

Braves of all Colors

The Story of

ISAIAH DORMAN,

Killed at the

Little Big Horn

by ROBERT J. EGE

FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING, mountains of material have been written about June 25, 1876, and the historic events popularly known to history and fiction as "Custer's Last Stand" and "The Custer Massacre." Brevet Major General George Armstrong Custer, for more than a century, has endlessly trod the literary gamut in terms ranging from "abject fool" to "zealous" to "heroic tactician." Historians, pro and con, have been tireless in their efforts to chronicle the deeds of Reno, Benteen, Keogh, Weir and others. Battle buffs of the Indian Wars have credited close-mouthed "Lonesome" Charley Reynolds with more words than he was probably ever heard to utter. Hero and heel alike have attained their niche in the ever-expanding archives of Custeriana.

But this is the story of a man—not a fighting man—but one who was courageous, sober, of proven dependability, and possessed of the unique ability to converse with the Sioux Indians in their native tongue. It has little to do with all that has been written or said.



At about 3:00 p. m. on June 25, 1876, Major Marcus A. Reno's abortive attack on the southern perimeter of the great Sioux and Cheyenne camp had been repulsed. A number of young warriors had faced the half-hearted Reno assault and the Major had led, what he later deemed a charge, away from his objective to the apparent safety of some bluffs on the east side of the bloodied Little Big Horn. The hasty "charge" resulted in several wounded and a number of those who failed to comprehend Reno's garbled orders, were left behind.

The fighting then in this particular area—the flat bottom land on the west bank of the river—had ceased. As was their custom, the Sioux (and a few Cheyenne non-combatants) were edging along the timber between the flat and the water's edge, in search of any wounded



SITTING BULL

—as well as spoils of the victory—that might be there for the taking. The squaws were very adept at this maneuver. A short distance behind them, but for a different reason, rode the great Hunkpapa medicine leader, Sitting Bull. He was there to appraise the progress of the fight. His Hunkpapa camp circle was located at the southern end of the huge village and his lodges had already borne the brunt of Reno's short-lived, futile ambushade. That proximity had also resulted in Sitting Bull's young men being the first to return the fire.

Upon his approach to a dense growth of timber, the great Medicine Man was brought quickly to attention by a squaw's excited cry.

"AI-eeee—Come quickly, *a wasicum sapa*, and he is still alive!" The italicized Sioux word, interpreted, means "black white man." Sitting Bull quickly dismounted. There on the ground, clad in bloody buckskins, was indeed a *wasicum sapa*—one of the few Negroes he had ever seen. The big, elderly colored man seemed mortally wounded. One bullet had entered near his right shoulder. Upon emerging, the slug had also torn a gaping wound in his dark chest. Sitting Bull also noticed that one of the man's boots was missing and that there were

still more wounds in his lower leg and foot.

Sitting Bull waved away the enraged squaws. The famed Sioux knelt beside the dying Negro. As their eyes met they conversed briefly in the guttural Sioux tongue. Sitting Bull ordered one of the squaws to the river for water. She returned quickly with a dripping shawl and squeezed water into the medicine leader's horn cup. The Negro drank a small amount, smiled faintly at Sitting Bull, and slumped over dead.

Sitting Bull explained to the curious group which now surrounded them:

"This is *Azimpi*. I do not know why he is here with the soldiers. He was always one of us. I knew him as a friend and once he was afraid of the white soldiers. His woman is Sioux. When she learns that he has gone to the Sand Hills she will mourn as the women of our lodges also mourn for their braves killed today."

Following Sitting Bull's departure, squaws quickly stripped the bloody buckskins from the man's body. One old Indian suddenly became the owner of a white straw hat worn by the dead Negro. His watch and a few other possessions were stolen, but the desecration ended on this note. Out of respect for Sitting Bull's friendly gesture to the dying man, they did not scalp or otherwise mutilate his corpse. Instead, they vented their pent-up fury by viciously hacking the bodies of other soldiers found nearby.

In Sioux history and lore, there are many stories of a large "black white man" who roamed their lands, and who was welcome in their villages as early as 1850. He was known as *Azimpi* or "Teat." In the spoken Sioux dialects, *Azimpi*, meaning teat or nipple, also sounds like Isaiah. This frontiersman had sustained himself by small-scale trapping and trading, the story went. He traveled with a horse and also a mule. He seemed to prefer the hospitality of the isolated and roving bands of Plains Indians to that of white settlers. This gives birth to the thought that possibly *Azimpi* was hiding from something

—or at least was content to cast his lot away from the white man.

Little is know of *Azimpi*. One finds veiled references to the loss of several male slaves by the D'Orman family of Louisiana and Alabama in the late 1840s. A search for old "wanted" posters indicates that a Negro named Isaiah was one of these. But other leads were in vain. It is notable, however, that Dorman first appeared at a white settlement in 1865, following the cessation of hostilities between the North and South, which brought automatic reprieve for many runaway slaves, North and South.

By this time, Dorman had definitely married a young woman of *Inkpaduta's* band of Santee Sioux. Perhaps weary of the roving life, and surely safe from those who sought his bounty, he built a small cabin at Fort Rice, D. T., near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota. He supported himself and his Indian bride by cutting wood for the fort. Soon he became known to the officers of that garrison as a jovial, sober and trustworthy individual. Inordinately fond of tobacco, Dorman abstained from the jug that ruined so many civilian employees on the frontier. In the early fall of 1865, he was hired as a wood cutter by the trading firm of Durfee & Peck. Due to his size and strength, it was said that "Old Teat" could cut a cord of wood faster than a helper could stack it.

When the post commander and his quartermaster learned of Dorman's ability with the difficult Sioux language, as well as his vast knowledge of the land, he was promptly destined for better things.

On November 11, 1865, according to military records, Dorman was hired by Lieut. J. M. Marshall to carry the mail between Fort Rice and Fort Wadsworth. He made the 360-mile round-trip only once that year. But his reputation for dependability was established. His terms of employment were of short duration and he was hired when needed. Between trips he continued employment with Durfee & Peck, and occasionally by

Major Charles E. Galpin at the Standing Rock Agency.

On April 22, 1867, Isaiah was rehired as a mail carrier by Lieut. F. E. Parsons, then serving as quartermaster at Fort Rice. He again made the Wadsworth trip when Indian troubles made it unsafe for a soldier to attempt the journey. Subsequent trips to James River and other military installations were made by Dorman during this hectic period. His income averaged perhaps \$50 per month. Yet these wages were comparable to those of a lieutenant in the army and were supplemented by extra earnings as a wood cutter. Isaiah Dorman fared rather well as an emancipated wage-earning employee of the white man.

As a result of his now proven ability Dorman, on September 9, 1871, was hired by Capt. Henry Inman to serve as guide and interpreter in the field for an army column escorting a party of engineers participating in the Northern Pacific Railroad Survey. He was paid \$100 per month. Inclement weather cut short the duration of the project. Dorman was scheduled to be out of a job on October 20, 1871.

On the day prior to the termination of his services, or October 19, 1871, the Commanding General of the Military Department of the Dakotas issued Special Order No. 149, whereby Isaiah Dorman was to be hired as post interpreter at Fort Rice and paid at the rate of \$75 per month. His immediate superior was Lieut. William Van Horne. In February, 1874, a reduction in budget caused all civilian employees of the army to be reduced in pay. The interpreter's salary was cut to \$50 per month. By all existing standards, Dorman was still very well fixed. Lieut. Van Horne left Fort Rice in 1872 and from that time until he assumed his duties with General Custer, Dorman served under Capt. J. W. Scully. He continued to be a valuable employee whose understanding of the Indians and their language helped avert many incidents at Fort Rice. Dorman's service record is impressive;

there are no notations of any disciplinary action ever taken against him.

The trading firm of E. H. (Hicks) Durfee and Campbell K. Peck, with headquarters at Leavenworth, Kansas, enjoyed virtually a monopoly in the Indian and military trade in large sectors of the Dakotas and Montana during the years of 1870-74. They were contractually obligated to supply cattle, wood, lumber and hay for the military installations and Indian agencies in the territory. The firm, however, was bankrupt and apparently dissolved in 1876, when the government refused them a license to continue their operations.

Refusal of the government to relicense Isaiah Dorman's former employers was not a result of failure to fulfill obligations to the Interior Department. It was necessary for a trading firm to post a \$5,000 bond with the Secretary of Interior in order to do business. Columbus Delano occupied the office at the time. Delano and President Grant's younger brother, Orvil, were reputedly involved in an operation in which a "kickback" was expected from those in the trading business. Durfee & Peck honestly refused to cooperate; hence their bond was refused in 1875.

The national trading post scandal and investigation began in 1875. Delano was found guilty of negligence and incompetence, and resigned. George A. Custer, in newspaper and magazine articles and through other unofficial channels, hinted strongly regarding Orvil Grant's involvement. Both Custer and Campbell K. Peck were summoned to testify before the Indian Affairs Committee by Chairman Heister Clymer in March, 1876. Custer's testimony resulted in harsh rebuke by President Grant. It was only through intervention by Generals Alfred H. Terry and Phil Sheridan that Custer was allowed to lead his Seventh Cavalry in the summer campaign of 1876.

Upon his belated return to Fort Abraham Lincoln, Custer began assembling the contingent of civilian employees, scouts, packers and interpreters that

would accompany the military. The following order was issued:

Hq. Middle Dist.
Dept. Dak.
Ft. A. Lincoln, D. T.
May 14, 1876

/ E X T R A C T /

Special Order
No. 2

IV. The commanding office Ft. Rice, D. T. will order Isaiah Dorman, Post Interpreter to proceed to this post and report for duty to accompany the expedition as Interpreter—During his absence he will still be borne on the rolls of the Post Quartermaster at Fort Rice.

By order of

Brevet Major General Custer.

(Signed) W. W. Cooke
1st Lt. A djt. 7th Cavalry
AAA Gen.

Pursuant to this special order, Isaiah was officially hired as interpreter for the regiment by Lieut. Henry J. Nowlan, Regimental Quartermaster of the Seventh. He was to assume his duties on May 15, 1876 at the rate of \$75 a month.

Dorman was pleased to accept the position. He was now about 55 years old and most of the past 12 years had been spent in and around the frontier forts in the Dakotas. It wasn't that he wanted to make war on his old friends, the Sioux. He expressed a keen desire to see once again the wonderful Montana land to the west. To him, this wasn't a mission of war, but a chance to renew old acquaintances.

Enough has already been written about Custer's march to the Little Big Horn. At noon on June 25th, when "Long Hair" made the fateful division of his command, the entire column was at the Crow's Nest on the divide separating the Rosebud from the Little Big Horn. Most of the scouts and several civilian personnel had been assigned to accompany Troops "M," "A," and "G" in the Reno battalion. Reno's orders were to cross the river and attack the Indian encampment from the south.

Reno did this. He led his battalion across the river and proceeded at a brisk pace towards the village. However,

when faced with an unexpected, brutal opposition, his attack fell short and he formed his command in a dismounted skirmish line across the valley. The late Dr. Charles Kuhlman describes that line in his excellent text, *Legend Into History*:

. . . the skirmish line was formed near the site of the present headstone for Lieutenant McIntosh. Its right rested on a narrow strip of timber running parallel, or nearly so, to an old riverbed 150 to 200 yards from the line. Troop "G" under McIntosh held the right. "A" under Moylan, the center, and "M" under French, the left. For a few minutes a mixed group of scouts and civilians, under Varnum and Hare, stood about 200 yards to the left of French. Among them were, besides the Arikara and several Crows, the two Jackson brothers, half-breed Blackfeet, Reynolds, Girard, Reno's orderly, Davern, Herendeen and probably the Negro Dorman. . . .

In this position, the command was relatively exposed. The strength of their opposition at this particular point is highly controversial. In reality, the enemy was in such force, that, after 10 or 15 minutes of long-distance sniping, Reno ordered the command to a more sheltered position in the timber on the west bank of the river.

It was here that a closely formed group of soldiers and civilians drew a concentrated fire from the Indians. A well-placed hostile bullet splattered the brains of Custer's favorite Indian scout,

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MARCUS A. RENO

Bloody Knife, into Reno's face. Dripping with gore, but unharmed, the Major panicked. Lieut. Benny Hodgson was wounded. Two enlisted men and the chief white scout, "Lonesome" Charlie Reynolds, were killed. It was also in this place that Dorman received his mortal wound. He had renewed no old acquaintances nor had he the opportunity to use his particular skill in palaver with the Sioux. Isaiah, along with others, was left to die in Reno's disorganized exodus.

Some time prior to 1930, Wooden Leg, the famous Cheyenne warrior, told his friend and biographer, Dr. Thomas B. Marquis, that he viewed the body of Isaiah Dorman on the morning of June 26, or the day following his death. The Cheyenne related that at this time the body had been stripped of all clothing, but was otherwise unmolested. There is no reason to doubt Wooden Leg's story. Although he often ranged far afield in typical Indian fashion in relating the battle in narrative style, when queried about specific details, as he was about Dorman, Wooden Leg's answers were truthful and a great deal of useful history has been gleaned from his keen memory.



SITTING BULL EXHORTING HIS FOLLOWERS

(Frank Leslie's Illustrated, 1890)

When the troopers under Generals Terry and Gibbon came to the relief of Reno's beleaguered command on June 27, a search was immediately made for possible survivors. The picture then had been altered considerably. Isaiah's body when found had indeed been horribly mutilated. In addition to slashing wounds, more than a dozen arrows had been shot into his chest—even a cavalry picket-pin had been driven through his lower abdomen. This desecration was probably the parting gesture of enraged, savage squaws, or of the Cheyennes, who did not know him.

Isaiah Dorman remains essentially anonymous. No photograph of him is known to exist. The location of his grave—like many others on the west side of the Little Big Horn—has been lost. No marker was ever erected to his memory, nor has there been any effort to mark the approximate location where he fell.

At the time of Dorman's death, there was \$102.50 due him for services ren-

dered to the army—\$40 for the month of May and \$62.50 for the days in June of 1876. A recent search of old records in the Treasury Department revealed that on May 23, 1879, a person named Isaac McNutt claimed to be the assignee of Dorman's pay voucher and attempted to collect the money. McNutt, known as a "hanger on" around Fort Rice who worked sporadically as a wood hauler and carpenter, never collected Isaiah's money. His claim was disallowed on September 25, 1879. Dorman's Santee Sioux widow apparently never applied at all.

Along with many other ironies in the story of Isaiah Dorman is the fact that the only reference to his color was made by Major Reno in his report of the battle. War department records of that period required no such information. Out of what was probably haste or oversight, Reno omitted Isaiah's last name in his report. Someone, at a later date, pencilled "Dorman" beside the Major's entry. That sparse entry is followed by the words: **KILLED BY INDIANS.**