

Soldiering In The Shadow Of Wounded Knee: The 1891 Diary Of Private Hartford G. Clark, Sixth U.s. Cavalry

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Review

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Garrison Scenes: The Diary of Hartford G. Clark

Soldiering in the Shadow of Wounded Knee is the edited diary of Private Hartford G. Clark, 6th U.S. Cavalry. The diary begins in January 1891 and ends in December. Essentially, it is a transcription of a transcription. In 1962, National Park Service historian Don Rickey, Jr. contacted Clark's widow, Pearl, who allowed him to transcribe her husband's diary, which he did by hand and typewriter. Four years later, Pearl Clark died and the original diary has since been lost; however, Rickey's transcriptions remained and Editor Jerome Greene has used them to complete *Soldiering in the Shadow of Wounded Knee*.

Private Clark's diary entries annotate each day of the year. While some are short, single-sentence entries, most of them are meaty, detailed descriptions of life on the Nebraska frontier. The chapters are broken by month and are easy to read. Only one month is missing. The February entries never made it to Rickey for copying, so Editor Greene has included a five-page chapter, describing the known movements of Private Clark during this period.

Although born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1869, Private Clark considered himself a New Englander. His family had moved to South Carolina during the Civil War to set up a retail business. In 1878, the Clarks moved back to Exeter, New Hampshire, where young Hartford completed his schooling. In the summer of 1890, at age twenty-one, he enlisted in the U.S. cavalry for a five-year term of service. He was assigned to Troop G, 6th U.S. Cavalry, a unit recently redeployed to South Dakota to deal with the Ghost Dance uprising. Clark's company arrived too late to participate in the Battle of Wounded Knee Creek, but Clark was witness to its grisly aftermath. His January 12, 1891, entry read: "There lay in death the old and young of both sexes that were not [yet]

buried, also about seventy-five dead horses and ponies.” (34)

Still, readers should be advised that *Soldiering in the Shadow of Wounded Knee* has little to do with the Battle of Wounded Knee itself, a veritable massacre that left as many as 200 Sioux dead on the field. After Clark left the battlefield, he did not think about it again. Mostly, Private Clark’s diary describes his hum-drum life inside and around Fort Niobrara, a 470-person army outpost in northern Nebraska, immediately south of the Sioux reservations and 130 miles from the scene of the December 29 massacre. The diary, then, is not an action-packed account of U.S. cavalry operations. Instead, it is a catalogue of the day-to-day activities within one of the U.S. cavalry’s many far-flung frontier outposts.

But let it not be said that *Soldiering in the Shadow of Wounded Knee* is without excitement. In fact, the year-long diary is chock-full of colorful stories about life at the fort, both depressing and uplifting. Crime, vice, and violence marked Clark’s year. During the winter months, boredom and melancholy caused by the foul, freezing weather set the soldiers on edge. Even the mild-mannered Clark became involved in a brawl with a surly, drunken soldier over a game of pool. Even in the vast prairie, the troopers at Fort Niobrara had easy access to the sins of civilization, and throughout the diary, they are seen drinking, swearing, fighting, or womanizing. In September, one trooper—Trumpeter Clinton Dixon—murdered Corporal John R. Carter when they fought over a local courtesan, Lillian “Offie” Lewis, sparking something of a scandalous murder trial that was well-remembered by local Nebraskans.

At various points, Clark experienced wholesome activities. He participated in friendly horse races and he played on the fort’s excellent baseball team. Further, his diary described his deep relationships. Much of his diary is devoted to his courtship of a young lady, Sarah Marshall, who lived in the nearby village of Valentine. Clark also developed a heart-warming connection with his horse, Nooney, and a friendship with a Brulé (a branch of the Lakota) named Yellow Hand who served with Company L, 6th U.S. Cavalry, one of the first units to enlist Indian men as regular cavalry (as opposed to scouts).

Clark’s diary is generally devoid of broad opinions about his unit’s mission, and rarely did he offer thoughts about the success of Indian pacification. However, after Wounded Knee, Clark offered this tantalizing assessment. He became enraged by a newspaper article that described the battle as a massacre.

That was not the way he saw it. He wrote, “What do they [in the East] know about what the Indians do . . . [?] Comparatively nothing. If they were out in this part of the country, and see the deeds done by them (Indians) while on the warpath, it would make them wish they were back among the more civilized class in the East.” (36) The lack of military campaigning, the recruitment of Indians into the Army, and his friendship with Yellow Hand probably changed Clark’s opinion of his unit’s mission, but we are left to guess how. Editor Greene speculates: “In the broadest sense, neither Clark nor his compatriots at the time likely fathomed that the era of the Indian campaigns had passed before them.” (16) In short, Clark’s diary describes the culmination of U.S. policy against the Plains Indians, but Clark’s service was not long or deep enough to understand its significance.

Soldiering in the Shadow of Wounded Knee is a great book, copiously footnoted and expertly annotated. Editor Greene makes Private Clark’s stories interesting and accessible. This book will likely appeal only to specialists, those particularly interested in the history of Fort Niobrara or the history of late nineteenth century cavalry operations. It is an excellent example showing how a U.S. soldier’s garrison journal can be used, but the subject matter will capture the attention only of those already deeply interested in this narrow slice of U.S. military history.

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