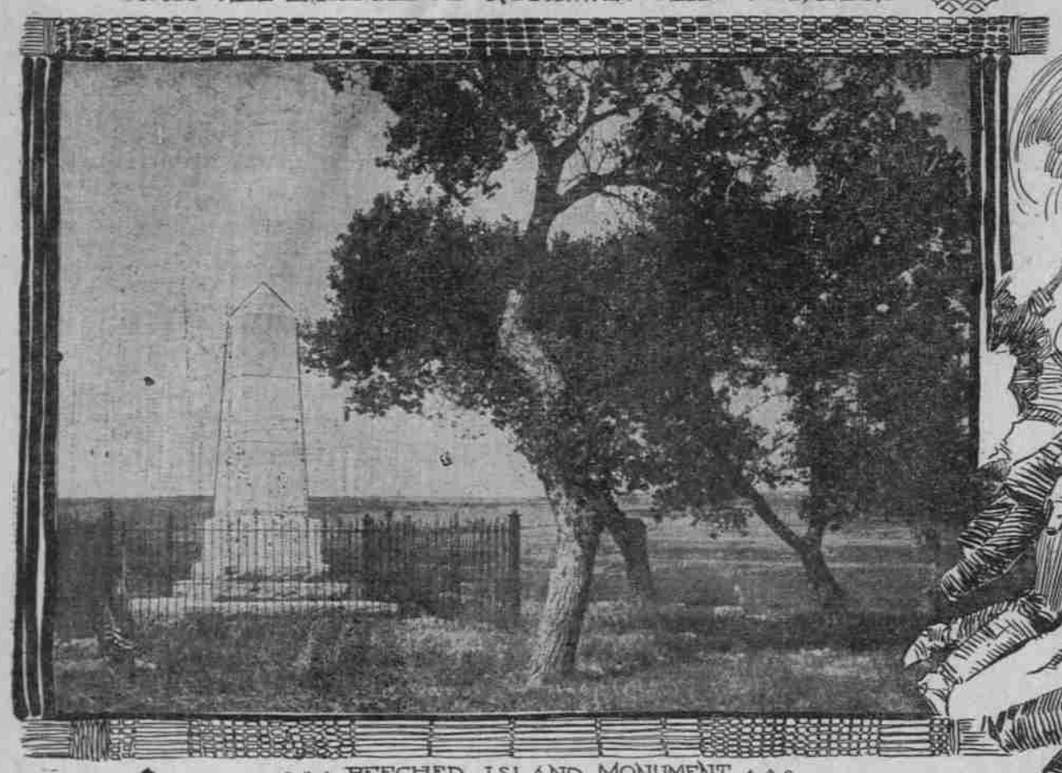
MOST DESPERATE INDIAN CONFLICT IN FRONTIER HISTORY

FORSYTH'S FIFTY SCOUTS WHO WITHSTOOD A THOUSAND WARRIORS FOR NINE DAYS AT BEECHER ISLAND

GENERAL VIEW OF BEECHER ISLAND BATTLE GROUND
SCOUTS WERE ENTRENCHED AT COTTONWOODS NEAR MONUMENT

A. J. PLILEY, WHO WENT FOR RELIEF
THE LETTERING IN THE BACKGROUND TELLS OF HIS EXPLOIT.



BEECHER ISLAND MONUMENT
GRAVES OF VICTIMS SHOWN BY FLAGS

SURVIVORS OF BEECHER ISLAND INDIAN FIGHT
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: SCOUTS GREEN, PLILEY, MORTON, RANAHAN, PEATE AND GILBERT

BY ARTHUR CHAPMAN.

SIX MEN, some of them enfeebled by bullet wounds, and all of them bearing painful memories of the most desperate Indian conflict and siege in frontier history, gathered about a granite shaft in Eastern Colorado, near the Kansas line, in the bright sunshine of mid-September. They were members of Forsyth's scouts, and had come to attend the 16th reunion and 40th anniversary of the battle of Beecher Island, the most desperate conflict and probably the most heroic defense against odds in frontier history.

Forty years ago these six scouts were grouped on the bank of the Arikaree River under different circumstances. Where the granite monument now stands—a joint tribute from the state of Colorado and Kansas—men were falling, stricken down by Indian bullets. A few yards away, across the little stream, that is hardly more than knee-deep in its sandy bed, nearly a thousand warriors, Cheyennes, Arapahoes and Brule Sioux, were pouring a deadly fire into the half-hundred scouts under command of Colonel George A. Forsyth. The Indians had swept down on the scouts at dawn on September 17, and the little command had been forced across the river to a tiny island, at the upper end of which stood a few cottonwood trees. The Indians, under command of the great fighting Cheyenne, Roman Nose, thought their victory would soon be complete. Five of the scouts were killed, including Lieutenant Fred Beecher, and nearly a score were wounded, including Colonel Forsyth, who had fallen with a shattered hip, but who was coolly directing the work of scooping out rifle pits in the sand.

Soon most of the scouts were protected by rifle pits and the carcasses of slain mules and horses. Furious because the tiny command had not been wiped out, even as the commands of Custer and Fetterman were slaughtered, Roman Nose launched an attack that has few parallels in Indian warfare. Marshaling his warriors in military formation, the war chief gave the command to charge. The scouts knew that the crucial moment had come, and reserved their fire until the horsemen were in the stream. Then volley after volley broke forth from the sand-pits and the Indian line broke and swept around the island, only to be reformed by the dauntless Roman Nose.

Three Charges Repulsed.

Three times the Indians charged, and success would have crowned their efforts at the last attempt had not one of the sharpshooters behind the rifle pits succeeded in killing Roman Nose just before the gigantic leader of the Indians reached the island. Dismay spread through the ranks of the Indians when the chief fell. There were no more charges, but the redskins, knowing that the scouts were without provisions, encircled the island and settled down to a siege. But even this contingency was met by the resourceful Forsyth, who called for volunteers to penetrate the besieging lines and to get aid from Fort Wallace. The first night Jack Stillwell and Pierre Trudeau succeeded in getting through. The second night two others made the attempt, but were turned back by the watchful Indians, and the third night Jack Donovan and A. J. Pilley succeeded in getting away without attracting the attention of the besiegers. The scouts all reached Fort Wallace about the same time, Donovan and Pilley arriving only an hour behind Stillwell and Trudeau, who had started two nights ahead of them. Donovan joined the relief expedition and guided it back to the island, and the siege was lifted on the ninth day.

Preserved in Marble.

Such, in brief, is the story of Beecher Island—the battlefield having been named in honor of the gallant young Lieutenant, a nephew of Henry Ward Beecher, who was one of the first to fall under the Indians' murderous fire. Ten years ago two or three of the scouts located the battlefield, and a memorial association was formed and a temporary wooden monument put up. In 1906, the states of Colorado and Kansas built a monument, costing $10,000, on which are engraved the names of the scouts who took part in the fray, and a brief account of the battle. The Government has set aside the battlefield as a National park. The graves of Beecher, Dr. Moores, Culver, Farley and Wilson, who were killed on the island, have been marked with headstones, and the patriotic people of the vicinity see that the grounds are not disturbed by vandals. The annual reunions of the scouts attract widespread interest, and the country people flock to the battlefield for miles around and spend several days camping with the old Indian fighters and hearing their versions of the encounter.

This year the scouts who took part in the reunion were: Thomas Ranahan, of Weiser, Idaho; Howard Morton, of Prescott, Kan.; A. J. Pilley, of Kansas City, Kan.; George Green, of Sedro Woolley, Wash.; E. A. Gilbert, of Beagle, Kan., and J. J. Peate, of Beverly, Kan. Of these scouts, Ranahan and Gilbert had not been on the field since the fight. Gilbert was shot through the lungs early in the engagement, but recovered and served as an Indian scout many years. Morton had an eye shot out, and Peate was one of the first men to reach the island with Carpenter's relief expedition from Fort Wallace, for relief, in company with Jack Donovan, is cut on the granite monument, modestly related his experiences during that terrible expedition.

Hero Tells His Story.

"After the first day's fighting," said Mr. Pilley, "it was plain that we must get aid from Fort Wallace, or we'd be starved out, if our position was not taken by assault. At the first call for volunteers Stillwell and Thudeau started out. Of course, we had no means of knowing whether they got through the Indian lines or had been killed; so it was decided to send out others. The second night I volunteered, and a big, heavy chap who was not built for such work, insisted on going along. We crawled away from the island, but every once in a while the sky would be illuminated with flashes of heat lightning, which made discovery imminent. An extraordinarily bright flash came, and showed that we were crawling directly toward a group of Indians. We retreated to the island, and Colonel Forsyth would not permit any more attempts that night.

"On the third night I succeeded in convincing my companion that he was not built to withstand the hardships of the long trip across the plains to Fort Wallace. He gave place to Jack Donovan, who proved to be just the right man for the place, and but for whose courage and endurance the scouts might have perished. Donovan and I pulled off our boots and put on moccasins that we had taken from a couple of dead Indians near the island. We thought if we left any trail the Indians would not notice moccasin tracks, but we soon found that we had made a terrible mistake. We crawled down the middle of the Arikaree, which was very shallow, and, on reaching a point, several hundred yards from the foot of the island, made our way up the bank and across a high bench of land, in the direction of Fort Wallace.

Suffered Excruciating Pain.

"Donovan aimed to strike the Smoky Hill stage route at Cheyene Wells. This stage route led to Denver, and we knew if we should strike it in time to catch the eastbound stage we might get to Fort Wallace in a few hours. We could only travel nights, however, and had not gone a mile before we found out what a mistake we had made in leaving off our boots. The moccasins were wet, and the cactus thorns which were plentiful on the desert, went into our feet like needles into a pincushion. Soon we were hobbling in painful fashion, but walked until dawn, when we took refuge in a buffalo wallow on the open prairie, knowing that we would have to remain in concealment all day.

"We took off the moccasins, in the endeavor to ease our feet. The cactus thorns broke off, instead of pulling out of our feet, and then, when we put the moccasins on again the broken pieces simply drove into our skin in new places. The pain from our feet was almost intolerable. We had no water, and the sun was blistering hot. We dared not stir from our shelter, as we knew there were Indians all about. In the middle of the afternoon we gave ourselves up for lost, when we saw a war party of about 25 Indians riding straight toward us. We looked to our rifles, and Donovan, who was the lightest-hearted man I ever knew, began to sing. But, when within a quarter of a mile of us, the Indians stopped, and, after much argument, changed their direction and disappeared. At nightfall we resumed our march, guiding ourselves by the stars, and at midnight we got to the south fork of the Republican River, the Arikee being the middle fork. After bathing our swollen and festered feet, we pressed on, and at dawn took shelter and waited again until nightfall.

"At 3 o'clock the next morning we struck the Smoky Hill stage route, and knew that most of our troubles were over. We arrived at a little ranch house, and told the men there who we were, and asked them to wake us when the stage arrived, after which we fell asleep. When the stage came we rode to Fort Wallace. Stillwell and Trudeau had arrived a short time before, and a relief party, under Colonel Carpenter, was already under way. I was too sick and exhausted to go another mile, but the heroic Donovan ate a bite of food and jumped on an old mule and started out after Carpenter, knowing that, without a guide, the relief party might never find Forsyth. Sure enough, he found Carpenter going up the south fork of the Republican River, instead of the middle fork. Donovan guided the party aright, and was the first man to arrive on the island."

"And every one of us on that island owed an everlasting debt of gratitude to the scouts who went for relief, and particularly to Jack Donovan—God bless him!" said "Tom" Ranahan. "There wasn't one of us who fell back on that little island, after those Indians came sweeping down on us, that didn't think he was face to face with certain death. All we thought of was giving as good an account of ourselves as we could, but such a thing as escaping from those Indians never entered our heads. Those Indians felt sure of us, too. Lord! what a sight it was when that big chief Roman Nose lined 'em up and led those charges. The squaws and children were on a high bluff, a few hundreds yards up the river, yelling and singing, but they got to wailing when we began to bowl the Indians over. I am sure it was Louis Farley who killed Roman Nose. He was a fine shot—one of the best among the scouts—and he had picked Roman Nose for his target. It wasn't long after Roman Nose fell that Farley lost his life, but the scout had done his work and done it well.

"And we had to be on the watch even after the Indians had given up trying to take the rifle pits by assault," continued Ranahan. "They had sharpshooters stationed all around the island, and it went pretty hard with a man who exposed himself to their fire. One of the bravest of our boys crawled out and got a spade which was lying some distance from the island—did it under fire, too. When we got that, we felt better, and it didn't take us long to dig down to water. But living on dead mules isn't very pleasant—and when the mule meat began to spoil, life on that island can't be described. It was especially hard for the wounded, but they were game, every one of them. Forsyth took his razor and cut the bullet and gangrened flesh out of his own hip. He was a good soldier and full of pluck. I remember when we were following the big Indian trail, just a day or two before the fight at the island began, one of the scouts said:

Got What They Wanted.

"'Colonel, this is a big war party we are following, and if we keep on we'll go right into a trap.' Some of the others said: 'That 's so,' and Forsyth just smiled and said:

"'Now, look here, boys—when you fellows signed that agreement with Uncle Sam, didn't you specify that it was Indian fighting that you wanted?' After that there wasn't another kick—and we sure got all the Indian fighting we wanted for a while."

Forsyth's command, which had such a memorable experience, was an independent body of scouts. Forsyth was on General Sheridan's staff in the Civil War. He is living today, and unveiled the Beecher Island monument in 1906. Aside from himself and Lieutenant Beecher, the command was composed of frontiersmen—stage drivers, pony express riders, buffalo hunters, and free lances of the plains in general. Many of the scouts have died since the battle on the Arikaree. Pierre Trudeau never recovered from the effects of his terrible trip to Fort Wallace and Stillwell. The latter died a few years ago and Jack Donovan, the hero of the relief, died at his home in Denver. Fourteen of the scouts have never been heard from since the battle. Hudson Farley, who lives in a little town in Washington, had a peculiarly painful experience, as he held his dying father in his arms on the island. Sigmund Schlesinger, the "kid" of the command, is in business in Cleveland, Ohio; Eli Zeigler is a resident of Salem, Or., and George Oakes, a famous marksman, lives in Tucson, Ariz.

Soon there will be no more scouts to gather on the battleground and tell their experiences, but it is evident that the scene of this display of Yankee courage is not going to be neglected, even though it is comparatively remote from the beaten routes. The story of the American valor, written on the Beecher Island monument, will live as long as the story of the Alamo or any other tale of courage in the face of overwhelming odds.

Denver, Colo.

How Shall Museum Be Made More Useful?

Necessity Exists Now for a Permanent Building for Exhibits.

By A. W. Miller, Librarian and Curator of the Free Museum.

OUR public museum, like most all great museums of the world, sprang from a very humble beginning. In the year 1897 the late L. L. Hawkins succeeded in securing the "Christ Ross' collection of shells, which was placed on exhibition in the City Hall as a nucleus, Mr. Hawkins assuming the management. And it is due largely to his uninterrupted devotion and interest in solicitation that some of our people loaned or donated small collections of curios, promiscuously gathered together, regardless of any system of classification or labeling. Numbering several thousand specimens and representing nearly every branch of natural history, it has outgrown its limits as a collection of curios and has assumed that of an educational museum. This has been dragging along the best it could in the limited space allotted to us in the City Hall by the municipal authorities, which, owing to a few of our public-spirited citizens, has developed into a museum that is not only a credit to our city and state, but the whole Northwest as well.

It compares favorably with any in the country in the quality of the various specimens, along all lines of scientific research, which has notably increased its usefulness. It has grown to such an extent that it cannot be accommodated or properly displayed in its temporary quarters in the City Hall, thus retarding its growth. For under the present existing conditions we are unprepared to offer any inducements to those having large and valuable collections to place them with us, as many of the larger museums are doing elsewhere, through which they receive generous gifts from wealthy patrons of science.

Specific mention could be made of several large and valuable collections scattered throughout the city and state in the hands of people who have spent years of labor and expended great sums of money making them. They are anxious to place them where they could be exhibited, safely housed and properly cared for in some local museum where they could be enjoyed by the public at large, asking only the assurance that they will not be packed away out of sight in some out-of-the-way place for an indefinite period, at great risk of injury and destruction. No one feels like parting with his treasures without some assurance that they will be preserved in safety. Owing to our inability to give this assurance, several valuable collections have been sold and removed from the state.

Under these conditions we cannot expect the kind of support from the general public that has done so much for many other museums. It is one of the principal functions of both the Academy of Science and Free Muesum to sow the seeds of knowledge broadcast in the minds of all, in the hope that some may take root, multiply and bear fruit through exerting an influence in awakening and stimulating interest concerning the wonders and beauties of earth.

Knowing that an important and far-reaching influence will result from the personal contact and friendly exchange of ideas and experiences between persons engaged in the same or similar lines of research, our museum would be the proper meeting place for people of congenial tastes. Therefore our museum should be located among surroundings adapted to investigation of all branches of natural science, with sufficient natural light and ventilation, in well appointed working quarters, including a well-equipped laboratory and workshop, provided with all modern appliances, where all the activities of the musuem could be carried on, conveniently separated from the exhibits and away from the annoyances of visitors, where every specimen would be so situated and arranged that any one could be found at once and examined.

Could we but provide these conveniences our museum would be the greatest educational institution in the whole Northwest, where all could know that they are at liberty to pluck the fruits and flowers of truth, and knowledge without feeling that they were trespassing or fear of being considered intruders. Then our museum would be looked upon as a center of research, where all who are engaged in study could visit and find encouragement as well as every facility needed for investigation and study.

But until we are provided with a permanent home we can accomplish but little. No collection can be of much value unless it is well installed, where it will not be crowded. It should be classified and labeled with descriptive labels, to be of much value to science or from an educational standpoint. Though these defects are being remedied by rearranging, classifying and properly labeling the specimens, our progress has naturally been slow, owing to the lack of proper financial aid. Having never received either bequests or donations of funds from any source, we have not been able to accomplish all we wished. For, in order to obtain the largest measure of success and public recognition, we must interest men of capital as well as the educators at the heads of our schools and educational institutions.

Among our collections at the City Hall our conchological collection alone numbers several thousands of specimen of various types, and will compare favorably with any similar collection in the world. While our geological series is not as extensive as it might be, yet it is growing rapidly, having had several hundred specimens added within the last year, including some very fine types of fossils and petrifactions, which will be classified and properly labeled in the near future.

All of which naturally suggests the question, what shall be done in order to increase the efficiency and usefulness of our free museum?