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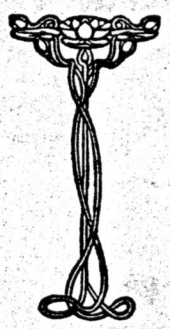
Battle of the Big Hole

IN AUGUST, 1877

As told by T. C. Sherrill, a volunteer member of Gen. Gibbon's command which was so nearly wiped out on that occasion.



WRITTEN BY ELLA C. HATHAWAY, JULY, 1919

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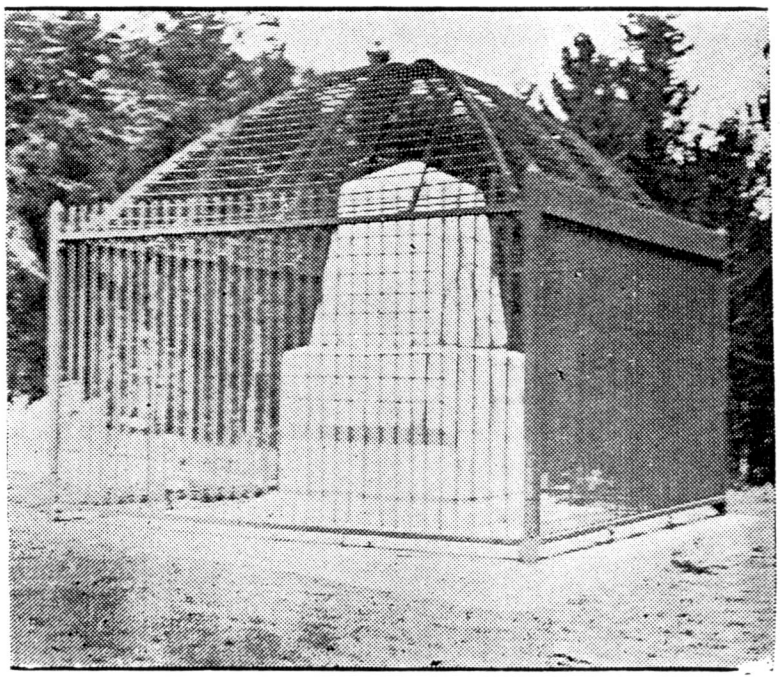

Erected by a grateful government to the men who fell in the Nez Perce Indian battle. Inclosed to keep out souvenir hunters.

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Historic Spots on the Big Hole Section Park-to-Park Highway

Sula Ranger Station road

THE work done upon the western scenic park-to-park highway during the past summer has made this altogether beautiful drive over the Rocky mountains between the Big Hole and Bitter Root valleys more enticing than ever. Many of the turnouts have been widened, especially on the Bitter Root side, where such improvement was more essential than on the Big Hole side. Next season more improvements will be made in this regard, and in time there will be scarcely a possibility of accident. There is really no reason for accidents, even now, if people would realize that they are on a mountain road and not on a macadamized speedway.

One of the beauty spots along the route is the ranger station at the Gibbon battlefield, ten miles west of Wisdom. The government has extensive plans for making this popular resort even more popular. Outdoor fireplaces have been built for the accommodation of those who wish to camp there or entertain at picnicking.

A Hallowed Spot.

This is a historic spot, hallowed by the blood of the brave pioneers and soldiers, who fell under the relentless fire of the Nez Perce Indians in August, 1877. A grateful government has erected a magnificent monument upon the spot where they were buried and upon its surface one may read the names of those who fell. Because of liberties taken by souvenir hunters, it has been necessary to inclose the stone in steel.

The station is at present in charge of M. G. Ramsey of the forest service, but T. C. Sherrill, one of the survivors of the Indian battle so long ago, was in charge for some years. He was but a stripling then; now his hair is streaked with gray, yet he is erect and agile. A little hard of hearing is all the perceptible mark, save the hair,

which time has laid upon him. He is a fixture there, the government having built for him and his family one of the coziest bungalows in the hills.

He loves to tell the story of the battle, and while it differs slightly in some minor points from the report of General Gibbon, one cannot but regard Sherrill's story as absolutely true. That his memory—recollection of the events as they were at the time of the battle—is perfect, was illustrated during the past summer. Forest Supervisor Summers was over from Dillon for the purpose of locating spots of especial interest in order that they may be appropriately marked for guidance of the tourist. As a matter of course, Mr. Sherrill must be depended upon for the data. While standing near the monument and looking across the willows where the Indians were camped before the battle, Mr. Sherrill said to his chief:

The Dying Squaw.

"Right over there, against the cut-bank on a line with those old Mormon diggin's, there ought to be the bones of a squaw I saw one fall. She was on the run, with the rest of the redskins, and turned to look back. Just as she did a rifle ball caught her in the jaw and tore the whole side of her face off. She tried again and again to get up that cut-bank, but couldn't make it and finally quit trying. She must have died there."

Mr. Summers and others present who heard the story were a bit skeptical and finally some one suggested going to the spot designated. Mr. Sherrill walked as directly to it as though it might have been his camp of the night before, and after kicking around in the sands of the north fork of the Big Hole river a skeleton was found.

Of the battle, Mr. Sherrill says:

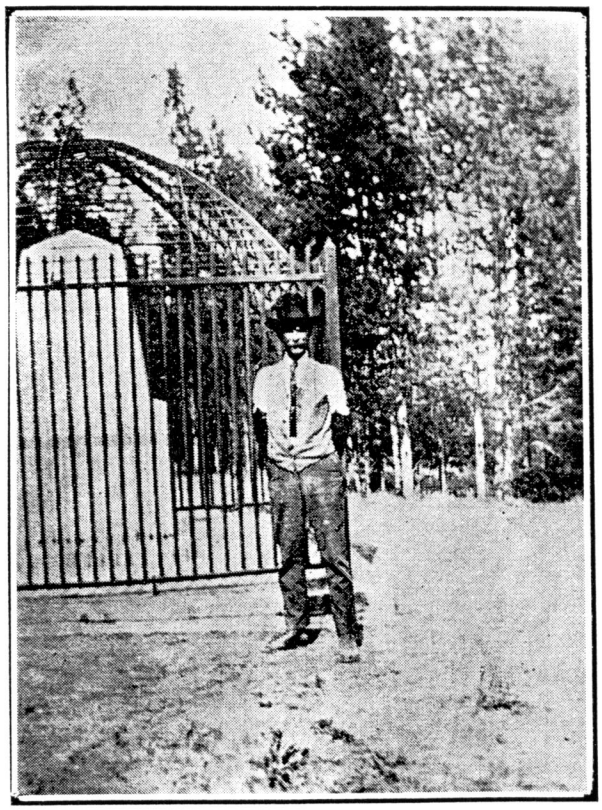
"I had asked General Gibbon himself if I might not join his company and make the trip into the valley with his men, and being only a citizen and no soldier, I didn't know whether they would take me along, but I certainly wanted to go, and as I was pretty young, only about 21 or so, I did not realize just what General Gibbon's men were up against. But I wanted to go, and the only thing to do was to ask the general himself, and I was mighty glad when he said I could go, but that I would have to consider myself as one of the company and take orders the same as the rest. Well, that suited me fine and I was glad I could go, no matter what the conditions. So we started out and met the infantry and a supply train at Bradley's ranch, and there were about 22 cowboys there, too.

"General Gibbon had received word that the Nez Perces has started east over the Lo Lo trail, and had ordered one of the companies to start at once for Fort Shaw. This is the company I joined, and we reached Fort Shaw July 27. I guess there were only about

40 men that came over the mountain on Tuesday evening into the valley. We came over to a point four miles above here, known as Fool Hen Creek, but now Kramer's saw mill."

Indians' Advantage.

And right here the writer would like to give the readers some idea of the ground on which this battle was fought. Picture this valley—75 miles in length and from 6 to 16 miles wide, skirted all around by mountains, with their foothills, the ravines and underbrush and the many trees so thick that one could scarcely see beyond a few yards—then realize the advantage the Indians had in



Tom Sherrill standing before the monument which marks the graves of his companions of other days.

this battle, which took place on the side of one of the mountains, at the foot of which was a wide ravine covered with brush and willows, where the Indians had pitched their tents and where the white men had to meet them.

Mr. Sherrill goes on to say:

"We started for Missoula, by way of Dadott's pass, with pack mules. I guess it was about 150 miles, and we made it in seven days, reaching the new post near Missoula late on the afternoon of the 3d of August in wagons that were sent out to meet us. There were about 76 men and 8 officers. We heard that the Nez Perces and a large herd of horses had managed to avoid Captain Rawn's little command by marching around it and had turned up the valley. They stopped for a day or so along the way to trade with the white people and get fresh horses, food and supplies of all kinds, including ammunition.

On Pack Mules.

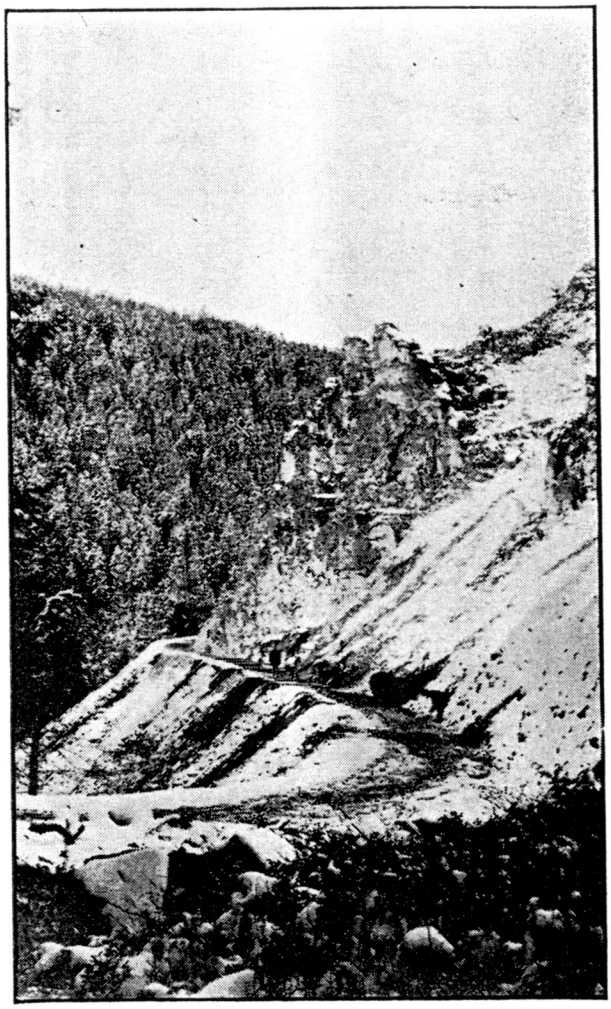
"On the way over there were some men sent to join us from Captain Rawn's command and about seven officers with them. By this time I guess there were about 146 men and 15 officers, and we went in wagons to Steubenville, where we arrived about 9 o'clock, making about 25 miles. The next day we made about 30 miles and were joined by a number of citizens from the upper valley, who volunteered as scouts and to join us if we should overtake the Indians—pretty much the way I joined. Some one told us that up a ways it would not be possible to take wagons, so we brought along pack mules. We had a pretty good road until we came to climb the divide, at the upper end of the Bitter Root valley. Here the ascent was so steep, rocky and crooked that we had to halt that night and camp before reaching the summit. We only made 24 miles that day and the next morning it took up all of four hours to reach the top and only made about 13 miles that day, and we still had a steeper climb ahead of us for the next day.

On Indians' Trail.

"All along the road we had been passing the Indian camping grounds, which showed that they were moving at the rate of 12 or 14 miles a day, so that if we could only continue to double this distance it would only be a question of time when we would overtake them. The best estimate we could make of the number of Indians, judging from the camps, etc., was about 260, and we knew they were well armed and had plenty of ammunition. We also heard that Lieutenant Bradley and his command of some 60 men had been ordered to push forward during the night and try to strike their camp before daylight.

"The next morning we started up again at 5 o'clock and started to climb the steep barrier, and the traveling was much more difficult on account of the fallen timber which had to be removed or climbed over, but our wagons were lightly loaded and by doubling our teams and using the men to help drag the wagons, we finally reached the summit, making only two miles in six hours. From there on we

began to descend on a gentle incline of 20 miles or so into the Big Hole basin. But even here the abrupt road was so obstructed by fallen timber, and a difficult stream with abrupt banks crossed our path several times, so that traveling at best was a slow job.



Portion of tortuous Indian trail which is now a perfect boulevard on the Western Scenic Park-to-Park route.

Nearing Hostile Camp.

"We got word some way that Lieutenant Bradley had not been able to reach the Indian camp as expected, so had to conceal his command in the mountains, as daylight had overtaken them and they could not surprise the Indians as planned. We were ordered to go

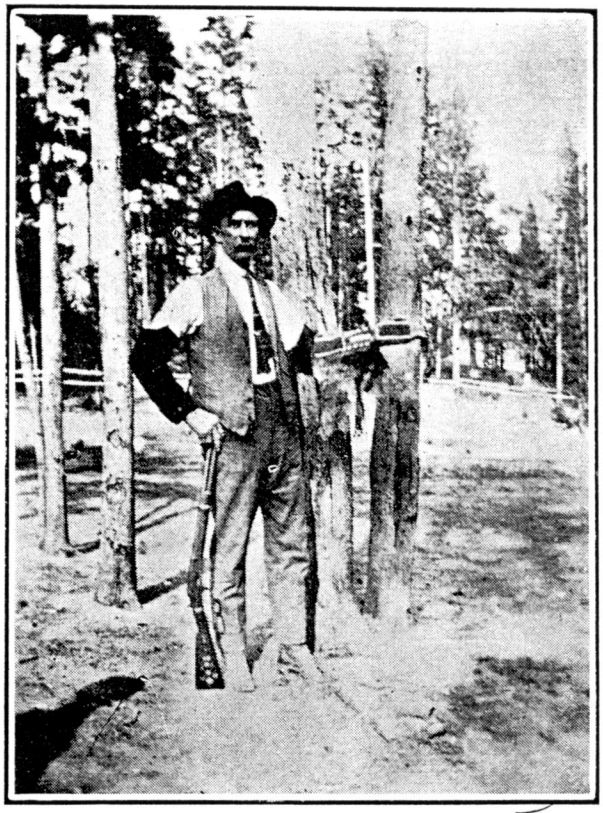
right ahead without resting or feeding the animals, and we also learned that Lieutenant Bradley had located the Indian camp, but it was still four or five miles distant from Bradley's and we had just reached the place at sunset. We were not allowed to build any fires, and after pickets had been posted, we all laid down to rest until 11 o'clock. At that time we were ordered to hit the trail on foot and each man was supplied with about 90 rounds of ammunition. There were just 17 officers, 132 men and 34 citizens, and on account of the rough road we had to leave the only howitzer in the company behind, as not only would it be hard to take along, but

Trees marking the course of the Northfork and willows wherein the Indians had pitched their tepees.

the noise made in removing timber would be sure to reach the ever-ready ears of the Indians. After going about three miles the country opened into the Big Hole basin, and, guided by one of the citizens, who knew the country, we turned up to the left and followed the low foothills and soon came in sight of fires. We approached the Indians' location cautiously and in single file, and after going along in this way for a mile or so we passed through a point of timber projecting into the valley and just past that we encountered a large herd of ponies grazing upon the hillside. As we advanced very quietly, they commenced neighing and fortunately did not become alarmed, and by the time we had passed through the herd the out-

line of tepees in the willows right down there," and Mr. Sherrill pointed directly below us at the bottom of the hill, where we could readily see the Indians had a splendid vantage point, "became visible in the bottom below.

"We could hear all kinds of noises coming from there—the barking of dogs, crying of babies and the usual accompanying noises. This was about 3 o'clock in the morning. We could see the tepees and could also see that they were formed in the shape of an open V with the apex toward us, and extended along the opposite side of



brother Bunch Tom Sherrill, his right hand resting on the muzzle of ~~his~~ The trusty Winchester of his which brought the death yell from more than one Nez Perce throat that day. Note shortness of the barrel. It is a "saddle gun." In his left hand he holds trophies of the battle wrested by himself during hand-to-hand struggles.

the creek for about 200 or 300 yards from us. The space in between the camp and the foot of the slope where we were was almost entirely covered with a dense growth of willow brush, and herds of ponies were grazing in between.

"I think they wanted to surrender, as they didn't give any sign of warfare, and from the noise they made it did not look as though they were making any preparations for war, with the exception of three chiefs giving a warwhoop once in a while, and it wasn't a very pleasant sound at that. As the day broke we could distinguish many women and children among the Indians.

"We were soon assembled at the foot of the hill. There was a deep slough of water, in places waist deep, and this wound through this bottom from right to left and had to be crossed before the stream itself could be reached.

Halt.

"We were commanded to halt and were almost entirely covered with a dense fog, and while we waited we were very close to the Indian camp. We got orders not to shoot until we heard a signal, which was to be one shot, either accidental or otherwise, when we were to open fire.

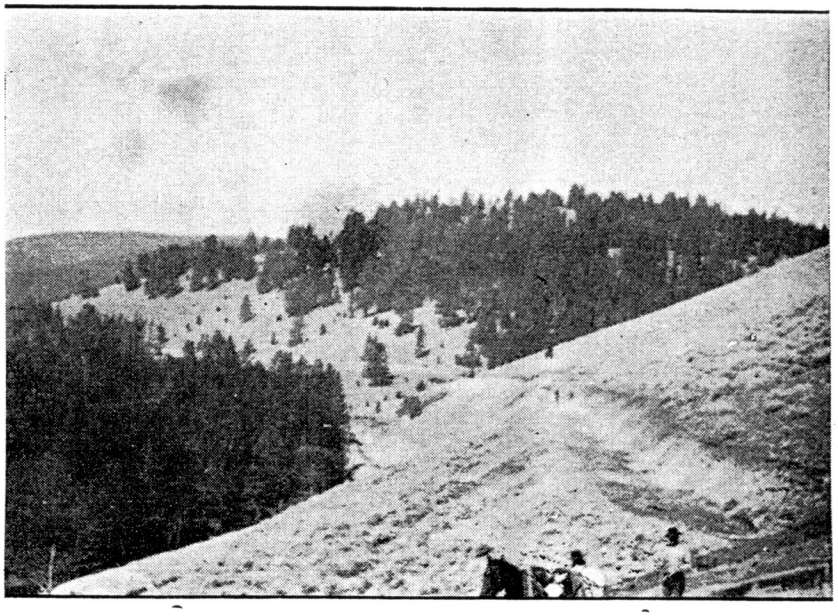
The Attack.

"While we were lying in wait, hardly breathing, one Indian herder, who could not see a group of us that had crouched down in a hollow, came straight toward us, not knowing of our location, and walked up to within six yards of us. We knew that he would be right on us in a few seconds and thus give his tribe the signal, so the only thing for us to do was to shoot him down at once, and three of us fired on him all at once. This, of course, was a signal for our men to attack, and the whole line pushed rapidly forward through the brush, Logan's company being sent in on the extreme right. A heavy fire was opened at once along the whole line of the tepees, the startled Indians rushing from them in every direction, and for a few minutes no shots were returned. Part of our company first struck the camp at the apex of the V, crossed the main stream and fired at close range into the tepees and at the Indians as they poured out of them. Many of the Indians broke for the brush and sheltered themselves behind the creek bank and opened fire on the troops as they came into the open ground."

Any one acquainted with the Indians and their methods of warfare can readily picture the scene that followed. Mr. Sherrill continued:

"The fight didn't last very long and in less than 20 minutes we had complete possession of the whole camp and we were ordered to commence destroying it. But the Indians had not yet given up the fight, and while some of us were setting fire to the tepees other rifle shots came from every direction—from the brush, the creek bank and the open prairie and the distant hills. The fire from these positions, although at long range, was by far the most deadly and it soon became evident that the Indian sharpshooters were hidden behind trees, rocks, etc., and we were at a great disadvantage as we could not compete with their methods of warfare, and we lost some

members of the command at almost every crack of the rifles from the distant hills. The only thing left for us to do was to retreat up this this hill where we would be more on the level with them, and we set about building fortifications as best we could with logs, etc., and after digging trenches in the ground just deep enough to conceal our bodies in we took our position behind trees, fallen logs, etc., and replied to the fire of the sharpshooters. I had dug a place for myself just behind a tree and thought I was protected, but all at once I felt a bullet whiz past and it just grazed the edge of my hat, and that shot was immediately followed by another one which went



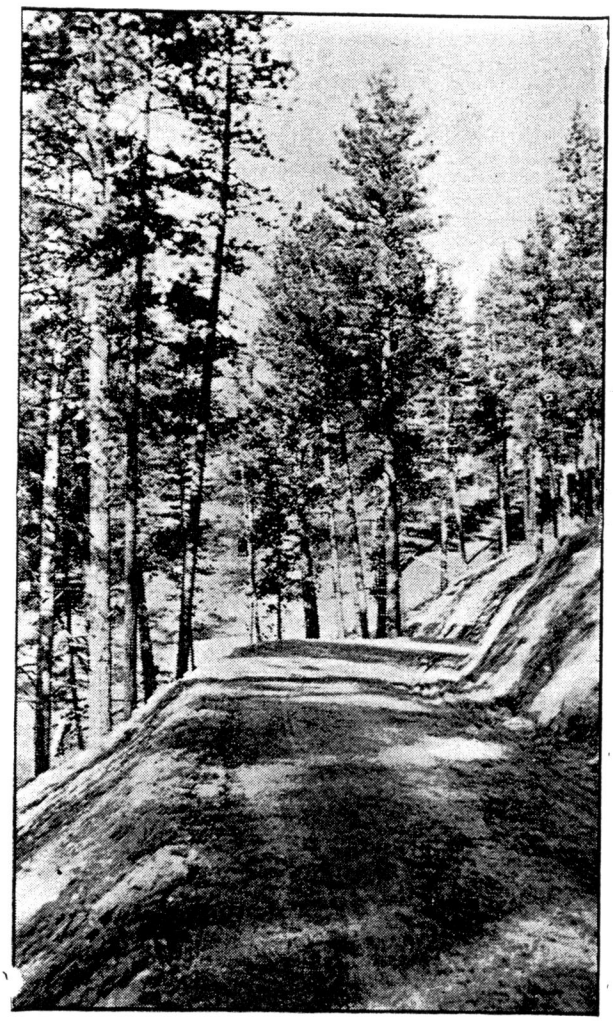
Face of the hill on which grew the twin trees in whose branches Indian sharpshooters concealed themselves and picked off many men before being discovered.

through the top of my hat, and I still have the hat to prove the story.'' Mr. Sherrill brought out the historical hat as well as the deerskin sleeve torn from the jacket of a dead Indian, and it still bears the bloodstains. Mr. Sherrill also displayed the scalplock of another Indian killed in the fight.

A Close Call.

''Well, I got pretty uncomfortable when that second bullet came so close, so I thought best to play 'possum and just stretched out flat in time to escape another bullet which struck the bottom of the tree trunk behind which I was hiding.'' Here Mr. Sherrill pointed

out the bullet hole in the tree which still stands on the hill. "A large number of our men were killed and wounded, and although the fierce fighting was over, the Indians kept up their sniping. The rest of that day was spent on both sides by taking care of the killed and wounded and bringing in as many as we could.



Where the highway is bordered with beautiful pines.

"At about 10 o'clock that morning a guide was started with a cannon and seven men up into the timber, but were fired on by about 35 Indians on the other side of the creek. The men fired the cannon,

but as the Indians outnumbered them they were soon overpowered and the Indians captured the cannon, killed one man and wounded another.

"During the night a runner was sent to the train and two others to Deer Lodge via French gulch for medical assistance and supplies. We were afraid our train had been captured and this fear was increased early the next morning on the arrival of a courier from General Howard, who said he had seen nothing of it. He had passed it in the darkness of the night without seeing it. Later in the day Captain Browning with 25 men was sent to bring it in and it reached us just before sundown, bringing us out much needed blankets and supplies, but not until we had partly consumed the flesh of Lieutenant Woodruff's horse which had been wounded on our side and killed by the Indians. The Indians gave us a parting shower of bullets about 11 o'clock that night, and that was the last we saw of them.

Indians Move On.

"We learned that the Indians moved up the Whitebird river to Whitebird, Idaho. They had about 3,000 head of horses in their camp and they had hard work rounding them up and gathering up their dead and wounded and packing up to move. They had a lot of supplies—three wagon loads of clothes, etc.—and we found out they made their next stop at Rock creek. The Indians had not been able to stay at the government reservation and had been making their way up to the right of Bannack. They had killed about six people in the upper Horse Prairie, Birch creek, and had several barrels of whiskey which they had taken away from the whites. They had been having great times along the way, and were all fixed up in their war paint and had been carrying on their war dances all along the way. We learned they were finally captured by General Miles.

Medical Aid Needed.

"During all this time our wounded had received little if any surgical attendance, as there was only one surgeon in our company and he had no supplies or equipment to care for the wounded, and we had had very little to eat during this time, also; in fact, many of us had been without food all day Thursday and did not receive food until Friday night, when all we got was coffee and hardtack. General Gibbon left Sunday morning for Deer Lodge to secure medical aid for his men, and also called for volunteers to warn the people in the vicinity. Much to the surprise of the whole company, an Englishman by the name of William (Bill) Edwards volunteered. None of us had looked with much favor on the Englishman and did not think much of his ability as a soldier, and much less suspected him of the courage he displayed by volunteering to go on such a desperate mission. There were, of course, other volunteers following

Edwards' offer, but he was selected. He started off on foot with but a single rifle and walked straight through the Indian camp to French gulch to warn the citizens there of the Indians, and when he told them what had happened they could scarcely believe him. So little had the company thought of the Englishman that he had not even been provided with a horse on which to make his trip, and went on for quite a ways, when some one on the road gave him a horse, when he proceeded to Deer Lodge.

"Billy Ryan was another chap who started out that same night for Gibbonsville pass to warn the miners and prospectors of the presence of the Indians.

Howard Delays.

"It was said that Howard could have given aid to the small company of whites sooner than he did, but that he was opposed to fighting the Indians, and he dillydallied before he sent out aid which met our men when they were part way out in search of Howard and his aid. We found out later that Howard had been acting under orders to follow the Indians out of the country, but not to fight them, while Gibbon had been told to go ahead and fight them, so you see that there were two officers that should have helped each other but couldn't very well because each was acting under orders which prevented them from working together.

"We had all kinds of guns to fight with, but the .50 caliber needle gun, breech loader, was the most popular.

"It was reported at the time of the battle that a white girl was being held by the Indians, but no one ever saw her and there was no proof as to this, but recently I dug up the leather robe of a woman, which had been richly trimmed with many beads, and right where the head or skeleton of the head should have been I found the braid of hair which I shall now show you." Mr. Sherrill went in and brought out the hair which he had found and showed it to us. It was very fine in texture and very light, probably golden at one time. "And I believe this is the hair of that white girl and she had no doubt been killed by the Indians when they had been fired upon by the whites, and had no doubt buried her body right here on the hill."

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