**“Custer Discovers Gold”**

By Charles Windrolph

*In 1868 the Untied States signed a treaty with the Sioux which granted them ownership of the Black Hills, a region they regarded as holy land. No sooner had the ink on the treaty dried, however, than rumors began to circulate that the Black Hills contained major gold deposits. To investigate these rumors, General George A. Custer entered the Black Hills in the summer of 1874 at the head of an expedition which numbered more than a thousand men. The following account of Custer’s expedition was written by Charles Windolph, a private in the U.S. Army, who took part in it.*

The outfit that left Fort Lincoln for the Black Hills on July 2, 1874, was ***formidable***. General Custer was in command, and he had ten companies of the Seventh Cavalry, one company each of the 20th and the 17th Infantry, a three-inch field rifle, two Gatling guns, a detachment of Indian Scouts, numerous white guides, interpreters, civilian ***teamsters,*** packers and herders. We had 110 six-mule team wagons, and we were ready for bear. Brevet Colonel Williams Ludlow was sent along as chief engineer and we had several scientists from the East, and a young newspaper correspondent for a Chicago paper named Charles E. Curtis. He had a good deal to do with what happened later, when they let the cat out of the bag.

Of course, I don’t remember all the details of that Black Hills expedition. I know we marched 400 miles westward and to the south, camping late afternoons where we could get wood and water. That’d always be along some creek or river. General Custer was good at picking out camp sites. He did most of that work himself. He’d usually ride way ahead of the column, and lay out the line of march and the crossings, and pick the spot where we’d camp. He was a good plainsman, right enough. He had an eye for it.

We had a long column, and we moved out with our wagons four abreast. It was a pretty sight to see those canvas-covered army Studebakers, each with its three teams of government mules. We had civilian mule skinners. The infantry was their special guard, but we were always ready for any Indian surprise attacks. We had 300 head of beef cattle, and they were driven behind the wagon train. There was always at least one cavalry company in the rear guard. It was a big outfit; a thousand men and horses, 700 mules and 300 steers.

We didn’t see any buffalo for several days, but there was a world of ***fleet*** little antelope. We had 60 days to make the trip to the hills, explore the region, and get back to Fort Abraham Lincoln. Some days we’d make 30 miles, but now and again when the going was bad we wouldn’t make more than 14 or 15.

It was fun in the long evenings, when we’d taken care of our horses, and the guards were posted, and everything was ship shape. It was getting higher country all the time as we went west, and that meant cool night, even in the middle of July. We’d make great campfires, and almost every evening there’d be a band concert. General Custer was mighty proud of our Seventh Regiment band. They were mounted on white horses and he had them along on all his expeditions and campaigns. They’d never fail to play the regiment’s own song, “Gary Owen.’ That was an old Irish battle song that Custer had adopted for the Seventh’s own. I faintly remember some of the other tunes they used to play on that trip. One of them “The Mocking Bird.” And then there was “The Blue Danube.” We had a mighty fine band, and on the nights when the moon was out and the stars cracking in the sky, and the air was crisp and cool, it was something to stretch out before a big open log fire and listen to the music. Soldiering wasn’t half bad those times.

Colonel Fred Dent Grant, the President’s oldest son, was along with us, too. He had no official position but just came for the fun of it. The Colonel used to get a little tipsy. But that didn’t do anybody any harm. There were also two civilian miners from Bismarck who were brought along as experts. More about them later.

It seems to me we’d been out about three weeks when we left the hot, dry country up near the head waters of the Little Missouri River and headed straight south until we hit the headwaters of the Belle Fourche. The Belle Fourche is really the North Fork of the Cheyenne. Between these streams rises this strange formation of hills and high valleys, woods and lovely parks, shut off from the rest of the world by steep cliffs and green mountains.

We were traveling slowly down the west side of the Black Hills. Scouts finally found an opening, and we turned sharply to our left, or east, and entered the forbidden land. It was a paradise of flowers and cool, sweet air and clear running streams. You never saw so many wild flowers in your life as there were that first day. And the grass reached almost to our stirrups. It was like heaven, after the hot, dry days on the Dakota plains.

General Custer, who as usual was riding ahead with a couple of troopers, came upon smoldering campfires that showed that three Indian Tepees had recently been there. He sent Bloody Knife ahead with several Indians. Soon they galloped back with information they had located the Indians. Custer surrounded the little group and brought back four bucks with him to our camp. The head was a minor chief named One Stab, whose squaw was a daughter of Red Cloud. Custer promised them food if they helped him, but they seemed to be in a hurry to leave, and before they could be checked they mounted their ponies and were off. Custer sent troopers after them, but the only one they could catch was One Stab. He was told he would be given all the bacon, sugar, and coffee that two ponies could carry if he’d act as a guide. He agreed, but in order to make it stick Custer had four troopers guard him night and day. It was a good thing we had One Stab with us for the next three or four days because it was hard to find a way through those narrow valleys and canyons of the Black Hills. When One Stab finally left he got his two pony loads of grub, as Custer had promised. His band were the only Indians we saw while we were in the Hills proper.

A couple of days after we had entered the Black Hills, we passed over a divide and rode into Castle Creek Valley. It was pretty and green there, too. We weren’t hurrying matters. Every day the two miners would be out with their picks and shovels and pans. Troopers were prospecting, too, and you couldn’t hear much else talked about but gold. Everybody was sure the creek bottoms must be full of gold, and you’d hear all sorts of wild rumors of big nuggets and findings.

But I believe the first real gold that was panned was found by the miner named Horatio Nelson Ross. If I remember rightly, that was on the afternoon of July 30. We were camped for several days in one spot while General Custer was exploring south of Harney’s Peak. I suppose we were 25 miles or so south of what is now Lead. Lead, South Dakota, is where the Great Homestake mine was discovered in the early eighties. More gold has been taken out of that mine than any other mine in the world. I ought to know, because I worked for the Homestake for 48 years. I still live at Lead. It’s a great place.

We sure were excited when word spun around our camp that Ross had really found gold.

I suppose that word “gold” is the most exciting word in the language. Men will do more crazy things, and more brave things, and more cruel things for it than anything else. Just holler “Gold!” a couple of times, and men will stampede like Texas longhorns used to when they were driven north up the old Chisholm Trail.

Gold to most men means sudden wealth, big times, whiskey and gambling and women. It means fortune and adventure and all the things they never had. The gold fever is like taking dope. You’re helpless when it strikes you.

That’s the way most of us felt in those days at the end of July 1874. I had a great friend in H Company who at the time was our trumpeter. His name was Everett Edward, and we used to call him “Dutchie.” He’d been a gold miner in California in 1849, and during the Civil War he’d been a lieutenant in a Negro regiment. He hadn’t hit it very well in the California gold rush, and he was fit to be tied when he heard about Ross finding gold here in the Black Hills. We got the cook of H Company to loan us a pan, and we found a pick and shovel and hurried off by ourselves. And we found gold, too. We panned out a number of tiny specks. But it was gold enough.

I get excited when I think about it even now – 72 years later. We had it bad. Dutchie filled me full of all kinds of stories. We’d come back here and get rich. We might even “go over the hill.” You have to have money to get yourself an outfit, and money was something we didn’t have. But we knew you couldn’t keep white men out of these hills once word of the gold discovery got out to the world.

All the soldiers in the United States couldn’t hold back the tide then. You could sign all the Indian treaties you could pack on a mule, but they wouldn’t do any good. Me n would get through. They’d go after gold in spite of hell and high water.

We had some newspaper men along, and they had a story big enough to suit them. It’d help make them famous, even if it would do a lot of harm. Lots of people connected with the discovery would pay for it with their lives.

Charlie Reynolds rode out late on the evening of August 1st or 2nd with the newspapermen’s dispatches and the report was from General Custer.

He was a wonderful, that Chalie Reynolds. We used to call him “Lonesome Charlie” because he never talked very much and seemed to be by himself. He was the silent kind. I suppose you might say he was on the moody side. I never did know much about him, but I’ve been told that he was born in Warren County, Illinois, in March of 1844. Like a lot of boys around that time, he joined up with an ***emigrant*** train going west. I think he was 16 then – so that would make it 1860 when he first touched the Plains country. I heard he served three years in a Kansas regiment during the Civil War; then for a time he settled down in Atchison, Kansas. From then on he started living in the Indian Country, trapping and hunting buffalo. I first saw him in the summer of ’73, when he was chief scout and guide of the Yellowstone Expedition.

He was all nerve, afraid of nothing, and he had a good head on his shoulders. This day in the Black Hills when he volunteered to try to get those dispatches through, it didn’t look like he had more than an even chance of getting through alive. He had to ride more than a hundred miles southwest through dangerous Indian country before he reached Fort Laramie, Wyoming. He did it alone, riding at night and hiding by day. He took the story of the Black Hills gold to the world. And he paid for it with his life on that terrible day of June 25th (the Battle of the Little Bighorn), two years later.

I read once about how everyone who touched an Egyptian King’s tomb was doomed to die a violent death. Seems to me that the Indians must have put some curse like that on the white men who first touched their sacred Black Hills at this time.

Custer got a lot of ***notoriety*** from his Black Hills expedition, and the discovery of gold. But he never had any luck after that.

The cat was now out of the bag. There was no holding back the men with the faraway look in their eyes – and the word “gold” on their lips. That following spring and summer of 1875, white miners trooped into the Hills, despite every effort made by the Army to keep them out. White man’s civilization was again on the march, and nothing could stop it. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

*Adapted from “I fought with Custer,” by Charles Windolph (New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1947)*