

GEN. CUSTER'S LAST FIGHT.

Story of the Battle as Gleaned From Indians Who Participated.

Omaha, Special, Dec. 20.—The war department is preparing a volume on the Custer massacre in accordance with the resolutions which passed congress two years ago, and, as singular as it may appear, interesting facts concerning that terrible chapter in the Indian wars of the plains are now developing, a quarter of a century after the battle and when most of the principles in the sanguinary contest have passed beyond.

It is no secret that for many years after the wiping out of Gen. Custer and his three companies not an Indian could be found who would admit having taken part in the battle. As no white man survived that terrible onslaught it was with the greatest difficulty that the facts leading up to the battle were learned. Of course, from the position of the bodies strewn over the plains the average plainsman would read

The Bloody Details of the Fight sufficient to show the desperate resistance of the troopers and show that the soldiers were outnumbered probably five hundred to one, yet the truth could not be known except from the tongue of the Indians who participated in the fight. The vastness of the victory they had won actually frightened the Indians and prevented them for years from boasting of their part in the awful butchery.

Now, it begins to look as if the minute details were about to be given to the world through Frank Gourard, the veteran scout, Indian fighter and pioneer plainsman. Gourard receives his information absolutely from Indian sources. In fact, it is fitting that the public should learn the real story of the battle through old Frank Gourard, because, as the grizzled old plainsman admits, by rights his bones ought to lie among the little white headstones that glisten to-day in the sunlight on

The Custer Battlefield.

Frank Gourard was scouting for Custer at that time and but for an accident would have been with Custer's forces instead of Reno's at the time of the fight, and of course Gourard would have been killed, as were all of Custer's men.

Secretary of War Melkieleh had a long talk with Gourard on the subject of incorporating his story in the government story of the Custer affair, soon to be issued. The conversation occurred this week and Melkieleh met the veteran scout and Indian fighter in Omaha. Gourard had just returned from Pine Ridge agency, where he had

Discussed the Custer Battle

with many of the survivors. The Indians have known Gourard so long that they trust him, even though they know the unerring aim of the swarthy scout is responsible for many of their braves being sent to the happy hunting grounds. It was a happy accident that resulted in two persons who participated in the campaign which resulted in the tragic affair of the Little Big Horn meeting Secretary Melkieleh. The other was Capt. Arrasmith, now on his way to join the Twenty-second in Manila. Gourard and Arrasmith were with Crook through that memorable campaign, and their meeting in Omaha was the first that had occurred since they met in converging columns near the Custer battlefield a quarter of a century ago. Gourard contributed materially to the story he had to tell to the representative of the war department by narrating an experience he had a few weeks ago on the reservation at Pine Ridge.

The Fight in Picture.

He met an Indian who had fifty water colors of the famous fighting Indian characters that could not be duplicated. The Indian who exhibited them to Gourard said they had long been in possession of the Pine Ridge Indians, and no white man had ever seen them before. It was a perfect picture story of the famous battle, showing Custer through all his desperate charging, concluding with the final struggle of a handful of troopers and the dramatic finale, with the brave general blowing out his own brains rather than submit to capture and torture at the hands of his savage enemies.

Secretary Melkieleh has written the war department suggesting that Dr. McGillicuddy, the ex-Pine Ridge Indian agent and the most likely person to approach the Indians on such a delicate subject, be commissioned to make an effort to induce the Indians to permit the department to copy this remarkable picture of the fight that it may be incorporated in the government history.

Story of the Fight.

Discussing the subject, Frank Gourard said:

"As to the story, I can give it to you in brief and tell you many things you never heard before. You know, of course, of the concerted effort made by the half-dozen converging columns to hem the Indians in and cow them out of their telligent attitude. You know of how Custer struck the trail one summer morning in '70 and how he, according to his usual tactics, divided his forces with Maj. Reno at the crossing of the Rosebud creek, which, by the way, we old fellows call Reno creek. His idea was to hem the Indians in. Custer never considered the numbers of his foe. He would have gone out with a single company in just the same way to combat the whole howling Indian nation, dividing his forces and fighting them from both sides at once.

"You know the story of Reno's march down the creek, his crossing of the river and his sudden appearance before the tepees of the Indians, as much a surprise to him as to the Indians, of his weak sort of an attack, his repulse and retreat in disorder through the timber, the crossing of the river and his taking up a safe position in the bluffs opposite the scene of the engagement, with but a

handful of Indians to watch him a few hours until night.

"Now, the Indians knew nothing of the division of the forces. When Reno took up his position in the hills they intended to wait until night and then assault and finish him before daylight. Right here is where I am coming to the meat of the story as told by the Indians and overlooked in the chronicles of the battle.

Custer's Appearance.

"Custer's route behind the bluffs and down to the river through the bed of a creek was longer than Reno's. Therefore it was some little time after Reno had been penned on the top of the bluffs that Custer's company suddenly appeared before the Sioux like an apparition, coming through the dry creek bed to the bank of the river. The Indians were dumbfounded, for was not this the body of men whom they had left under guard of their young men penned in the bluffs?

"As for Custer, it is undoubtedly true that he knew nothing of the defeat or even of the engagement of Reno, the bluffs having cut off all sound of the brief conflict.

"Still relying upon his subordinate, he had no fear of the Indians, although he could see that their tepees extended down the valley for three miles. Neither did he know that the Sioux, in order to deceive as to their fighting strength, had crowded each tepee as full of young bucks as they would hold. This is how it is that, although the story writers place the number of the Indians at about 3,000, the Sioux say they numbered

More Than 8,000.

"It was two hours past noon and Custer's horses and pack mules, maddened by thirst, became unmanageable at sight of the water. One of the mules carrying nearly all of the ammunition stampeded into the river, and, sinking almost instantly in the quicksand, was lost, with all its precious burden, an accident which caused the fight to end much more abruptly than it otherwise would have done.

After allowing his horses to drink, Custer halted his command in the protected hollow made by the intersection of the creek bed with the banks of the river, and reviewed the situation.

"Strangely enough, he could see no hostile demonstrations on the part of the Indians. The women and children having been hurried back from the scene at the first attack, there were none but warriors in the tepees. They had not intended to attack the intrenched Americans before dark, and no more would they move against this body before nightfall, especially since the Sioux appreciated the fact that Custer had halted in a position under whose protection he might have held their entire force off for a number of days.

Indian Strategy.

"Conjecturing that however he had escaped his position in the bluffs that their young men were still clinging stealthily to his rear, the Sioux, with no intention of making an immediate attack, but with the aim to get into the most favorable position, sent hundreds of their warriors down the river under cover to cross unperceived three miles below and fill the ridges and high places of the line of bluffs full of watchful, cruel and revengeful fighting force. Also unperceived a number of braves made their way across the river a short way down and secreted themselves under the precipitous bank on Custer's side.

"The Indians, under cover and watching the little column like a thousand hawks, could see the white leader showing signs of impatience and disquiet. He scanned the country beyond the clump of timber through his glasses again and again. They could not know that he was watching and hoping for some sign of the approach of Reno, so no indication would show that he had taken up his position on the other side. This delay gave the Indians plenty of time for their forces to deploy and scatter over the most advantageous positions in the high ground round about.

Custer's Mistake.

"Finally, well along in the afternoon, the white leader did a thing for which the Indians could hardly credit the evidence of their eyes. Either tired of waiting for Reno, or being sure that he must already have taken his position unobserved on the flanks of the Indians, Custer moved out of the protected hollow and naturally fortified ravine into the open of the exposed hillside and marched down the river, the slope of the bluffs resting on his right, on his left at a distance of but a few hundred yards the precipitous bank of the river, with a writhing pack of reds beneath, and just beyond the water the camp of more than 8,000 Indians in their war paint. Custer's fate was sealed with that command to advance, and there was not an Indian but knew it and exulted in his treacherous red breast at the thought of the grand killing in store for him and his comrades. There was no immediate attack Custer was marching

Right Into the Trap.

and the Indians lay low and let him come on, but from the time the little force moved out of the hollow until the time when the last man fell riddled with bullets there was not a moment when the troopers were not covered by the sights of a thousand rifles, while a thousand itching fingers played with the set triggers.

"Apparently puzzled by the actions of the Indians, and for the purpose of drawing them out, Custer halted after marching a considerable distance down the river and fired a volley across into the straggling lines of tepees. Instantly the volley was answered by a deadly fire

from the under side of the river bank, taking the soldiers so by surprise that they fell back toward the peak of the ridge, the Indians continuing their fire. Still without any intimation of the danger behind them, the troopers mounted on their horses and left a number of dead on the field. With the Indians still under a perfect cover, the soldiers had no chance to reply with effect. They reached the crest of the hills and were headed toward the protection of the ridges and gullies at a gallop, when the concealed Indians opened a murderous fire upon them, directly in front. Nearly a whole company was mowed down at the first fire and the column fell back, as the Indians had planned, once more into the jaws of the trap.

Ended His Own Life.

"Now right here is where one of the most startling parts of this Indian version comes in. You recollect the big bay thoroughbred the Indians called Gourard and which raced all through the Northwest for years after the massacre? Well, one of Custer's young lieutenants was mounted on that horse that day. When the column fell back under the fire the big bay took the bit between his teeth and thundering down right into the midst of the redskins, burst savagely through their lines, his head down, squealing with rage, a diabolical incarnation of equine fury.

"A number of Indians immediately detached themselves from the rest and gave chase. They were hopelessly distanced from the first. Nothing an Indian ever rode could beat that horse. Finally, as he streaked it out across the plateau nearly a mile in the lead the Indians gave it up and sitting back on their ponies watched the flying horse in a fury of disappointment. Then they witnessed an amazing thing, something which they, with no conception of the code of honor which actuates officers in the United States army, could not understand. They saw the young lieutenant look back, and, finding himself hopelessly out of the fight, deliberately draw his revolver and

Shoot Himself Through the Head.

The horse stopped at once, and the Indians, continuing the chase, captured him, leaving the body of the officer lying alone on the sands. The first report of the fight reported him missing, but a stone was erected to his memory on the field.

"In the meantime Custer's men met in front and on the river side by the same deadly fire, were compelled again to retreat, this time down the second side of the fatal triangle, as you can see. So they were driven again to lower ground, fighting desperately all the while. The troopers, having dismounted from their horses, were now proceeding at a walk, using their mounts as much as possible for cover.

Custer's Death.

"At the spot where Custer met his death there was a rally and a last stand, for the Indians, bursting out of cover from the front, swept down on the little band like a lot of yelling fiends. The combat, waxing into an incredible fury, was waged almost hand to hand. The rifle ammunition was exhausted, revolvers were emptied, and the troopers, drawing their sabers, died fighting to the last breath.

"Standing untouched through all the melee, Custer must have begun to guess that the Indians were making an effort to capture him alive. Expecting nothing but the cruellest and most inhuman tortures from their hands, he fought until they had closed in about him on every side, until all the men immediately about him were down, and then turned his revolver against himself.

"After that the end was not long in coming. The scattered survivors were driven back along the third side of the triangle, so that when the last men fell he died within a hundred yards of the place where the first was killed."

An Interesting Character.

To one familiar with the sanguinary history of the plains from 1872 until the uprising at Pine Ridge, culminating in the death of Sitting Bull in 1891, Gourard stands as one of the most unique and interesting characters surviving. Capt. Arrasmith, who has known him for years, declares that as a scout he had no equal, not even in the famous Kit Carson himself.

To-day fifty years of age, Gourard is in appearance a type of the full-blooded Sioux. Not a drop of Indian blood flows in his veins, however. A Sandwich islander by parentage, a Californian by birth, he was endowed by nature with the physical hardihood of a young mountain lion, and the instincts of the most wily of forest creatures. Captured by the Sioux when but a child, he was reared as one of them. From his captors he learned all that nature and circumstances had taught the crafty savage. He learned the languages of the plains and became a master in the sign code. His roaming with the restless tribes gave him knowledge of the topography of the country, which served him well in after years.

Practical Curiosity.

Near the town of Baku, in the Russian Caucasus are several tracts of land where no cattle would feed, although they were covered with the usual rich herbage. The superstitious peasantry declared that an evil spirit had bewitched the meadows in question. By and by there happened along a practical, matter-of-fact Englishman, who started to investigate the phenomena. He quickly discovered that, although the grass was undoubtedly rich and succulent, it tasted strongly of paraffin, a substance the flavor of which is strongly repugnant to nearly all animals, but especially so to cattle. Such was the origin of the discovery of the Baku petroleum deposits—deposits that have already yielded millions of pounds' worth of oil, and which show no signs of becoming exhausted.

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