



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

Private Tarbox

Here on the Figure 8, our humble rancho in the ponderosas, we have inadvertently created an interpretive center. That it also happens to be housed in the entryway “half-bath” is merely a side-note. It is, in my humblest estimation, everything that a museum hosted in a water closet should be.

In the “Custer Bathroom,” as it has come to be appreciated, are framed collections of bird points and arrowheads — some fabricated from trade steel — collected by my grandfather when he was a boy in the early days of the last century. There is a cavalry bugle stationed above the toilet paper, a print reproduction of Edgar Paxson’s “Custer’s Last Stand” on the wall, and historical books — “The Custer Reader” and “Walter Camp’s Notes on the Custer Fight,” among others — for those inclined toward a longer, more leisurely residence.

There are also postcard curios of natives involved in the fight, including Low Dog, Curley, Hairy Moccasins, and other Crow scouts photographed on their return to the battlefield.

Naturally, there is a framed portrait of Custer himself, ensconced above the towel rack, from which he stares at himself in the mirror above the sink, looking velvety and absorbed while striking a pose that is certainly self-conscious, and regrettably smug.

In the grand scheme, I prefer to think of Custer, the man, as a lesson rather than a gallant.

But most importantly, for my purposes here, there is a framed reproduction of the *Bismarck Tribune*, dated July 6, 1876. The *Tribune*, a territorial newspaper whose embedded reporter — Mark Kellogg — also died there, is broadly credited with announcing to the world the fact of Custer’s death and defeat in battle. In point of fact, however, the *Tribune* did not actually have the scoop — both the *Bozeman Times* and the *Helena Daily Herald* beat them to the punch by several days — but their coverage, for whatever reason, is largely spiked from history.

Call it gravity, or perhaps just a natural line of sight, but for whatever reason my gaze, while utilizing the Custer Bathroom for its erstwhile purpose, seems to fall to that point on the front page of the *Tribune* — which

contains a lengthy casualty roll — where Private Tarbox is listed as killed in action. The call of nature — and dozens of readings of the *Tribune* front page — have encouraged me to think about Private Tarbox more than, perhaps, I normally would.

Private Byron Tarbox was born in 1852, at Brooksville, in Hancock County, Maine. He enlisted on September 22, 1875, and told recruiters that he was previously employed as a shoemaker. He was 5 feet 6 inches tall. We know that his father was a man named Valentine Tarbox, and that his parents divorced. His mother was Lavinia Bolton Tibbets Tarbox Morris, who seems to have been — without condemning her circumstances — a serial bride, and who passed from this earth in 1918.

But we learn something else about Private Tarbox, who served in Company L of the 7th Cavalry, which was under Custer’s direct command. Tarbox, who would have trotted out with the Son of the Morning Star along the ridge above the Little Bighorn and then down Medicine Tail Coulee where he and his comrades would have encountered the most unwelcome surprise of their lifetimes, also had a brother at the fight.

In the coulee, Tarbox would have likely turned his horse and scrambled back up the to the ridge, probably disorganized but not yet panicking, where he would have been ordered into a dismounted, rearguard action. It was here, on Calhoun Hill, while Custer rode north with the remainders to die in infamy, that Byron Tarbox would perish along with his comrades.

One wonders if he thought of his younger brother, fighting somewhere off to his left, in the few minutes he had left to live in the summer dust and heat.

William Ephraim Morris, Tarbox’s half brother, who lied about his age to enlist, was actually 14 years old at the time of the fight, assigned to Company M, under Major Marcus Reno. There is a description, perhaps apocryphal, of a final discussion between the brothers, as the commands were split at Reno Creek. Byron, 24 years old, is alleged to have warned his youthful brother in passing, “Look out for your scalp, Bill, the Indians don’t like red-headed fellows.”

Young Morris survived, though he was wounded in the chest after Reno’s disastrous attack on the south end of the enormous native village — perhaps the largest gathering of Plains Indians

ever — while scrambling in retreat, back up the bluffs on the east side of the river. He survived the continuous fighting that followed, and must have surmised at some point that his older brother, somewhere off to the north, was dead.

Ultimately, Morris was discharged from the Army, but not before participating in the Nez Perce campaign, and only after a drunken brawl in which he suffered a broken arm. His discharge papers describe him as a private of “worthless character.”

But Bill Morris was bigger than the Army’s opinion of him. He went on to become a lawyer, a judge in New York City, and a Captain in a National Guard infantry regiment. He died in 1933.

I don’t know how Private Tarbox and Judge Morris would greet the news that here, in 2017, their stories were related in a column inspired by bathroom decor. But something tells me they might find their way to the irony in it, and I’m deeply hopeful they would offer at least a smile at the consolation, inasmuch as they were at least remembered, however briefly, 141 years later. “Look out for your scalp, Bill. The Indians don’t like red-headed fellows.”

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