

Custer's Massacre: How the News First Reached the Outer World

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# CUSTER'S MASSACRE

## How the News First Reached the

By Harrison Lane

Outer World

On June 25, 1876, General George A. Custer and five troops of the 7th U. S. Cavalry were completely annihilated by the warlike Sioux and Cheyennes on the Little Big Horn River, some three miles from the present site of the town of Crow Agency, Montana. Two days later, Generals Terry and Gibbon, with about 450 men, most of them infantrymen from Fort Ellis and Shaw, and from Camp Baker, all in Montana, arrived on the battlefield, discovered the dead, and relieved the remainder of the 7th Regiment besieged on a hilltop some four miles up river from the Custer battlefield.

The stunned population of the United States heard about this—the greatest individual defeat yet suffered by the U. S. Army—early in July, from two sources: the Bismarck (Dakota Territory) *Tribune* and the Helena (Montana Territory) *Herald*.

The story of how the news was dispatched by the editor of the *Tribune* is well known; but the part played by the *Herald* has been lost in obscurity; and yet it now appears that the *Herald* account was the first to be published in the eastern papers, and the third story to be carried by any newspaper.

The news came to Bismarck by way of the steamer, the *Far West*. Captain Grant Marsh, commanding the steamer, had worked closely with the military to carry out the campaign. The *Far West*

was on the Big Horn River when news reached Marsh of the Custer disaster. It was quickly decided to use the *Far West* to transport the wounded to Bismarck, a distance of over 700 miles down stream. Time was necessarily consumed in moving the wounded from the battlefield and in transporting Gibbon's troops across the Yellowstone. Free to start, Marsh made the 700 miles to Fort Abraham Lincoln, across the Missouri from Bismarck, in 54 hours. He arrived there at 11 o'clock on the night of July 5th.

Colonel Clement A. Lounsberry, editor of the *Tribune*, was an accredited correspondent of the New York *Herald*. On hearing the news he at once prepared to send dispatches to that eastern paper. But the operator could not secure connection with St. Paul until Fargo came to breakfast, and the news was therefore delayed.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, while the news reached St. Paul on the 6th, it did not get further that day because the Bismarck wire only worked direct as far as St. Paul. It appeared in the Eastern papers on the 7th.<sup>2</sup>

The Bismarck *Tribune* itself published an extra on the 6th containing a 2,500 word account of the battle. Lounsberry had access to the notes of Mark Kellogg who he himself had sent as a reporter to the battlefield, and who was killed there; and he had the opportunity to interview others who had been on the scene.<sup>3</sup> He was able to give a full report. This was the first detailed account to be published. However, it was not the first published account.

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Harrison Lane became interested in General Custer while studying history at Montana State College. He is working toward an advanced degree at the University of Minnesota between teaching at Belgrade high school, now.

The most dramatic of all  
U. S. Indian Battles  
occurred in Montana.

Yet for 77 years credit for  
reporting it went to an outside  
newspaper. Now we claim this  
honor for two pioneer

### Montana papers

To the *Bozeman Times*, edited by E. S. Wilkinson, goes the credit of actually printing the first account, on July 2, as will be pointed out later in this article, and the first accurate full account, on July 3.

While Captain Marsh was transporting troops and making his epic trip, an attempt was being made to get the Custer story to the nation's press by taking the news west instead of east. It was this attempt which resulted in both the *Times* and the *Helena Herald's* accounts.

Early on the morning of July 26th, as the *Far West* was pushing up the Big Horn, the sound of shots disturbed the crew. A man on horseback, closely pursued by Indians, was seen racing toward the *Far West*. This was Muggins Taylor, a scout with Gibbon's column. Safely aboard, Taylor repeated the tragic story of Custer's defeat and this corroborated the story which the men aboard the *Far West* had heard the day before from Curly, one of Custer's scouts.

Taylor had been sent from Captain Kirtland's base camp on the Yellowstone with dispatches for Fort Ellis. Pursued by Indians, he had raced towards the Little Big Horn and happily had come upon the *Far West*. He remained on board until July 1st when he set out once more on his 175-mile ride to Fort Ellis.<sup>1</sup> He arrived at Stillwater, near present day Columbus, the same evening.<sup>2</sup> Here W. H. Norton, "special correspondent for the *Helena Herald*,"<sup>3</sup> operated a store together with Horace



Countryman.<sup>7</sup> Upon hearing Taylor's news, Norton wrote a dispatch for the *Herald* and also one for the *Bozeman Times*. Taylor continued on to Bozeman arriving there on the 3rd.<sup>8</sup> That evening the *Bozeman Times* got out an extra based on Norton's dispatch. This was reprinted in the *Times'* regular edition of July 6th.

The telegraph line was at that time broken beyond Bozeman so that there was a delay in forwarding the official dispatches that had been sent to Fort Ellis.<sup>9</sup> However, W. H. Norton's dispatch was taken to Helena and it was published by the *Helena Herald* in an extra on July 4th, two days ahead of the *Bismarck Tribune*.<sup>10</sup> Andrew J. Fisk, one of the editors of the paper, was at that time correspondent in Helena for the Associated Press.<sup>11</sup> He proceeded to see that the news was given to the world. Accord-

<sup>1</sup> *Helena Daily Herald*, August 3, 1876, quoting the *Bismarck Tribune* of July 19.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph M. Hanson, *The Conquest of the Missouri*. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1909), 307-11.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 281-83.

<sup>5</sup> *Helena Daily Herald*, July 5, 1876.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Progressive Men of Montana* (Chicago: A. W. Bowen & Co., n. d.), 1748.

<sup>8</sup> *Bozeman Times*, July 6, 1876.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Dustin, *The Custer Tragedy* (Ann Arbor: Edward Brothers, Inc., 1939), 205.

<sup>10</sup> It was reprinted in the regular edition of the *Daily Herald*, July 5, 1876.

<sup>11</sup> *Helena Daily Independent*, July 6, 1908; *Helena Daily Herald*, July 31, 1876.



7th Cavalry graves on the Custer battlefield.

ing to an account published by the *Daily Herald* on July 22, 1876: "The local reporter, Mr. Frederick, immediately forwarded the *Herald's* letter to Pleasant Valley, where the southernbound coach was retained to convey the message beyond the broken wires to Franklin, from which place it was flashed by wires to Salt Lake City and thence to all points east and west." Since the Helena dispatch was started on its way July the Fourth, it would appear that it "beat" the Bismarck account by at least a full day. It had to be the *Herald's* story that appeared in the Eastern papers on July 6th.<sup>12</sup>

Custer writers do not have a great deal to say about how the news first reached the outside world, nor are they completely accurate. They content themselves with the mystery surrounding the Custer fight itself. But credit has generally been given to the Bismarck *Tribune* for sending the first dispatch as well as printing the first account of the battle. No one would want to dispute the accuracy and overall completeness of the Bismarck account as compared to that of the *Herald*. Indeed, with partial truth, Joseph M. Hanson, in his book *The Conquest of the Missouri*, refers to the Montana accounts as "garbled rumors" and he further points out that the news sent from there "was not believed in the East until the full account from Bismarck, via St. Paul, came in on the 7th."<sup>13</sup> However, despite the somewhat garbled nature of these accounts, and whether they were believed or not, there seems to be no doubt that the Helena *Herald* managed a "scoop" on what was the most

famous Indian fight of Western history; and that the Bozeman *Times* printed the first two published accounts.

There still remains one point that needs clarification with reference to the *Herald* story. In the Helena *Daily Independent* for July 6, 1908, there appeared an article by A. J. Fisk in which he stated that on July 4, 1876, he was in the news office of the *Herald*, when Horace Countryman, in a state of near exhaustion from hard riding, entered and gave an account of the Custer fight. According to Fisk, it was this account that was published in the *Herald's* extra and was then sent east over the Salt Lake wires. Contemporary stories do not mention Countryman and both the Helena and Bozeman extras were obviously based on the Norton dispatches, since they appeared above Norton's signature. Moreover the *Herald* for July 22, 1876, definitely states that Mr. Norton's dispatch to that paper was transmitted by "Mr. Taylor to Bozeman, from which point it reached us by the earliest mail, July 4th."

Furthermore, Fisk's latter day account is at variance with the contemporary accounts of his own paper in another particular. On July 31st, 1876, the *Herald*, in a reply to the *Madisonian*, a Virginia City paper, reasserts its claim to having been "first" to report the "massacre" by quoting a telegram from J. G. Bennett of the New York *Herald*, which acknowledged the *Herald's* dispatch and asked for more news. The telegram bore a date line of July 6 but the *Herald* stated that it was not received until July 11 "owing to the break then unrestored in the wire south." In his article of 1908 Mr. Fisk mentioned this telegram but he refers to it as having been received by him on the midnight of July 4th!

However, in spite of these discrepancies, it is possible that Countryman did ride from Stillwater to Bozeman and

Curley, Custer scout, who informed the crew of the *FAR WEST* of the massacre, the day before Muggins Taylor rode in from Gen. Gibbon's command.

thence to Helena possibly carrying Norton's dispatch. The story had been given popular credence. E. A. Brininstool accepts it<sup>14</sup> and Hanson states: "To the men [at Stillwater] . . . he [Taylor] gave some news, and one of them started for Bozeman, arriving there the same day as Taylor . . ."<sup>15</sup> This may well have been Countryman.

Reprints of the pertinent newspaper and other published accounts follow:

### HIGH LEVEL CONFUSION

On the 27th day of June, General Terry wrote a dispatch to his superior officer, General Sheridan, which begins:

HEADQUARTERS DEPARTMENT  
HEADQUARTERS,  
DEPARTMENT OF DAKOTA,  
Camp on Little Big Horn  
River, Montana.

June 27, 1876.

To the Adjutant General of Military  
Division of the Missouri,  
Chicago, Ill., via Fort Ellis:

*It is my painful duty to report that day before yesterday, the 25th instant, a great disaster overtook General Custer and the troops under his command . . .*

[Fred Dustin, in the book, *The Custer Tragedy*, 1939, had this to say: |

"The above report was written late in the day of June 27, and was sent as speedily as practicable, by the scout Taylor, to Bozeman via Fort Ellis, Montana, as the former place was the nearest telegraph station, and it was supposed to be the quickest mode of communication with Sheridan's headquarters. Taylor remained with the command until the *Far West* tied up at the mouth of the Big Horn, leaving that point the morning of July 1, the boat having arrived there the night of June 30."

"As a matter of fact, it was through the story of Taylor that the outside world received its first news of the battle, although the report above quoted, which



was under seal, was not given to the press until later. It was Taylor's own story that was published in more or less correct versions, coming by way of Salt Lake City and appearing in eastern papers on July 5. The Terry report, however, was not given to the public until July 7, the day following that on which a confidential report from Terry to Sheridan was stolen, copied, and printed in an eastern paper, it having arrived at Fort Lincoln in custody of Smith, Terry's acting assistant adjutant general, telegraphed to Sheridan, and by him shown to Sherman. (p. 180.) In the meantime, Terry had prepared a confidential dispatch to Sheridan, his official dispatch having been sent by "Muggins" Taylor the morning of July 1, he having been sent down on the boat for that purpose. THIS CONFIDENTIAL DISPATCH went with the "Far West." (p. 196.)

" . . . Night and day had been the same to the men of the *Far West*, and at eleven o'clock the night of July 5, she touched the dock of Bismarck, after a run of seven hundred and ten miles, at the average rate of thirteen and one-seventh

<sup>12</sup> Dustin, *Ibid.*, 180; Hanson, *Ibid.*, 311; Helena *Daily Herald*, July 12, July 31, 1876.

<sup>13</sup> Hanson, *Ibid.*, 309-10.

<sup>14</sup> E. A. Brininstool, *Troopers with Custer* (New York: Stackpole Company, 1952), 251-54.

<sup>15</sup> Hanson, *Ibid.*, 310.



Ruling spirits among the war chiefs, whose thousands of braves struck the disastrous blow against the troops of Custer, Terry, Reno, and Gibbon, were Crazy Horse, Gall and Crow-King. Other Sioux leaders were Black Moon, Big Road, Low Dog, Spotted Eagle and Hump; for the Cheyennes, White Bull, Two Moon and Little Horse; and for the other tribes, Chiefs Lame Deer, Kill Eagle, Lone Wolf, Little-Big-Man and Red Dog. Three of the leaders are pictured here.

miles per hour, just fifty-four hours out from the south of the Big Horn. The telegraph operator, J. M. Carnahan, and others were aroused, and the wire was kept hot with messages for hours. The complete report was published in the *Bismarck Tribune* the next morning. In the meantime, "Muggins" Taylor had made his way to Bozeman, arriving there in the evening of the 5th [July 3 seems correct], and the next morning at about the same time the complete story appeared in the Bismarck paper, the *Helena Independent*, and one or two other western papers had a dozen lines or so on the subject, giving the substance of news." (p. 200-1.)

\* \* \* \*

### BOZEMAN TIMES

The *Bozeman Times* was a wide-awake paper. On July 2 it printed its first extra, giving an account of the Battle of the Rosebud. This was brought to Fort Ellis by two Crow scouts, employed by the correspondent of the *New York Herald* with Crook's command, to carry a report of the latter to Fort Ellis. The following day the *Times* really was rolling. This is an exact account:

*Bozeman TIMES, Extra.*  
*Bozeman, Montana,*  
*July 3d, 1876, 7 p. m.*

Mr. Taylor, bearer of dispatches from the Little Horn to Fort Ellis, arrived this evening and reports the following:

The battle was fought on the 25th. Thirty or forty miles below the Little Horn. Custer attacked the Indian village of from 2,500 to 4,000 warriors, on one side, and Col. Reno was to attack it on the other. Three companies

were placed on a hill as a reserve. General Custer and fifteen officers, and every man belonging to the five companies were killed. Reno retreated under protection of the reserve.

The whole number killed was 315.

General Gibbon joined Reno. The Indians left. The battle ground looked like a slaughter [sic] pen, as it really was, being in a narrow ravine. The dead were very much mutilated. The situation now looks serious.

Gen. Terry arrived at Gibbon's camp on a steamboat and crossed the command over; and accompanied it to join Custer, who knew it was coming before the fight occurred.

Lieut. Crittendon, Son of Gen. Crittenden [spelling as given], was among the killed.

The Indians surrounded Reno's command, and held them one day in the hills cut off from water, until Gibbon's command came in sight, when they broke camp in the night and left.

The Seventh fought like tigers, and were overcome by mere brute force.

The Indian loss cannot be estimated as they bore off and cached the most of their killed.

The remnant of the 7th Cavalry, and Gibbon's command are returning to mouth of the Little Horn where the steamboat lies.

The Indians got all the arms of the killed soldiers.

P. S. There were seventeen commissioned officers killed, and the whole Custer family died at the head of their column. The exact loss is not known, as both the Adjutant and Sergeant Major were killed.

*The Indian camp was from three to four miles long and was 20 miles up the Little Horn from its mouth. The Indians actually pulled men off their horses in some instances.*

*I give this as Taylor told me, as he was over the field after the battle.*

*Respectfully,*

*W. H. Norton.*



The Bozeman Times followed in their regular issue of July 6th, to print a very lurid account of the Battle of the Little Big Horn and the Custer massacre, based on the report of H. M. Taylor. On July 20, 1876, the Times claimed that its July 6th issue "contained as complete and perfect an account of Custer's disastrous battle as will ever be published." This, undoubtedly, is not true as pertains to volume, for the large metropolitan papers later carried reams of copy on the subject—but they were much later.

This is the story carried by the Bozeman Times, July 6, 1876:

#### ARMY CORRESPONDENCE

*Camp on Little Big Horn, June 28, 1876.*

*Gen. Custer's command met with terrible disaster here on the 25th. Custer, with five companies were, so far as we can ascertain, completely annihilated, no living man of them having yet been found, and probably none with them escaped except two Crow scouts who brought in the first news.*

*On the 26th Gen. Gibbon's command made a long march till dark; came in sight of some scattering Indians, and the next day reached Col. Reno's command fortified on a hill. They were in desperate straits, with very little water and fifty wounded men. The Indians decamped in very great haste at our approach, leaving an immense quantity of plunder behind, which we will destroy to-day.*

*The delight of the poor fellows when they discovered us to be friends was extreme. The Indians were in great strength, and were estimated at 2,500 warriors.*

*Gibbon's command is intact and in fine order.*

*When the fight commenced Col. Reno with three companies charged the village; had a heavy fight; was overpowered and driven back and took to the bluffs, where he was joined by parts of four other companies. They had heavy fighting all the rest of the day and all of the 26th and knew nothing of the fate of Custer and his five companies until Gen. Gibbons arrived and informed them of it at three p. m.*

*We buried all the dead and hoped to have litters finished for the wounded in time to go a few miles down the river to-day, camp near the sight of the Indian camp and destroy the property deserted by them.*

*The wounded will be taken to the steamboat at the mouth of the Little Big Horn; thence down the Big Horn and Yellowstone.*

Apparently this is the letter that General Gibbon sent to his own headquarters at Fort Ellis. It was printed in the Helena Independent for July 6 as well as in the Bozeman Times, with no note to its source. It probably had been obtained unofficially. In its July 6th issue, the Times refers to Mr. H. M. Taylor as the "bearer of dispatches from General Gibbon to Fort Ellis."

This story was carried by the *Bozeman Times*, July 6, 1876:

A NARROW ESCAPE — Mr. H. Taylor, who brought the news of Custer's defeat to Fort Ellis, traveled the most direct route. On the Big Horn he discovered forty Sioux driving a herd of about 100 buffalo up the valley, and not wishing to have trouble with them, made a detour for a high bluff, and the first thing he knew, WHIZ went an arrow near his person, looking in the opposite direction from the Indians with the buffalo, he saw an Indian about sixty yards from him, deliberately drawing on him for a shot, and still beyond, several other Indians. He then made a dash for the river, plunged into it, swam it twice on horseback, the Indians in hot pursuit and shooting, when he discovered a high rock, perpendicular on all sides and inaccessible except at one place, which a man well armed, like he was, could defend against a good many Indians. Abandoning his horse, he immediately ascended and took possession of the rock, which afforded him protection against the Indians who spent the rest of the day in shooting at him and trying to catch his horse, but failed. At sunset they left, when he came down from his covert on the rock, easily caught his horse (which is a good one) mounted him, and continued his journey night and day, ARRIVING AT FORT ELLIS ON THE THIRD DAY FROM STARTING. He will remain here 'till dispatches from Washington arrive for Gibbon, and carry them to headquarters.

\* \* \* \*

#### HELENA HERALD

Helena Herald, July 5, 1876. p. 3, col. 3. (From the *Herald Extra* of July 4):

#### A TERRIBLE FIGHT

Gen. Custer and His Nephew Killed.

The Seventh Cavalry Cut to Pieces.

The Whole Number Killed 315.

From our special correspondent

W. H. Norton.

Stillwater, M. T., July 2d, 1876

Muggins Taylor, scout for Gen. Gibbon, got here last night, direct from Little Horn river with telegraph dispatches. Gen. Custer found the Indian Village of about 2,000 lodges on the Little Horn, and immediately attacked the camp. Custer took five companies, and charged the thickest portion of the camp. Nothing is known of the operations of this detachment only as they trace it by the dead.

Major Reno commanded the other seven companies, and attacked the lower portion of the camp.

The Indians poured in a murderous fire from all directions, besides the greater portion fought on horseback. Gen. Custer, his two brothers, his nephew, and his brother-in-law were all killed, and not one of his detachment escaped.

Two hundred and seven men were buried in one place, and the killed is estimated at 300, with only 31 wounded.

The *Helena Herald*, July 12, 1876, p. 1, prints the following excerpts from eastern papers:

San Francisco, July 6—A dispatch from Virginia City reports great excitement at the news over Custer's death.

Chicago, July 6—News confirmatory of Custer's fight with the Indians on the Little Horn river, has been received by General Sheridan's headquarters.

Washington, July 6—The news of the death of General Custer and the terrible disaster received from the West, created a profound sensation here, particularly in army circles. Up to noon there has been no official advices received at the War Department.



Helena Herald, July 22, 1876. p. 3, col. 3:

### CREDIT TO WHOM CREDIT IS DUE

With exceptional fairness and fidelity, the journals of the country, great and small, gave credit to the *HELENA HERALD* for the first news communicated of the frightful disaster which befel the brave Custer and his gallant command. Our correspondent, Mr. W. H. Norton, who intercepted Gen. Gibbon's courier, "Muggins" Taylor, on the Stillwater, obtained the startling account of the battle and its appalling results, and transmitted the same by Mr. Taylor to Bozeman, from which point it reached us by earliest mail, July 4. Thousands learned the terrible news from the *HERALD* extra of that evening. The local operator, Mr. Frederick, immediately forwarded the *HERALD*'S letter to Pleasant Valley, where the southern-bound coach was retained to convey the message beyond the broken wires to Franklin, from which place it was flashed across the wires to Salt Lake City, and thence to all points east and west. All the daily papers in the States of the date of July 6th contained the *HERALD*'S report, none of them, so far as we can discover, failing to give credit therefor, and as a rule accepting the account as trustworthy and reliable.

\* \* \* \*

NEW YORK, July 6, 1876.

To Editor of the *Helena Herald*:

We have received your account of the massacre of Custer and his men on Little Horn River. Please telegraph us latest news of interviews with stragglers, and any special news you may have.

J. G. BENNETT.

This dispatch did not reach us until July 11, owing to the break then un-restored in the wire south. We thus show the error of the *Virginia City* paper, and the justness of our claims as originally made.

\* \* \* \*

Helena Daily Herald, August 3, 1876. p. 3, col. 2.

### CONFIRMATORY TESTIMONY

If any further evidence were wanting, the following, from the *Bismarck TRIBUNE* of July 19th, fully confirms our claim of having furnished to the country the first report of the Custer Massacre. It will be remembered that the *HERALD*'S account of the disaster, published here on the evening of July 4, appeared in all the morning papers of the States, July 6. Says the *TRIBUNE*:

"The news of the Custer massacre was received at Bismarck July 5th at midnight, but the operator could not secure connection with St. Paul until Fargo came to breakfast. From that time forward the line was in constant use, day and night, for forty-eight hours, and forty thousand words of press telegrams, together with a large amount of private and Government work, was dispatched within that time. The manager, Mr. J. M. Carnahan, by all odds the best operator west of St. Paul, found himself unequal to the task, and called to his assistance Mr. S. B. Rogers, an a 1 operator, who, being disengaged, turned in and jerked lightning in a manner perfectly delightful to Carnahan. A word of praise is due to Messrs. Gridley and Hughes, operators St. Paul, who worked twenty one hours at a stretch without going to their meals. Gridley thought the St. Louis Convention a funeral compared to the lively work Carnahan and Rogers gave him, and Hughes moaned when near the end: "My God—ain't we having lots of fun?"