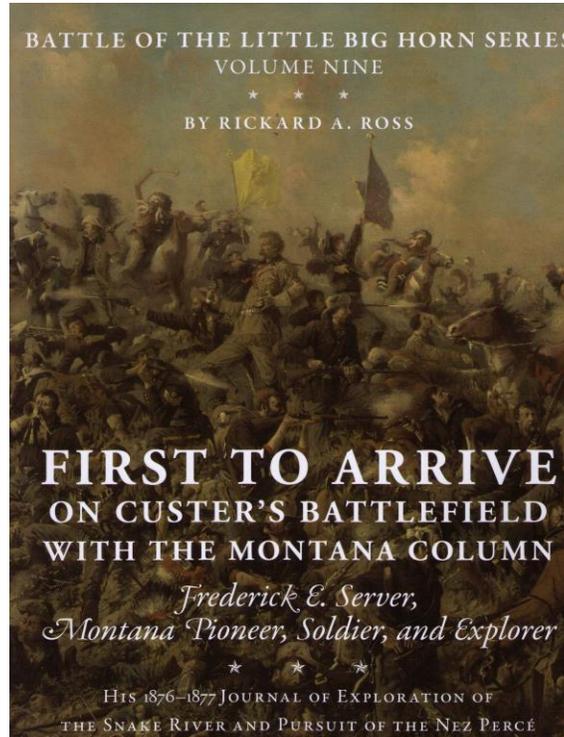


CBHMA BOOK REVIEW

by Rev. Vincent A. Heier



First to Arrive on Custer's Battlefield with the Montana Column: Frederick E. Server, Montana Pioneer, Soldier, and Explorer

By Rickard A. Ross

El Segundo, CA: Upton & Sons, 2010 Pp. 214, contents, illustrations, maps, acknowledgements, appendices, bibliography, index, hardcover, \$55.00

Remember your first visit to the battlefield at Little Big Horn? Although the Montana landscape looks peaceful now, it belies the fact that the National Monument was once the scene of bloody conflict. Such was the experience of a young Frederick E. Server. Although interviewed by Indian Wars historians Walter Camp and Eli Ricker, this cavalry trooper was overlooked until the efforts of his great-grandson, Rickard A. Ross. A self-described "100 percent Montanan," Ross has written the story of an interesting personage in the history of that state.

Server is a classic example of the young men who joined the post-Civil War Frontier Army. The Philadelphia native enlisted in 1873 at the age of 18. After rudimentary basic training at Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis, he was assigned to the battalion of the 2nd Cavalry at Fort Ellis near Bozeman,

Montana Territory. He and Private William White would become lifelong friends and find an able officer in Lieutenant Gustavus Doane of that regiment.

Private Server so demonstrated his competence as a soldier that he was promoted to first sergeant of G Company in 1876. He accompanied the first delegation of the Crow tribe to Washington, D.C. and upon returning helped to conduct the census at Crow Agency. In 1875 he travelled through the Yellowstone Park with Secretary of War William Belknap and a group of officers. Another duty was finding a new location for Crow Agency.

Because of close contact with that tribe, Server led a Crow (and civilian) scout detachment during Major James S. Brisbin's mission to relieve Fort Pease near the Big Horn River in early 1876. Hereditary enemies of the Sioux, the Crow would guide the Army in the campaign against the "hostile" Lakota bands of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse.

The military commands ordered to participate in the Great Sioux War of 1876 included that of Colonel John Gibbon, who would lead a combined cavalry-infantry force from Fort Ellis east to rendezvous with the "Dakota Column" of General Alfred H. Terry from Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory. Among the components of the "Montana Column" was the Fort Ellis 2nd Cavalry battalion that included Server's company.

Gibbon's force would experience many frustrations in the next three months, including the failure to attack Sitting Bull's village in mid-May because the soldiers could not cross the swollen Yellowstone River from the north bank. "In a little more than a month," the author notes, "Server would look back on this unsuccessful attempt as a most fortunate event. Gibbon's proposed advance with less than four hundred troops against the warriors of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse would likely have ended in disaster."

After Gibbon linked with Terry in June the general formed the fateful plan that sent Lieut. Colonel George Armstrong Custer and the 7th Cavalry south up Rosebud Creek "in pursuit of the Indians." Gibbon and the Montana Column would march west along the Yellowstone and up the Big Horn to support Custer's attack on the Lakota *believed* to be on the Little Big Horn River.

As Server and scout Old Crow acted as left flankers on June 27, 1876, they stumbled upon the stripped and scalped body of a soldier. After discovering more dead, Server reported Custer's defeat to Terry *before* Lieutenant James H. Bradley, who would soon also find Custer's battlefield. In describing this tragic scene, author Ross notes that his great grandfather always claimed that few of the dead were mutilated and that ultimately he blamed Custer's disobedience of orders for the disaster.

After the Little Big Horn campaign, Server returned to Fort Ellis, where he was assigned that autumn to the exploration of the Snake River country near Yellowstone Park. By documenting this treacherous saga using Server's journal, the author details the severe weather, rugged landscape and other dangers that imperiled the small military party led by Lieutenant Doane that included Private White.

Server's military career included moving the Crow tribe to its new agency and serving with distinction in the 1877 Nez Percé war. Life in the Army must have agreed with him because he reenlisted in 1878 and was awarded the Indian War Medal for his dedicated service. Following Server's transfer to Fort Custer, Montana Territory, he married Anna Getchell, a widow with children. When his service ended in 1883, his discharge paper described his character as "excellent."

Server's return to civilian life did not end his story. He settled near Custer's battlefield at Crow Agency where he established a small hotel that hosted such notable guests as Theodore Roosevelt and welcomed authors and historians who studied the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

Server maintained strong opinions about the Custer disaster. On the thirty-third anniversary of the battle in 1909, for example, he bluntly told the *Billings Gazette* that Custer "was too anxious to make a big showing. He disobeyed Terry's order when he followed the Indian trail, instead of going up the Rosebud."

Filled with numerous photos and illustrations and clear detailed maps, *First to Arrive* is an interesting, well written contribution to the literature of the Frontier Army. Although the author does not shed new light on Custer and his controversial last battle, he does offer insights on the soldiers of the Montana Column in the 1876 campaign.

This book thus becomes more than the story of Frederick Server when it outlines the settlement of Montana Territory and the Great Sioux War of 1876. If there is a major criticism, it is the fact that Server the soldier often disappears in the author's detailed recital of events, a common practice of biographers when few details of their "main character" are known. Server becomes submerged, for example, in the coverage of the Montana Column and almost disappears. The "life" of Server then becomes the *times* of Server.

Moreover, review by a subject matter expert prior to publication would have corrected erroneous citations, dates and other facts and source interpretations, notably in the chapter on the Montana Column. A case in point is George Herendeen, a civilian with Gibbon, and a statement attributed to that scout.

Herendeen had been a member of the heavily armed civilian expedition from Bozeman to the Rosebud valley in 1874. Ross states: "Pursuing the Sioux and their Cheyenne allies in an effort to drive them from the Yellowstone valley, they headed up the Rosebud and attacked the Indians at the big bend of the river."

However, Herendeen (in the source cited) clearly recalled: "The purpose of our expedition was to prospect it [Rosebud valley] and explore." The Lakota had, in fact, attacked first, a natural reaction to the "invasion" of their territory.

Nevertheless, this book is a long overdue biography of a dedicated soldier and astute recorder who first discovered the bloody field at Little Big Horn yet lived in the shadow of those larger events that shaped that controversy.

Author Rickard Ross will be a presenter at our 2014 Symposium. Lee Noyes contributed to this review by Rev. Vincent A. Heier.