

AN UNPUBLISHED PAPER
ON THE MILK CREEK BATTLE OF SEPTEMBER 29th,1879
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A beautiful sight greeted U.S. Army Major Tipton T. Thornburgh and his three companies of cavalry as they rode into the Milk Creek Valley on that fateful day of September 29, 1879. In the valley, the browns, reds, golds, and yellows of early autumn were stunning. To their right, the stark, as yet unnamed, Thornburgh Mountains rise 900 feet above the valley floor, giving one a slight sense of foreboding. The White River Expedition's path lay straight ahead to the southwest, up the gentle rolling hills and ridges to Yellow Jacket Pass, down hill through Coal Creek Canyon, and then the flat open country to the final destination of their mission: the White River Ute Reservation. Located in Powell Park, it sits approximately four miles southwest of present day Meeker, Colorado.

The scenery Thornburgh beheld and the knowledge that their long march from Fort Fred Steele, Wyoming Territory was nearing an end, may have helped to ease his anxiety about the delicate task that lay before him and his command. The Major was aware that the Utes had scouted for General Crook during the Rosebud Battle and was also aware that in the past the White River Utes held no hostilities towards the United States Government. But, if Thornburgh had known he was living his last hour on earth—well, what would any man do if he knew his end was near?

I will tell the story of the Milk Creek Battle through the historical records, and will show how the use of metal detecting equipment proves and disproves the aforementioned records. The Milk Creek Battle, like many other obscure Indian War battles, is known by only a few diligent students of western history. I find this obscurity somewhat surprising given the facts of the battle: (1) the battle raged on for six days, making it one of the longest Indian war battles on record, (2) the commanding officer's death in the opening hour of conflict, (3) the gallantry and heroics of the officers and enlisted men, (4) in particular, the conduct of Lt. Samuel Cherry, (5) the reinforcement of the besieged White River Expedition by Capt. Francis Dodge and his fearless Buffalo Soldiers, (6) the scout, Charley Lowery Grafton, who died twice, (7) the lifting of the siege by the illustrious Col. Wesley Merritt after a grueling forced march of 170 miles in less than three days¹, and, of course, (8) the sheer amount of trenches the encircled troopers dug to find cover from the pelting rain of lead the Utes delivered from their ridge top positions². It is estimated that the trench works covered a 3000 square foot area. I have recovered artifacts as deep as five feet below the surface of the battlefield. A trooper may have felt it was beneath him to maneuver a shovel, but with 44 caliber Henry bullets impacting on all sides, I'm sure the proudest horseman became a most sincere digger.³ The facts I have gleaned through the historical records, coupled with the artifacts I have recovered on the battle site, convinces me that the Milk Creek Battle (also known as the Thornburgh Battle) is one of the most interesting of all Indian War confrontations.

¹ Col. Wesley Merritt – Marching Cavalry, p. 78.

² Mark E. Miller – Hollow Victory, p. 85.

³ Dawson & Skiff – The Ute War, p. 32.

The historical accounts surrounding the causes of the Milk Creek Battle and the simultaneous massacre of the Indian Agent, Nathan C. Meeker, and his eleven employees, are well recorded in several books. Marshall Sprague's excellent book, "Massacre, The Tragedy at White River," tells the story in depth. Also, Fred H. Werner's fine book, "The Story of the Meeker Massacre and Thornburgh Battle, September 29, 1879," explores the causes of the conflict. Dawson and Skiffs' book, "The Ute War." Dawson and Skiff were journalists. In my opinion, a lot of their writing is inaccurate and puzzling. However, a few accurate accounts emerge from their narrative. M. Wilson Rankin's book, "Reminiscences of Frontier Days," is the most important primary source account. As with much of our American history, the true causes of the Ute War of 1879 have been clouded by revisions in our modern era. Meeker, and to a lesser extent, Thornburgh, had all blame lay at their feet. Much criticism has been directed at Nathan Meeker for his stewardship of the White River Utes. Most historical accounts agree that Nathan Meeker was considered a utopian and was ignorant of Ute Indian ways⁴. However, he did not deserve to die for his efforts in helping the White River Utes to assimilate into the inevitable tide of manifest destiny. In their attempt to blame Major Thornburgh, modern scholars claim that when he and his command crossed the reservation boundary, he overstepped his authority, thus causing the battle that ensued. However, considering Major Thornburgh's unblemished, exemplary military career, this author strongly disagrees with their assertions because he was as solid and competent an

⁴ Marshal Sprague – Massacre, The Tragedy at Milk Creek.

officer and gentlemen that the American warrior class has ever produced. In fact, the Major's orders were explicit.

Headquarters Department of the Platte
Assistant Adjutant General's Office
Fort Omaha, Nebraska, September 16, 1879

Commanding Officer, Fort Fred Steele, Wyoming

Under orders from the General of the Army. You will at once move with sufficient number of troops to arrest such Indian chiefs belonging to White River Agency as are insubordinate, and you will enforce obedience to the requirements of agent Meeker. You will afford him such protection as the exigency of the case requires and hold the ringleaders as prisoners until an investigation can be had. You are authorized to suspend orders for movement of "E" company, third cavalry, and to use this company if necessary. Report receipt of this by telegraph and if you require additional troops.

By Command of General Crook
(signed) R. Williams, A.A General

General Crook's orders to Major Thornburgh never instruct him to provoke or cause offensive maneuvers against the White River Utes. The White River Expedition's mission was simply to restore order at the government agency so it could lawfully administer government affairs to the White River Utes. The head of the Utes, Chief Ouray, seemed to have little control over the White River band. In spite of Chief Ouray's brilliant diplomatic negotiating skills on behalf of the five tribes of the greater Ute nation, Douglas, Jack, Colorow, Johnson, and many others by their actions and deeds, destroyed the Ute people's last hope for a peaceful and productive integration into the ever advancing American tide of westward migration. Several primary source accounts mention numerous Ute trepidations committed in the months and weeks leading up to the

sad day of September 29, 1879. The White River Utes started numerous forest fires⁵. When confronted by the authorities with eyewitness accounts of their fire-starting, the White River band would exclaim that they were only trying to flush the deer and elk out of the forest and fields. This author conservatively estimates that at least 500,000 acres burned in a ten-month period just prior to September 29, 1879. In just one fire, which I call the Danforth fire, approximately 112,000 acres burned 20 miles deep into the remote Danforth Hills. (The White River band started this fire on the afternoon of September 29, the first day of battle). Numerous instances where Indian bucks intruded upon homesteads, usually when the man of the family was absent, demanding that the unlucky settler's wife and children cook a meal for these most unwelcome visitors⁶. Colorow was said to be the most prolific perpetrator of this crime. He carried a bulk of 300 pounds. In my opinion, he most likely ate a lot of extorted biscuits and gravy⁷. The settler's wife, for her terror-ridden efforts, received in thanks the grief of watching the departing Indians run off the family's stock and watching hayfields being put to the match. Rankin's book gives several accounts where White River Ute's charged lone settlers and miners, scaring them into running away. The Indians could then enjoy the chase of the horrified, outnumbered, and hapless victim. Rankin writes of one occasion in 1875, where Joe Collom was making one of his first trips to the agency with mail. On the way down Coal Creek Canyon, he was surprised by a band of Utes. Joe held his ground and drew his revolver. Chief Johnson called out from beyond pistol range,

⁵ Dawson & Skiff – The Ute War, p. 59.

⁶ Robert Emmitt – The Last War Trail, p. 86.

⁷ Marshall Sprague – Massacre, The Tragedy at White River, p. 104.

“White man no scare.” To which Joe Collom replied, “Some white men will kill you if you make a practice of that kind of joking.”⁸

As if the trepidations on the settlers were not serious enough, the state of affairs at the White River Ute Agency was spinning out of control. The White River Ute’s aggressive and belligerent resistance to any change in their lifestyle not only made Meeker’s job untenable, as it did the previous agent Danforth⁹, but also caused the mayhem and murder which the Utes wrought upon the agency employees on September 29, 1879. In the aftermath of the Ute war, the U.S. Government absolved the Utes from any punishment for the Milk Creek fight. The army considered it a fair fight between combatants. Regarding the kidnapping and massacre of the white women and children, the government could not excuse those crimes. Out of all the men guilty of participating in the massacre, only one man, Douglas, a Ute sub-chief, was punished. He spent less than a year in Fort Leavenworth Prison. Upon release, he developed a dangerous persecution complex and drank heavily. In 1885, a member of his own tribe shot him after a drunken spree in the Town of Meeker.¹⁰ Of course, the real punishment was meted out upon the entire Ute nation through the abrogation of the existing treaties and the break up of the White River Ute Reservation. I believe that the cold hard truth of the Ute War of 1879, is that the White River Utes nearly ruined the greater Ute people and surely contributed to the demise of their most able and intelligent leader, the great Chief

⁸ M. Wilson Rankin – Reminiscences of Frontier Days, p. 48.

⁹ Marshall Sprague – Massacre, The Tragedy at White River, p. 134.

¹⁰ Marshall Sprague – Massacre, The Tragedy at White River, p. 324-325.

Ouray.¹¹ To the student of the battle of Milk Creek, I raise this question: Could the Ute War have been avoided if Chief Ouray exercised firmer control over the White River Utes?

Being a student of the Indian Wars since childhood, I made the decision in the summer of 1999 to follow my instincts. I would conduct historical research and investigations on an actual battlefield site. I chose the Milk Creek Battle of 1879. My reasons were multifaceted. First and foremost was the fact that the battlefield currently lies on private property. I adopted this criteria because of the federal laws against nonprofessional research on government land. These narrow-minded laws severely limit countless discoveries that could be made by students of history.¹² Secondly, based upon the historical records, I was interested in finding a site where I would be confident of recovering a few artifacts, at least.¹³ The Milk Creek Battle certainly filled this criteria, especially because of its six-day duration. Lastly, I was looking for a site with a somewhat close proximity to the Denver area. The Milk Creek site, at 250 miles from Denver, was my final choice.

My first trip was in mid-May 2000. Surmounting the crest of Yellow Jacket Pass, the Thornburgh Mountains and the Milk Creek drainage came into view. The winter had been mild and the spring wet, leaving the benches and bottoms the greenest of greens. This, I knew, was a very good sign as metal detecting equipment works at its best when

¹¹ Robert Emmitt – *The Last War Trail*, p. 251-253.

¹² J. Grenell – M. Brown – *Rocky Mountain News*, Feb. 12, 2001, Article: Public Economy Research Council.

¹³ Joe Rankin – *Reminiscences of Frontier Days*, p. 67.

the ground is moist. I drove directly to the monument site, which is situated on a knoll overlooking the bench, where the troopers rallied to their makeshift barricade. The actual site of the barricade is not marked. However, I had a good idea of its location from my studies of Fred H. Werner's overlooked and underrated book "The Story of the Meeker Massacre and Thornburgh Battle of September 29, 1879." While pondering what to do next, a pick-up truck pulled up to the gate of the ranch. Saying a quick prayer to bolster my chances of receiving permission to enter the site, I ran for my truck and within several minutes approached Pete Etchart, the boss of the Yellow Jacket Ranch. Providence could not have shown its light any brighter on me by my meeting Pete, and later, his gracious wife, Parna, that fine spring day. Without Pete and Parna's help and support, this article could not have been published. Suffice it to say, I owe the Etcharts a debt of gratitude that I can never repay. I introduced myself to Pete, gave him my business card, and then attempted to convey to him my interest and enthusiasm in the Milk Creek Battle. Pete smiled as he granted permission to enter the site, exclaiming that the owners of the ranch, the Carrolls, had kindly allowed others on the site through the years. After instructing me to close the gates as I passed through, Pete, the Basque-born quintessential sheep man, wished me luck and pointed to the bench where he thought the barricade was located.

Slowly driving toward the bench, I noticed a dozen vultures perched in the limbs of a small copse of Cottonwoods. I wondered if this might have been an omen. Crossing Milk Creek, I veered right, up a ravine, and onto the bench. The historical records all locate the barricade approximately 400 to 500 yards from the Milk Creek crossing. Slowly passing through a herd of ewes and lambs, I unknowingly drove over the

barricade area. Circling east and north of the bench, I parked near a low knoll. Gearing up, I tested and adjusted my detector and proceeding to work south toward the creek. I hoped to discover the barricade area soon by working a zigzag pattern. After closing two-thirds the width of the bench, I received my first return signal. Pinpointing the exact location of my target, I knelt down before the twelve-inch circle I was about to excavate. I drew my digging knife and began probing the circle's perimeter. To my gratification, the ground was wet, yet firm; almost like a cake. This, of course, makes the recovery of artifacts easier and, therefore, lessens the risk of damage. After about five minutes of careful digging at the 3-inch level, I made eye contact with my first Milk Creek Battle 44 caliber Henry impact bullet. I was ecstatic with my discovery, to say the least—it was like learning to ride a bike and your first kiss rolled into one. Surveying my position on the bench, I knew I was nearing the barricade area. Grateful for this first unearthing, I continued the zigzag search pattern toward the Creek. Within twenty feet of the Henry bullet, I received another signal where I quickly recovered another 44-caliber impact bullet. Proceeding ever to the south, my equipment strongly announced a target within ten feet of the last. I knew from the strength of the signal that this specimen was larger than a bullet and, again I pinpointed the target. (Pinpointing is a technique used by professional operators to precisely locate a target, therefore rendering the traditional method of random, large-scale excavation, on sites such as Milk Creek, obsolete.) I began to probe and dig at dead center of the twelve-inch target area where two-inches below the surface the first Springfield, Model 1873, 45-caliber cartridge case revealed itself to me after its 121-year descent through the mysteries of bioturbation.¹⁴ My insides

¹⁴ E. Dixon – Bone, Boats and Bison.

were doing cartwheels as I grasped and held this most precious cavalry-related artifact. Pondering my find, I visually scanned my current position and noted that I was now 50 to 60 yards from the southern edge of the bench. The bench abruptly drops 15 feet to the flood plain of Milk Creek, with Milk Creek itself, ox bowing 75 yards further south. Based upon the historical record, I now knew I was on the threshold of the barricade area where Lt. Paddock, with Company D 5th Cavalry, John Gordon's wagon train, and the civilian teamsters occupied this outer area when the wagon train first came under direct fire. The Utes had outflanked Payne, Lawson and Cherry's forward skirmish lines. (I would later find surface evidence of John Gordon's twelve wagons lying 30 to 50 yards due east of my location.) According to several sources, the army had 16 to 20 wagons and their teams, requiring plenty of room to maneuver. Having collected over four dozen artifacts from this northeast sector throughout the 2000 season, I believe this area saw the first fighting at the still forming wagon barricade. Searching slowly, I recovered six more artifacts within 15 to 20 yards of my pattern. I was now 30 to 40 yards from the edge of the bench and about to enter the barricade of the Milk Creek Battle.

The barricade is a target rich environment. Over my next thirteen research trips, encompassing 44 days at the site, I recovered 700 specimens in the barricade area and, of course, the honor of the inadvertent discovery of October 22, 2000.¹⁵ The remainder of my first day was spent searching for the outer perimeter of the north and east sides of the barricade. The abrupt drop to the south constitutes the perimeter in that direction. A tally of the day's discoveries surely exceeded my wildest expectations for I had recovered

¹⁵ Author's Note: On October 22, 2000, I discovered the skeletal remains of two cavalry troopers who perished in the Battle of Milk Creek on September 29, 1879.

eight 45 caliber Springfield cartridge cases, eleven 44 caliber Henry impact bullets, three buckles, two of which were horse tack related, and numerous nails and tin can fragments. While cleaning dirt from the inside of the cartridge cases, I was further amazed at discovering cardboard wads inside two of the cases. These one-inch long, by 3/8 inch diameter, hollow, cardboard wads were used to wrap and enclose the 55 grains of powder that sent the lethal 405 grain 45 caliber bullet on its deadly mission.¹⁶ My best guess on how these wads could still be in tact and not crumbled with deterioration after 121 years, is that perhaps the cases, when ejected from the troopers carbines, landed with the open end down. Or, perhaps, the subsequent plowing of the pasture turned the cases open end down. (This author is aware of at least two such occasions.) Of course, the scant precipitation at the battle site certainly helped to preserve these and other specimens. One of the three buckles was in excellent shape, and not horse-tack related. It is approximately one inch wide by 3/4 inch high and made from 1/8 inch diameter, round brass rod. I later identified this buckle to be from a trooper's Pattern 1874 Haversack.¹⁷ As the day was overcome by night, I decided to pack up my gear and call it a day. And, what a day it had been.

As a boy of 6 or 7, I viewed my first cavalry movie with awe and wonder. From the excitement and rousing action of those great western movies, I developed a keen interest in the true history of the great Indian Wars. And now, to be standing on the very ground occupied by the gallant troopers of the White River Expedition, filled me with gratitude. The months of reading and rereading the primary source accounts and

¹⁶ Ernest L. Reedstrom – Bugles, Banners and War Bonnets, p. 25.

¹⁷ Douglas McChristian – The U.S. Army in the West, p. 206.

numerous historical articles, the expense of the detecting equipment, and the practice required to be a competent operator, was greatly rewarded. It had been such a fortunate first day. When I was nearly completed packing, the loud and excited bleating of about 100 ewes and their lambs startled me. I gazed out over the 200 yards to their position and, in the fading light, caught site of a surly coyote slinking up the ridge, no doubt frightened away by the approach of Pete's ever-watchful Great Pyrenees guard dogs. These dogs are massive, with the male weighing at least 150 pounds and standing a full 48 inches to the top of his huge head. While most likely no match for a large bear and certainly no match for the feared mountain lion, these dogs could easily take down a coyote. By October 1, 2000, I learned from Pete that he had lost over 80 head of stock from predation. Such is reality on a working ranch in northwestern Colorado. I made a mental note to renew my small game license and ask Pete's permission to bring along my trusty Remington BDL 30.06 with Leopold 3x9 scope on future trips. I too would guard the herd.

The second day at Milk Creek dawned warm and clear. I first drove to the monument overlooking the battlefield and then walked to the north boundary of the fenced, one-acre site. I gazed out over the tranquil almost surreal valley. In the creek bottoms, on the bench, and up the northern hillside were over 1000 sheep. Every few seconds the quiet air was punctuated by their bleating. After surveying what I reckoned to be the location and dimensions of the barricade, I decided to search the Utes ridge top positions to the north and east. While walking back to the truck, I spotted Pete heading for the gate. Meeting him, I proceeded to inform him of the good fortune I had the day before. Displaying the artifacts, he smiled kindly and congratulated me. I noted that he

and his intelligent work dog, Tommy, had a long day of ranching ahead, so I thanked him again and opened and closed the gate so we could both pass into the ranch. I drove as I had done the day before to the northeast side of the bench and parked in front of a knoll I would later name, Earring Knoll. It was becoming a beautiful spring day. Gearing up, I routinely tested and adjusted my detector. With all systems go, I started to the east. I planned to surmount the ridge there and then follow the ridgeline north to the saddle, which connects with the hogback running east/west. This hogback looks directly down onto the bench. Common sense points to this ridge top as a main position for the Utes during the six-day battle.¹⁸ Fred H. Werner's book mentions Indian rock forts with firing loopholes on the ridge top. As the crow flies, I judged the distance from this position (which I now call Sharpshooters Ridge) to the center of the barricade area to be approximately 600 yards, depending upon your east-west location on the ridge. Later research at the site points to the conclusion that all the cavalry, and probably most of the White River Utes, were killed in action on the first day of the battle. I surmised that the distances between combatants were too great for the Henrys, Winchesters, and Springfields used in the battle. Of course, the fighting on the 29th of September was without cover, more fluid, and general skirmish line-type fighting. The shots of the Utes from their 200 foot high, 600 yard distant positions onto the barricade, probably were nothing more accurate than well-placed pot shots, notwithstanding the Utes' marksmanship brought to bear upon the horses and mules in the first two days. The troopers were well entrenched on the second day of battle, as their trench works grew deeper and more extensive as the hours of siege wore on. The cavalrymen return fire was

¹⁸ Fred H. Werner – The Story of the Meeker Massacre, back cover.

probably even less effective than the Utes. I ponder what kind of energy the 405 grain 45 caliber Springfield bullet maintains at these distances and elevations. Perhaps some onsite ballistics testing would settle that question.

Half way up the east ridge overlooking the old Milk Creek Road, I received the first signal of the day. After ten minutes of careful excavation a 45-caliber Springfield bullet was unearthed. Continuing upward, I reached the ridgeline to immediately receive another signal. Much to my chagrin, I discovered a round aluminum tag with the word “Squire 79” inscribed on the side. I quickly recalled from Werner’s book that a Mr. Squire owned the Yellow Jacket Ranch during Fred’s fieldwork. Resuming the search on the backside of the ridge, I kept moving higher. Minutes became an hour until I was at the saddle to Sharpshooter’s Ridge.¹⁹ The search up this east ridge failed to expose any Indian firing positions or additional return fire by the troopers. More research needs to be conducted on this east ridgeline perimeter to determine the extent of Ute occupation during the battle. Undaunted, I started down the saddle to gain the more promising ridge top positions to the north. Where the dropping ridge meets the upside of the saddle, I noticed the ground surface becoming quite rocky. I peeled my eyes to focus for surface artifacts. Visions of piles of Henry cases lying on the ground danced in my head. Over the next two-hour ascent and decent over and down the full length of Sharpshooter’s Ridge I failed to locate any evidence of the battle. I know at least several thousand rounds were fired from this ridge during the six-day conflict, and thought my colleagues in years past recovered the vast majority of Indian artifacts still on the surface. It was

¹⁹ Author’s Note: Sharpshooter’s Ridge is where I believe the largest group of Utes took up firing positions during the battle.

also possible that perhaps Fred and many others with modern detection equipment unearthed the remainder. Continued research, with a systematic multi-operator approach, may, in all likelihood, uncover evidence of the Utes firing from Sharpshooter's Ridge.

From the west end of the bench, I made a beeline for much needed food and drink. Following lunch, I decided to search Earring Knoll 50 yards to the north.²⁰ According to Rankin²¹, the Utes mounted one last charge on the barricade, at dusk, on the 29th of September. I believe that behind this knoll, approximately 300 yards from the barricade, an estimated eight or ten mounted Utes massed, and then charged the barricade. Rankin writes they stampeded and gathered about 30 head of horses and mules on the creek bottom. Dawson and Skiff also mention this charge at sundown. A further indication that the Utes held this position, is the relative close proximity to the barricade. At 250 to 300 yards, the knoll must have been a tempting firing position for the young bucks who, in their first battle, were looking to establish themselves as brave warriors in their tribesmen's eyes. After fruitlessly searching the south-facing front of the knoll, I shifted to the backside of the knoll to search for evidence of the Utes occupation of the area. After 30 minutes of searching, my detector signaled a target very near the apex of the knoll. The ground was very rocky, so I used my hands to remove the rocks and pebbles. At three inches below the surface, an iron object one inch long, resembling a fishing weight, was unearthed. Puzzled as to the identification of this specimen, I bagged and tagged it and then spent another half hour zigzagging the area.

²⁰ Author's Note: I refer to this knoll as Earring Knoll because I recovered what I believe to be an Indian earring near the apex of the knoll.

²¹ M. Wilson Rankin – Reminiscences of Frontier Days, p. 70.

For some reason, I couldn't stop thinking about the iron object. I knew I had seen this, or an object very similar to it in my research, but where I could not recall.²² Perplexed, I decided to suspend the search here and return to the barricade area.

After arriving at the barricade area with my truck and gear, I quickly checked my equipment and began working a zigzag pattern where I had left off the previous day. Several minutes passed before a return signal, loud and clear, greeted me at my new location. Again, pinpointing the target, I attempted to employ another technique frequently used by old-timers searching for coins. The technique uses a simple probe to locate a target. The probes resemble a screwdriver, but it has a brass shank and a rounded point, so as not to damage the target. To observe an expert using this technique is very impressive, however, I found this method impractical for my work. Considering how moist the ground was, I decided to try yet another technique. I proceeded to cut a twelve-inch circle, six inches deep, around the perimeter of the target. I then removed the entire plug from the ground. This was easily accomplished. Putting the plug to the side of the hole, I ran my equipment over the hole. There was no response from the detector, so I put the coil over the plug and located the target in the plug. Kneeling down, I broke the plug into three parts with my hands and proceeded to locate the target in a grapefruit sized plug of earth. I grasped the plug and proceeded to crumble the dirt away with my hands. I was quickly rewarded with another trooper 45 caliber Springfield cartridge case. Realizing how expedient this retrieval method was and, moreover, how the risk of damage to the artifact was further lessened, I resolved to use this technique to recover

²² Fred H. Werner – The Story of the Meeker Massacre. A photo of Colorow on p. 122 shows an earring in his right ear that strongly resembles the object I recovered.

future finds.²³ While returning the dirt to the hole, I discovered a bone insitu in a plug of earth. Carefully removing the bone, which resembled a horseshoe, my thoughts returned to the historical records. Dawson and Skiff's book "The Ute War" contains a wealth of references to the terrible slaughter visited upon the army's horses and mules. If one can imagine a makeshift wagon corral containing approximately 150 able, wounded, and dead men, seeking shelter from a deluge of Ute lead, amongst 300 panic-stricken, wounded, and dying horses and mules, then one can see what havoc and slaughter is. The animals could see, hear, and smell the carnage all around them. The soldiers' horses and mules became the proverbial sitting ducks. I recalled a poignant, yet sad incident involving a trooper and his beloved horse. The horse, upon being wounded, did not succumb to the panic-drive gyrations like the others. Instead, the horse came hobbling to the trench where its trooper was ensconced and looked down at the trooper as if to say, "help me for God's sake". The trooper, being too distraught to deliver the coup de grace, pleaded to a trench mate "I can't do it. By God, I can't do it. You'll have to finish him Hank." Hank, waiting his chance, as the horse turned, put a ball right in behind his left ear. That night, the horse was hauled outside the corral like the rest.²⁴ I have come to see the Utes' killing of the army stock for what it is, quid pro quo. There are numerous instances of the army killing Indian ponies. With this doctrine, the enemy was deprived of mobility and transport. To my recollection, the Milk Creek Battle was the first time that the tables were turned, where the Indians visited this doctrine upon the army. Yet another unique event in the battle of Milk Creek. Having no knowledge of equine

²³ Author's Note: Upon assessing extraction damage to my entire 800 piece specimen collection at the end of the 2000 season, I discovered that less than one percent of the artifacts exhibited any damage resulting from their retrieval.

²⁴ Dawson & Skiff – The Ute War, p. 39.

anatomy, I bagged and tagged the bone. I would later identify this specimen as a coffin bone. Thinking the bone to be a rare find, I felt fortunate to have recovered it. Little did I know that by season's end I would discover nearly 200 equine bones, including a most rare find; a nearly complete horse skull co-discovered with Bill Stewart, the cattle rancher of the Yellow Jacket Ranch.

Recovering artifacts literally every five feet, I worked the north and west outer perimeter of the barricade until reaching the fifteen-foot drop to Milk Creek several hours later. From the location of artifacts recovered on this outer perimeter area, I now had the rough size and shape of the corral. Its size roughly corresponds to the historical record. On a later trip to the site, I staked out the outline of the barricade with connecting blaze orange marker tape. I did it to mark the site for a school group from Craig, Colorado and, also, to photograph the marked outline from the 400-yard distant monument site. Unfortunately my equipment was unable to focus on the one-inch wide tape.

While I was now located on the southwest side of the barricade, my thoughts returned to the first day of battle. Somewhere on this southwest end stood the entrance to the corral. Rankin writes that Wagon master McKinsty, while arranging the wagons, was killed as Payne's force rushed in under a strong Ute barrage. Two of his men were wounded and one horse killed near the entrance to the corral. All was in turmoil within the barricade.²⁵ The entrance must have been located on this southwest side where the forward troopers were slowly fighting their way back to the relative safety of the wagon

²⁵ Joe Rankin – Reminiscences of Frontier Days, p. 70.

corral. As Rankin writes, Payne's command was first in, followed by hard fighting Joe Lawson's Company B, and lastly followed by Lt. Samuel Cherry's brave and determined rear guards. These troops were returning from the initial skirmish area. This area, approximately 1-1/4 miles southwest towards Yellow Jacket Pass, saw the first shot of the Milk Creek Battle. I would make several future trips solely to research this area. More on this in future writings. Returning to the pandemonium in the wagon corral, poor Lt. Paddock could not have picked, or fate predisposed, a worse spot to form a defensive barricade. The barricade was entirely exposed on all sides and elevations. Were it not for Capt. Payne's assumption of command, Capt. Lawson's steady and courageous fight on the ridge and subsequent orderly withdrawal, and last, but not least, the stubborn professionally executed rear guard action, so ably lead by Lt. Samuel Cherry, the Battle of Milk Creek may have been a major disaster for the U.S. Army.

Lt. Cherry distinguished himself above and beyond the call of duty during and after the first day of battle. As I wrote at the beginning of this article, his actions merit particular attention. I submit to the reader this letter, written and signed by thirteen noncommissioned officers present during the battle of Milk Creek.²⁶

2nd Lt. Samuel A. Cherry, 5th Cavalry

Sir:

We, the undersigned noncommissioned officers of Company E, 3rd Cavalry and Companies D and F, 5th Cavalry, desire to express to you, our admiration of the gallant and praiseworthy conduct displayed by you in the recent engagement with the Ute Indians at Milk Creek on September 29, 1879. To a brave man, bravery needs no better or higher reward than the consciousness of duty well performed. But, in

²⁶ Fred H. Werner – The Story of the Meeker Massacre, p. 125.

order that you should fully understand the feeling of approbation that exists among the men who fought with you, we take this method of tendering to you our hardy approval. You do not need this—you have already a page in the history of our country and endeared yourself to the men, who witnessed your noble conduct, and who feel that to a great extent it is to your coolness and sagacity, they owe their lives. The party that accompanied you on your dangerous mission to check the enemy and cover the retreat knew full well that the chances of life and death were equally paired and that one false move would turn the scale far down on the side of death. But, you did not make that move. With unflinching courage you held the Indians in check, though their bullets were striking your men from every side, and by your bearing, nerved even the wounded to fight to the last—and when the retreat was safely made and your services at that point no longer necessary—with seventeen of the twenty men composing your party, wounded, you accomplished your own retreat, fighting your way inch by inch, without leaving one of your wounded on the field. Such conduct is beyond all praise—no words of ours could express to you the respect we feel for the man who displayed such courage. But if in the future it should be your lot to lead men onto some great feat of daring, as long as there remains a man who fought with you at Milk River, you will find ready and willing hands to share your glory or your death. But this is not all:—when the brunt of the fighting was over, when each man looked about him and saw the fearful destruction wrought—when each heart for the moment quailed at the thought of what the morrow might bring—when the excitement of the battle had past and the reaction had brought despair in its stead, you infused a new spirit in the hearts of the despairing men, and by the force of your example led them to make still greater efforts towards their own preservation and defense. In conclusion, we have only to add that we express the sentiments of the companies we represent and are proud to be permitted to do honor to one whom honor is richly due,—to a soldier among soldiers, a man among men.

Very respectfully your obedient servants,
1st Sgt. E.P. Grimes, Company F, 5th Cavalry

(Thirteen other noncommissioned officers signed, under the signature of Sgt. Grimes.)

The writer of this most eloquent letter, praising Lt. Cherry's gallantry, was also a very brave man. Sgt. Edward P. Grimes, Company F, 5th Cavalry, was awarded the Medal of Honor for voluntarily going for a supply of ammunition, while under heavy fire

at nearly point blank range. The skirmishers of old war dog, Capt. Lawson's Company E, 3rd Cavalry, were nearly out of cartridges and being pressed hard on three sides by the advancing Utes. The historical records indicate that all of the officers of the White River Expedition displayed coolness and courage under fire. However, Lt. Cherry stood out above the rest for he was in the thick of battle from the initial contact with the Utes. The Utes' opening shots were directed at him and he was probably the last man to gain the barricade and the safety within. As Grimes' letter states: "with seventeen of the twenty men composing your party wounded, you accomplished your own retreat, fighting your war, inch by inch, without leaving one of your wounded on the field." The flat Milk Creek bottom, where the retreat took place, is devoid of cover. Only through Lt. Cherry's cool, disciplined leadership was this feat of arms accomplished. Lt. Cherry's selfless heroism first manifested itself at West Point, where he pushed a classmate away from a falling cannon taking the full brunt of the falling piece. Upon recovering, he limped for the rest of his life. Endearingly like George Armstrong Custer and this author, Lt. Cherry was a dog lover, having brought his greyhound, Frank, along on the White River Expedition. Frank was no exception to the horrific animal casualty list. While returning at dusk from watering in Milk Creek, Frank was mistaken for an infiltrating Ute and sadly had a paw shot off by a trooper sentry. Upon limping back to his master's trench, Samuel said goodbye to his beloved dog and ended his misery.²⁷

²⁷ Dawson & Skiff – The Ute War, p. 39.

Two years later, Lt. Samuel Cherry would die a death even more tragic than Major Thornburgh. This man embodies the finest traditions of the American warrior class. I will continue to research and write about Lt. Cherry's military career.

History fading, coming back to the present, I marveled at the setting sun to the west. I somehow knew in the back of my mind that what I was to do at Milk Creek may be one of my life's missions. I believed that fine spring day that my mission was made apparent. A friend calls it "serving the higher good," others call it "following your instincts," but I call it my mission to unearth the battle of Milk Creek. Resolving to return the next weekend, I resigned myself to packing up my gear and readying myself for the long 250-mile trip home. On a lark, I could not help but make one quick search ten feet behind my pick-up truck. I was immediately apprised of a target. Employing the plug method, another 44 caliber Henry impact bullet was recovered. Upon scanning the eight-inch deep, twelve-inch diameter, circular recovery hole, the equipment continued to register a target. Slicing to the sixteen-inch deep level, a rusted hatchet head materialized. The specimen was lying flat and offered a large surface area to reflect the transmitting signals of my detector. Now, preparing to depart, I made a quick count of the artifacts recovered on this, my first trip to the Milk Creek site. Forty-six was the tally, including the hatchet head. Considering past explorations at the site by a professor and students from a local college (who, to my understanding, conducted traditional archeological digs over a number of years), Fred H. Werner and his work, the generous, hard-digging, father-son team, George and Tom Ledoit, who donated several hundred

relics they recovered to the White River History Museum, and many others through the years, the number of specimens greatly exceeded my expectations.²⁸

Driving amongst the herds, winding through the middle gate, I stopped at the old school house located near the ranch entrance. Viewing the barricade from the schoolyard, I was very honored to be this close to the battle of Milk Creek and the cavalymen of the U.S. Army. My in-depth historical research and on-site exploration had given me a clearer insight into the battle.

Modern filmmakers have attempted to distort the truth about the U.S. Army's conduct during the Indian War period. In popular culture, the American public is subjected to movies such as "Dances with Wolves," with its misleading portrayal of the U.S. Army as drunken sadists without honor or respect. Some say this trend started with the 1976 movie "Little Big Man." This sometimes funny, yet totally inaccurate fantasy about Custer's last stand, features a babbling, nearly unhinged Custer on the hill in his final moments. There is no question that some U.S. soldiers committed atrocities throughout the long Indian War period, but these were the exceptions, rather than the rule. Considering the brutal, bitter, no quarter asked or received fighting the Indian Wars manifested, the abysmal living conditions and meager pay for both officers and men, the U.S. Army showed a remarkable amount of restraint in dealing with the native tribes. What many people forget about the U.S. Military's role in the Indian Wars is that its policies were continually undermined by the Commission of Indian Affairs. As many

²⁸ Author's Note: The total specimens collected during the 2000 season was 832 pieces.

astute officers wrote, “how can one branch of our government arm the Indians while we are ordered to make war on these same Indians?” The Milk Creek Battle was no exception. Major Thornburgh’s orders were clear. The White River Expedition did not come to make war. Major Thornburgh’s response to Joe Rankin's advice to commence firing upon the Utes at the beginning of the battle clearly reflects the commander’s intent. Rankin said to Thornburgh, “Fire on the redskins. It is our only show.” To this request, Thornburgh replied, “My God! I dare not Joe. My orders are positive.”²⁹ Shortly after these words were spoken, Major Tipton T. Thornburgh would make the ultimate sacrifice doing his duty, as would twelve other brave troopers of the White River Expedition.

These writings and my research are dedicated to the twelve brave men who never left the battlefield. As a friend of the author and a humble active duty paratrooper in the U.S. Army writes about the battle of Milk Creek, “Eleven Medals of Honor were awarded for this engagement. These soldiers deserve the highest recognition and honors. They are a part of our great army’s history.” Surely they had family and friends who loved and mourned for them. A few children perhaps, crying for their fathers. Grieving wives, mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers, left with only memories. While these men still man the trenches in their lonely vigil upon that windswept battlefield, those who care about these men will take heart in the knowledge that they are gone but not forgotten:

Private John Burns, Company F, 5th Cavalry
Private Dominick Cuff, Company E, 3rd Cavalry
Sergeant John Dolan, Company F, 5th Cavalry
Private Michael Firestone, Company F, 5th Cavalry
Lowery C. Grafton, Civilian Guide
Private Michael Lynch, Company D, 5th Cavalry

²⁹ M. Wilson Rankin – Reminiscences of Frontier Days, p. 68.

Private Samuel McKee, Company F, 5th Cavalry
William McKinstry, Civilian Wagon Master
Thomas McGuire, Civilian Teamster
Waggoner, Amos D. Miller, Company F, 5th Cavalry
Private Thomas Mooney, Company D, 5th Cavalry
Private Charles Wright, Company D, 5th Cavalry

Postscript from the author: Brad L. Edwards.

Twelve men lost in the march of time, two men found on October 22, 2000.

Allow me to explain. In the literature as far back as Marshall Sprague's 1957 book, "Tragedy at White River", the exact location of the troopers' remains has been a mystery. In fact, Sprague's book claims the dead troopers were escorted with the wounded to Fort Fred Steele and Fort D.A. Russell by Capt. Dodge's Company D.³⁰ My research has led me to what I think is the most accurate primary source literature on the exact location of the troopers' remains. Joe Rankin's book, "Reminiscences of Frontier Days", page 82, states "Because of the Indian's quitting the fight and the stench about the trenches being unbearable, Merritt ordered the camp with the wounded men moved up Milk Creek one mile to the east, where there was grass for the stock. Details of troops scouted the surrounding hills during the day. From this camp, Capt. Auger, with an escort of his cavalymen and a detail of workers, was ordered to bury the dead. Of these, all were buried near the trenches except Major Thornburgh." Joe Rankin's account is accurate except Capt. Auger did not bury the dead near the trenches. In fact, the dead troopers were laid into an existing trench very near the center of the barricade area, quite possibly in one of the hospital trenches.³¹ They were then backfilled with the dirt and the debris of

³⁰ Marshall Sprague – Massacre, The Tragedy at Milk Creek, p. 226.

³¹ Dawson & Skiff – The Ute War, p. 32.

battle. It was this debris I was searching through when I inadvertently discovered the first trooper's skull. I have recovered over twenty artifacts, including unfired 45 caliber carbine cartridges, over the shallow grave. As proof of my assertions, I have included a photo of the two brave soldiers. The soldier on the left was found first. The soldier on the right lies with his legs over his comrade on the left. Judging by the position of the skeletal remains, I believe this is the location where Capt. Auger also buried the additional ten dead troopers. These discoveries, and my research into the Milk Creek Battle have evolved into what I look upon as my mission. This mission is ongoing and will be detailed in future writings as the story unfolds.

For those interested in the Milk Creek Battle, please read all literature available. For those interested in visiting the battle site, the White River Historical Society maintains, for public access, a monument site very near the battlefield. However, please do not ask permission to enter the ranch. Permission must be obtained in writing. Also, remember that trespassers will be caught and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Lastly, I urge anyone wishing to comment about the Battle of Milk Creek or my research, to contact the author in writing, via e-mail, or to visit my website.

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