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# Searching for General Custer

## Pursuing a legend in books and on the battlefield

*John C. Roberts*

In the spring of 1876, Americans were preparing to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. It was a difficult year for the country. Ulysses S. Grant's scandal-plagued presidency was coming to an ignominious end, and the disputed election of 1876 would plunge the nation into one of its worst political crises. Many Americans were still feeling the effects of the hard times precipitated by financial panic in 1873. The wounds of civil war and reconstruction still festered, particularly in the South. Even so, the energy and adventurous spirit that characterized 19th-century America could still be seen in the West, where railroad builders, gold seekers and settlers poured into the lands beyond the Missouri River. It was a tumultuous time.

The centerpiece of the country's 100th birthday was the gala Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, which drew throngs of awed visitors. At the same time, many Americans followed dramatic newspaper accounts of the U.S. Army's attempt to subdue the recalcitrant Plains Indian tribes that obstructed the march of settlement in Dakota, Montana and Wyoming. They knew that a decisive summer campaign against the Sioux and their Cheyenne and Arapaho allies, led by Sitting Bull, was well underway, and that it was being spearheaded by one of the most popular heroes of the day, George Armstrong Custer. Sure enough, on July 6, as Generals William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan were touring the Philadelphia Exposition, word reached the East of a great battle between the U.S. Cavalry and the Indians on a stream called the Little Big Horn in Montana. Shockingly, the news was not of a great victory, as Americans had expected, but a crushing defeat, in which the dashing cavalier Custer and 200 of his troopers were killed. In that moment of total defeat was born the complicated and compelling legend of Custer and the Last Stand, which intrigues and fascinates both scholars and ordinary Americans to this day.

*Custer in 1864, in a widely reproduced photo by Matthew Brady*

This year I set out to explore the Custer legend from the points of view of both an amateur military historian and a book collector interested in the West. How could Custer be both adored and reviled by so many over the 130-odd years since the battle? Exactly what did Custer mean to Americans? I read and reread many of the principal books about Custer's life and career, and in an effort to understand his last campaign on a different, more personal, level, I decided to follow the 7th Cavalry's 300-mile trek from Fort Abraham Lincoln near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota, across the grasslands and badlands to the Little Big Horn, aided immeasurably by Laudie J.Chorne's invaluable guide *Following the Custer Trail* (1997). In the process, I learned much about both the myth and the reality of the Custer story.

George Armstrong Custer was well-known to most Americans before he died at the Little Big Horn. He was a genuine Civil War hero, and, according to most historians, one of the most talented cavalry leaders on the Union side. He participated in a number of important battles, and played a key role at Gettysburg leading his Michigan brigade. He had been awarded the brevet rank of Major General for his wartime accomplishments, though reverting to his per-

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**GENERAL CUSTER**, *from page 1*

manent rank of Lieutenant Colonel after the war. Custer's wartime record was so extraordinary that General Sheridan actually purchased the desk used by Grant and Lee at Appomattox and gave it to Elizabeth Custer, saying that no one had contributed more to the Union victory than her husband. Though his career after the Civil War had its ups and downs, including a court-martial and suspension from duty in Kansas in 1867, his dashing image as the youngest general in the war and his relentless self-promotion in magazines and newspapers made him the symbol of the frontier Indian fighter in the eyes of most of his countrymen. His fame culminated in the publication of his best-selling book *My Life on the Plains: or Personal Experiences With Indians* in 1874.

Custer was born in Ohio in humble circumstances, but later spent most of his time in Monroe, Michigan, where his sister lived. He was briefly a school teacher. Though he was a Democrat, and Republicans dominated Congress, he managed to obtain an appointment to West Point, where he was a superior horseman but an indifferent student. Disdainful of Army discipline, he ranked last in his class with the largest number of demerits accumulated by any cadet before or since. Graduating in 1861, Custer was catapulted immediately into the Civil War. On a visit to Monroe in 1862, he met Elizabeth Bacon, daughter of a local judge, and they married in 1864. Following a practice they repeated throughout his career, Libbie followed him to the front in the latter stages of the war, staying at nearby farms and inns. Theirs was a storybook romance and a devoted marriage. While most of the legion of amateur Custer buffs have focused on The Last Stand and his other exploits in the West, there is at least one excellent biography covering his entire life, Robert M. Utley's *Cavalier in Buckskin* (1988). As noted below, most of the other biographies are slanted and outdated.

Custer had been given effective command of the 7th Cavalry Regiment in 1866, since its Colonel remained in St. Paul. In 1873 he and Libbie moved to Fort Abraham Lincoln in Dakota Territory. They built a fine house at the cavalry post, which quickly burned down and was replaced by a finer one. The second house has been painstakingly rebuilt according to its original plans, and I visited it in the summer. Walking through its rooms, you can still get some of the flavor of the social circle the Custers created at the fort. As was his habit, Custer surrounded himself with friends and relatives, what his enemies called "The Royal Family." He managed to get assigned to his regiment old subordinates from the Michigan Brigade, his brother Tom and his brother-in-law James Calhoun. Later he invited his brother, Boston, to join him as a "guide." Libbie had around her not only Custer's sister, Maggie, and the other officers' wives, but young women from Monroe who came to Bismarck to visit in the summer. According to all surviving accounts, there were picnics, games, and amateur plays, as well as hunts and horsemanship displays. Custer rode his prized thoroughbred horses and was accompanied everywhere by several hunting dogs. The setting even today is beautiful, on a bend in the Missouri River with the charming Heart River nearby for picnics and swimming. To the west, however, was Indian country. In 1876 there were no towns, no farms or ranches, no roads and no railroads for hundreds of miles. The Northern Pacific Railroad had stopped at Bismarck on the Missouri River and the Union Pacific was far to the south in Nebraska.

Though the Custers created a relatively comfortable frontier life for themselves, the General (as he was always called in deference to his brevet rank)

*Re-creation of Custer's house at Fort Abraham Lincoln in North Dakota.*

*Illustration from* A Popular Life. *It typifies the image of Custer in the years immediately after the "last stand." Courtesy Special Collections and Preservation Division, Chicago Public Library.*

was in deep professional trouble in 1876. An uncommonly ambitious officer, he knew that a major war against the Plains tribes was coming, and he wanted desperately to be a part of it. The Laramie Treaty of 1868 had given to the tribes the land in Dakota Territory west of the Missouri and declared as "unceded Indian Territory" the land farther west in the Powder River Basin (including the Little Big Horn). By 1876, however, the U.S. Government was determined to break these promises, as it had done so many times in the past. Settlers and gold-seekers wanted access to the Black Hills, and the Northern Pacific Railroad was set to move up the Yellowstone River into the heart of traditional Sioux country. After unsuccessfully trying to buy the Black Hills, the President simply ordered that all free-roaming Indians must come to the reservations to live by January 31, 1876. Those who refused would be declared hostile. Sitting Bull and his allies defied these orders. Custer, who had always been an active Democrat, had foolishly allowed himself to become embroiled in the growing scandals surrounding Secretary of the Interior William Belknap. Just at this time, he was called to Washington to testify against the administration. His public comments and actions angered Grant, and the President retaliated by ordering Sherman to let the coming war with the Sioux and their allies go on without Custer. Only through the personal intervention of General Terry, who commanded the Department of Missouri, and the support of his old Civil War superior Phil Sheridan, did Grant relent and allow Custer to return to his regiment. As a personal insult, however, he insisted that Custer not command the Dakota Column, though its core was the 7th Cavalry. He would be subordinated to Terry, a New Haven lawyer who had become a general during the Civil War but had no experience fighting Indians.

Terry and Custer prepared to move west against the Plains tribes in May of 1876. They were part of a loose, three-pronged effort to find Sitting Bull, and either defeat him or bring him peacefully onto the reservations. Colonel John Gibbon was to move from Fort Ellis, near present day Bozeman, Montana, eastward along the north bank of the Yellowstone River to block any escape to the north. Old Indian fighter George Crook, with the most powerful of the three forces, was to move north from Wyoming to the Big Horn area. Though the original plan had been to wage a winter campaign, delays in logistics forced the three columns to wait until spring.

Many books have been written about the military campaigns on the frontier after the Civil War. While both professional and amateur historians have criticized Custer's actions at the Little Big Horn, it is important to judge him in the context of the time. The best books on the purely military aspects of this period are Robert M. Utley's *Frontier Regulars: the U.S. Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (1973) (a volume of the distinguished MacMillan Wars of the United States series), and John S. Gray's *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876* (1976). Utley is the Dean of frontier historians and Gray was a talented amateur, by profession a physician from Chicago but an avid and respected Custer expert. A very useful compilation of articles can be found in Paul L. Hedren, ed., *The Great Sioux War of 1876-77* (1991). These books put into context the events of 1876. For the post-war U.S. Army, fighting Indians was a sideshow compared to real fighting against another modern army. Consequently, its leaders never really developed any tactical doctrine for fighting the light, mobile plains tribes. Indians regarded warfare as a kind of game and were reluctant to incur casualties. "Counting coup," touching an enemy with a coup stick in battle, was the ultimate distinction for a warrior. They often were saddled with their lodges, families and pony herds, and were almost never willing to engage cavalry in a set-piece battle. Experience on the frontier had taught the Army that large bodies of Indians invariably scattered when attacked,

*See* ***GENERAL CUSTER****, page 4*

*Campsite along Rosebud Creek on the way to Little Bighorn. June 22 was three days before the famous battle.*

ABOVE *View from Last Stand Hill. Little Big Horn River is behind bluffs which concealed the size of Sitting Bull's village.* BELOW *cemetery at Fort Abraham Lincoln.*

GENERAL CUSTER, *from page 3*

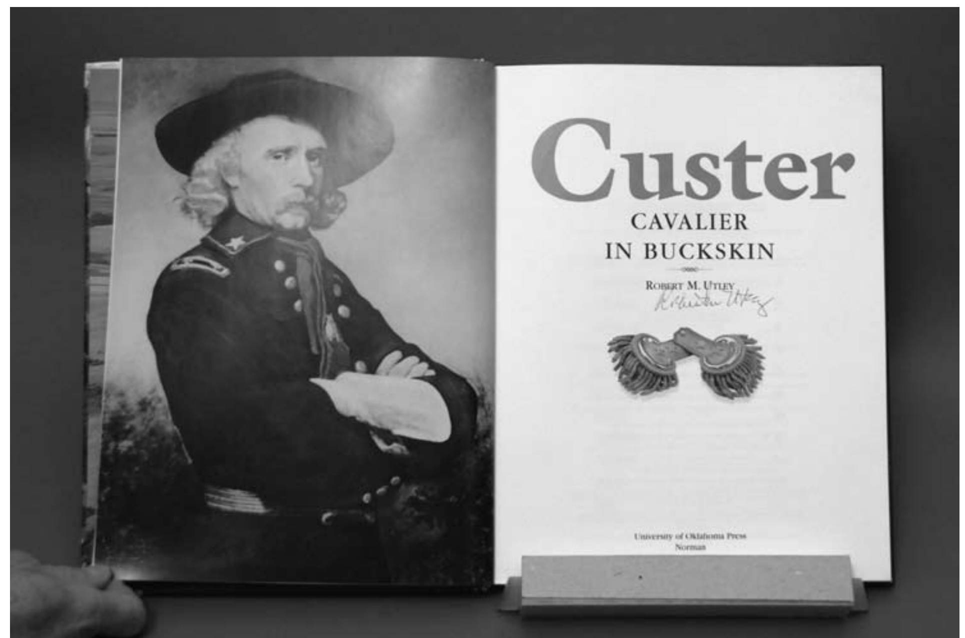
particularly if their villages were nearby. Even when they did fight, Indian warriors were extremely individualistic and had no real tactical organization or command structure. Superb horseman as individuals, they rarely fought in a coordinated fashion. Because any sizeable Indian village needed vast amounts of grass for its pony herd and game for the families, large concentrations of warriors were rare. The villages were constantly on the move in the summer months. On the other hand, the American cavalry, while better armed, trained and led, suffered from a number of severe handicaps in the west. Many of the recruits were of low quality; drunkenness and desertion were constant problems. The soldiers usually fought in unfamiliar country, and their horses were inferior to the smaller Indian ponies. Logistics were a nightmare. Because they had to carry not only ammunition and food, but also forage for their horses, large cavalry units were extremely slow and unwieldy. Finally, communication between units in the vast western plains was extremely difficult. In light of these background factors, the outcome of the campaign that ended at the Little Big Horn may be easier to understand. Until the summer of 1876, a large body of warriors had never aggressively attacked a sizeable cavalry unit. Indian victories were usually hit-and-run attacks against stragglers or small bodies of troopers, or ambushes in which soldiers had been lured into a trap and defeated. All of the Army's major "victories" over the tribes had been surprise attacks against Indian villages of 200 lodges or less, usually in winter, which killed many women and children and resulted in the destruction of food, tents, equipment and horses. This history undoubtedly created a mindset among the officers converging on the Little Big Horn in 1876, that their principal goal was to find the Indian villages and prevent the tribes from scattering, not to defeat them in a classic military engagement.

As I followed the route of the Dakota Column across North Dakota and Montana, I was struck by the obstacles it faced. The land, even today, is sparsely populated, and mixes undulating hills with large buttes and broken badlands. Most of the trees visible today were planted later by settlers. Terry and Custer had not only the mounted 7th Cavalry troopers, but 150 wagons filled with feed for their horses, food and equipment. Further slowing down the column were a detachment of infantry and three unwieldy Gatling guns. A huge herd of horses, mules and cattle followed along behind. Temporary bridges had to be built over the many gullies and stream beds, and camp sites had to be found each day with sufficient game, water and firewood. While 2010 has been an extremely wet year in this part of the west, resulting in a green landscape and abundant water, the same months in 1876 were mostly hot and dry. Except for a freak snowstorm which delayed the column for two days, most surviving letters and diaries stress the heat and lack of grass for horses.

Typically for the Custers, Libbie and Maggie rode with the military column to the first night's camp on the Heart River. Standing on a ridge above the site, I could picture the picnic-like atmosphere recorded by the participants, many of whom would be dead a month later. The women returned to Fort Abraham Lincoln the next day, though Libbie and Maggie tried unsuccessfully to persuade the captain of the supply steamer, which was to meet the column on the Yellowstone, to let them accompany him into the battle area. Along the march to the Little Big Horn, Custer exhibited many of the traits that made him both loved and hated in the frontier Army. He often rode far ahead of the column, to General Terry's consternation, accompanied by his relatives and a loyal group of officers, hunting and sometimes simply frolicking. Indeed, on this expedition he brought along his 17-year-old nephew, Autie Reed, a civil-

ian, and (against Sherman's explicit orders) a reporter for the *New York Herald*. Custer wrote articles for *Galaxy* magazine and sent in anonymous newspaper dispatches about the column's activities. Custer also brought his 16-piece Cavalry band, riding identical white horses, to play in the evenings. The General had his own wagon with a tent, a desk and a bed, and his own cook. Life in the field for the enlisted men, by contrast, was hard and unrelenting.

Everyone who has written about Custer has noted the many peculiarities of his character, seen by some as charming or heroic and by others as vain or just plain odd. During the Civil War, even though he had just graduated from West Point, he had his own velveteen uniform made, with a flowing collar and ample gold braid. He always wore a non-regulation red scarf and often a wide-brimmed white hat, which became his trademarks. In the west he usually wore a special buckskin uniform with brass buttons and general's stars. He designed his own personal flag, and a soldier carried it aloft wherever he went. He usually wore his red-blond hair very long, though it was cut short before leaving for the Little Big Horn. Custer, unlike most of his officers and men, did not drink or smoke and rarely swore. He was a gambler, however, and throughout his life pursued various get-rich investment schemes, which invariably failed and left him in financial difficulty. He could be cruel and unfeeling toward enlisted troopers and often pushed them to exhaustion. He was a superb horseman, devoted to his thoroughbred horses and his hounds, and loved to hunt. He hunted and fought with an expensive Remington rifle and was an excellent shot. Everyone who knew him commented on Custer's nervous energy and on the fact that he could ride all day without tiring. In the field he slept little. Utley calls it "hyperkinetic restlessness." The General was a compulsive hand-washer who also carried a toothbrush with him everywhere, even into battle. He was physically slight but strong and agile. He had an unattractive high voice and was a compulsive fast talker. Surprisingly, since he was not particularly well educated, Custer was a superb and habitual writer. His *Galaxy* articles, collected and molded into *My Life on the Plains*, are quite readable despite the flowery prose conventions of the day. Most of all, Custer was physically brave, impetuous and supremely self-confident. He was considered by all who knew him to be extremely lucky, having fought all through the Civil War with only one small scratch despite repeatedly exposing himself to enemy fire. He had a number of loyal officers in the 7th Cavalry, but there were others who hated him. Outside of the Army, General Custer and his wife had befriended a number of luminaries in Washington and New York, including Democratic leaders like August Belmont, financiers Jim Fisk and Jay Gould, *New York Herald* publisher James Gordon Bennett, and the famous actor Lawrence Barrett. He and Libbie often spent their winters in New York. All in all, Custer possessed a strange mixture of qualities which has both fascinated and annoyed those who wrote about him.




ABOVE Son of the Morning Star *was a surprise best-seller;* Little Big Man *portrayed Custer as a megalomaniac;* BELOW *Utley's* Cavalier in Buckskin *is the best treatment of his whole life.*

As I continued tracing the route of the Dakota Column, I began to appreciate the tactical difficulties facing Terry and Custer. When they finally rendezvoused with the supply steamer at the junction of the Yellowstone and Powder Rivers on June 11, they paused for ten days. Terry had very little intelligence on the number or location of Sitting Bull and his allies. His chief concern was that these non-reservation Indians would escape and scatter, as they had done so many times in the past. Gibbon had proven to be cautious and slow-moving. Crook, however, fought the Indians some 70 miles to the south on Rosebud Creek on June 17 and was soundly defeated. Crook did not know exactly where Terry and Custer were, but made no effort to

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report on the battle. If he had, he might have given Custer pause, because a large group of Indians had aggressively attacked Crook in the open and had displayed coordination in their tactics. This uncharacteristic behavior might have made Custer more circumspect and convinced him that the tribes were present in large numbers and ready to fight, not flee. As for Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, encountering Crook's large force moving toward their village undoubtedly convinced them that they were in mortal danger, but the battle also increased their confidence.

By June 21, Terry had finally received vital intelligence, from a reconnaissance by Major Marcus Reno, that Sitting Bull was probably camped somewhere on the Little Big Horn, but he still had no hard information on the size of the village. Signs pointed to a large number, and Terry's scouts feared the worst. His plan was to send Custer as the mobile striking force up Rosebud Creek, on the other side of the Wolf Mountains from the Little Big Horn, and then down the Little Big Horn to attack the Indians. He and Gibbon would move to the mouth of the Little Big Horn and move upriver to trap Sitting Bull's village. At the junction of the Rosebud and the Yellowstone, near the current town of Rosebud, Montana, the 7th Cavalry passed in ceremonial review before Terry at noon on June 22, with Custer flamboyantly in the lead. In 2010, I was able to stand where Terry stood exactly 134 years earlier as the Cavalry rode by, and to follow Custer's trail up the idyllic Rosebud valley. On June 24 at Busby's Bend, sooner than they had expected, scouts found a large trail indicating that many Indians had recently crossed the divide over to the Little Big Horn. Custer decided to follow across the Wolf Mountains.

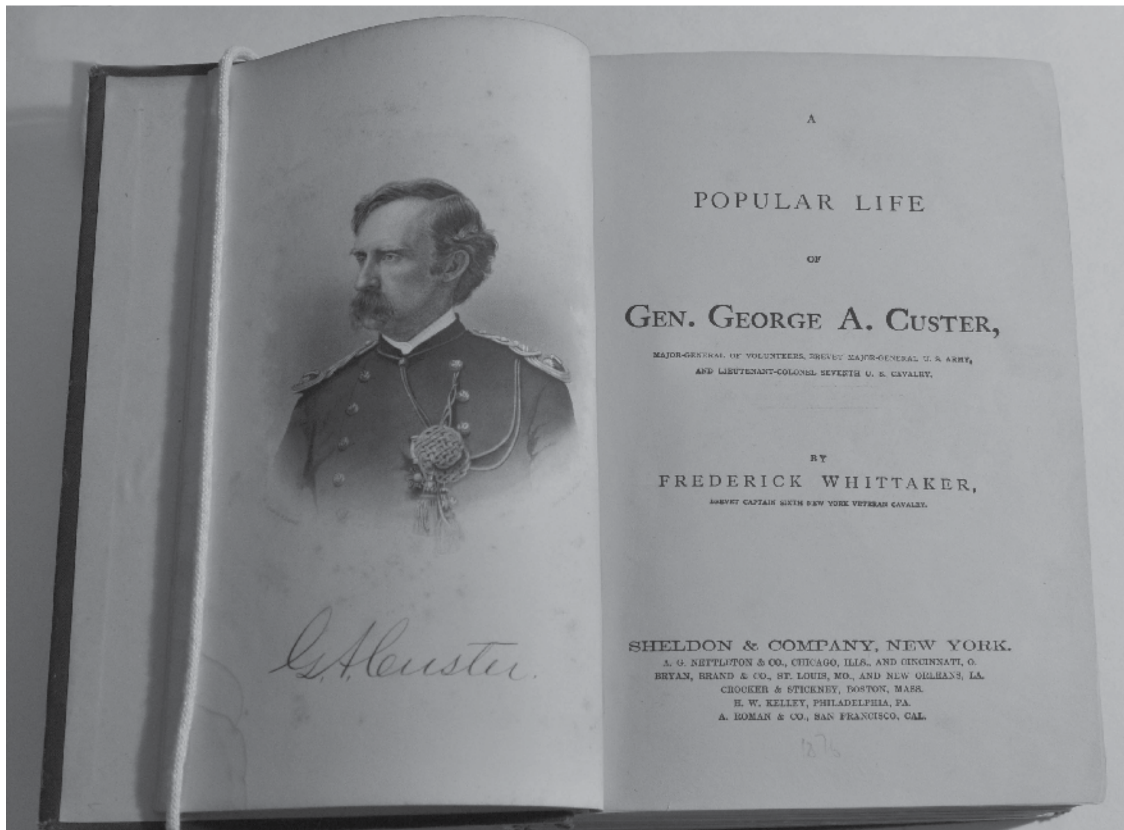
Scholars and Custer buffs have debated endlessly the wisdom of Custer's tactical decisions after deciding to cross the divide to the Little Big Horn. His original plan was to cross the mountains and find a place to rest on June 25, attacking the village at dawn the next day as the Army had done so many times before. But he saw a small group of Indians early on the 25th and concluded that his column had been discovered. Fatefully, he decided to attack the village that afternoon, a tactic the Army ordinarily had avoided. To make matters more difficult, the rough terrain made it impossible for him or his scouts to fully measure the size of the village. Walking over the ground at the Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument, one can see the problem. Sitting

*Barracks interior at Fort Abraham Lincoln*

Bull and his Cheyenne and Arapaho allies were camped all along the river, but bluffs on the east side obscured the village. It is almost impossible to see the entire village site from any vantage point. Custer first sent Captain Benteen, one of the officers who despised him, on a scout to the left to make sure the Indians did not try to escape upriver. He then sent a second smaller part of his command under Major Reno to cross the river and attack the south end of the village. Custer himself, with five companies of troopers, moved along the high ridge to the east of the river, ostensibly to attack from another direction. Reno was repulsed with heavy losses and retreated up the bluffs to a defensive position, where Benteen joined him. They were unaware of Custer's fate until the next day.

We do not know the precise details of Custer's Last Stand, despite all of the books, movies, poems and paintings about it. Indian accounts have been assembled over the years, but are marred by translation difficulties and other problems. No one in Custer's command survived to tell his story. But it does appear that warriors led by experienced and energetic leaders like Crazy Horse and Gall attacked Custer from several directions, that they were armed with repeating rifles as well as bows and arrows, and that they fought with unusual skill and determination. Scholars have established that the village contained about 1000 lodges, perhaps the largest single gathering of Plains tribes ever, and that the number of warriors (more than 2000) was much greater than Custer had guessed before the battle. We do know that Custer and every man in the five companies were killed, along with an unknown number of Indian warriors. The dead included all of the Royal Family – Custer's favorite officers, his two brothers, his brother-in-law, reporter Mark Kellogg, and Custer's young nephew. Reno and Benteen held out until rescued by Terry and Gibbon two days later, after Sitting Bull had moved the village farther up the river.

How do current historians judge Custer's conduct of the battle? Over the years, several criticisms have been leveled. First, Custer is accused of disobeying Terry's orders in that he engaged the village on the 25th instead of waiting until the next day when Terry and Gibbon might have been in a position to support his attack from the north. But there was no assurance that Terry and Gibbon would have been in position, and Terry's written order clearly gives Custer flexibility to fight the battle as he sees fit. We know from survivors of Reno and Benteen's units that Custer was principally concerned with blocking the village's escape. And, of course, we know that Custer originally intended to wait until dawn on the 26th, but thought (erroneously, it turned out) that he had been discovered. Second, critics argue that Custer should not have attacked without knowing the exact size and configuration of the village. But many historians now agree that given the Army's experience in the Indian wars, exact knowledge would not have changed Custer's tactics. Army officers believed in the superiority of their training and weaponry. Moreover, recall that Terry and Custer never really thought the Indians would fight aggressively, since they had never done so in similar situations. Had they known of Crook's experience the week before, they might have had second thoughts. In one sense, Custer was simply unlucky that he had attacked the largest known concentration of Plains Indians while they were in a




*Title spread from* A Popular Life. *Image courtesy Special Collections and Preservation Division, Chicago Public Library.*

very angry and aggressive mood. Third, and perhaps most important, Custer is accused of unwisely dividing his command before the attack. But this argument ignores the fact that such division was a common Army tactic in the Indian wars, and that it had worked before. Ordering Reno to attack, while he moved to support him from another direction, was the same maneuver Custer had used in the Civil War and at the successful Battle of the Washita in 1868. Sending Benteen around to the left is less defensible. But given the size of the Indian force, their improved weapons, their superb tactics and their aggressiveness, many historians believe that had Benteen been with Custer he too would have been annihilated.

Robert Utley and John Gray add other factors in reaching their overall conclusion that Custer made the correct decisions given what he knew at the time and his past experience with Indian warfare. First, of course, is the overwhelmingly large number of warriors present, by far the largest Indian force ever assembled in the Plains wars. Second is the unfavorable terrain, which made it hard for the Cavalry to operate, and easy for the warriors to move unseen to positions from which they could rain down arrows on the exposed soldiers. I could appreciate that point better after walking the battlefield. From the contemporary marking of the bodies and archeological evidence unearthed later, we can see where the soldiers were deployed. They were on high ground, but without cover. On all sides there were concealed ravines and undulations that gave warriors the advantage of concealment. Though attitudes of racial superiority prevented a frank expression of the point for many years, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Custer didn't lose the Battle of the Little Big Horn so much as the Indians won it.

The building of General Custer's legend – the Last Stand – began soon after the battle itself ended. Though Democratic newspapers portrayed Custer as a gallant hero from the start, many in the Army were critical of his generalship, including President Grant. Libbie Custer returned to Michigan and immediately began working with a well-known dime novelist, Frederick Whitaker, on a full biography of her beloved General. Astoundingly, this large volume, entitled *A Life of Major General George A. Custer,* was published before the end of 1876. Given Libbie's involvement, it was not surprising that it painted an altogether heroic portrait of Custer and was a best seller. The book was considered for many years the definitive account of his life and exerted a strong influence on the public's image of the battle. It blamed both Reno and Benteen for not coming to Custer's aid. The legend of the heroic cavalier defeated by an overwhelming force of savages was also perpetuated by poems, articles and paintings which were widely distributed (Whitman, Whittier and Longfellow all wrote poems about Custer). Buffalo Bill Cody's popular Wild West show for many years ended with a showy reenactment of the battle, centering on Custer as a tragic hero. Also, a key to the strength of the heroic legend for some 50 years was Libbie Custer herself. She proved to be a formidable woman, bombarding the Army, newspapers and her New York friends with her version of the Custer story. She also became a popular writer, publishing *Boots and Saddles: Life in Dakota with General Custer* in 1885, *Tenting on the Plains; or General Custer in Kansas and Texas* in 1887 and *Following the Guidon* in 1890. *Boots and Saddles* in particular, with its romantic account of their life together in the West and its defense of Custer's generalship at the Little Big Horn, played a major role in creating the Custer myth. Libbie died in 1933, outlasting all of Custer's contemporary detractors.

Finally, Custer was portrayed as a romantic cavalier in numerous movies over the years, notably by Errol Flynn in the wildly successful *They Died With Their Boots On* in 1941.

Starting in 1934, however, with the publication of Frederic Van de Water's influential *Glory Hunter: A Life of General Custer,* the Custer legend became more complicated. Van de Water portrayed Custer as selfish, reckless and ambitious, his decisions on the battle field causing the death of his men. Other writers took up the critical theme, though at the same time Custer loyalists continued to defend his memory. In the 1960s, America's growing acknowledgement of its unjust treatment of the Indian tribes contributed to another morphing of the Custer legend. In *Little Big Man* (1964), novelist Thomas Berger portrayed Custer as a deranged megalomaniac. The book was made into a successful movie. Books like Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1988) made Custer a symbol of the persecution and duplicity practiced by Americans and their leaders in their zeal to

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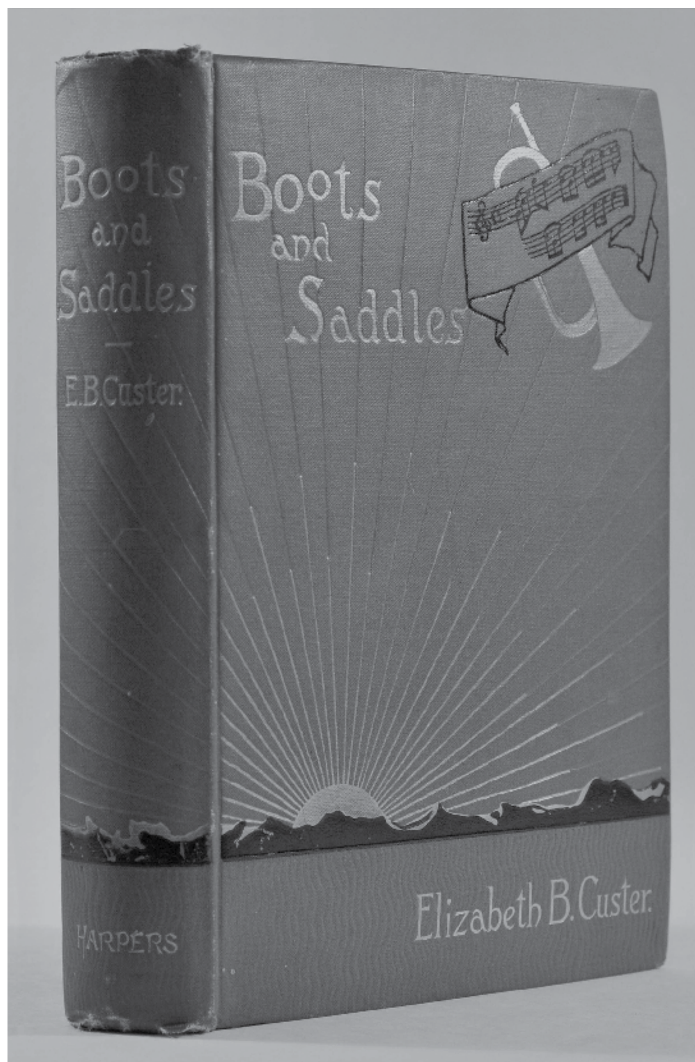
settle the west. Other books tended to fall into one camp or the other, yet Custer's popularity never waned. One of the most interesting, and hardest to categorize, is novelist Evan S. Connell's *Son of the Morning Star* (1991). This surprise best-seller is a confusing kaleidoscope of facts and speculation, but contains some provocative insights into Custer and the other participants. Lest the reader think that no one is still interested in the Custer legend, I would point to Nathaniel Philbrick's 2010 treatment *The Last Stand*, a highly readable book which breaks no new ground but was a *New York Times* bestseller.

Serious efforts have been made to delve into the psychology of the Custer legend, or the Custer myth, and to understand its persistence in the American psyche. Useful works of this genre are Utley's *Custer and the Great Controversy: the Origin and Development of a Legend* (1962), which traces newspaper and magazine accounts of Custer and the battle, and Brian W. Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (1976). W.A. Graham, *The Custer Myth: a Sourcebook of Custeriana* (2000), contains a wealth of interesting and sometimes contradictory material. Perhaps most fascinating of all is Bruce A. Rosenberg, *Custer and the Epic of Defeat* (1974). Rosenberg locates the Custer legend among similar heroic stories from many cultures, in which the outnumbered hero fights gallantly, often against a heathen foe, but dies spectacularly. The deep resonance of this archetypal story surely helps explain Custer's place in the first rank of American heroes. For those who are new to the Custer legend and would like an introduction to both the military and cultural issues, I highly recommend as a first step Paul Andrew Hutton's excellent compilation of articles in *The Custer Reader* (1992).

There are some striking ironies in this story. Custer is remembered as a great Indian fighter, though his only real victory, the Battle of the Washita, was more a massacre, in which many women and children were killed and their belongings torched. Nelson A. Miles, who vanquished the Sioux and Cheyenne after the Little Big Horn and was probably our greatest Indian fighter, is little remembered. Custer is thought of as the figure of the Indian wars, when his real accomplishments as a soldier were earlier in the Civil War. He is portrayed by many as a symbol of our mistreatment and racist policies toward the American Indian, when in fact Custer was sympathetic to his Indian foes and admired both their horse culture and their fighting prowess. The General usually rode in the field with his trusted scouts, especially the Arikara Bloody Knife, with whom he was often photographed. By many accounts, he was disdainful toward those in the Army who preached extermination of the Plains tribes, and was critical of the abuses and corruption he saw in the administration of Indian policy and the reservation system. A final irony, of course, concerns the ultimate outcome of the Great Sioux War. While the Sioux and Cheyenne could rightly be proud of their decisive victories at the Rosebud and the Little Big Horn, unique in all the Plains wars, these battles also sealed their fate. As has happened in other times in history, most notably after Pearl Harbor, sudden unexpected defeats can energize and mobilize a stronger foe and lead inexorably to ultimate disaster for the victor. After the Little Big Horn, the Army mounted a strong winter campaign under Nelson Miles, thoroughly defeating the Sioux and Cheyenne, and sending them permanently to reservations. Only Sitting Bull, who fled to Canada, refused to capitulate, but even he came to the reservation, defeated and impoverished, in 1881.



*Pristine copy of an early edition of* Boots and Saddles *with a popular cover. Image courtesy Special Collections and Preservation Division, Chicago Public Library.*

What can I add to the torrent of words that have been written about Custer? Why do Americans remain fascinated by the General, Libbie and the Little Big Horn? Recalling others who have achieved legendary status, a crucial ingredient may be that they, like Custer, not only died dramatically but also died young – think John Kennedy or James Dean. We thus remember them for their early triumphs, usually embellished over time, and need not contend with their later missteps, or grow tired of their personal quirks. But with Custer there is also something else at work. My own theory, in addition to the factors already mentioned, is that there is something quintessentially American about Custer. He quickly became a living embodiment of those qualities which many see as unique about our country. Custer came from humble beginnings and rose to greatness. He had the same restless ambition and adventurous spirit that characterized 19th-century America. He was an individualist who didn't like taking orders, but was devoted to his brothers and family. He wanted to be rich and famous. He was also highly skilled as a soldier, a marksman and a horseman. Finally, he had a storybook marriage, often defying orders so that he could be with his wife. George Armstrong Custer was the kind of man that many Americans secretly wanted to be.

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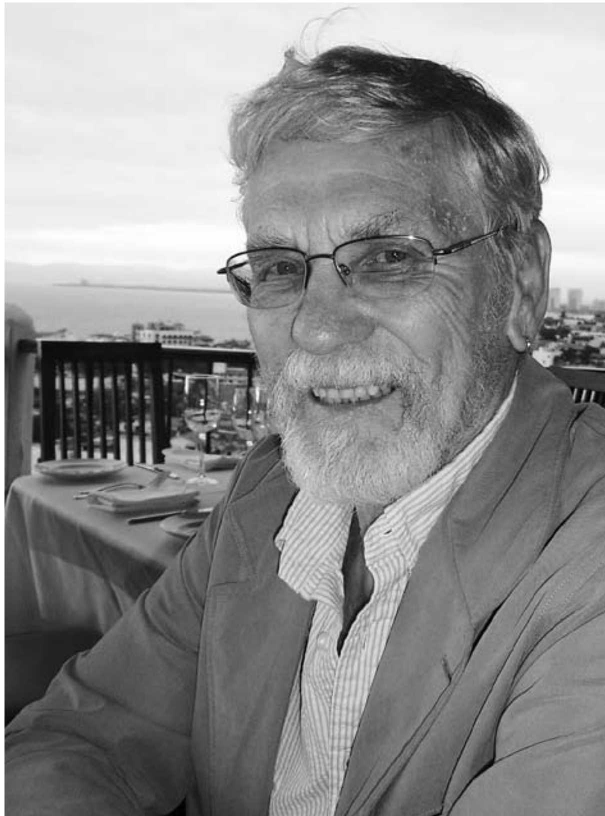
South Dakota and Montana photographs by the author. Uncredited book photographs (of books in the author's collection) by Robert McCamant.

# Ron Offen: Poet, Editor, and Caxtonian

*Robert McCamant*



Ron Offen, who died on August 9, was elected to the Caxton Club in January of 2007. By the time of his election, Offen was a well-known man. He'd written 9 books: *Off-Target* (2006), *God's Haircut and Other Remembered Dreams* (1999), *Answers, Questions* (1996), *Instead of Gifts* (1995), *The Starving Poets' Cookbook* (1994), *Brando* (1973), *Cagney* (1972), *Dillinger: Dead or Alive?* (1970, co-authored with Jay Robert Nash), and *Poet As Bad Guy* (1963). One, *God's Haircut*, had been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Wikipedia summarizes his achievements:

> Offen lived most of his life in Chicago and worked as an insurance investigator, editor, freelance writer, and theater producer. With R. R. Cuscaden he was the co-editor of *Mainstream: A Quarterly Journal of Poetry* (1957), one of the first publishers of Richard Brautigan. He was also co-editor with Cuscaden of *Odyssey: Explorations in Contemporary Poetry and the Arts* (1958-59), which published the early work of Charles Bukowski, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), David Ray, and others. He was a reviewer and executive editor of *Chicago Literary Times* (1962-1965), poetry editor of *December* (circa 1970-72), and columnist ("Poetry Beat") for the *Chicago Daily News* (1974-75). From 1970-77 he was a book reviewer for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, a drama critic for Chicago's weekly newspaper, *Skyline*, and worked in the Poets-in-the Schools program sponsored by the Illinois Arts Council.
>
> .... In 1975 Offen and his second wife, Rosine (1930-2000), an Actors' Equity actress and director, formed the theater company, The Peripatetic Task Force. He was the executive producer of this company, which produced avant-garde and original plays. He was also instrumental in creating Gangway Playhouse in Chicago, a summer outdoor free children's theater. The company's production of Jack Stokes's *Wiley and The Hairy Man* at Gangway Playhouse won a special Joseph Jefferson Award in 1977 for children's theater.

*Free Lunch*, published from 1989 to 2009, seemed to be the project of which he was most proud. He gave a free lifetime subscription to the magazine to American poets he considered "serious," whether he published their poems or not. There were also some paid subscriptions; the total press run was about 1200.

Alice Schreyer noted his relationship with the University of Chicago: "Ron was proud of his affiliation with the University of Chicago, where he received an MA degree. He decided to place his professional papers and the archive of *Free Lunch* in the Special Collections Research Center, where they are a perfect fit with other collections of contemporary poetry archives. The papers are processed and available for research, and the index can be found online. I was always impressed by his versatility and generosity: a writer of biographies of Dillinger and Brando yet a poet to the core, happiest in helping new writers."

Don Chatham fondly remembers an encounter with Offen at a Revels: "When I noticed that an old copy of an issue of one of his now defunct journals that he had donated carried poems by one of my thesis advisors (Fred Eckman) whom Ron admired but had never met, I brought it up and off we went on Eckman's life and work. I then went scouring through my old yearbooks to take pictures of the poet to send off to Ron. We got together one day at his home where he went through his impressive collection of poetry books, which had a concentration in Charles Bukowski, and then went out for burgers and a beer. So, one of my favorite, and last, memories of this great but modest man was our shared interest in just that – burgers, beers, and Bukowski."

Offen is survived by his wife, Beverly.

We end, appropriately, with one of his poems:

**POET AS BAD GUY**
by Ron Offen
for Kenneth Rexroth

I like to enter small jerkwater towns
with engine roaring, then rock to a stop
and park before a group of local clowns
to make a cigarette-dangling entrance.
I glance past them with a frown,
puffing, turning my collar up,
and digging my hand deep down
in my trench-coated stealth;
then weasel my eyes around
for some unknown assailant and proceed.

I like to imagine skulking by
they think I'm some professional syndicate-hood,
ex-convict, or disreputable private-eye
come to douse with gasoline the chimney
of the mayor, to swell the bellies
of their best examples of virginity,
or rubber-hose their schoolmarm editor
whose outraged expose in the *Monthly Journal* led to my untimely downfall.

I'd like to pull it off
just once, get past that sweet old frump
grandmothering me a smile that scoffs:
you naughty boy, you've been off drowning cats
or making bombs again, but we love
you just the same. And in a way, I guess
they do. At least I can't maintain the bluff
when the flat bellies of their girls shake
with giggles but not terror. It's too much.
I button the top button of my hate
against the piercing onslaught of their love
and smile, to show I'm just a country boy at
heart.

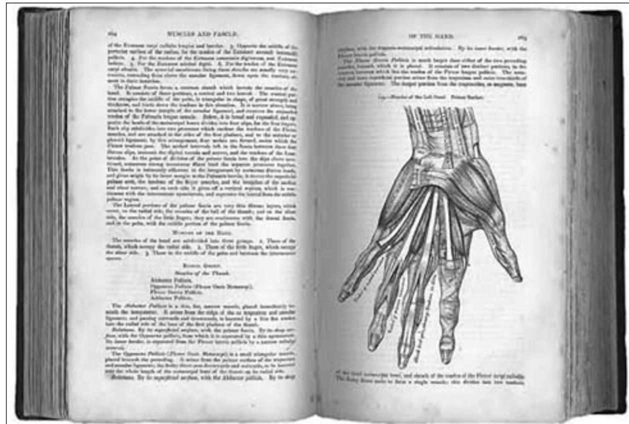
*Copyright © 1963 by Ron Offen*

# Book and manuscript-related exhibitions: a selective list

Compiled by Bernice E. Gallagher

(Note: on occasion an exhibit may be delayed or extended; it is always wise to call in advance of a visit.)

Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 312-443-3600: "Everyday Adventures Growing Up: Art from Picture Books" (works by award-winning illustrators Nancy Carlson, Peter McCarthy, and Timothy Basil Ering, showing how picture books help children to decode images and develop critical thinking skills), Ryan Education Center and Gallery 10, through November 28; "1885: First Books in the Library Collections" (books from the first printed catalog of 1885, reflecting the Art Institute's important role in the history of art and providing a glimpse into the world of late 19th-century book publishing), Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, ongoing.



*Humanities Festival: Gray's Anatomy*
FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL WEBSITE.

Chicago Botanic Garden, Lenhardt Library, 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe, 847-835-8202: "Emily Dickinson's Garden: The Poetry of Flowers" (illustrated books, manuscripts, and rare nursery catalogs, showing how Dickinson's horticultural knowledge influenced her use of plants and flowers in poetic metaphor; part of a traveling exhibit created by the New York Botanical Garden's Mertz Library), through November 14; "Bibliotheca Sylva" (rare books depicting historic uses of trees as wood products and in forestry, featuring fine illustrations, photographs, and wood samples), November 19 through February 6, 2011.

Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington Street, Chicago, 312-744-6630: "Louis Sullivan's Idea" (photographs, drawings, documents, and artifacts relating to Sullivan's life, writings, and architectural works, presented by Chicago artist Chris Ware and cultural historian Tim Samuelson), Chicago Rooms, through January 2, 2011.

2010 Chicago Humanities Festival: "The Body" (choreographers, economists, philosophers, neuroscientists, poets, psychologists, historians, and musicians offer opinions on the splendors, mysteries, and paradoxes of human incarnation), at various locations citywide, information and tickets at 312-661-1028 or www.chicagohumanities.org, November 3 through 14. Of special interest to Caxtonians:

"Corpus: Pre-modern Books and Bodies" (an interdisciplinary panel of scholars offering insights into the history of the book from the pre-modern period to the digital age, showing the link between the treatment of bodies and books, and examining how the metaphor of "book as body" influences the way we read and use books), Claudia Cassidy Theater, Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington Street, Chicago, 312-661-1028, November 6, 1 to 2 p.m., Admission $5, free for Festival members; "Dissecting Gray's Anatomy" (author Bill Hayes articulates the medical, historical, and artistic significance of Gray's Anatomy and shares the fascinating tale of its creation, pieced together from long-forgotten letters and diaries), Events Building Theater, Wilbur Wright College, 4300 N. Narragansett Avenue, Chicago, 312-661-1028, November 8, 7:30 to 8:30 p.m., Admission $5, free for Festival members.

Harold Washington Library Center, 400 S. State Street, Chicago, 312-747-4300: "Alfred Appel on Classic Jazz" (works by the late Alfred Appel, Northwestern University English professor for over thirty years, who wrote widely on the history of jazz in its larger context of 20th century art, with a special focus on Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Fats Waller), Upright Case, Eighth Floor, through June 30, 2011.

Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society, 361 E. Westminster Avenue, Lake Forest, 847-234-5253: "Nature by Design: Drawings of the Foundation for Architecture and Landscape Architecture, 1926-1935" (a collaborative project with Special Collections at Lake Forest College, featuring watercolors, measured drawings, sketches of estates and gardens at home and abroad, drawn by students from Midwestern universities who participated in an innovative summer program founded over seventy-five years ago by renowned landscape architect Ferruccio Vitale and housed at the College), through December 16.

Newberry Library, 60 W. Walton Street, Chicago, 312-943-9090: "Marbled Papers and Fine Bindings by Norma B. Rubovits" (nineteen fine bindings and sixty sheets of Rubovits's own marbled paper, chosen from 5000 items that make up the Rubovits collection and paying tribute to her forty year career as the creator of original, imaginative art), Hermon Dunlap Smith Gallery, through December 31.

Newberry Library, Center for the History of Cartography, 60 W. Walton Street, Chicago, 312-255-3659: Lectures in the History of Cartography, "Mapping the Transition from Colony to Nation" (as a follow-up to the Newberry's 2004 series "The Imperial Map," the 2010 lectures examine how peoples and states used maps, in a variety of geographical settings and over 200 years, to define, defend, and administer national territories, to develop national identities, and to establish their place in the community of nations), November 4 through 6, registration required.

Northwestern University, Charles Deering Library, 1970 Campus Drive, Evanston, 847-491-7658: "Burnham at Northwestern" (documents, photographs, blueprints, and sketches of Daniel Burnham's 1905 "Plans of Northwestern," a redesign of the University's Evanston campus), Special Collections and Archives, ongoing.

Oriental Institute of Chicago, University of Chicago, 1155 E. 58th Street, Chicago, 773-702-9514: "Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond" (illustrations of new research on the origins of writing: artifacts from the four "pristine" writing systems of Sumer, Egypt, China, and Mesoamerica; examples of the forerunners of writing, such as rock paintings and pot marks, photographic tablets from Uruk/today's Iraq, seal impressions from the tombs of early Egyptian kings, and oracle bones used in Chinese rituals; examples of early alphabetic texts in Proto-Sinaitic, Old South Arabian, and Hebrew, all of which re-evaluate the origins of the alphabet; a video kiosk demonstrating how photographic techniques can examine sealed clay Token balls ca. 3350-3100 BC, whose previously unread contents are thought to be the ancestors of Latin letters), through March 6, 2011.

Bernice Gallagher will be happy to receive your listings at either 847-234-5255 or gallagher@lakeforest.edu.

# *Caxtonians Collect: Kathryn DeGraff*

Seventy-first in a series of interviews with members

*Interviewed by Robert McCamant*

Kathryn DeGraff joined the Caxton Club in 1982, when women members were still few in number. But her boss (the director of the DePaul library) and legendary Caxtonian Abel Berland (a recently-retired DePaul trustee and friend of the library) decided it was the right thing for the newly-appointed special collections librarian to do, so she did.

What she found was interesting. "They served us prime rib every month!" she exclaimed. "Some of the members were still complaining that cigars were no longer permitted. Mind you, this was 1982, when much of the rest of the world had changed."

But it turned out well, she now says. "I owe a great deal to the Caxton Club. By nature I'm shy. I came from a working-class Dutch background, and my experience with other people was limited. Through the Club I learned that rich people can be as nice or as unpleasant as any other people. And that if you have a shared interest, you can have a good conversation with anyone." She also recalls with pleasure her friendship with the late Karen Skubish, one of the few other female members at the time.

DeGraff grew up in the Chicago suburbs. She went to DePaul as an undergraduate, working full time and simultaneously taking night courses. "I think it took me nine years to finish," she laughs. "But we were having quite a bit of fun, and also thought we were going to change the world, so finishing in the least possible time was never a goal."

But she soon buckled down to library school at the University of Illinois in Urbana. "When I applied, I declared that I intended to work in special collections. That was what I specialized in." But when she got around to looking for a job, she didn't find any in the field, so she settled for doing acquisitions at the DePaul library for her first 8 years there.

"DePaul did have a special collections department. It started in the 1930s. But it was something of a backwater, the place where older librarians were assigned when they were nearing retirement. But I'd had all the indoctrination in the value of special collections in a curriculum, and I thought we could do better. Eventually the library director and I came up with a plan, the previous special collections librarian finally retired, and I got the job."

*DeGraff, left, talks with Florence Shay at the farewell-to-MidDay event in December 2007.*

Photograph by Robert McCamant

DeGraff insists that the DePaul collections are modest. "But we get plenty of educational value out of them," she says. From the first, she started working with the faculty to bring students to special collections in conjunction with their class work. "We get 60 classes through in a typical academic year. It's a delight to provide an opportunity for people to hold a 500-year-old leaf of a book or look in the archives for a primary source."

Over the years she has seen the interests of the students change. When she started, a rare Aldine edition impressed them, because they had studied some Latin and this was proof of its endurance. "Then in the 90s the only Homer they seemed to have heard of was Homer Simpson!" she laughs. She's delighted to discover that the pendulum has turned: "Students now are more curious about the past. So much of their experience of the world is electronic that seeing artifacts of a bygone time makes history more real."

She mentioned two items that almost always get the students' attention: a 14th-century manuscript book called Legenda Aurea by Jacobus de Voragine, and a 1564 edition of the cannons and degrees of the Council of Trent. (This latter was a gift of the aforementioned Abel Berland.) No wonder the kids pay attention: when she asks the students the oldest artifact they've ever touched previously, the typical answer is something from the 1940s. "Don't get me wrong, though," she adds. "The students don't come in of their own volition. They come in because their class does, and they show up carrying drinks and snacks to the first meeting. It takes a while to develop their interest and get them to understand preservation."

DeGraff suffers from the philosophical problem that all special collections librarians do: how to collect for herself without putting her interests into conflict with those of her library. Though she is interested in the two areas of strength in the DePaul special collections – Napoleon and the Victorian era, Dickens especially – she collects those only for the library. At home she lets her husband's interest – the Hollywood blacklist and all the memoirs it has spawned – be the main thing that accumulates. She also has a small collection of books of days which was started with gifts from her father, who was an important influence on her love of books.

She lives with her husband, Joe Gallina, in west Lakeview. "We were lucky to be able to buy a house there at a time when a librarian and a camera-store manager could afford one." It means that she can walk to work, something she enjoys doing. She has two sisters who live in the city, and had the rewarding experience of having her mother live nearby for the final ten years of her life.

The city location used to mean that DeGraff and Gallina got out to many cultural events. They were particularly fond of Chicago Shakespeare Theatre. "But we're finding it harder and harder to stay out late on weeknights and still get up in the morning," she admits. "It's such a privilege to do what I do. I'm so eager to get to the library that I can't sleep in."

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# *Bookmarks...*

**Luncheon Program**
**Friday, November 12, 2010, Union League Club**
**William Tyre**
**"John J. Glessner (1843-1936): the Man, His House, and New Research on His Extensive Library"**

William Tyre, Executive Director and Curator of the John J. Glessner House, will deliver an illustrated talk about a most untypical captain of industry and his Romanesque-Revival home at 1800 S. Prairie Avenue (an architectural gem), with special emphasis on the Glessners' 5,000 volume library. Come and hear: about a house that (including its furnishings and decorative art) has become a premium site in the world for the study of the Arts and Crafts Movement; whether or not H.H. Richardson's fortress-like design reflected labor unrest; how a home with 18,000 square feet could be considered "cozy" (Glessner's family lived there 50 years); about the collecting patterns of John and Frances, his wife; about specific books in the collection and their importance to John and/or the world; and how this home and contents survived while Potter Palmer's castle did not.

**Dinner Program**
**Wednesday, November 17, 2010, Cliff Dwellers**
**Paul F. Gehl**
**"Marvellous Marbling: The Norma B. Rubovits Collection at the Newberry Library"**

Periodically since 1992, Caxtonian Norma Rubovits has been transferring parts of her extensive collection of marbled papers and books on marbling and binding to the John M. Wing collection at the Newberry Library. A friend and mentor to many marblers, Norma acquired her collection almost entirely by exchange with other talented artists. It is a selective collection, embracing only the best papers by the best artists in the field. Now numbering over 4,000 sheets of paper, the Rubovits collection is believed to be the second largest in public hands in the U.S. A. The Newberry is honoring Norma with a retrospective of her 45-year career as a paper marbler and fine binder. Wing curator and Caxtonian Paul Gehl will describe and illustrate Norma's work, show highlights of her collection of marbled papers from around the world, and describe the ways the collection is accessed and used. Please join us for a celebration of one of our eminent members.

*The November luncheon will take place at the Union League Club, 65 W. Jackson Boulevard. Luncheon buffet (in the main dining room on six) opens at 11:30 am; program (in a different room, to be announced) 12:30-1:30. Luncheon is $30. Details of the November dinner: it will take place at the Cliff Dwellers Club, 200 S. Michigan, 22nd floor. Timing: spirits at 5:00, dinner at 6:00, program at 7:30. Dinner is $48, drinks are $5 to $9; $10 parking, after 4 pm, at the garage on the SE corner of Jackson & Wabash – enter just south of Potbelly on Wabash. For reservations call 312-255-3710 or send email to caxtonclub@newberry.org;* ***reservations are needed by noon Tuesday for the Friday luncheon, and by noon Friday for the Wednesday dinner.***

## Beyond October...

**DECEMBER LUNCHEON**
On December 10, cultural historian and Caxtonian Celia Hilliard will speak about her new book, *The Prime Mover: Charles L. Hutchinson and the Making of the Art Institute of Chicago.*

**DECEMBER DINNER**
Our annual Revels, including fundraising auction, will take place at the Newberry Library on Wednesday, December 15. Get your auction items to Dan Crawford at the Newberry!

**JANUARY LUNCHEON**
Friday, January 12, painter, writer, graphic artist, carpenter and lover of literature Rick Tuttle will talk about his foray into the world of books as works of art. Illustrated, plus show and tell.

**JANUARY DINNER**
We will meet on Wednesday, January 19 at the Cliff Dwellers. Speaker to be announced.