

MARK A. MINER

SPECKLED LEGACY

Tom Custer in American Pop Culture

is much better known. The siblings—George, Frank, Joe, Matt and Al—all perished together after their U.S. Navy cruiser, the *Juneau*, was torpedoed at Guadalcanal during World War II. Their saga was trumpeted nationwide in news stories and wire photos and even became a 1944 Hollywood film, *The Fighting Sullivans*, starring Anne Baxter and Thomas Mitchell. It led the U.S. War Department to bolster its rules about separating siblings in military service, known as the “Sole Survivor Policy.” And the policy was central to Steven Spielberg’s 1998 blockbuster film *Saving Private Ryan*, starring Tom Hanks, Matt Damon and Tom Sizemore.

Beyond his death at the Bighorn, Thomas Ward “Tom” Custer, younger brother of General George Armstrong Custer, made his mark on Americana in many ways—as a Civil War hero who won two Medals of Honor; as a brother-in-law who charmed the general’s wife Elizabeth “Libbie” (Bacon) Custer; and as a fighter for the U.S. Seventh Cavalry on the Great Plains during the Sioux Wars.

In death, Tom has not been ignored in American popular culture, but his presence has been more speckled and uneven. He just never has received his “big break” into the limelight until the dawn of the twenty-first century, and even then, the effect has been limited.

Tom could have been a posthumous folk hero. Perhaps the best known legends about him, which could have become larger story lines, are his feud with Chief Rain in the Face, who vowed to cut out and eat Tom’s heart; the run-ins with lawman/gunfighter Wild Bill

WHEN FIRST BECOMING AWARE of our Miner-Miner family’s connection with General Custer’s brother Tom, I was deeply moved by the fact that the general was not the only Custer to die at Little Bighorn. In fact four of his immediate relatives—two brothers, a brother-in-law and a nephew—also gave their lives on the field that fateful afternoon. It should have been an American tragedy for all time. Instead, at best, the story has been treated in American popular culture as a mere footnote.

The Custer disaster at Little Bighorn mirrors the epic story of the five Sullivan brothers whose dramatic tale

Above—Plate 1. Major General George Custer, Lieutenant Thomas Custer, and Elizabeth Custer, January 3, 1865. Photograph by Mathew Brady & Co.

Hickok in Kansas; and his well-earned reputation as a heavy drinker and womanizer, including a sexual relationship with my own cousin, Rebecca Miner.

In the most famous Custer film of all—*They Died with Their Boots On*, starring Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland—Tom’s persona is noticeably absent. The film reportedly was Warner Bros.’ second biggest hit of 1941 and has inspired many to become interested in the Custer story. Despite intimate scenes where the general made important decisions, settled barroom brawls and planned for battle, where Tom could have played a meaningful big screen role, he was not written into the script.

Any legend typically has a core of truth that has staying power as it takes on new meanings and twists over time. A legend often requires that others, perhaps motivated to exploit the story to make money, add their own interpretation and shadows. All of these factor into Tom’s legacy. Some of what we know today bears little resemblance to actual facts, but the paper archaeology tracing the development and continuance of Tom-related stories in our culture’s mass media is fascinating and enhances our understanding.

It was not until 2002—some 126 years after the Bighorn battle—that Tom’s story was featured in not one, but two full-length biographies. One was authored by Carl Day, *Tom Custer: Ride to Glory*. Roy Bird also published a lesser-known biography about the same time, *In His Brother’s Shadow*, later re-issued under the title *The Better Brother: Tom & George Custer and the Battle for the American West*.

This article is a survey of the photographs, news and magazine articles, books, stage plays, and television and movie films which have influenced Americans’ limited perceptions of Tom Custer up through the year 2002. Material published after 2002 is not part of this study.

Photography

Perhaps the most well-known photographic image of Tom is a *carte de visite*-size portrait with his famous brother George and beautiful sister-in-law Libbie Custer [See Plate 1.], taken on January 3, 1865, at Brady’s National Photographic Portrait Galleries at 352 Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC. [See Plate 2.] This photo is numbered K-49 in the standard reference book *Custer in Photographs* by D. Mark Katz.¹

Little, Brown & Co. distributed copy prints of the K-49 photo to newspapers in October 1959 to publicize the upcoming Jay Monaghan book, *Custer: The Life of General George Armstrong Custer*.² Note the editor’s crop marks in grease pencil in the top and right-hand margins. The purple caption was ditto-stamped on the back. [See Plates 3 & 4.] The newspaper that received and published this image kept it on file for years and published it again on January 2, 1977. In 1996, a similar copy print was distributed by the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) to promote the new eight-part series, *The West*. Executive produced by Ken Burns, and directed and co-produced by Stephen Ives, this series



Plate 2.



Plate 3.

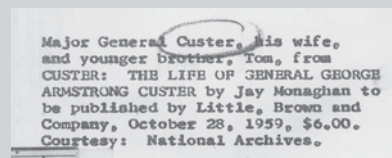


Plate 4.



Plate 5. Tom Custer, wearing his two Medals of Honor. Courtesy of the Denver Public Library.



Plate 6. Photo from the Dr. Lawrence Frost Collection, courtesy of the late W. Donald Horn, Sr.

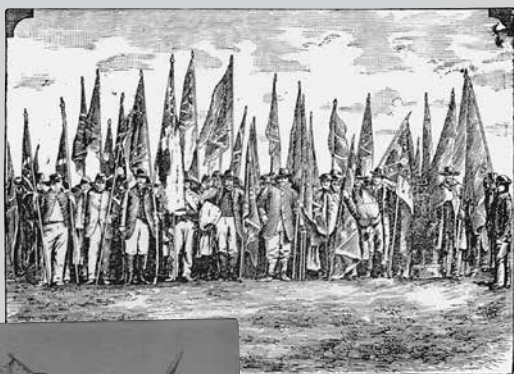


Plate 8. Captured Confederate flags from Sailor's Creek

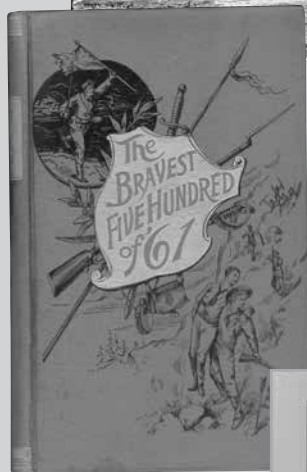
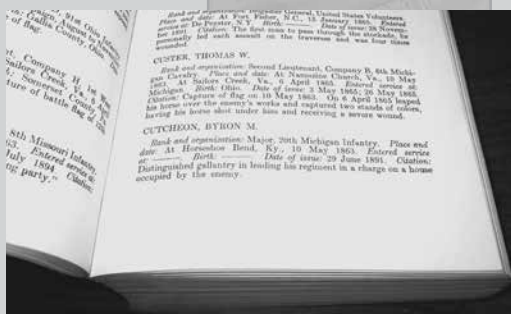


Plate 7.



Plate 9 & 10. U.S. Senate book naming Medal of Honor recipients



was part of the General Motors Mark of Excellence Presentation airing on September 15, 1996.

A famous studio portrait shows Tom wearing his two Medals of Honor. [See Plate 5.] The original photographer is unknown. This image was printed by D. F. Barry in Bismarck, Standing Rock, Dakota Territory, and marketed for sale in the 1880s in a cabinet-size format, 4.25 x 6.5 inches. Variations of the photograph have been published in many books and news articles since then. An original sold for \$2,180 on eBay in January 2015.

An extremely rare portrait Plate 6 shows the Civil War gunshot-wound scar on Tom's right cheek. In December 2004, the Swann Galleries auctioned an original *carte de visite* version for \$1,955, as part of a collection of important nineteenth and twentieth century photographs.³ The CDV was described in the catalogue as an albumen print measuring 3.75 inches by 2.25 inches.

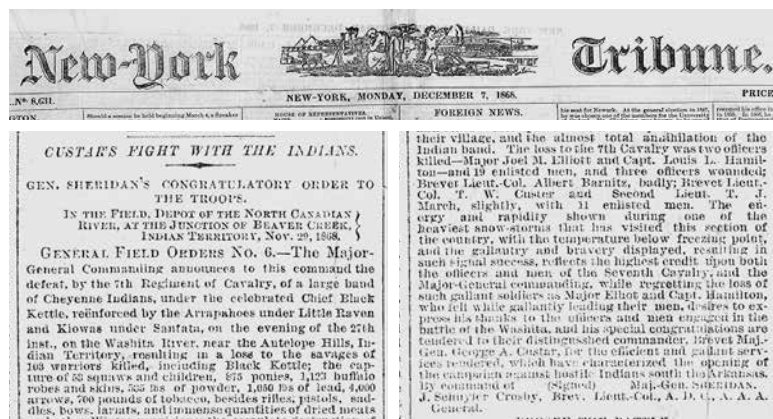
Medals of Honor in the Civil War

In the book *The Bravest Five Hundred of '61: Their Noble Deeds Described By Themselves, Together With an Account of Some Gallant Exploits of Our Soldiers in Indian Warfare. How the Medal of Honor Was Won*⁴ [See Plate 7.], Libbie Custer wrote a chapter about Tom entitled "A Beau Sabreur." A pen and ink drawing from the book, based on a tintype photograph, shows Union soldiers displaying Confederate colors captured at Sailor's Creek on April 6, 1865—one of the two battles in which Tom earned a Medal of Honor. [See Plate 8.]

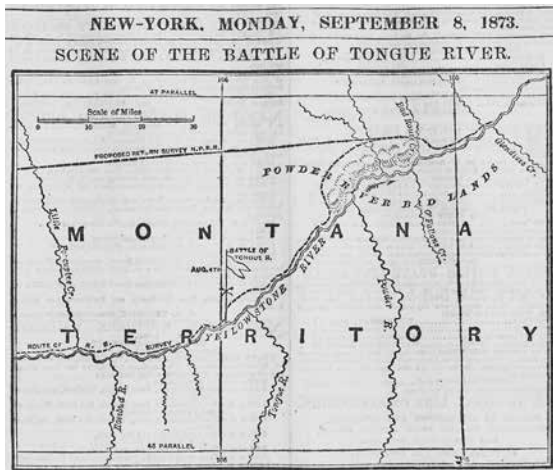
The book *Medal of Honor Recipients: 1863–1973*, dated October 22, 1973, and published by the Committee on Veterans' Affairs of the United States Senate, includes a short profile of Tom.⁵ [See Plates 9 & 10.]

Contemporary Newspaper Accounts of the Sioux War and Little Bighorn Battle

A December 7, 1868, *New York Tribune* article described the Battle of the Washita near present-day Cheyenne, Oklahoma. It mentions Tom and his slight wound received in the fight.⁶ [Plate 11, 12 & 13]



Plates 11, 12 & 13. New York Tribune, December 7, 1868



Never was an order obeyed more promptly. Every man sprang to his picket rope, and the horses were immediately brought under cover. A line of skirmishers was at once thrown out to receive with martial courtesy the advancing Indians, whose intention when within 250 yards became clearly evident. They had not come to hold a peace conference, but to steal our horses and drive out our men. They were evidently the decoy of a larger party. Gen. Custer immediately sent word back to Capt. Moylan for all the men in the woods to saddle their horses. With his dismounted skirmish line the General kept the Indians off until the horses were saddled, the men in the timber who had saddled coming out and relieving those on the skirmish line. Gen. Custer then called for his horse, and accompanied by Lieut. Calhoun and Lieut. Custer, and his own orderly, rode out toward the Indians. As they advanced, the Indians retreated. Gen. Custer, having a thoroughbred horse whose speed he had tested in many a

Plates 14 & 15.
New York Tribune,
September 8, 1873

The *New York Tribune's* coverage of the Battle of Tongue River, dated September 8, 1873, a.k.a. Battle of the Bighorn, included a map of the battle and mentioned Tom and his brother riding out to meet with a skirmish line of Indians who scattered as the party approached.⁷ [See Plates 14 & 15.] Their mission was to protect Northern Pacific Railroad surveyors working in the region.

Continuing *New York Tribune* coverage of the Battle of Tongue River⁸ [See Plates 16 & 17.], this September 9, 1873, article mentioned Tom among cavalymen on an aggressive assault:

"Forward!" shouted the commanders, and away they went "pell-mell," the horses seeming to share the eagerness of the men. There was no scattering or flagging. Every man keeps in his place. On they go like a whirlwind. Weston and Hale on the left, Tom Custer plunging down the ravine on the right. Ditches, gullies, hills, cannot stop them.... Lieut. Custer on the left led his men on furiously. "He is a terrible rider," said one of our "casuals" to me. "I saw him fly over a ditch about 15 feet wide. The man after him missed it, and horse and rider rolled into the gully."

Tom, the general, and their brother-in-law James Calhoun were named in a *New York Tribune* article, September 12, 1873, about the Yellowstone War at Battle of Honsinger Bluff on the Tongue River, Montana.⁹ [See Plates 18 & 19.]

Front page coverage in the *New York Tribune*, July 14, 1876, included a map of the battlefield with numbers showing where the bodies of Tom and his brothers were found.¹⁰ [See Plates 20 & 21.]

Meanwhile Gen. Custer with five companies—Yates's, Keogh's, Tom Custer's, Smith's, and Calhoun's—had marched three miles northward in a ravine running parallel with the bluffs on the east side of the Little Big Horn, and had reached a break in the bluffs where an Indian trail toward the river indicated a ford. Suddenly, before it was reached, the Indians appeared on the trail behind them and on their left flank, cutting off retreat in the direction of Reno's force. Apparently Custer did not descend to the level of the water, but, perceiving that his little band was outnumbered five to one, ordered a retreat to the north in the direction of Gen. Terry's infantry, then marching up the Little Big Horn. The lines of advance and retreat are shown in the diagram. Two parallel ravines opened to the north-east away from the river. Custer divided his force, leading Companies C and E into the ravine nearer the river, while the upper gully formed the line of retreat for Companies I, L and M. As the Indians were in hot pursuit it became necessary to make a stand at the head of the gully. Company L halted at the head of the upper ravine to defend the entrance, the men being deployed as skirmishers. Companies F and I passed on up the ravine. Midway in the lower gully a stand was made, and 28 men were killed. Two companies fought their way in the direction of higher ground, and were cut to pieces. Stragglers from the five companies joined Custer and his brothers on the crest of a little hill, and here the last stand was made.



THE YELLOWSTONE WAR.

BATTLE OF THE BIG HORN.

BURIAL OF HONSINGER AND BALIRAN—IN PURSUIT OF THE INDIANS—UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPTS TO CROSS THE YELLOWSTONE—THE INDIAN ATTACK—CUSTER'S ORDERLY KILLED—THE SIOUX SWIM THE RIVER AND ARE ROUTED BY THE CAVALRY. [FROM THE SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT OF THE TRIBUNE.] CAMP NEAR MUSSEL SHELL RIVER, Montana, Aug. 19.—For three days after the fight at Tongue River, Gen. Custer with two squadrons of cavalry went on each morning in advance of the train for the double object of finding a road and looking for the Indians. It was not deemed best to bury Dr. Honsinger and Mr. Baliran in the camp where the fight occurred. The Indians have wonderful skill in finding a new grave. Once found, no scruple forbids them to desecrate the grave and mutilate the dead. The bodies were therefore taken on 15 miles further to the camp of the next day, and buried at evening in the cottonwood trees. The

THE CHARGE AND ROUT OF THE SIOUX.

The second onslaught of the Indians was made on our center. Failing to dislodge Lieut. Braden, a large party of them got into a ravine on our front and opened a galling fire upon us. Gen. Custer, who had established his headquarters on the top of this bluff, now deemed it time to drive the Indians away. "Strike up Garry Owen," said he to the leader of the band. The familiar notes of that stirring Irish air acted like magic. If the commander had had a galvanic battery connecting with the solar flexus of every man on the field, he could hardly have electrified them more thoroughly. What matter if the cornet played a faltering note, and the alto-horn was a little husky? There was no mistaking the tune and its meaning. "Forward!" shouted the commanders, and away they went "pell-mell," the horses seeming to share the eagerness of the men. There was no scattering or flagging. Every man keeps in his place. On they go like a whirlwind. Weston and Hale on the left, Tom Custer plunging down the ravine on the right. Ditches, gullies, hills, cannot stop them. Now Yates and Moylan are ordered to advance and support them, and add two more to the black columns dashing over the hills. No Indian would venture to

Plates 16 & 17.
New York
Tribune,
September 9,
1873

THE YELLOWSTONE WAR.

BATTLE OF TONGUE RIVER.

A HOT AND THIRSTY MARCH—GEN. CUSTER STRIKES AN INDIAN TRAIL—A CUNNING SIOUX DECOY—THE INDIAN LINE OF BATTLE—TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY PAINTED WARRIORS—THREE HOURS' FIGHTING AND A CAVALRY CHARGE—THE KILLED AND WOUNDED.

[FROM THE SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT OF THE TRIBUNE.] CAMP NEAR MUSSEL SHELL RIVER, Montana, Aug. 19.—No day since the expedition started opened more monotonously than the 5th of August. Our march since we left the Yellowstone has been devoid of interest except that afforde

While the infantry and the cavalry near the train were longing for any deliverance from heat, thirst and monotony, Gen. Custer, with a squadron of cavalry several miles ahead, was having a warmer and much more lively experience. With a squadron numbering 80 men under Capt. Moylan, one troop of which was commanded by his brother, Lieut. Thomas Custer, and the other by Lieut. Charles A. Varnum, he had started in advance of the train to find a good road. In addition to the officers named, he was accompanied by Bloody Knife, the Indian scout, an interpreter, and the regimental adjutant, Lieut. James Calhoun. When about two miles from

Plates 18 & 19.
New York
Tribune,
September 12,
1873

Plates 20 & 21.
New York Tribune,
July 14, 1876

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The front page of the September 8, 1877, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* featured the funeral and burial service for Tom and his brother-in-law, James Calhoun, held August 4, 1877, at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.¹⁴ [See Plates 27 & 28.]

The first biography of Custer, *A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer, Major-General of Volunteers, Brevet Major-General U.S. Army, and Lieutenant Colonel Seventh U.S. Cavalry* by Frederick Whittaker, was published three months after the battle.¹⁵ [See Plate 29.] The book is said to have helped stir up public controversy over the possible dereliction of duty by Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen. Tom, his brother-in-law Calhoun, brother Boston, and nephew Reed are pictured on a page of oval engravings. [See Plate 30.] How this collage—a mother's worst fear realized—failed to inspire generations of poets, painters, authors, playwrights, songwriters, and movie-makers is astonishing.

Century Magazine published a January 1892 article authored by E. S. Godfrey, Captain of the Seventh Cavalry, picturing Tom and titled "Custer's Last Battle."¹⁶ [See Plates 31, 32 & 33.]

Wide World Magazine's August 1901 issue featured a photo of Tom in an article by Alfred Burkholder titled "The Massacre of General Custer and His Command."¹⁷ [See Plates 34 & 35.]

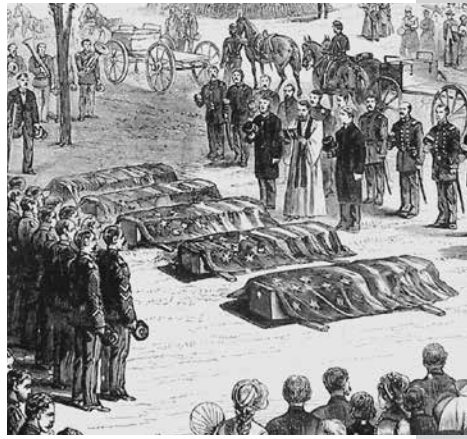


Plate 27.

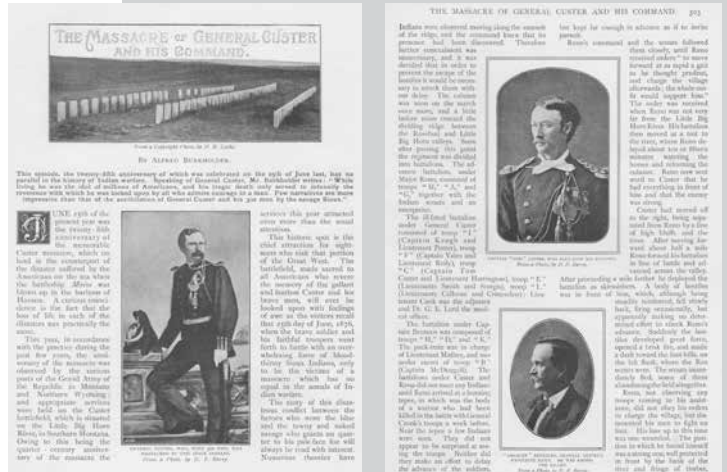


Plate 28. Front-page coverage in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper



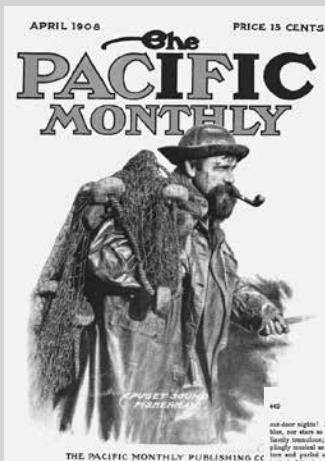
Plate 29. Whittaker's biography of Custer, 1876

Plate 30.



Plates 31, 32 & 33. *Century Magazine*, 1892

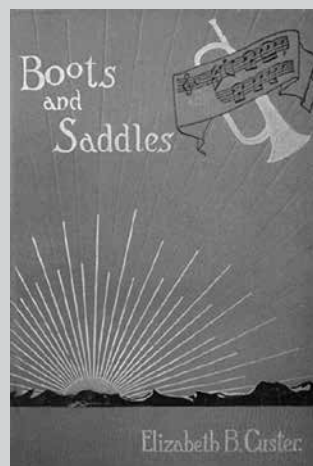
Plates 34 & 35. *Wide World Magazine*, 1901



Plates 38 & 39.
The Pacific
Monthly, 1904.
Courtesy of
Google Books.



Plates 40, 41 & 42. Libbie's books
fondly recounting Tom's exploits



Plates 36 & 37. Pearson's Magazine, 1904. Courtesy of Google Books.

The August 1904 edition of *Pearson's Magazine* contained the three-part article, "War With the Sioux," by Cyrus Townsend Brady, with Tom's photo.¹⁸ [See Plates 36 & 37.]

The *Pacific Monthly* published an April 1908 article with Tom's portrait. The article, by Fred A. Hunt, was titled "A Purposeful Picnic," part II.¹⁹ [See Plates 38 & 39.]

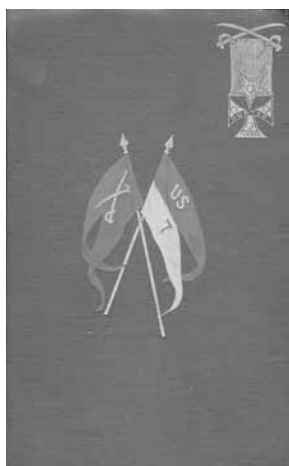
Libbie Custer's Memoirs

Tom is widely- and well-mentioned in three major memoirs published by the general's widow, Libbie Custer. [See Plates 40, 41 & 42, left to right.] *Boots and Saddles: Or Life in Dakota with General Custer*; *Following the Guidon*; and *Tenting on the Plains: Or, General Custer in Kansas and Texas*.²⁰

In the years after Little Bighorn, Libbie published and lobbied diligently to preserve the memory of her dead hero-husband. She aggressively fought a propaganda war with journalists and authors who published material critical of the general. Shirley Leckie, in *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth*, wrote, "Her perception of who her husband was and what his life and death meant shaped and colored public opinion until she died."

Libbie adored her brother-in-law, despite his many flaws of character, and often referred to him as "Our Tom." She once wrote that he "honored and liked women extremely." In *Boots and Saddles*, she knowingly wrote:

Colonel Tom used to pay visits of an unconscionable length to ladies of the garrison, and no amount of teasing on his brother's part would induce him to shorten them. [Tom] never knew, when he started to go home from these visits, but that he would find on the young lady's door-mat his trunk, portmanteau, and satchel—this as a little hint from the general that he was overtaxing the lady's patience.



In the 1897 book *Sabre and Bayonet*, compiled by Theodore F. Rodenbough, Libbie authored a special chapter about Tom, "A Beau Sebreur."²¹ [See Plates 43 & 44.]

Feud with Chief Rain in the Face

Chief Rain in the Face, of the Hunkpapa component of the Lakota tribe, attracted Tom's enmity in August 1873. That month, led by Rain, the Hunkpapas attacked a Northern Pacific Railroad survey crew near the Tongue River in Montana. General Custer learned that the chief was the perpetrator and, after the incident, was staying at Standing Rock in the Dakotas. The general dispatched Tom in 1874 to make the arrest. Tom apprehended Rain in a trading store at Fort Yates and brought the captive to Fort Abraham Lincoln. Richard O'Connor's 1959 book *Wild Bill Hickok* states that "Tom had his henchmen hold him down while Tom beat and kicked the Indian."²² Under a sentence of death by hanging, the chief escaped and vowed revenge, boasting that he would cut Tom's heart out and eat it raw.

After the Little Bighorn battle, the predominant rumor circulating in America was that Rain in the Face had gained revenge and cut out Tom's heart as part of the ritual mutilation of the body, and also fired the final shot into the general. This was widely reported in Eastern newspapers in the weeks following the massacre, citing "official reports received at the War Department in Washington," including publication in Ohio by, among others, the *Cleveland Leader*²³ [See Plate 45.] and *Perrysburg Journal*²⁴ [See Plate 46.] in the home region of Tom and his parents in Wood County.

The nationally renowned poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow [See Plate 49.] cemented the myth of Tom's disembowelment with his poem, "The Revenge of Rain in the Face," written almost immediately after the battle. Yet, surprisingly, Tom is not named. While the 1876 work is sympathetic to the Indian cause, Longfellow took significant creative license by stating that the general, not Tom, was whose heart was cut out. First known publication was in *The Youth's Companion* on March 1, 1877,²⁵ [See Plates 47 & 48.] with wide reprinting in a variety of journals.

"The Revenge of Rain-In-The-Face" poem was included in the 1886 anthology entitled *The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*.²⁶ [See Plates 50 & 51.]



Plates 50 & 51.
Longfellow's poem in book form

THE REVENGE OF RAIN-IN-THE-FACE.

In that desolate land and lone,
Where the Big Horn and Yellowstone
Rear down their mountain path,
By their fires the Sioux Chiefs
Muttered their woes and griefs,
And the menace of their wrath.

"Revenge!" cried Rain-in-the-Face,
"Revenge upon all the race
Of the White Chief with yellow hair!"
And the mountains dark and high
From their crags re-echoed the cry
Of his anger and despair.

In the meadow, spreading wide



Plates 43 & 44.
Sabre and Bayonet, 1897



A BEAU SEBREUR.*

I CANNOT tell with what gratitude I embrace the opportunity to add my tribute to the valor of one of the soldiers this book seeks to commemorate.

Many a woman adds to the pang of bereavement, the sorrow of knowing that the great has sprung up and faded, her own twenty years, on the graves of those who saved us in the unity of our beautiful land, and, alas! who now lie forgotten. Will not, then, the hearts of many fill with thankfulness that the brave deeds of those that are gone are here given anew to their Country, and that a monument is raised to their "famed and lost" more lasting than "stated men or animated busts?"

In New Ramsey, Ohio, on March 31, 1845, Emanuel and

* This chapter is from the pen of Mrs. George B. Conner.

RAIN-IN-THE-FACE.

ST. PAUL, August 5.—News by the way of Bismarck is to the effect that Rain-in-the-Face, accompanied by 220 lodges of Indians in the hostile camp, has arrived at Standing Rock. This Indian murdered a trader of Stanley's expedition in 1868, was arrested therefor by Captain Thomas Custer, but escaped, and is said to have cut the heart from Captain Custer's body and to have fired the last shot at General Custer.

Plate 45.

Plate 46.

Mainstream news stories about
Tom's dismemberment by Rain-in-the-Face



For the Companion.

THE REVENGE OF RAIN-IN-THE-FACE.

In that desolate land and lone,
Where the Big Horn and Yellowstone,
Rear down their mountain path,
By their fires the Sioux chiefs
Muttered their woes and griefs,
And the menace of their wrath.

"Revenge!" cried Rain-in-the-Face,
"Revenge upon all the race
Of the White Chief with yellow hair!"
And the mountains dark and high
From their crags re-echoed the cry
Of his anger and despair.

Plates 47 & 48.
First printing of
Longfellow's poem

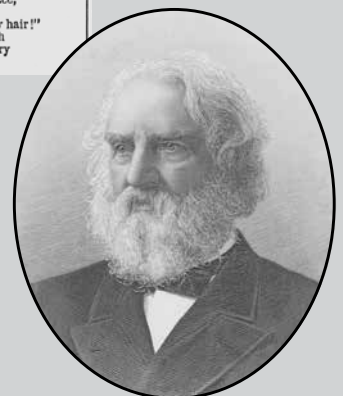


Plate 49.

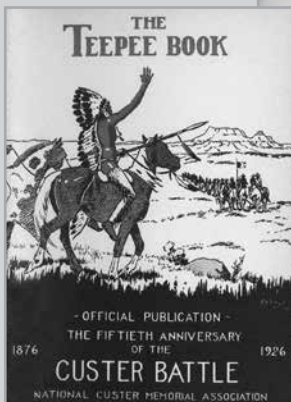
Plates 52 & 53.
Reprint of
D. F. Barry's catalogue—
published to help sell
his portraits of
Rain in the Face



Rain-in-the-Face is a daring and desperate Indian. He surrendered at Fort Keogh in 1881. In 1875 he was taken from Standing Rock by Capt. Tom Custer and a company of the Seventh Cavalry and confined in the guard house at Fort Lincoln for murder. While awaiting his trial he made his escape. It is stated on good authority that he killed Capt. Tom Custer. He is a fine looking Indian.

Plate 54.

Booklets published
on anniversaries
of the battle



Plates 55 & 56.



Banking on the lingering popularity of the feud between Tom and Rain in the Face, photographer D.F. Barry kept the story in public view as part of American lore to help sell his pictures. After Rain surrendered at Fort Keogh in September 1880, Barry used that as an opportunity to become friends and make a series of photographic portraits.

In his eighteen-page sales booklet, *D. F. Barry's Catalogue of Noted Indian Chiefs*, [See Plates 52 & 53.] published in the 1880s in Bismarck, Barry wrote this in his description of the chief's photo: "It is stated on good authority that he killed Capt. Tom Custer. He is a fine looking Indian."²⁷ Later, Barry relocated to West Superior, Wisconsin, and re-issued the catalogue from that location.

Thomas M. Heski's biography of Barry, *The Little Shadow Catcher*, contains eight photos of Rain but names Tom only once. The text states that among the natives, Rain was a "true and loyal friend."²⁸ Barry and Rain even had a portrait made together, reproduced in the book.

The legend of Tom's Rain in the Face feud was widely retold on anniversaries of the battle. In June 1916, for the official fortieth anniversary, a memorial service was held which featured remarks by General E. S. Godfrey who delivered a personal message from Libbie Custer. As a commemoration, Herbert Coffeen of Sheridan, Wyoming, published *The Teepee Book, Custer Battle Number*, with an article by Raymond Richards repeating the feud story, titled "The Human Interest of the Custer Battle."²⁹ [See Plate 54.] *The Teepee Book* was reprinted by The Mills Company in 1926 in connection with the battle's golden anniversary, an event again involving Libbie's approval.³⁰ [See Plates 55 & 56.] It was reprinted again in 1974 by Sol Lewis, New York, in two volumes.³¹

Journalist D.W. Bronson penned an article, "The Story of the Little Big Horn," in *Overland Monthly*, January 1907.³² His piece states that after Rain in the Face cut away Tom's heart, he bit off a piece, spat it at someone, and then rode off waving the bloody organ. Author Charles A. Eastman interviewed Rain in the Face in July 1905. In his 1918 book, *Indian Heroes and Great Chieftains*,³³ printed just a few months before the chief's death, he quoted the warrior as saying:

Many lies have been told of me. Some say that I killed the Chief [General Custer], and others that I cut out the heart of his brother, because he had caused me to be imprisoned. Why, in that fight the excitement was so great that we scarcely recognized our nearest friends! Everything was done like lightning.

The American Mercury, a national intellectual journal edited by H.L. Mencken and published by Alfred A. Knopf, printed an article in its November 1926 edition titled "Custer and Rain in the Face," authored by Eli L. Huggins.³⁴ The lengthy article focuses on the Indian warrior's hatred and distrust of the general and only mentions Tom once.

The Famed Anheuser Busch Custer's Last Fight Painting

Tom is depicted in one of America's most well-known Custer popular culture artifacts, the famed *Custer's Last Fight* painting by Cassilly Adams, and reprinted by Anheuser Busch. In the scene, Tom is positioned at the general's right breast, seated on the ground and firing a pistol. [See Plate 57.] His name appears accordingly in the legend at the bottom of the print. [See Plate 58] Thousands of copies were mass distributed to beer distributors, barrooms and U.S. servicemen between the 1890s and 1940s as advertising for the beer manufacturer. The original, donated to the U.S. Army, was destroyed in a Fort Bliss fire circa 1946. High quality prints are available today from the Custer Battlefield Museum in Garryowen, Montana.³⁵



Plate 57.

Portions of the famed Anheuser Busch Custer's Last Fight depicting Tom

Children's Literature

Tom is mentioned on the back of a 1941 trading card featuring Rain in the Face. [See Plates 59 & 60.] The card is part of the *Famous American Indian Series*, published by G.I. Groves.³⁶ The caption reads, in part: "He was arrested in 1873 by Col. Tom Custer for killing a surgeon and a trader. Was imprisoned for a time, but released by his guard to join Sitting Bull, declaring that he would cut out the heart of Tom Custer and eat it."

The book *Famous Indian Chiefs* by Ben Ely features "17 Portraits in Color."³⁷ [See Plate 61.] A one-page profile of Rain in the Face, on page three, states that Rain "was reputed to have killed General Custer (though he denied it) and to have cut out the heart of Custer's brother Tom for revenge because Tom Custer had once arrested him." [See Plates 62 & 63.] The other chiefs featured in the book are Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Gall, Crow Big-Foot, Tecumseh, King Philip, Black Hawk, Plenty Coups, Pontiac, Wolf Robe, Osceola, Red Cloud, Geronimo, Joseph, Petalasharo and American Horse.

While briefly named in the opening chapter, Tom only enters the story on page 137 of Quentin Reynolds' 1951 *Custer's Last Stand*. [See Plate 64, next page.] Tom's persona builds from there to the end.³⁸

Custer was surrounded on all sides. His men were twenty against a thousand. They were ten now, and finally only two. Autie Custer and his brother Tom knelt side by side, pouring lead into the screaming braves. Two bullets hit Autie at the same time. He wheeled toward Tom and reached out a hand. Tom was hit at the same moment. He swerved toward Autie. They died as they had lived—together.

Page 181 contains artist Frederick T. Chapman's illustration of the brothers as they were falling. This book often was a child's first exposure to the Custer/Bighorn story.

RAIN-IN-THE-FACE (about 1835-1905) was a noted Sioux warrior and chief whose name once aroused terror all along the frontier. He took part in the attack on Fort Phil Kearney, Wyoming, and later in the battle of the Little Big Horn, in 1876, where he was reputed to have killed General Custer (though he denied it) and to have cut out the heart of Custer's brother Tom for revenge because Tom Custer had once arrested him. About this latter incident Henry W. Longfellow wrote his poem entitled "The Revenge of Rain-in-the-Face." He passed his last years peaceably on the Standing Rock reservation.



Plate 58.

Plates 59 & 60.
Trading card
featuring portrait of
Rain-in-the-Face
and mentioning Tom

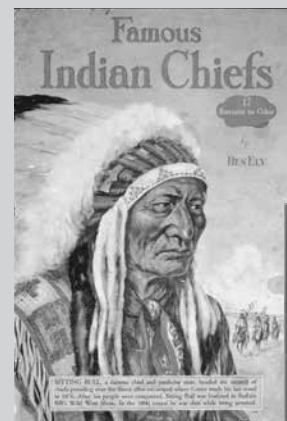


Plate 61.
The book
Famous Indian Chiefs



Plates 62 & 63.



Plate 64.

Children's
books
mentioning
Tom



Plate 65.

Margaret Carver Leighton's 1957 book *Comanche of the Seventh*³⁹ tracks the life saga of a horse born on the plains in the spring of 1862. [See Plate 65.] The horse was later captured for use by the United States Army and became part of the Seventh Cavalry. Comanche was ridden by Captain Myles Keogh and became the only survivor of the Little Bighorn battle. Mentioned on twenty-eight pages of the work, Tom is first described in a scene at Fort Leavenworth, in April 1868, as he prepares to send the freshly purchased horses further west: "A lean, fair-haired young officer supervised the loading. As the train began to move out towards the setting sun he grinned and waved his hat at a railroad official on the station platform."

Tom was a character in the *Lion and Champion* comic strip series "Texas Jack and the Custer Clan," October 22, 1966 edition.⁴⁰ He is sketched riding with his brothers George and Boston on the Great Plains and spotting a large herd of buffalo. Tom spurs his horse to run headlong into the herd, saying, "It's the leader of the herd I'm after! What a monster!"—only to have the buffalo lunge and knock Tom "and his horse into a flying tangle of limbs! Tom lay right in the path of the oncoming herd... General Custer knew that he could never get there in time to save his brother from a horrible death!"—Tom is pulled to safety at the last second by "Texas Jack," the Seventh Cavalry's chief of scouts Colonel Jonathan Morningstar.

Fiction: *Little Big Man*, *The White Buffalo* and the Wild Bill Hickok Legend in Print and on Film

Tom's exaggerated scrapes with gunfighter Wild Bill Hickok have entered American myth in a variety of stories, books and films. Among the published works of fiction made into major motion pictures are *Little Big Man* by Thomas Berger⁴¹ and *The White Buffalo* by Richard Sale.⁴²

The seeds of the brawl legend were planted in a February 1867 *Harper's* article by army Colonel George Ward Nichols. The article related how the lives of Tom and Hickok intersected in Hays, Kansas. At the time, Hickok was serving as a local sheriff. Eugene Cunningham's 1941 book *Triggernometry: A Gallery of Gunfighters*⁴³ [See Plate 66.] describes the feud in a paragraph that does not name Tom other than "Custer" and "General Custer's brother." Cunningham writes that Tom "felt that his position in the Army rendered him immune to authority other than that of the military, but when he rode drunkenly up and down the streets shooting up the town, Hickok took him quietly into custody. The incident rankled with Custer." Tom is alleged to have retaliated by recruiting a handful of toughs within the Seventh Cavalry and trying to ambush Hickok in a Hays saloon on New Year's Eve, with Hickok killing three of the soldiers. Cooler heads broke up the fight and "drove them out of town."

O'Connor, in his book *Wild Bill Hickok*, calls Tom "a violent drunkard" and says he enjoyed shooting windows and lights when carousing through Hays.⁴⁴ It also tells the apocryphal

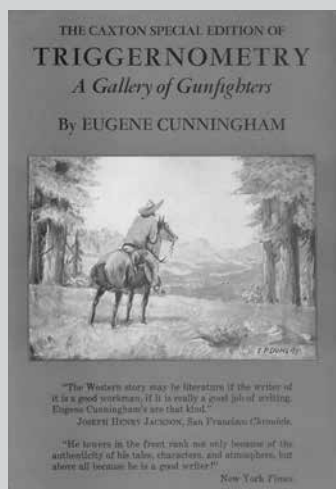


Plate 66.

story that Tom once brought his horse into a Hays pool hall and shot the animal when it failed to jump on top of a billiard table. The source of this tale appears to be research notes by William Connelley preserved in the Denver Public Library.

In *Little Big Man* [See Plate 67.] Tom is mentioned on sixteen pages. The fictional narrator Jack Crabb—later portrayed on film by Dustin Hoffman—says that he was “a carbon-copy of the General with the characteristics less authentic—like he was more impudent than truly arrogant, with his hat on the side of his head, etc.” Crabb adds that while chasing Indians on the Plains, Tom and his brother Boston “was usually to be seen acting as if we was on a picnic outing.”⁴⁵ One character in the book says of Tom:

There’s another bastard. You seen that specimen? Wild Bill Hickok put a head on him once down in Kansas and Tom pulled in his horns. And old Rain in the Face, when he was arrested a couple years ago for murdering three white men, he blamed Tom Custer for it and swore he would one day cut out Tom’s heart and eat it. Tom’s been pissing his pants ever since that Indian escaped.⁴⁶

Tom’s *Little Big Man* character did not survive the editing process from book to major motion picture, directed by Arthur Penn, in 1971.

In *The White Buffalo*, [See Plate 68.] Tom is named on three pages of the book, not as an active participant, but in the third person. The primary reference is in a conversation between James Otis (alias of Wild Bill Hickok) and Charlie Zane, a one-eyed seller of cats, who meet in a saloon in Fetterman, Kansas. They eventually talk about a New Year’s Eve dispute when Hickok arrested Tom for drunk and disorderly conduct, and Tom later returned with a few men to give Hickok a beating. “Tom Custer tried to murder me,” Hickok says. Zane replies, “I always knew you and Tom got along like a pair of scratch cats. He was green-eyed about you ‘cause the General thought you was Jesus in buckskins.” Hickok goes on to call Tom “always hothead, always sotted. One night he breezed into Hays [Kansas], shooting out the windows, and I had to buffalo him like a common lush.”⁴⁷

Actor Ed Lauter, [See Plate 69.] portrayed Tom in a scene in the film version of *The White Buffalo*,⁴⁸ a United Artists film, presented by Dino DeLaurentiis, and starring Charles Bronson, Jack Warden, and Kim Novak. [See Plate 70.] The plot is a search by Wild Bill Hickok and Crazy Horse to hunt and kill a massive albino bison. In a brief scene, Tom sits at a saloon drinking and becomes angry when learning that Hickok—who allegedly had shot two of Tom’s men years before in Hays City—has returned to town. Hickok is acclaimed to have been the victor in thirty-two pistol duels and “the quickest and best pistol shot that ever lived.”

Blaine Burkey, in his book *Custer, Come at Once! The Fort Hays Years of George and Elizabeth Custer, 1867–1870*,⁴⁹ writes of Tom’s self-acknowledged alcoholism, vulgarity, profanity, and proclivity for playing underhanded tricks on others.

Tom’s biographer Carl Day calls the “whole story” surrounding Hickok “a total fabrication.”⁵⁰ Educator and author J. Jefferson “Jeff” Broome, Ph.D., debunks the Hickok tales with precision in his deeply researched articles. The first article was “Wild Bill

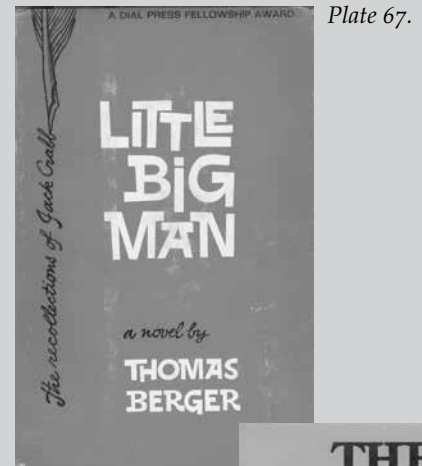


Plate 67.

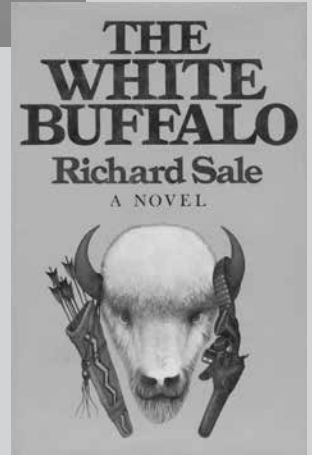


Plate 68.

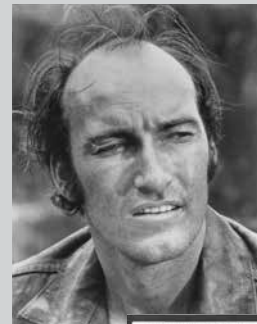


Plate 69.
Actor Ed Lauter,
who portrayed Tom
in the film
The White Buffalo,
courtesy Metro
Goldwyn Mayer.

Plate 70.
Film poster
from
*The White
Buffalo*





Plates 71 & 72. Tom sketched as a gambler in Ante—I Raise You Ten, Courtesy Huntington Library.



Hickok's 1870 Hays City Brawl With Custer's Troopers,"⁵¹ in the *Journal of the Wild West History Association*. The most recent article was "Tom Custer & Hickok's 1870 Brawl with Company M, Seventh Cavalry."⁵²

An pen and ink drawing of a long-haired Tom was published in the 1902 book *Ante—I Raise You Ten: Fascinating Stories of Great Poker Games and Players*,⁵³ by Eugene Edwards. [See Plates 71 & 72.] The drawing appears in a seventeen-page chapter entitled "Tom Custer's Luck." Edwards calls Tom

a dashing poker player. He played without any apparent style or reason, sometimes coming in on the most ridiculous hands—such as a nine and ten, or standing a raise on three cards of a suit, in hope of catching two more to make a flush—and made them win often enough to cause remark. He used to make the remark, half true, that he would a little rather start out with nothing in his hand, because then he had a better chance in the draw.

Popular Twentieth-Century Biographies of the General

The Little Big Horn Associates has produced a list of the "best" thirty-five books about the General and the battle. All go into some detail about Tom. Some already are analyzed elsewhere in this article; others produced after 2002 are outside the scope of this discussion; while several others that reached audiences outside of the immediate Custer community are outlined here:

- *Custer in '76: Walter Camp's Notes on the Custer Fight* by Kenneth M. Hammer⁵⁴
- *Custer's Luck* by Edgar Irving Stewart⁵⁵
- *The Custer Story: The Life and Intimate Letters of General George A. Custer and His Wife Elizabeth* by Marguerite Merington⁵⁶
- *The Custer Album: A Pictorial Biography of General George A. Custer* by Lawrence A. Frost⁵⁷
- *Custer* by Jeffrey D. Wert⁵⁸
- *General Custer's Libbie* by Lawrence A. Frost⁵⁹
- *Son of the Morning Star* by Evan S. Connell⁶⁰

In *Son of the Morning Star*, Tom, while pictured twice and mentioned in a photo caption of *Rain in the Face*, is not discussed until more than halfway through the narrative.⁶¹ The majority of text about Tom focuses on whether Rain cut out and ate Tom's heart.

Twentieth-Century News Stories and Magazine Articles

Famed newspaperman Damon Runyon penned a nationally syndicated column commenting on a wide variety of Americana. On the eve of World War II, he penned a column entitled "Captain



Plate 73. True West magazine, November 1994



Plate 74. The Guidon magazine, 1999

Plate 75.
Real West
magazine,
January 1982

Tom Custer's Deeds Retold"⁶² in which he said that Tom and Smedley Butler were the only two Americans to win two medals of honor. Runyon recounted Tom's wound in battle, his feud with Rain in the Face and his death at Little Bighorn.

The November 1994 edition of *True West* magazine, featured "Tom Custer: In His Brother's Shadow,"⁶³ by Ernest Lisle Reedstrom. [See Plate 73.] It was the first published article to acknowledge Thomas C. "Tommy" Custer as Tom's son, and Rebecca Miner as the boy's mother. The article included a photo of Tommy found at Bowling Green State University.

The October 1999 edition of *The Guidon* magazine,⁶⁴ [See Plate 74.] had many articles devoted to Tom and his legacy.

The January 1982 edition of *Real West* magazine had an article by Dale T. Schoenberger entitled "Tom Custer: The General's Brother."⁶⁵ [See Plate 75.] Schoenberger states that Tom "was more than just the opposite of his more famous brother. He was an interesting Old West personality and an American military hero who has stood in his brother's shadow for too long."

The Little Big Horn Associates has been a leading force in preserving Tom's legacy in print over the years—in its *Newsletter*, its *Research Review* magazine and as topics of annual and regional conferences. Among its *Newsletter* feature articles are: "Custer Family," Vol. V, No. 1, Spring 1971⁶⁶; "Letters Back Home" (cover illustration by Reedstrom), Vol. IX, No. 12, 1975⁶⁷ [See Plate 76.]; "Tom Custer's Medals of Honor," Vol. X, No. 1, January 1976⁶⁸; "Tom Custer and the Wadsworth Girls," Vol. XIV, No. 12, 1980⁶⁹; "The Forgotten Custer," March 1984⁷⁰; and "The Custer Family," Vol. 6, No. 2, June 1992.⁷¹

The Ohio Historical Society, in the state of Tom's birth, published "Our Brother Tom" in its *Timeline* magazine in the August–September 1990 issue, authored by Frank R. Levstik.⁷²

"Tom Custer: The Other Custer," authored by Tom O'Neil, was published in the Dixie Gun Works *Blackpowder Annual* 1997.⁷³ [See Plate 77.] O'Neil later reprinted the article with its own yellow cover. [See Plate 78.]

Cameo Appearances in Films, Television, Radio and Stage

In the 1965 film *The Great Sioux Massacre*, starring Joseph Cotten and Darren McGavin, Tom is portrayed by John Napier and General George A. Custer by Philip Carey.⁷⁴ [See Plate 79.] The film depicts the court martial trial against Major Reno for the slaughter at Little Bighorn, and how Reno refuted the charges by showing that General Custer was at fault, blinded by his mad ambition that victory would sweep him into the White House. The character of Tom in this film is limited to the battle scene at the end, when a soldier fighting beside the general falls, and the general calls out the single word, "Tom."

In the 1991 *Son of the Morning Star* mini-series airing on ABC Television, Tom was portrayed by actor Tim Ransom. [See Plate 83.] Gary Cole had the role of General Custer, and Rosanna



Plate 76.
Little Big Horn
Associates'
Newsletter



Plate 77



Plate 78

TOM THE OTHER CUSTER

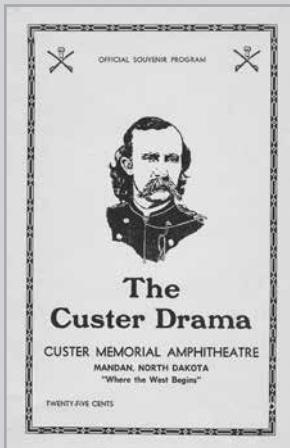


By Tom O'Neil



Plate 79. Movie
theatre lobby card
for *The Great Sioux
Massacre*

Plate 81. Bruce Oliver, portrayed Tom in The Custer Drama



BRUCE OLIVER
Captain Tom Custer

Bruce Oliver, a native of St. Paul, Minnesota is currently playing one of the major roles in the CUSTER DRAMA. Bruce, a senior theatre major at Macalester College is appearing in the role of Captain Tom Custer. Bruce brings a great deal of experience to the production, having appeared in "Cinderella", "Merry Wives of Windsor", "Two Gentlemen of Verona", "Skin of Our Teeth", "Noah", "Teshouse of the August Moon", "Anatol", and "Ball Soprano".

Plate 80.
Program booklet for The Custer Drama performed circa 1961 in Mandan, North Dakota

performed between 1959 and 1968 at the Custer Memorial Amphitheatre, Fort Lincoln State Park, Mandan, North Dakota.⁷⁶ [See Plate 80.] Performances were held Wednesday through Sunday in July and August. Acts I and II took place in Sitting Bull's camp and in Fort Lincoln in 1873-1876. Act II included scenes in the Bismarck Tribune office and in Washington, D.C. Bruce Oliver, a native of St. Paul, Minnesota, and a student at Macalester College, portrayed Tom. [See Plate 81.]

In the 1949 John Ford film *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, Tom is not a character but is mentioned verbally.⁷⁷ The film stars John Wayne as Captain Nathan Cutting Brittles who, following the Little Bighorn battle, and just a few days away from retirement, leads a mission from Fort Starke to put down an imminent Cheyenne and Arapaho attack. Early in the film, Brittles sits at his desk and reads aloud a list of the Little Bighorn casualties he has received: "George Armstrong Custer. Tom Custer. Boston Custer. Calhoun. Cooke. Crittenden. Harrington. Keogh... Myles Keogh." The film won an Oscar for best cinematography.

Tom occasionally has been portrayed in television programs. One of the more prominent was in Castle Rock Entertainment's 1996 *The Lazarus Man*, [See Plate 82.] in an episode entitled "The Boy General." Tim Ransom [See Plate 83.] played Tom, and Jon David Weigand the General. They conspire with Robert Urich's Mr. Lazarus to put down mutiny attempts at Fort Hays. In this episode, Tom admits to a stranger that he is in love with Libbie and gives her longing glances during a dinner.⁷⁸ Other TV portrayals include *The Court Martial of George Armstrong Custer* (1976), which aired on December 1, 1977, on the Hallmark Hall of Fame. Produced by Norman Rosemont, and directed by Glenn Jordan, it was based on a novel by Douglas C. Jones, and included some discussion of Tom⁷⁹; and *Time Tunnel* (Season 1, Episode 8, airing on October 28, 1966) had an episode entitled "Massacre" with Tom portrayed by Bruce Mars. It was directed by Murray Golden, produced by Irwin Allen, and written by Carey Wilber.⁸⁰

In the ephemeral realm of sound, Tom was a character in the following radio broadcasts or recordings:

1. *Durant Heroes of the West*.⁸¹ No known date.
2. *Quiet Please*, February 9, 1948, program entitled "A Red & White Guidon," with actor Arthur Kohl portraying Tom in a soldier's tribute.⁸²

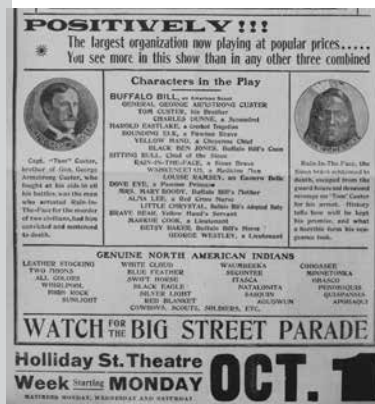


Plate 82.
The Lazarus Man promotion featuring Robert Urich, courtesy Castle Rock Entertainment.



Plate 83. Actor Tim Ransom, who portrayed Tom, courtesy Twentieth Century Fox/Bruce Birmelin.

Plates 84 & 85.
1903 broadside featuring Tom's photo, advertising the nationally-touring stage play, Custer's Last Fight



A nationally-touring stage play, *Custer's Last Fight*, was produced in the early 1900s by Aubrey Mittenenthal Attractions.⁸³ The ultra-rare script, written by James Halbert "Hal" Reid, is preserved today in the Library of Congress. A 1903 broadside advertising the show featured Tom's portrait opposite his nemesis Rain in the Face, although Tom was not portrayed in the play. [See Plates 84 & 85.] Tom was a character in another stage show, R. Kram's play *Court Martial of Capt. Thomas W. Custer: A Ghost Story of the Little Bighorn*.⁸⁴ It was later recorded for audio compact disc.

Two Full-Length Biographies

Carl Day wrote a 301-page biography, *Tom Custer: Ride to Glory*. [See Plate 86.] The author spoke at the 2002 National Miner-Minard-Miner-Minor Reunion in Kingwood, Somerset County, Pennsylvania. [See Plate 87.]

Roy Bird's two-hundred-page biography, *In His Brother's Shadow: The Life of Thomas Ward Custer*⁸⁵ [See Plate 88.] was later reissued under the title, *The Better Brother: Tom & George Custer and the Battle for the American West*.⁸⁶ ★

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The author thanks Carl Day, Vincent Heier and Beverly (Hansen) Miner for their contributions and to J. Jefferson Broome and the late Joan Croy for their generosity.



Plate 87.

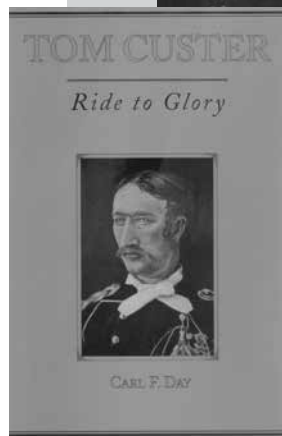


Plate 86.

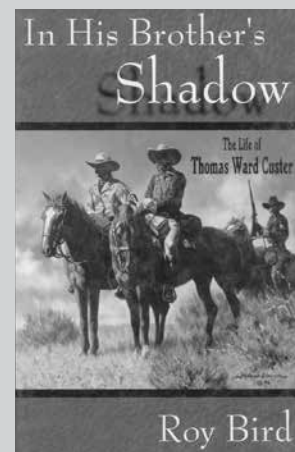
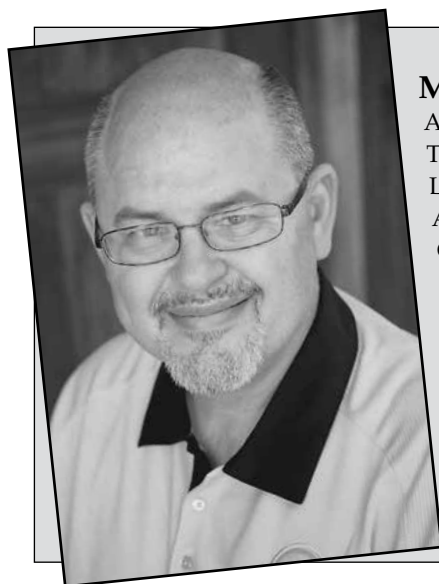


Plate 88.

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