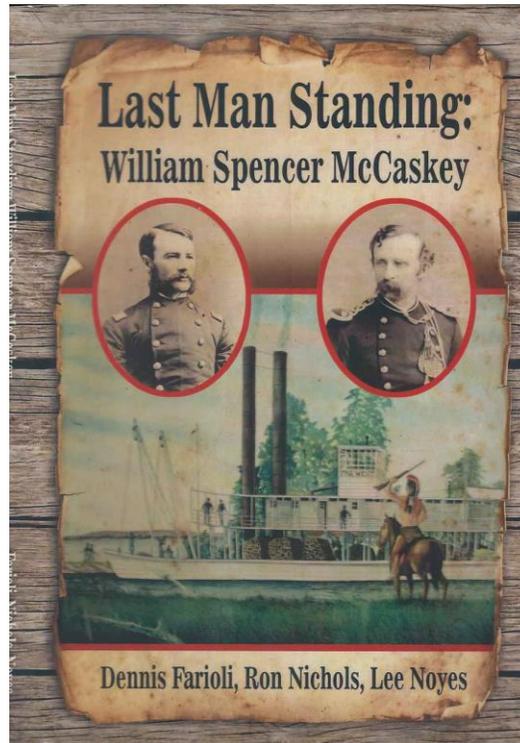


CBHMA BOOK REVIEW

By Rev. Vincent A. Heier



Last Man Standing: William Spencer McCaskey

By Dennis Farioli, Ron Nichols and Lee Noyes

Fort Collins, CO: Old Army Press, 2014 Pp. 141, table of contents, preface, introduction, addendum, appendices, index, softcover, \$22.00

“Six degrees of separation” is an expression that denotes how connected human beings can be. Certainly that could be true of the post-Civil War U.S. Army. It was a small world and for those who study the personalities connected to the Little Big Horn it can be even smaller.

Now we have a short yet comprehensive biography of one of these personalities: General William Spencer McCaskey (1843-1914). His story became known to one of the authors, Dennis Farioli, who had purchased a letter by this soldier and remembered that McCaskey might be connected to George Armstrong Custer. With the assistance of fellow author Ron Nichols, he contacted McCaskey’s great-grandson, Henry H. Chapman, who provided photos, letters and family history. What they discovered was an individual who had played a small but notable role in the Little Big Horn story whose distinguished service as a soldier needed to be told.

In 1876 McCaskey, a captain in the 20th U.S. Infantry, was the commander of Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory after Custer and the 7th Cavalry had departed on their ill-fated *rendezvous* with

destiny. On July 6 (accompanied by other officers of the post), he informed Elizabeth Custer of the death of her husband and those of his command at the Little Big Horn. Among the dead was the second lieutenant of his own company, John J. Crittenden. McCaskey would confess that this was the most difficult duty he had ever performed. Mrs. Custer would thank him “for your sympathy and consideration for me in my sorrow.”

William Spencer McCaskey was the third of seven children born to a farm family in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In addition to chores, he and his siblings learned to read at an early age. Joining local militia (the “Lancaster Fencibles”), he considered life as a soldier “glorious.”

The Civil War profoundly affected young McCaskey. In 1861 he joined the 79th Pennsylvania Infantry as the first sergeant of his company and was promoted to captain in that volunteer regiment by 1862. He and his unit fought throughout the war in Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia and North Carolina. The authors’ access to his extensive correspondence and military service file enabled them to paint a detailed picture, not so much of battles but of the actions, attitudes and responses of someone who literally grew up through the war.

When the war ended, McCaskey returned home to Lancaster but the life of a soldier beckoned. Commissioned as a second lieutenant in the 13th U.S. Infantry in 1866, he began his service in the West. At Fort Randall, Dakota Territory he experienced Indians for the first time. After marriage he saw service in Minnesota as well as Dakota. Promoted to captain in the 20th Infantry, he was ordered to command Fort Abraham Lincoln in 1876. His favorable impressions of Custer and General Alfred H. Terry at that time reflected his first-hand contact with the major characters of the Little Big Horn.

After Little Big Horn, McCaskey remained in the Army even though he felt that further promotion eluded him. After spending two years on recruiting duty in New York City, he returned to the West. Finally in 1895 he attained the rank of major in the 20th Infantry. McCaskey served with distinction in the Spanish-American War and the Philippines, leading to promotions to lieutenant colonel and colonel of his regiment.

Shortly after the arrival of the 20th Infantry for a second tour of duty in the Philippines in 1904, he learned that he had been promoted to brigadier general. Retiring as a major general in 1907, William Spencer McCaskey had seen and done it all. His service to the nation was unquestioned and his devotion to his wife and children was inspiring.

Despite being a small volume, *Last Man Standing* is full of original photos. With excellent endnotes and interesting appendices, the book is a welcome addition for students of both the Civil War and Indian Wars *and* for those who esteem the valiant soldiers who have served our nation.

While most Custer students might easily pass over McCaskey as a mere historical footnote, we should be grateful for the authors’ diligence in fleshing out this brave and dedicated soldier.

Rev. Vincent A. Heier

General McCaskey was a topic at the 2014 CBHMA Symposium.