

**MYSTERY OF THE OREGON PRAIRIE MASSACRE**

# REAL WEST



35c

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**SAGA  
OF CHIEF  
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**ADELINE  
DALTON,  
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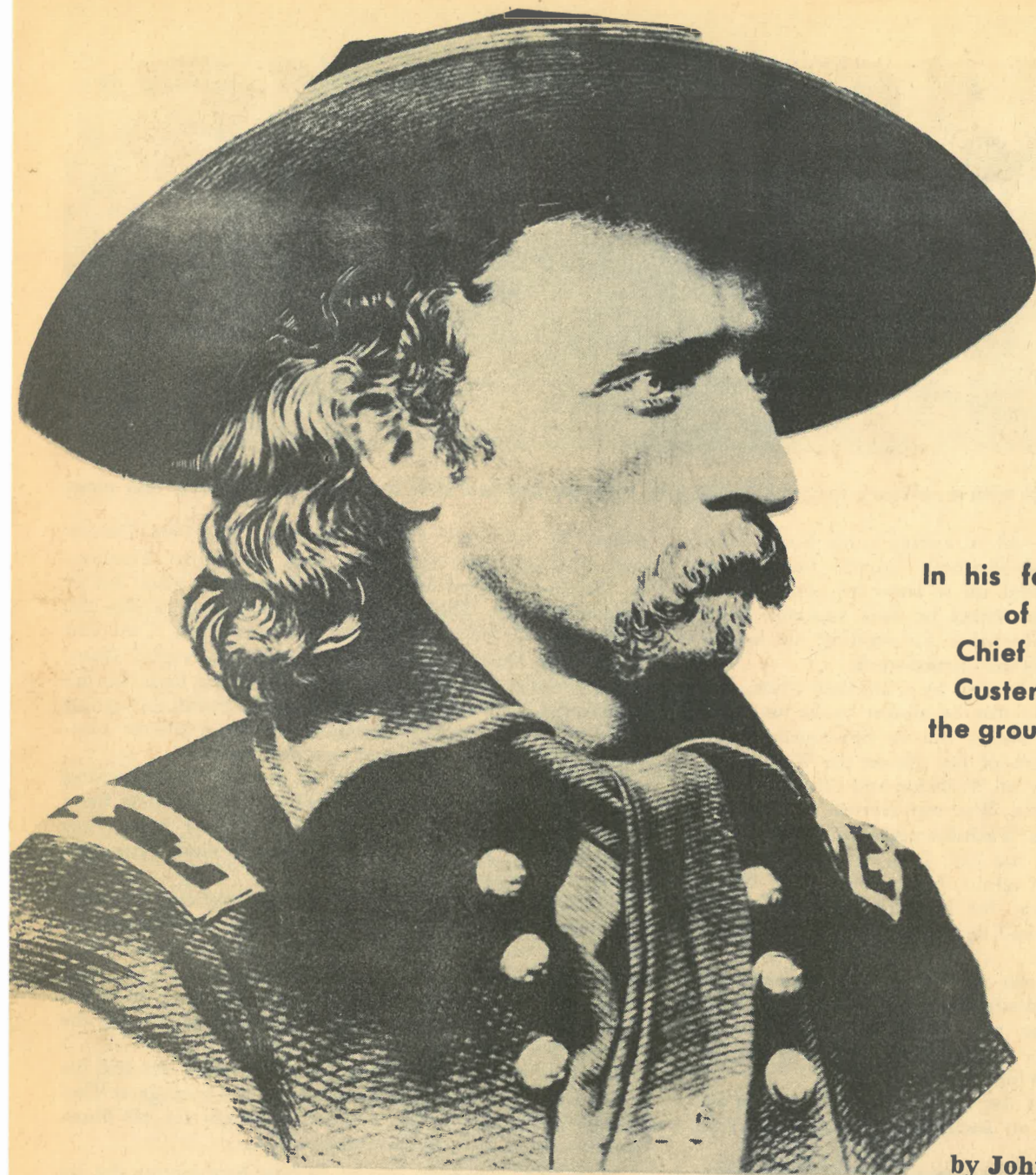
**THE TRAGIC  
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CUSTER'S  
GREATEST BLUNDER

NOREM



**In his feud with the Dept. of Indian Affairs and Chief Rain in the Face, Custer unknowingly laid the groundwork for his own tragic destruction.**

**by John Frederick Forman**

On August 3, 1873 General Custer led a troop from his seventh cavalry into the Tongue River stretch of land ceded to the Sioux by a supposedly sacred treaty. Custer knew that no white men were allowed in that area between the Tongue River and the Big Horn River unless given permission by the Sioux. Custer had no such permission and he didn't want any.

He was there to start trouble in the long feud between the army and the Department of Indian Affairs. This feud had started in 1849 when Congress transferred the supervision of the Indian tribes from the army to the newly formed Department in the Department of the Interior.

Custer found trouble, more than he had hoped for, although this trouble was to be the forerunner of his defeat at the Little Big Horn three years later.

This trouble was a commonplace event in the West, one that under ordinary circumstances would have been forgotten within twenty-four hours. But nothing was commonplace to Custer, if blowing it up big served his purpose. So this fracas between two white men and the Indians was to become the battle of Tongue River.

What happened was this: Two non-combatants wearing civies, disregarding the advice of scouts, an army-employed veterinary surgeon, Dr. John Honzinger, and a sutler named Augustus Baliran, volunteered to ride ahead of the thirsty force and look for water. There is no evidence that either Custer, his co-commander General David S. Stanley, or any of their top aides tried to restrain the foolish pair. But the behavior of the two brass hats does indicate that they knew little of the terrain on which they were risking men's lives nor were they very much concerned about those risks.

Just beyond sight of the cavalrymen, a party of Rain in the Face's Sioux jumped Dr. Honzinger and Sutler Beliran. Nothing however in Custer's records indicate that the youthful chief personally led the war party. As it was, the two army retainers were shot down like rabbits. Then the so-called furious engagement began.

From 11:30 a.m. until 3 p.m., if we can accept Custer's timing, the fight raged. Custer described cavalrymen falling with blood gurgling from their throats as they were hit by sharp-pointed Sioux arrows. Fewer Indians died

# CUSTER'S GREATEST BLUNDER

because they were battling on their ground and had something to battle for. The soldiers finally fell back to a defense salient from which the Sioux could not rout them. Eventually Custer, pulling one of his usual miracles of melodrama, led a charge which scattered the braves across the prairies.

The General went back to his headquarters in the Dakota territory to write his report. He played up the affair as a great victory. Until the recent discovery of some yellowed records in the National Archives at Washington, his version of the needless slaughter was accepted as historical gospel. Then Alvin Josephy wrote his memorable book, *The Patriot Chiefs*, several years ago. Indian leaders who fought for the rights of their people were usually regarded as plain, lowdown ornery skunks.

But this long lost material places the battle of Tongue River in an entirely new perspective. It casts new light on the long feud of the War Department to regain control of Federal Indian policy.

Even more importantly, it reveals Custer's attempts to frame prominent Chief Rain in the Face for the slayings of the sutler and the horse doctor. Thereby he could cover up his unauthorized presence on forbidden soil and would have a counter-weapon against the Indian Bureau if it demanded an official investigation that might be a preliminary to court martial. Also he could lay a basis for the silencing or the annihilation of Rain in the Face, bitterly resenting the cession of more Sioux country for the benefit of the Northern Pacific Railroad extending its lines west in the wake of the great homesteading and mining booms.

It is doubtful if the two civilians were "unarmed" as Custer claimed to magnify the alleged guilt of the Sioux who had every right under the 1868 treaty to repel intruders. Nobody, except maybe chaplains, rode without guns in Indian campaigns and even they sometimes carried side-arms. Custer also alleged that Honzinger and Baliran were "endeavoring to come from the main column to join the squadron in advance" and "were discovered by the Indians during the attack" instead of before as actually happened.

But if the pair were weaponless why should they try to crowd their way into the thick of battle? Why didn't they just get on their horses and make what would have been a perfectly justifiable escape.

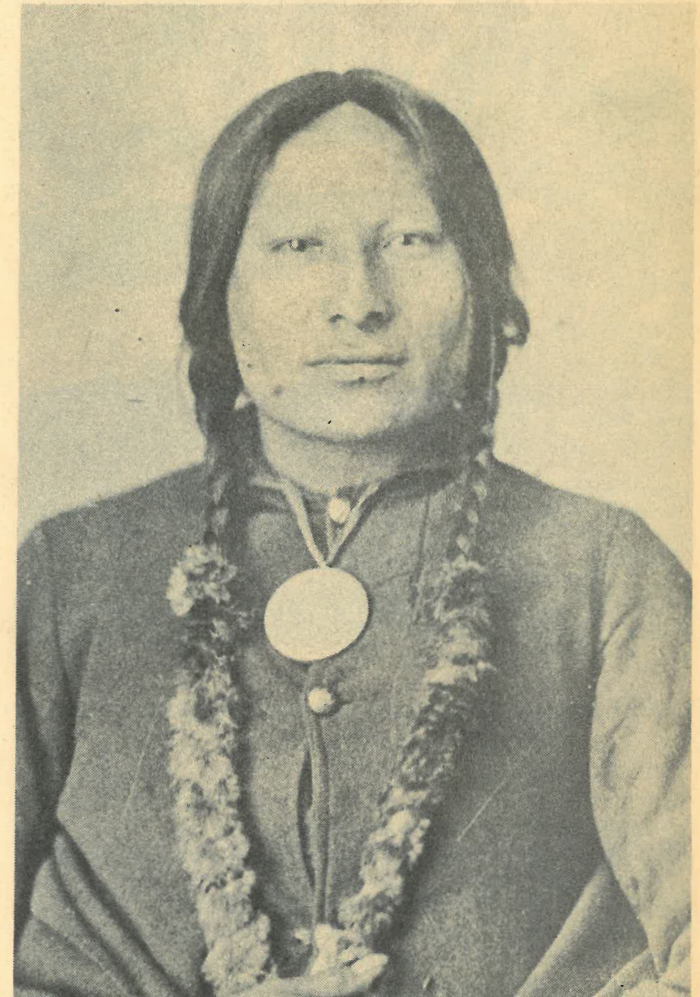
After the whole gory mess, Custer played it scared knowing that his report would be finely combed by decent functionaries in the Indian Bureau. To bolster his weak case,

he had to bring in Rain in the Face and charge him formally with the killings though, by any fair legal construction, the dead pair had been casualties of warfare rather than of deliberate murder.

His "evidence" against the Hunkpapa chief was gotten six months later through a half-blood whose name looms largely in the history of the Sioux wars. On February 28,

**Rain in the Face made Custer pay for his mistakes.**

Photo by Bureau of Amer. Ethnology



1874, one Johnnie Brughier arrived at Fort Sully from Standing Rock Indian Agency with a saddle, identified as Dr. Honzinger's, which he claimed to have bought from Rain in the Face. Custer was away from the fort, so Brughier, who would later defect to Chief Sitting Bull's war band, told his story to General Stanley.

Custer let the matter rest till the following winter since he seemed to be in no immediate trouble from that illegal invasion of the unceded Sioux lands. Chief Rain in the Face came and went unmolested at Standing Rock where



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#### Custer relaxes in his study at Fort Abraham Lincoln.

he was on good terms with the honest Agent Palmer, local representative of the Indian Bureau.

By December 1874, Custer was ready to spring a trap which he had rigged carefully. At this time, Rain in the Face had come into Standing Rock with his braves to spend the winter and to draw their stipulated government allotments for food and clothing. Custer began compiling a "report" of the slayings which did not mention Rain in

the Face as the actual killer since the young chief also had his defenders in Washington.

Custer based his reports on information furnished him by his top scout, Lonesome Charley Reynolds, who on the whole had a good reputation. But neither is Reynold's name actually mentioned in this long-buried Custer classic. The story he tells closely parallels the one spun by Johnnie Brughier.

On December 7, 1874, Custer made a very shrewd first move. He wired General Alfred H. Terry, commander of the army's Department of Dakota, at St. Paul, saying he had received positive information that one of the four Indians who killed Dr. Honzinger and Mr. Baliran on the Yellowstone (parent stream of Tongue River) is now at Standing Rock Agency. "He has in his possession," the message continued, "the government saddle taken from Dr. Honzinger's horse and acknowledges that he took a large pocketbook from Mr. Baliran."

So now we have "four Indians" accused of slaying two invaders. But evidence, if you can call it that, is in the possession of only one Indian. Custer failed to name any of the alleged four slayers, but wound up with a flourish that revealed the essential character of a man who had no business dealing with Indians. He ended the telegram asking his superior "would it not be well, as there is no doubt concerning his guilt, to arrest him so as to determine whether a white man has any rights which a reservation Indian is bound to respect."

General Terry got the message. For the brass always understand each others' inimitable private patois. Arrest and punishment of a prominent chief, living on an Indian Bureau reservation, would do much to undermine the prestige of the Bureau itself, and strengthen the hand of the Washington railroad lobby seeking to return jurisdiction over the harassed original Americans to the always obliging military caste.

Now the tempo of the grisly conspiracy picked up. Back came an answering wire from General Terry authorizing Custer to muster "a part of the garrison of Fort Rice" to arrest "the murderer." As historian John S. Gray, who found the lost records, comments aptly:

"Like an iceberg, this message conceals more beneath than it reveals above the surface. General Terry was a well-informed departmental commander, who had been a successful lawyer before the Civil War. Yet he is the first to apply the term 'murderer'."

"The charge was absurd. If killing your enemy in battle be murder, who could be more guilty than the General himself."

By the same token, Custer and every other warhorse of the United States army had committed much "murder." Supplementing a valued colleague, Dr. Gray, this author believes that Custer and Terry and the rest of the anti-Indian Bureau crowd, hoped for some kind of arbitrary court decision that would re-establish army authority over the tribes with Rain in the Face being the test case. But as it currently stood, the arrest instruction had no legal validity in any fair court within the United States or Dakota Territory. For none of these tribunals had been invested by Congress with "jurisdiction over the acts of Indians in their own territory."

By an odd contrast, one of the current residents of Standing Rock was a Sioux with a genuinely criminal record. His name was Brave Bear. He was known to have been implicated in the tragic slayings of the Delorme family on the preceding July 5th in the Red River Valley. The Valley was a settled section with long-established courts that would have been competent to try him had a sheriff served a warrant.

Custer must have known that Brave Bear was taking life easy at Standing Rock. The Delorme massacre was still a crying scandal throughout the Northwest. Why

did he take no steps to bring this genuine murderer to justice?

The answer seems pretty obvious. Brave Bear was only small fry. Rain in the Face was big game.

So Custer took a major step forward. Guided by Charley Reynolds, fifty cavalrymen under Captain George W. Yates rode seventy miles in fifty-below zero weather from Fort Abraham Lincoln to Standing Rock on December 12th, 1874. Yates didn't even know what his orders were till he opened, as ordered, a sealed letter of instructions.

The order instructed him to arrest and deliver into military custody Rain in the Face, chief of the Hunkpapa Sioux. Apparently nothing was said in the instructions about bringing in those three other alleged "suspects."

At Standing Rock Agency, Captain Yates was joined by fifty other cavalrymen under Captain T.H. French. The Indians were peacefully drawing their rations when the cavalrymen suddenly appeared. Agent Palmer, who got a long well with his wards, was annoyed by the sudden appearance of troopers whom he'd neither wanted nor requested. He feared that their presence would touch off hostilities.

To his surprise, Captain Yates learned that a hundred cavalrymen under Captain V.K. Hart, and accompanied by a United States marshal, had visited Standing Rock only a few weeks before for the purpose of arresting this same Indian and others. Evidently some other general was competing with Custer for the triumph of bagging Rain in the Face - and it was probably Stanley.

The young chief and his Hunkpapa band had fled. But they had since returned to draw their rations, and were encamped some three miles from the agency. On the evening of his arrival, Yates learned that Rain in the Face was attending a dance at another Sioux stopping place some ten miles away.

Bucking for Custer's favor, the Captain decided to play a careful hand. Two scouts - possibly Charley Reynolds and Johnnie Brughier - tipped him that Agent Palmer might warn Rain in the Face if the real purpose of the mission were known.

So Yates dispatched forty troopers commanded by Lieutenant N.W. Harrington to a Sioux camp under the pretense of making inquiry for the Indians who'd raised hell on Red River.

The trick served its purpose. At 1 p.m. on December 14th, hundreds of Indians began arriving at the agency to draw their beef rations. They noticed that Harrington's command had left Standing Rock and began asking:

"Have the soldiers gone after the Red River Indians?"

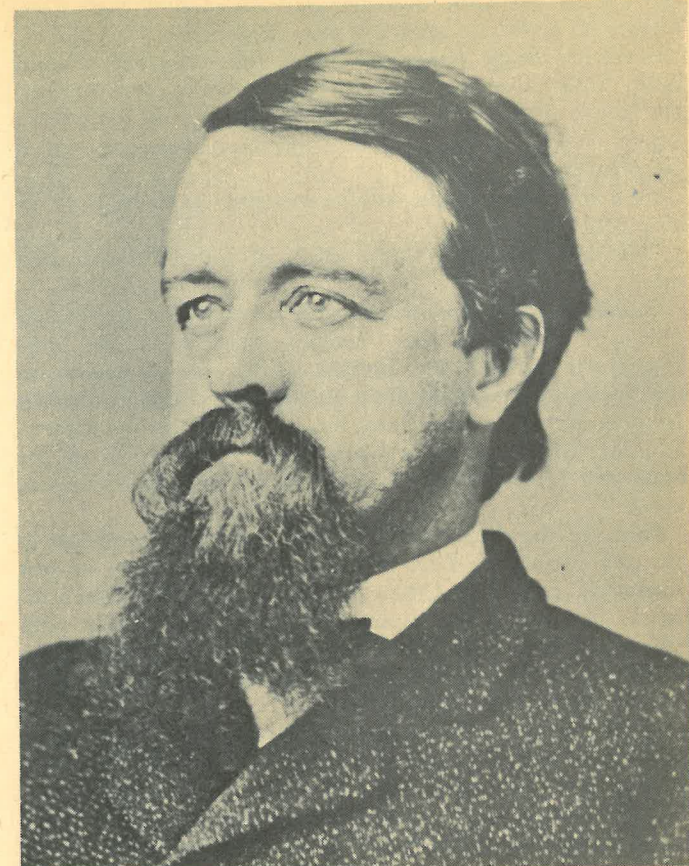
Yates had deployed the remaining sixty troopers in small groups around the agency. Massed compactly, they would have excited the suspicion of the visiting tribesmen. Finally, there were several thousand Indians on the grounds. The white population of Standing Rock - mostly government employees - amounted to about twenty, including Agent Palmer who had his hands full on ration day.

Around 2 p.m., Rain in the Face stepped into the trader's store on the grounds to buy merchandise not included in government Indian allotments. Some twenty-five to thirty Sioux including Johnnie Brughier, now serving as post interpreter, were inside the place.

Brughier pointed an accusing finger at the Chief. "That's him, Lieutenant. That's Rain in the Face who killed Dr. Honzinger and Mr. Baliran."

The soldiers seized and handcuffed the surprised chief-tain. Pandemonium broke loose in the store.

Some of the Sioux customers rushed out to sound the alarm. Others, by Yates' report, "attempted to rescue the prisoner by exhorting each other to fight." A chief made



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Above, Gen. Terry who authorized Custer's plot. Below, Johnny Brughier, half-breed fugitive who defected to Sitting Bull in the Bizarre campaign.

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his way to the door and delivered an oration urging the Indians to resist the capture of Rain in the Face.

A cavalry bugle sounded. The soldiers formed a solid rank. Yates hurried to the store, pushed his way through the angry Indians, and sent word through a trooper to Agent Palmer asking him to come immediately and quell the disturbance.

In a few minutes the soldier returned with the oral answer sent by Palmer:

"I'm too busy. You know where to find me if you want me."

Palmer's wise behavior probably headed off a pre-Custer massacre antedating that destined slaughter at the Little Big Horn. Sullenly the Indians let the soldiers depart on the following day with Rain in the Face. Palmer called in Johnnie Brughier and fired the half-breed as interpreter. But for three days the Indians raged and stormed till the agent was forced to call troopers from Fort Rice to restore peace.

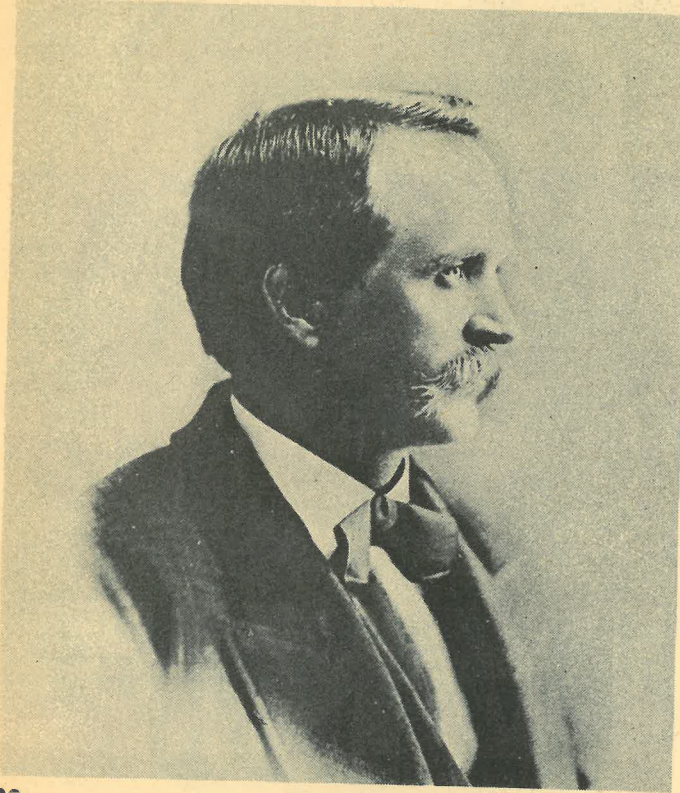
Rain in the Face was a prisoner, bound in chains, at the guardhouse in Fort Abraham Lincoln. There he was constantly grilled by Custer and the junior Napoleon's officers. But across the Sioux country, the war drums were beginning to sound. Hunkpapas rode to the camp of the Yanktonnais Sioux asking them to join in a campaign for the liberation of the popular chief.

The Yanktonnais also had sound reasons for hating Custer. Their braves began getting guns, traded for Indian ponies from the many army deserters in the Dakota Territory. Women started packing war bags for their mates. Medicine men began chanting the old songs of battle.

Only by heroic persuasion was the peaceful Yanktonnais chief, Two Bears, able to cool down his excited people. Even then he would not have succeeded had it not been for the influence of a noted Indian woman, Mrs. Picotte-Galpin, a full blood who was the only female ever

### Charlie Reynold's testimony shocked the angry Custer.

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to become a chieftain of the Sioux. But for the efforts of Two Bears and Mrs. Galpin, the war fever would have spread from clan to clan. The Dakota Territory would have been turned into a shambles.

Custer held the dice. He meant to find some supine court that would hang Rain in the Face. Meantime, he was using that coup at Standing Rock to discredit the Indian Bureau through its local representative, Agent Palmer.

While Rain in the Face, sun of wide spaces, rattled his chains, Custer began what historian Gray calls his "paper war." Through the chummy channels of the brass, he made accusations against both the Indian agent and the imprisoned chief that should have gotten him court-martialed. Palmer, he said, had refused cooperation in the arrest and was generally encouraging redskins to resist the authority of the United States government. As for Rain in the Face and the resentful Sioux, Custer really stretched the blanket.

Rain in the Face, he said, "confessed to having killed two men employed in a civilian pursuit, a railway survey." Thus Custer hoped to have a basis for trying the Sioux chieftain in some other white court if a Territorial judge ruled that his tribunal lacked jurisdiction in the killings of the surveyor and the veterinary surgeon on restricted tribal territory.

The chief had, of course, confessed to nothing for all the "promptings" of Custer. At the time of his seizure, Rain in the Face was allegedly carrying a "breech-loading rifle of the latest improved pattern and loaded with ball cartridges." Then to make it a real Wild West epic, Custer declared that all the Sioux who'd been at Standing Rock, on that memorable day, had been armed with "Henry rifles" and other high-powered shooting irons. From start to finish, the accusations were a tissue of lies woven in the grandiloquent Custer manner. Indians seldom had more than obsolete second-hand weapons since all legitimate sources of supply were closed to them. Had those thousands of Sioux at Standing Rock been armed, the far outnumbered troopers would have been massacred. As it was, the Sioux had simply come in expectation of rations rather than of battle.

But for a time, Custer's charges received a huge play. The brass bristled and the brass growled. Custer treated with cool contempt Sioux delegations led by Rain in Face's brother, Iron Horn, asking that the Hunkpapa chieftain be released. General William Tecumseh Sherman, burner of Atlanta and negotiator of the Constantly violated 1868 Sioux treaty, issued a statement from Chicago demanding the firing of Agent Palmer.

The uproar was a smoke screen for the real aim of the War Department, as it was then run: To dismantle the Indian Bureau. Abolish the ration system so that the all but conquered tribes would be forced, by starvation, to cede their remaining lands for the benefit of the railroads and the land speculators.

But finally Custer fell flat on his face for riding a good thing to death. The two burrs in his heel turned out to be Agent Palmer and a man whom he'd rated as his ever loyal flunkey, Captain Yates.

The quarrel resolved itself into the question of whether or not the Sioux had been armed on the day of the arrest. This statement did not appear in the on-the-spot report of Captain Yates, loyal Custer man though he was. Agent Palmer in his inspired and wry answer to the Custer charges declared in solemn spoofery:

"It is true that many of these Indians are armed with most formidable weapons called needle guns which they

have traded with army deserters in exchange for Indian ponies."

Needle guns. So far as their effectiveness in warfare was concerned, the Sioux might as well have used air rifles. But the statement subtly called attention to a fact which was a standing blot on the record of George Armstrong Custer, the appalling number of desertions from his Seventh Cavalry.

Agent Palmer exonerated himself of the charge that he'd refused help in arresting Rain in the Face by saying that the troopers had come into the fort under Yates' sealed orders which were kept secret from him. Custer couldn't deny that. Then came two other events which shook the General's case.

On Christmas Eve, December 24, 1874, Brave Bear gave himself up to a United States marshal on the charge of having murdered the Delormes family. His tribesmen had placed pressures on him to surrender, hoping that this might divert the heat from Rain in the Face. Later he would have the doubtful distinction of being the first Indian executed by the verdict of a court in the Dakota Territory.

On April 18, 1875, Rain in the Face escaped with the connivance of a guard at Fort Abraham Lincoln. He was probably bribed by a Sioux scraping up the necessary cash. In rapid succession, fate then turned all the tables on Custer.

His critics began asking why, with all his assumed authority, had he let a known killer like Brave Bear run loose for so long while bounding and imprisoning Rain in the Face against whom nothing could be proven under any valid law? An obvious strategy of the subtle Sioux had worked when Brave Bear had turned himself in. Rain in the Face meant more to the tribe than the sorry killer of the Delormes.

All over America, people were beginning to ask questions about Custer, questions that were embarrassing to the highest bracket of the top brass. To save his face, Custer publicly ordered a hunt for Rain in the Face, but privately ordered Captain J.S. Poland, now commanding a detachment at Standing Rock, not to catch him.

According to a damning report by Captain Poland, Rain in the Face made a bold appearance at Standing Rock in a very short time after his escape from Fort Abraham Lincoln. He paid somebody two horses for the right to slay the Indian who'd sold him the item of evidence that had gotten him into trouble - Dr. Honzinger's saddle. This business attended to, he'd taken off to the camp of Sitting Bull.

Poland, by instructions, delivered an order from Custer to Agent Parker, demanding the rearrest of Rain in the Face. Palmer said no. Rain in the Face might not be a bosom friend of the Indian Bureau's representative, but he was an honorable man.

Captain Poland would afterward reveal that Custer had specifically told him to make any effort, involving the military, for the actual recapture of the chief. Then Captain Yates turned on him, and afterwards Charlie Reynolds - good old Charlie who'd have once sworn that hell was an icebox if it meant accommodating his commander.

Shouting and screaming, Custer ordered Captain Yates to write a second report of what had occurred at Standing Rock on the day when Rain in the Face had been picked up. The Captain, sensing the wind's drift, simply rewrote his original document and again without any mention of armed Indians ready to slaughter the United States cavalry.

Then the General ordered Charlie Reynolds to go before a notary public and make an affidavit about those



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### Brave Bear fell into the scheme and died for it.

weapons allegedly carried by the Indians at ration time.

Before notary public Frank Inman at Fort Abraham Lincoln, Reynolds signed an affidavit that was a masterpiece of subterfuge.

On the one hand, he backed up Custer's statement about the Indians at Standing Rock Agency possessing Henry and Winchester rifles and that they were armed on the day of the arrest. On the other hand, he declared that he had not "even observed any rifle or gun in the possession of any of the Standing Rock Indians, or even observed any rifle or gun in the possession of said Uncapapa band, of a pattern used by the U.S. Army, although it has been a part of his duty at times to notice and report the kind of class of arms with which such Indians are armed."

To oblige Custer, Reynolds also claimed that he'd never seen any needle guns in the possession of the Sioux as claimed by Agent Palmer. Everybody felt that Reynolds was doing the best he could by trying to save his job and, at the same time, not be too obviously a liar.

Custer hurriedly closed the whole matter, after one or two feeble parting shots at Palmer. Rain in the Face would live for some years longer. But it can be truthfully said, in retrospect, that all of Custer's charges against the great chieftain spelled the death warrant that the Sioux would, not too long afterwards, serve on him at the Little Big Horn in Montana Territory.

Rain in the Face became one of the most implacable enemies of the whites in the turbulent Sioux councils. He was Sitting Bull's next in command when Custer, disregarding the advice of his own Indian scouts, brashly marched with his heavily outnumbered command into a hunting encampment of ten thousand Sioux on the Little Big Horn that fateful day of June 25, 1876.

RW

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