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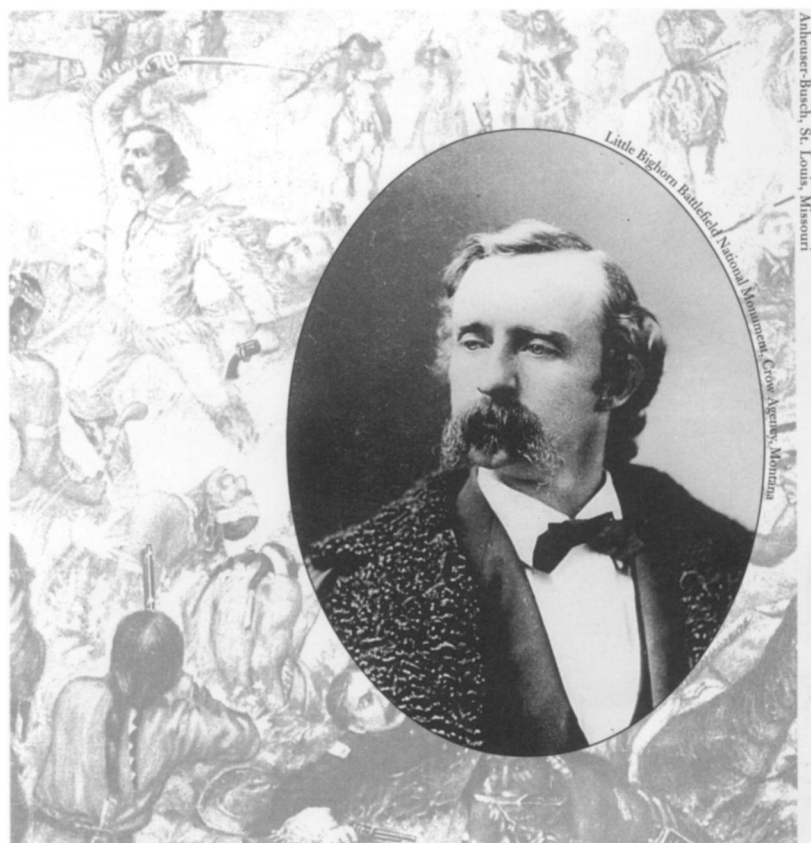
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CUSTER'S LAST STAND PROTECTING AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

by Gregory F. Michno

For most students of history, the idea of revision will appear to be anything but revolutionary. Indeed, one might argue that there are no historical “facts” at all, only models existing solely as the constructions of their creators. Debunking is also a part of the ongoing process of revision, and events and players in the drama on the Little Bighorn, June 25, 1876, have long been favorite targets. George A. Custer and the frontier military have been out of favor for decades, and it appeared that his continued denunciation was “a case of beating a dead horse.”¹ Yet in 1991 Custer lost his name from a national monument, and today not only the man but the “Last Stand” itself is threatened by the debunkers.

Traditionally, the fight on Custer’s Hill above the Little Bighorn has been depicted as a stand made by a handful of gallant defenders, their ammunition dwindling, yet fighting stoically to the last man, desperately determined to sell their lives dearly. One of the latest revisions challenging this rendition comes from Richard A. Fox, Jr., in his book, *Archaeology, History, and Custer’s Last Battle* (1993). Fox alleges that



physical remains must take precedence over interpretation of the documentary record, that archaeology is the skeleton and history only the clothing, and that any history that does not “fit” on an archaeological base must be discarded. His study, based mainly upon the ammunition-component artifacts

discovered during the 1984–1985 battlefield archaeological digs, concludes, among other things, that much of Custer’s battalion disintegrated in panic, that there was “no famous last stand,” and that the last stand is a myth.²

1. Brian W. Dippie, *Custer’s Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (1976; reprint, Lincoln, 1994), 122–23.

2. Richard Allen Fox, Jr., *Archaeology, History, and Custer’s Last Battle: The Little Big Horn Reexamined* (Norman, 1993), xii, 7, 11, 15–17, 68, 201, 216, 330.

3. Ibid., 88, 102, 108, 123, 330–31. The scale of Fox’s mapped cartridges leads to some overlapping and distortion, making exact numbers difficult to determine. In any event, cartridges in the south outnumber those in the north by about two to one.

General George Armstrong Custer
(inset, opposite page), 1874

Detail (opposite page), *Custer's Last
Fight*, by Otto Becker, 1896

Archaeological evidence gathered on
Last Stand Hill in 1984 led to a
reinterpretation of the events
surrounding the annihilation of Custer
and his immediate command, including
questions about whether there was a
last stand in the traditional sense. The
excavation site at right shows several
grave markers and a sifter box used to
separate small artifacts from soil.
Below, Miles City photographer L. A.
Huffman documented relic hunting in
this image titled "Gen'l Godfrey and
W. M. Camp search rocky ridge near
Reno's Hill for cartridge shells, 1916."

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Courtesy the author



By relying almost exclusively on
the remnant weapon relic patterns,
Fox finds a staunch defense, not on
Custer Hill, but about three-
quarters of a mile away on another
knoll called Calhoun Hill, after
Custer's brother-in-law, James
Calhoun, who died there defending
it. Because more soldier cartridges
were found in the south surround-
ing Calhoun Hill and Calhoun
Ridge (thirty-four), than in the
north on Custer Hill and the South
Skirmish Line (fifteen), and

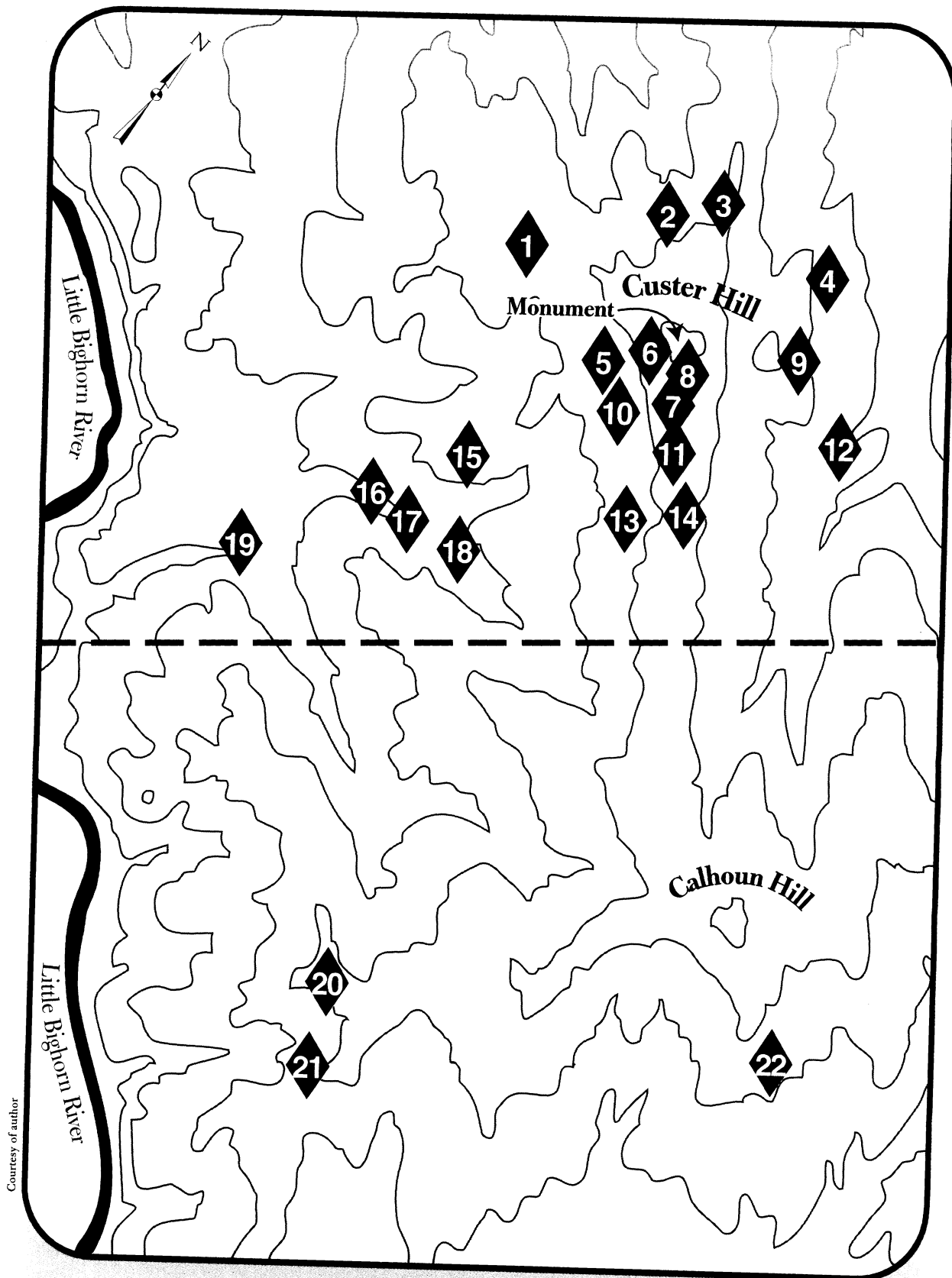
fight, Fox concludes that the
defense of Custer Hill was tentative
at best and that there never was a
last stand in the traditional sense.³

However, a body of evidence
also exists that leads to an interpre-
tation diametrically opposed to the
revisionist's non-last stand argu-
ment. This evidence is sustainable
based upon an alternative physical
skeleton that also fits nicely under
its historical clothing and it leads
directly back to the traditional view
of the last stand. It involves a

because
some Indian
accounts
indicate that
a number of
soldiers ran
from Custer's
Hill at the
end of the

somewhat gruesome factor that
became all too familiar to Ameri-
cans in the Vietnam War: body
count. According to the archaeo-
logical interpretation, the
positioning of the cartridges
indicates that the main successful
defensive position at the Little
Bighorn was on Calhoun Hill. The
Indians, however, by describing
the locations of their own casual-
ties, belie that conclusion.

On which part of the battlefield
did the adversaries of the Seventh
Cavalry receive their mortal
wounds that day? The survivors
left a record—and the record does
not reflect well on the effectiveness
of the defenders of Calhoun Hill.
Without getting into the details of
their deaths, we can locate where
most of them died with a modicum
of accuracy.



Courtesy of author

The charted locations where Indian warriors were wounded or killed on Custer and Calhoun hills graphically argues in favor of intense fighting surrounding Custer Hill, despite fewer cartridges having been found on Custer Hill than on Calhoun Hill. The numbered diamonds correspond to the Indian casualties listed on the facing page.

Indian Casualties

Custer Battlefield

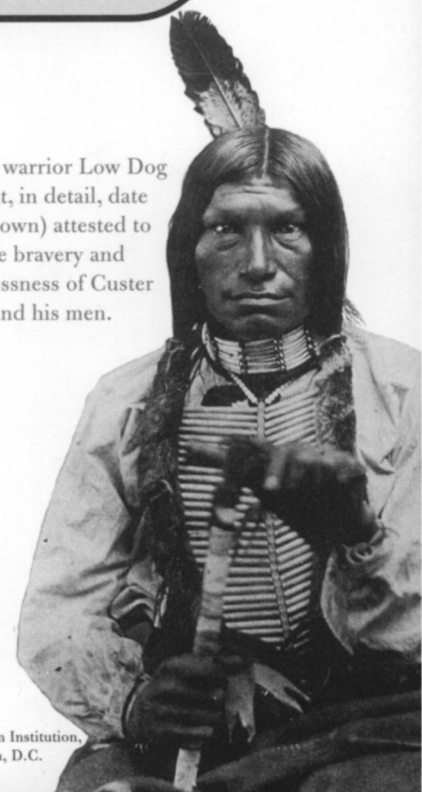
1. Cut Belly (Open Belly), killed near present cemetery grounds, per Wooden Leg.
2. Black Bear (Closed Hand, Fist), killed on north slope of Custer Hill, per Wooden Leg.
3. Limber Bones (Limber Hand), killed on north slope of Custer Hill, per Wooden Leg.
4. Lakota boy, killed, witnessed by Antelope.
5. Black Wasichu (Black White Man), mortal wound, west slope of Custer Hill, seen by Black Elk.
6. Lakota warrior, killed, near Custer Hill, per Black Elk.
7. Lakota warrior, killed, near Custer Hill, per Black Elk.
8. Turtle Rib's nephew, killed, on Custer Hill, witnessed by Turtle Rib.
9. Warbonnet Lakota, killed, north side of Custer Hill, seen by Wooden Leg and/or Big Beaver.
10. Little Bear, wounded while charging Custer Hill, seen by Iron Hawk.
11. Red Horn Buffalo, wounded, possibly mortally, while charging Custer Hill, seen by Iron Hawk.
12. Lakota warrior, wounded in jaw, seen by Wooden Leg.
13. Lame White Man, killed, identified by Wooden Leg, Tall Bull, et al.
14. Bear Horn (Bear With Horns), killed, while chasing soldiers on Custer Ridge, witnessed by Standing Bear.
15. Iron Hawk, wounded in ribs, per his own statement, although site of wounding is uncertain.
16. Lakota warrior, killed in Lame White Man charge, seen by Wooden Leg.
17. Lakota warrior, killed in Lame White Man charge, noted by Wooden Leg, Lone Man, and wife of Little Assiniboine.
18. Noisy Walking, mortally wounded, upper Deep Ravine, found by Wooden Leg, Antelope, et al.
19. Lakota warrior, killed, found by Feather Earring a few hundred yards up Deep Ravine from the river.
20. Lakota warrior wearing bird on his head, shot through the head and killed, seen by Eagle Elk.
21. Long Elk, wounded in the mouth, seen by Standing Bear.
22. Hump, wounded in leg during charge on Calhoun Hill, per his own statement.

A 1993 compilation by Richard G. Hardorff indicates sixteen warriors died or were mortally wounded fighting Custer's battalion. Bear With Horns was killed along Custer Ridge while Black White Man (Black Wasichu) went down on the west slope of Custer Hill. Black Bear (Closed Hand or Fist) and Limber Bones (Limber Hand) were killed on the north slope of Custer Hill. Open Belly (Cut Belly) was killed near the

present cemetery grounds. Noisy Walking went down in or near Deep Ravine, and Lame White Man was hit a few hundred yards down Custer Ridge from Last Stand Hill. Hardorff lists nine more deaths, with locations unknown: Guts, Red Face, Cloud Man, Lone Dog, Elk Bear, Kills Him, Bad Light Hair, Many Lice, and Young Skunk.⁴

There were additional woundings and possible deaths. Iron Hawk saw that Little Bear was

Oglala warrior Low Dog (right, in detail, date unknown) attested to the bravery and fearlessness of Custer and his men.



4. Richard G. Hardorff, *Hokahey! A Good Day to Die: The Indian Casualties of the Custer Fight* (Spokane, Wash., 1993), 82.

5. Raymond J. DeMallie, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln, 1984), 191;

Thomas B. Marquis, *Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer* (Lincoln, 1931), 243.

6. Walter M. Camp Manuscripts, folder 1, box 5, Lily Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

hit, and Red Horn Buffalo was knocked off his horse while charging the soldiers on Custer Hill. Wooden Leg said that two Lakotas were killed in the ravine near Noisy Walking during *Lame White Man's* charge.⁵ A Hunkpapa named Lone Man corroborated one of the Lakota deaths, as did the wife of the Hunkpapa, Little Assiniboine.⁶ Iron Hawk claimed to have been shot below the ribs during the battle. Turtle Rib said his nephew was killed right on top of Custer Hill. Antelope (Kate Bighead) saw a Lakota boy shot on the north slope of Custer Hill. Wooden Leg saw a Lakota warrior with a wounded jaw in a gully northeast of Custer Hill. Wooden Leg and Big Beaver saw a warbonneted Lakota shot in the head on the northern hillside.⁷ Black Elk saw two dead Lakotas near Custer Hill, in addition to Black White Man. Feather Earring found a dead Lakota a few hundred yards up Deep Ravine from the Little Bighorn River. Hump was wounded in a charge against Calhoun Hill. Nearby, Eagle Elk saw one Indian shot through the head, and both he and Standing

Bear saw another man who was shot in the jaw. Standing Bear later identified the victim as Long Elk.⁸

Ten of the above casualties are unnamed, which matches up rather nicely with the nine "unknowns" from Hardorff's list. But more important for this discussion than the exact names of these Indian casualties is the battlefield locations where they were hit. The accompanying map and key show the field divided into northern and southern halves, the names of the Indians who fell, and the approximate locations of their woundings. This graphic illustrates a striking point: Fifteen out of sixteen deaths on the Little Bighorn Battlefield occurred in the northern sector surrounding Custer Hill. If we include non-fatal woundings with the deaths, nineteen out of twenty-two casualties occurred in the north. Contrary to revisionist conceptions, this says very little for the .45 caliber-death supposedly being meted out by the stout defenders of Calhoun Hill. Red Hawk, the Oglala Lakota, probably gave us one of the most plausible explanations of the situation around Calhoun Hill: The

soldiers there delivered many volleys, but they hit few Indians. Their fire had little perceptible effect.⁹

In fact, the men shooting from the Calhoun Hill area probably were defending their position adequately, simply because the Indians at this time were still seeking safety in distance, remaining protected by the terrain, and exposing themselves rarely.¹⁰ They did not go into a close-range attack mode at that stage of the battle as they did following the Crazy Horse-White Bull breakthrough midway across the ridge between Custer Hill and Calhoun Hill. Against Calhoun Hill, the Indians were, in the early stages, content to harass with long-distance fire. It is not surprising that they had so few casualties.

The fact that a comparatively greater number of army cartridges were found in the Calhoun area proves little, other than that the soldiers had a relatively long time to stand around and pop long-range shots at distant Indians. For, contrary to a plethora of Hollywood B-westerns, Indians rarely exposed themselves to danger in



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Christian Barthelmess photographed Northern Cheyenne leaders and Little Bighorn battle participants at the *Lame Deer* council with General Nelson Miles in 1889. From left to right (in detail) are Sits In the Night, Red Cherries, Brave Wolf, Two Moon, American Horse, Buffalo Hump, Spotted Wolf, and Old Wolf.

massed, circling attacks. Unfortunately for the troopers on the Little Bighorn, once their fire control discipline had broken down and they turned their backs to run, the Indians had no qualms about pushing the attack home. On Calhoun Hill the troopers did not succeed in deterring the Indians from a subsequent close-range offensive on the northern half of the field. Fewer army cartridges were found in the north, yet somehow the defenders, with one fewer company of men, accounted for 93 percent of the Indian deaths.

Richard Fox indicates that relic collecting can compromise the material record left on a battlefield, but he argues that there was no selective collecting on the Little Bighorn Battlefield. He said that indiscriminate collecting over the long run is always random, and he thought it unlikely that collectors would have picked over other troop positions and left Calhoun Hill relatively untouched.¹¹ Yet thirty-four cartridges were found in the Calhoun Hill environs, an area that saw possibly one nearby Indian death, while fifteen cartridges were found in the Custer Hill sector, around which fifteen Indian deaths occurred. For Fox's argument to be valid, the soldiers in the north would have had to have been inestimably superb marksmen compared to their comrades in the south. The remnant cases show that where those in the south killed one Indian with thirty-four shots, those in the north killed fifteen

Indians with fifteen shots, hitting 100 percent of their targets!

What makes altogether better sense is the fact that the action was much more furious around Custer Hill, and the pursuing Indians, at last forsaking long-range firing, finally moved into harm's way at close range, thus easing the soldier's task of hitting a target. In addition, it is obvious that many more cartridges were indeed removed from the Custer Hill end than were removed from the Calhoun Hill end. Custer Hill has been the focal point of visitors from day one to the present. It has been picked cleaner than Calhoun Hill. If not, then about the only way to explain the great anomaly in expended shells versus Indian deaths between the sectors is to argue that the men in the north must have used magical silver bullets, for they fired 3,400 percent more efficiently than the men in the south. The most logical explanation for the discrepancy is simply that the battlefield does contain a skewed relic sample, and we certainly cannot use artifact patterns to contend that there was no last stand on Custer Hill.

Using the deceiving patterns of remnant relics has led us astray. On the other hand, using the body



Stanley J. Morrow, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Artifacts were disturbed, moved, and removed from the battlefield beginning as early as June 28, 1876, and continued to be ever afterward. Disturbance probably occurred, for example, during the April 1879 erection of markers (above), when postholes were dug beside graves. The marker in the foreground reads: "Col. Keogh and 38 soldiers of Co. I 7 Cav killed here June 25, 1876."

locations as given by the witnesses who saw them fall, or found them later, clearly indicates that there was a stubborn stand on Custer Hill and that the soldiers there sold their lives dearly. Drawing on a great Calvin Coolidge aphorism—"When people are out of work, unemployment results"—we must also conclude: When people are killed, bodies result. Where were the bodies? The *corpora delicti* incriminates the men on Custer Hill. It is there we find our most tenacious defense and our last stand. Drawing conclusions from relic patterns does not allow us to

7. Richard G. Hardorff, *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight* (Spokane, Wash., 1991), 67; Kenneth Hammer, ed., *Custer in '76: Walter Camp's Notes on the Custer Fight* (1976; reprint, Norman, 1990), 202; Thomas B. Marquis, *Custer on the Little Bighorn* (1967; reprint, Algonac, Mich., 1986), 90; Marquis, *Wooden Leg*, 236; "Big Beaver's Story of the Custer Battle," p. 53, J. A. Blummer Manuscript, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

8. DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather*, 185, 194; William A. Graham, *The Custer Myth: A Sourcebook of Custeriana* (1953; reprint, Lincoln, 1986), 98; Hardorff, *Lakota Recollections*, 104-5.

9. *Ibid.*, 43.

10. That Indians did not fight hand-to-hand against a cohesive, determined foe is borne out in many eyewitness and archaeological accounts. See, for instance, George Bird Grinnell, *The Fighting*

Cheyennes (1915; reprint, Norman, 1956), 353; Graham, *Custer Myth*, 60; Marquis, *Wooden Leg*, 230; Don Weibert, *Custer, Cases and Cartridges: The Weibert Collection Analyzed* (Billings, Mont., 1989) 123-25, 161-62; Colonel John Gibbon, "Arms to Fight Indians," *Bighorn-Yellowstone Journal of 1876*, 3 (Spring 1994), 11-12.

11. Fox, *Archaeology, History*, 127-28.

see beyond the tips of our noses when the conclusions are not built on a primary base of historical documents and a little common sense.

In addition to the evidence of body count we also have the Native American testimony to prove the validity of a last stand. Contrary to popular, perhaps ethnocentric conceptions, there were numerous survivors of the Little Bighorn fight who told us what happened to Custer's last troopers. The Minneconjou Lakota Flying By said that there was only one stand of note, and it was made at the end of the long ridge where Custer was killed. The Oglala Lone Bear said there was a fight at close quarters on Custer Hill, and "there was a good stand made." Gall, a Hunkpapa Lakota, said there was a stand on Custer Hill, and the fight ended when he and other warriors cut across the hill just south of where the monument stands today. Lights, a Minneconjou, said the stand on Custer Hill was longer than any other on the field. The Brulé Lakota, Two Eagles, indicated that the most stubborn stand made by the soldiers was on Custer Hill. A stand was made on Custer Hill, said the Oglala Red Hawk. "Here the soldiers made a desperate fight."¹²

Yellow Nose, a Ute, said that a soldier he thought might have been Custer himself, was one of the last fighting on that final hilltop. The Brulé, Hollow Horn Bear, rushed Custer's hilltop at the fight's end,

using his war club on the last defenders. Little Hawk, a Cheyenne, said the last soldiers gathered around and were killed upon the knoll where the monument now stands. Turtle Rib, a Minneconjou, participated in the last fight on the hilltop and up close to the soldiers, who were shooting back with their pistols. The Arapaho, Waterman, saw a man dressed in buckskin, who he identified as Custer, wounded on the last hilltop. Wooden Leg, a Cheyenne, was fighting the men on Custer's Hill until the shots quit coming. He rushed in to find a scene that he described as looking like one thousand dogs might have appeared had they been mixed together in a fight. Runs The Enemy, a Two Kettle Lakota, said: "The soldiers then gathered in a group where the monument now stands." He went in with the final charge, and a mountain of smoke rolled up over their heads. It was over.¹³

The litany of similar Indian accounts is voluminous. Besides verifying the reality of a last stand on Custer Hill, they also spoke of the soldiers' bravery. Although there were some who described panic among the troopers, many of the aforementioned warriors commented upon the soldiers' intrepid conduct. Additional witnesses speaking of their bravery were Feather Earring, Yellow Horse, Moving Robe, Brave Wolf, and Low Dog. Brave Wolf, a Northern Cheyenne, said, "I have

been in many hard fights, but I never saw such brave men." Low Dog, an Oglala Lakota, commented that he had never seen men as brave and fearless as the white warriors. "No white man or Indian," Low Dog averred, "ever fought as bravely as Custer and his men."¹⁴

Although Low Dog's assessment certainly must be granted some poetic license, the accounts of a brave last stand on Custer Hill are too numerous to dismiss. Yet the latest revisionist argument of a poor defense, a quick collapse, and no last stand, takes that very course. It does so by relying only on the written evidence that tends to support the archaeological framework—a framework that we have shown does not pass examination. According to Fox, the Indians who spoke of brave white men must have been lying, trying to curry favors, speaking from emotion, or telling the white man what he wanted to hear, for their accounts serve only to "create an illusion."¹⁵ One cannot dismiss as lies, however, a great mass of testimony because it does not support one's hypothesis. When there are more exceptions than rules, it is obvious that the hypothesis needs an overhaul. When we use casualty sites as our framework upon which to hang the historical clothing, we find that the Indians who spoke of brave white men and a last stand on Custer Hill were, indeed, telling the truth.

12. Hammer, *Custer in '76*, 210; Hardorff, *Lakota Recollections*, 44, 148-49, 157, 162, 167, 170, 173; Usher L. Burdick, ed., *David F. Barry's Indian Notes on "The Custer Battle"* (Baltimore, 1937), 13, 15.

13. "Yellow Nose Tells of Custer's Last Stand," *Bighorn-Yellowstone Journal of 1876*, 1 (Summer 1992), 16-17; Hardorff, *Lakota Recollections*, 183-84; Hammer, *Custer in '76*, 201-2; Jerome A. Greene, ed., *Lakota and Cheyenne: Indian Views of the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877* (Norman,

1994), 64; Graham, *Custer Myth*, 110; Marquis, *Wooden Leg*, 237; Joseph K. Dixon, *The Vanishing Race: The Last Great Indian Council* (Garden City, N.Y., 1913), 176-77.

14. Graham, *Custer Myth*, 75; Greene, *Lakota and Cheyenne*, 48.

15. Fox, *Archaeology, History*, 137, 200, 228, 239, 276.

16. Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1993), 482, 627.

17. I do not believe Fox wrote his study with any intention of being politically correct. Inevitably, however, popularizers will use some of his themes to advance their own agendas. For a prime example, see James Welch and Paul Stekler, *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (New York, 1994), 45-46, 57, 64, 77-80, 145-46, 166, 169-70, a jeremiad that revels in bashing Custer and the frontier military.

Certainly there was no famous last stand à la the Errol Flynn rendition in the 1941 movie, *They Died with Their Boots On*, where Custer remains on his feet until the end, standing erect next to the guidon flapping in the breeze, facing hundreds of circling warriors with saber and blazing six-gun, scores of men lying dead at his feet, clutching his chest as he dies, the last of the last. Perhaps, here, the conjured image of a last stand is more a matter of semantics and nuance. Was there no last stand at the Alamo because a few remaining defenders ran to take sanctuary in the mission chapel? Of course not. Granted, there was probably no Hollywood-style last stand at the Little Bighorn. Yet it is abundantly clear from the evidence of the bodies and from the Indian accounts that some of Custer's troopers had made a significant fight on that final hilltop.

Although the impression of the stand's time length and degree of intensity varied among the observers, the fact that it took place cannot be erased. The majority of Indian casualties on the battlefield were inflicted by soldiers defending

on or near Custer's Hill. The troops made several "stands," and one of them was "last." The time spent in their fight and the results of their shooting are all the proofs we need to show that they defended their ground tenaciously. A revisionist interpretation using archaeological evidence and claiming an apparent paucity of government cartridges on Custer Hill cannot change this. If some troopers ran from their position at battle's end in a futile attempt to save their lives, it does not preclude the fact that they held their position as long as they could humanly hope to. Because they all eventually died does not mean that they did not desperately try to live. I call this a last stand. So did the Indians—by their words and by their deaths.

The last stand on Custer Hill is a part of our traditional frontier mythology. Author Michael Kammen points out that serious history does not have to be anathema to myth, and Americans want their collective memories to be sanguine and supportive, yet at the same time, unwarped and true.¹⁶ This is just what we have on the

Little Bighorn. The knowledge that a last stand truly occurred, that it exists in fact as well as through a "mystic chord of memory," should preserve it in spite of the revisionists. It cannot be erased by archaeological relics nor political correctness.¹⁷ Save Custer's Last Stand, for, in the words of that proverbial child pondering the implications of the fate of the dinosaurs: "Once it's gone, it's gone." Our frontier myth, our heritage, will never be the same again. And in a more disturbing paradox, our future will never be the same again. *M*

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Photographer F. Jay Haynes captured this view of the Custer Monument (inside fence) atop the supposed site of Custer's Last Stand in 1894.

