Cheyenne had never seen so many Indians, or so many girls and boys. While the young people danced, the girls traipsed upright to reveal their beauty and elegance and, at least, suggest their chastity. The young men gyrated wildly, showing off the limber strength that would make them great warriors and great hunters, and great providers.

Some young men, though, were scoundrels of opportunity. There were three ways for a Lakota warrior to obtain what he wanted, a present of horses or other valuables to the future bride's father, an elopement after which the bride's family accepted what had happened, and “teepee crawling,” obtaining girls' favors by crawling into their teepees, with the girl's permission, and hoping the rest of the

family didn't wake up. The girls much preferred to elope and rarely liked a teepee crawler.⁽²⁾

Mothers of marriageable girls stayed up all night to keep their eyes on the dancing—and their daughters—or stayed awake at their teepees cooking meals of meat and *tunsipi*, Indian turnips, one of the rare vegetables in the Plains Indian diet and a seasonal treat.

While the mothers watched, the fathers drummed: each drum was an instrument, with a drumhead of two or three feet, beaten with synchronized strokes by four male drummers with drumsticks in a rhythm that simulated the human heartbeat. Each “drum” was a group of close friends, older warriors or older men who no longer danced, but offered music while they shared fellowship, while their wives kept an eye on the girls to make sure they behaved. Married women sometimes sang the high, quavering tremolo at the end of each dance to cheer on the dancers and drummers.

The dance thundered on through the night while young men roamed from camp to camp, danced to exhaustion, then stopped off where married women with eligible daughters fed them *tunsipi* and roasted meat and sized them up as sons-in-law. Then the young men got up and danced again.

The dancers never touched. Girls and boys danced in groups of friends with a sense of fascination, excitement, and power at seeing so many Indians in one huge encampment. Most danced until dawn. One young man, Wooden Leg, was so exhausted that he reached his own teepee at sunrise but fell asleep outside the flap.

“People were dancing around fires all over the village,” the Lakota Black Elk remembered. At 13 he was too young to be courting. “We boys went around from one dance to another, until we got too sleepy to stay up any more.”⁽³⁾

The next morning, the dancers, the drummers, and the women with daughters in their high teens and 20s were all asleep. Some of the younger boys got up for a swim, and the women whose daughters were too young for courtship, or whose children were all boys, took the youngsters and headed for the hills in search of more turnips.

Most others sought shelter from the heat of the day inside the lodges, where the shade and the air circulation made the 100-degree temperatures of a Montana summer bearable.

Black Elk, too young to dance, was able to get up by mid-morning and went for a swim, but he had an odd sensation that wasn't due to last night's exhaustion. "I did not feel well; I felt queer. It seemed that something terrible was about to happen."⁽⁴⁾

Notes

- (1) Marquis, Thomas, *Wooden Leg, a Warrior Who Fought Custer*, (pages 214-216)
- (2) Hassrick, Royal B. *The Sioux: Life and Customs of a Warrior Society*.
- (3) Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, Page 108. Many older Lakota people also told Mildred Fielder about the all-night dance.
- (4) *Ibid.*

Photos through the end of Chapter One courtesy of the Library of Congress.

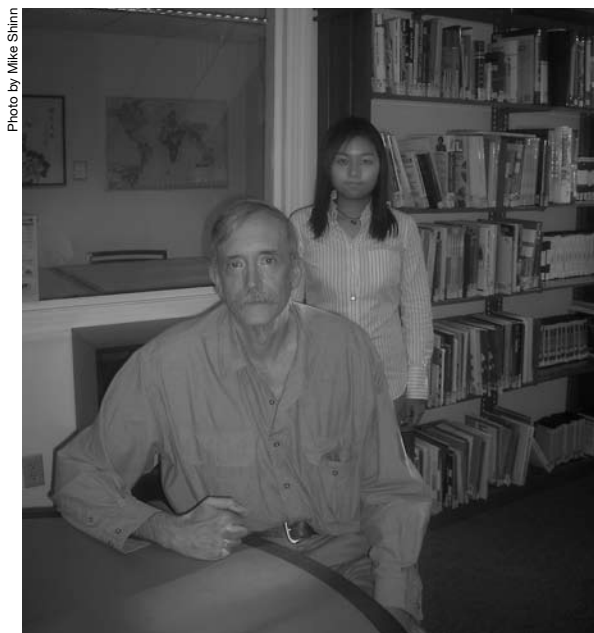


Photo by Mike Shinn

About The Author

John Koster has written about the U.S. Cavalry and American Indians in *American Heritage*, Custer's Last Stand in *National Geographic*, *Wild West* and for the British Marshall Cavendish syndicate. He has also written articles for *American History*, *America's Civil War*, *Civil War Times Illustrated*, and *Military History* and in U.S. Army publications including *Infantry* and *Soldiers*. An award-winning writer in history, journalism, and sociology, Koster has lectured at Rutgers, Long Island University, and Fairleigh Dickinson, and taught writing for publication as an adjunct professor at Ramapo College. He has also written on business matters ranging from agriculture to real estate. He is a veteran of the United States Army.

His journalism awards include the SDX for Distinguished Public Service, the AAA Highway Safety Award, two nominations for the NJPA Award, and one for the Ernie Pyle Award. A newspaperman since the late 1960s, he has covered the spectrum of local government, politics, and war crimes investigations.