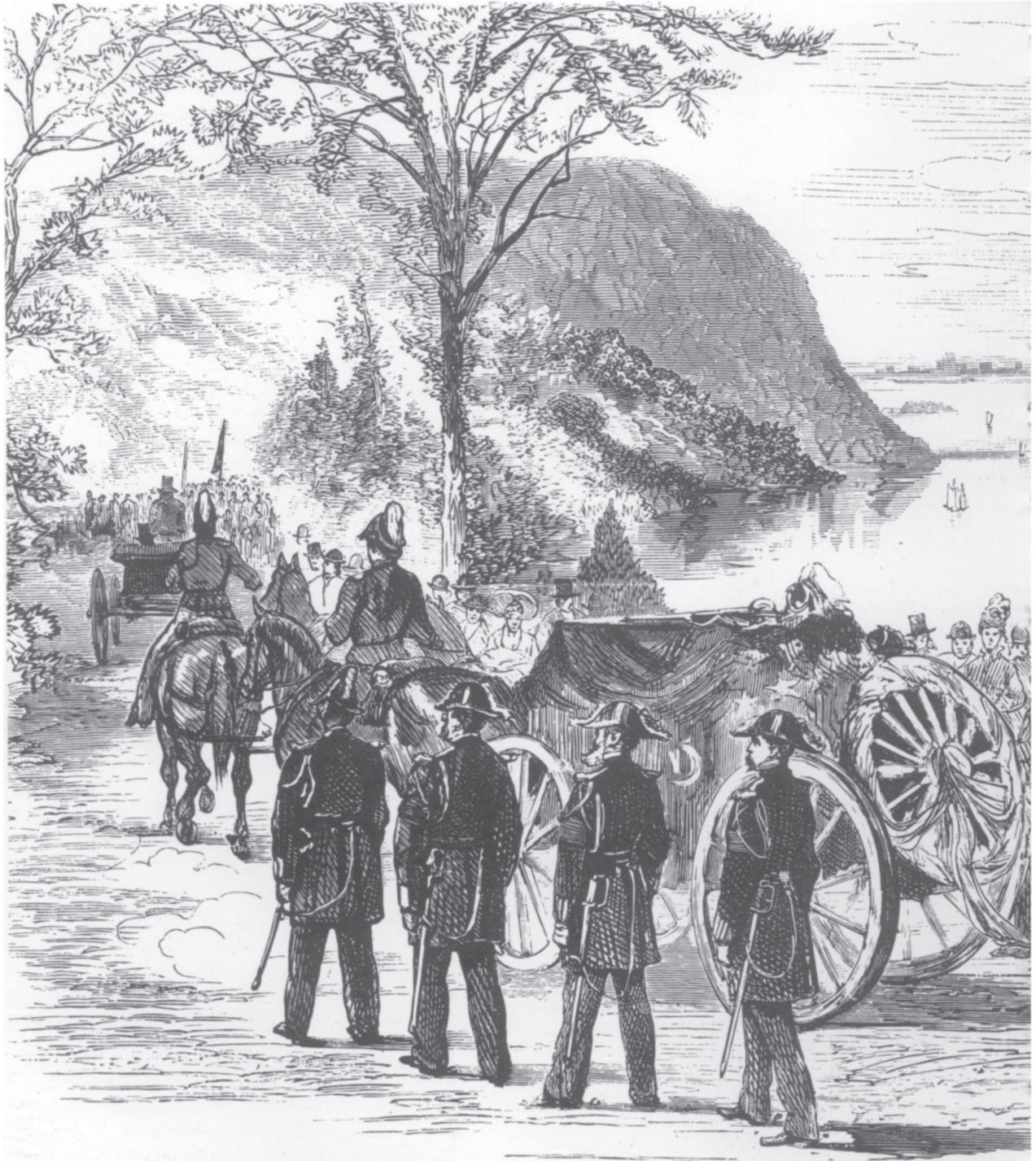


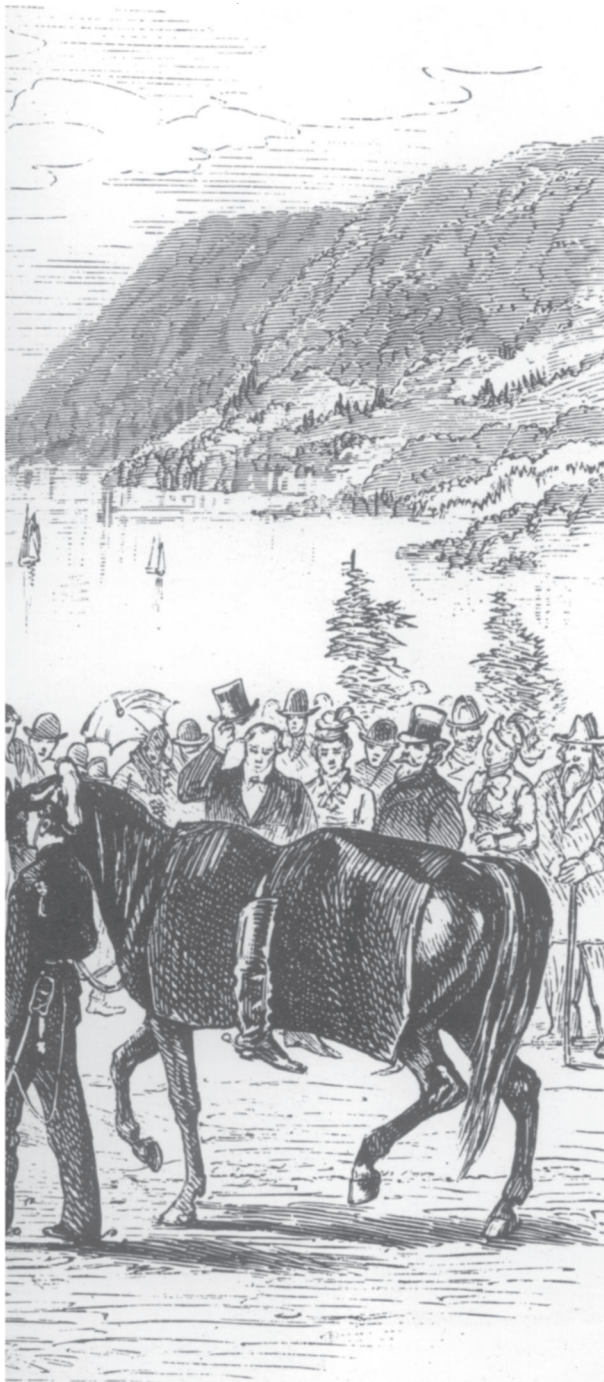
The Custer Battle and



FUNERAL PROCESSION OF GENERAL CUSTER, WEST POINT, 1877

Widow's Weeds

by EDGAR I. STEWART



(Harper's Weekly, Oct. 27, 1877)

WHILE NEWS OF THE CUSTER TRAGEDY shocked and horrified the nation, there was one group for whom it was nothing less than unmitigated personal disaster. This group was composed of the wives and children of the men who died on the brown, windy slopes of Montana's Little Big Horn nearly 93 years ago. Never affluent, they now faced stark financial deprivation.

While the wives of enlisted men were often employed as laundresses or servants at the army posts, wives of the officers rarely had any personal income. With the death of their husbands, they lost all claim, even to the quarters they occupied. Moreover, as Mrs. Custer was later to write in her book, *Boots and Saddles*, they literally lost their identity so far as the army was concerned. Regulations made no provisions for them or their children. They were considered "camp followers," with no official rights.

True to the traditions of the Old Army, however, unofficial steps were soon taken to alleviate the situation of the Custer widows and children, many of them reported in the *Army and Navy Journal*, whose files have been widely used in this article.

It was just slightly a month after the battle that *The Journal*, in its issue of July 29, 1876, published a story headed A WOMAN'S RELIEF FUND. Contained in the article was the text of a letter received by Colonel Thomas L. Crittenden, commanding the Seventeenth Infantry with headquarters at Fort Abercrombie, upstream from Fargo, Dakota Territory. The letter came from Seventh Cavalry headquarters at Fort Abraham Lincoln, the post near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota, from which men of the Seventh Cavalry had ridden out on the morning of May 17, 1876, to keep their desperate rendezvous with the Sioux and Cheyenne.

"The sorrow and suffering caused among the widows and orphans of [this] post by the death of the officers and soldiers are indescribable," the letter said. Twenty-four helpless women and "twice that number of children" were said to have been left in poverty by the Sioux massacre, and did not know which way to turn for relief.

"Their wants have not even been recognized by Congress," the text went on to say, "and the small pension which may eventually be granted will require months to determine. Such relief as can be given at Fort Lincoln will be generously bestowed but the latter days are not so full of promise."

The publishers of *The Army and Navy Journal* fully endorsed the sentiments expressed in the letter, adding that the time when relief should be extended to the widows and children had undoubtedly arrived: "Such sudden and unexpected bereavement never before fell to the lot of one regiment and we are sure that every officer and soldier who reads the above will gladly alleviate to the best of his ability the deep distress of the helpless ones."

Stating that they had already received more than a hundred dollars in an earlier appeal, *The Journal* now began an earnest campaign to secure contributions, despite the fact that similar movements had been organized by some of the newspapers.

The Army and Navy Journal, however, directed its appeal to members of the armed forces, promising that upon receipt of contributions in the editor's office, the next edition would carry "the names of individuals, companies, regiments or posts as desired."

Up to August 3, according to an item in the next issue of *The Journal*, over \$900.00 had been received, some of which had been sent to General Phil Sheridan for immediate distribution among the cases of greatest need. The largest single donation was for \$500.00, made by the Philadelphia firm of sugar refiners, McKean, Newhall and Borie.

In its issue of August 12, *The Journal* said that "nearly every class to whom an appeal has been made has responded most liberally," and that during the week more than \$500.00 more had been received, bringing the aggregate to \$1,462.81. That week's receipts had included \$50.00 from "General Meade and Colonel George Meade,"¹ and \$100.00 from Colonel DeLancy Floyd-Jones of the Third Infantry. Lieutenant Charles Braden of the Seventh Cavalry, permanently disabled on the Yellowstone Expedition of 1873, had, despite his own needs, contributed \$5.00.

¹ Since General George Meade of Civil War fame had died in 1872, this was undoubtedly a memorial by his son, Colonel George Meade.

MOST OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS WERE from Army personnel and ranged in amounts from \$20.00 to fifty cents, contributed by "a private of artillery." Besides reporting contributions, *The Journal* also took advantage of the opportunity to editorialize in favor of the Army Life Assurance scheme, which, while receiving some favorable attention in Congress, had not yet been enacted into law. *The Journal* now felt that this system, which allowed army officers to provide for the payment of an annuity to their widows and children by a specified monthly deduction from pay, should be revived and pushed to immediate enactment.

On August 19, *The Journal* reported many more contributions, including several from Navy units. Most of the contributions were small, but there was one for \$100.00 from the garrison at Fort Lyon, Colorado, and one for \$55.00 from the Third Infantry. The publication also said that Mr. Potter Palmer of the famed Palmer House of Chicago had sent \$250.00 "directly to General Sheridan."

The next week, the editors were able to report that the number, variety and amount of the contributions to the "widow's cruse of oil and barrel of meal" continued to increase, and that the receipts for the week were more than double those of the week before. The oldest contributor was said to be more than 90 years old and still remembered when he carried a rifle in the Black Hawk War.

The Chicago and Northwestern Railway Company was reported to be offering free transportation to widows and orphans from St. Paul to Chicago, either in one party or "in any way deemed best," and the Western Union was forwarding telegrams free of charge. Major T. H. Norton, retired from the U. S. Army, had given a lecture at Wheeling, West Virginia, for the benefit of the fund, *The Journal* reported in its issue of August 26, and \$71.00 had been derived.

Subsequent issues of the military publication indicate that contributions continued to come in, some weeks the receipts being much heavier than others, which caused the editors to suspect that the "recency" of a visit from the paymaster had something to do with it.

BY SEPTEMBER 16, 1876, THE FUND had reached an aggregate of \$5,057.50. In its issue of that date, *The Journal* published an excerpt from a letter written by the widow of one of the officers killed at the Little Big Horn, in which, speaking for



Some of the ladies who were to become widows as the result of the Custer Battle are pictured here with husbands and friends at Fort Abraham Lincoln in 1874. On the lower step, right, is George Custer, while his wife, Libbie, is standing in the background in the doorway. Seated next to her is her sister-in-law, Mrs. Margaret Custer Calhoun. The man in the back row with hands behind his back is Mrs. Calhoun's husband, Lt. James Calhoun. Others in the picture are Lt. Tom Custer, lower left, with Miss Emma Wadsworth between the Custer brothers.

photo courtesy

Custer Battlefield Nat. Monument

three of the bereaved ladies, she said: "We beg to assure you of our appreciation of your remembrance of us, but we particularly desire that our share of the fund so generously raised, be given to the widows and orphans of the enlisted men. Many of them sorely need assistance, and you cannot imagine what a Godsend any help will be."

There is no record of compliance with this suggestion, but it seems certain that the three ladies were Mrs. Custer, Mrs. George Yates, and Mrs. Custer's sister-in-law, Mrs. James Calhoun. All three widows were from the town of Monroe, Michigan, and all of them were beneficiaries of life insurance policies which their husbands had taken out at Fort Abraham Lincoln in 1874 through I. F. A. Studdart, agent for the New York Life Insurance Company.

Other Seventh Cavalry officers who had policies with the same company were Captain Myles Keogh of Troop I, with himself as beneficiary; First Lieu-

tenant James E. Porter, also of Troop I, whose beneficiary was his wife, and Second Lieutenant John J. Crittenden, who was regularly attached to the Twentieth Infantry but who was on detached service with the Seventh Cavalry. His beneficiary was his mother. All policies had a face value of \$5,000 but in accordance with the practice of the time, if the insured was killed in the military service, the policy was discounted five per cent. So each beneficiary received a total of \$4,750.00.

Mrs. Custer was apparently the beneficiary of another policy on her husband's life. Probably in late December, 1876, she wrote to the Secretary of the Michigan Department, Life Association of America, requesting that he express her thanks to the officers of the Association "for the prompt payment of the policy General Custer had provided for me. I could only multiply words in attempting to say how very much I appreciated the insurance."



CAPTAIN GEORGE W. YATES

LIEUTENANT JAMES CALHOUN



MEANWHILE, THERE WERE OTHER organizations raising funds for a memorial to General Custer, one for the purpose of erecting a monument. In its issue of September 23, 1876, the *Army and Navy Journal* quoted, with approval, from an article on General Custer in the *London Saturday Review* which, it said, "shows more sense and a trifle less vinegar than usual with the *Review* when discussing things American."

The article in the British magazine, after noting that a subscription suggested for a monument to General Custer was to take the form of a provision for his widow went on to observe, "... our correspondent thinks that he [Custer] would have preferred bread for her to a stone for himself, and we concur in that opinion, particularly considering that the stone might possibly assume some hideous shape or bear some extravagant inscription. Lately some of our own efforts in this direction have taken the safe and useful form of scholarships or the wings of hospitals. The Americans, like ourselves, are better at doing things than commemorating them. The same sensible writer who prefers bread to stone remembers that during the late war many officers were complimented with swords when their children needed shoes."

In its issue of November 4, *The Journal*, after stating that the contributions to the fund had come from three principal sources—generous patriotic people in civil life, enlisted men in the army, and commissioned officers in the Army and Navy, and mentioning that some of the money received had already been expended to meet pressing necessities—announced that a plan for distributing the proceeds of the fund had been agreed upon.

The distribution, it was said, would conform closely to the rate according to rank set by pension laws: \$30.00 a month for rank of Lieutenant Colonel or above; \$25.00 a month for Major; \$20.00 for Captain; \$17.00 for First Lieutenant, and \$15.00 for Second Lieutenant. Monthly rate for enlisted men was \$8.00, while for each child under age sixteen, one fourth of the amount of the base pension was added.

All the money received from enlisted men, as well as "all of the contributions from other sources which were specifically designated by the contributors for widows and orphans of enlisted men falls to that class of sufferers," said *The Journal* in its November 4 issue. The remainder was divided among the families of the fallen officers.

The enlisted men leaving widows and children under sixteen years of age were listed as: Henry Dorr, Company G, wife and two children; Frank Hughes, Company L, wife and three children; A. (for Archibald) McIlhargy, Company I, wife and one child; Sergeant J. K. Wilkinson, Company F, wife; John Kelly, Company F, wife and three children; Thomas N. Way, Company F, wife; First Sergeant Edwin Bobo, Company C, wife and two children; Jeremiah Finley, Company C, wife and two children; Sergeant Robert Hughes, Company K, wife and three children; John Mitchell, Company I, wife and two children; First Sergeant Fred Hohe-meyer, Company E, wife and three children; Trum-peter Thomas McElroy, Company E, wife and one child; William B. Crisfield, Company E, wife and three children.

The Journal announced that, in default of further information, the distribution of the enlisted men's fund would be restricted to the families of these men, and that every precaution would be taken to insure that the money reached the persons for whom it was intended.

Contributions continued to arrive. From Prescott, Arizona, General A. V. Kautz sent in the sum of \$303.00, the proceeds of a "Grand Amateur Vocal and Instrumental Concert." From the various posts in Montana, General John Gibbon, a part of whose command had participated in the campaign in which Custer lost his life, wired \$368.00, while Company K of the Twentieth Infantry, stationed at Fort Totten, on Devils Lake in Dakota, where companies of the Seventh Cavalry had been stationed before the campaign, subscribed \$53.00.

By November 25, 1876, the amount received totaled more than \$10,000.00. On the fifteenth a circular was prepared stating that it was intended to send \$4,150.00 to the widows and orphans of the enlisted men killed at the Little Big Horn. This would give \$200.00 to the widow of each enlisted man, and a fourth of that amount to each child. These donations were said to cover the amount contributed by enlisted personnel, and at the same time to conform very closely to the proportion between officers and men established by the pension laws. The remainder of the fund was to go to the widows and orphans of the officers, "in proportion fixed by the pension law," and to the amount assigned each widow was to be added one quarter of the amount for each child.

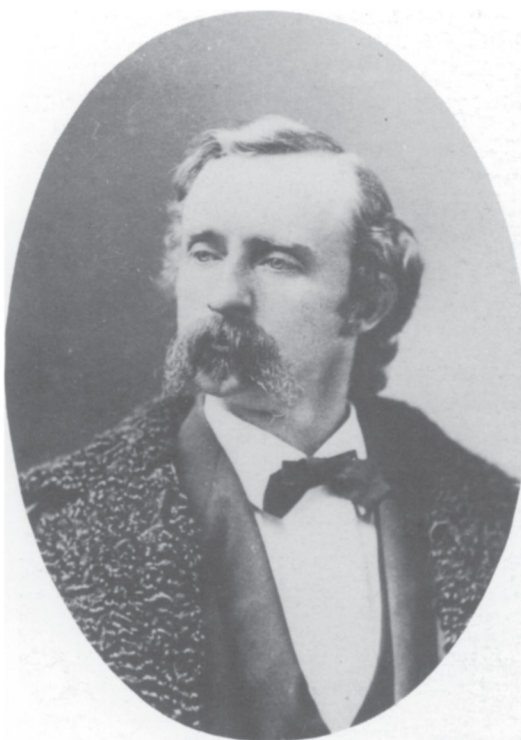
The amounts assigned to the widows of the officers were listed like this: 1 Lieutenant Colonel,



MRS. ELIZABETH CUSTER, 1874

photos courtesy
Custer Battlefield Nat. Monument

GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER, 1874





GENERAL CUSTER'S OPEN GRAVE, WEST POINT, 1877

(Harper's Weekly, Oct. 27, 1877)

no children, \$900; 1 captain, three children, \$1,050; 1 First Lieutenant, two children, \$765; 4 First Lieutenants, no children, \$510, and 1 Second Lieutenant, two children, \$765.²

There is one significant omission in the above lists: the widow of Dr. James M. DeWolf, who was with Reno's battalion and was killed during the retreat to the bluffs. Dr. DeWolf was a civilian contract surgeon with the expedition and apparently was not considered an officer, although he seems to have been considered as such during the march from Fort Lincoln. Neither was he an enlisted man, and so Mrs. DeWolf was not provided for in the distribution.

Another point of considerable interest is that all of the enlisted men who left widows and orphans were apparently killed with Custer, with the possible exception of Henry Dose (or Dorr) who was a member of Troop G. But such is by

no means certain, since there had been a great deal of shifting of personnel between companies. Thus both Privates McIlhargy and Mitchell were members of Troop I which was with Custer. Both of them rode into battle with Reno's battalion, and they were the two men used as messengers to Custer by Major Reno. Similarly, Sergeant Robert Hughes was a member of Troop K, which was with Benteen, but he carried Custer's battleflag and so was with that commander. Private Elihu F. Clear, (sometimes listed as Clare), who was one of the best shots in the regiment, was serving with Reno's battalion as orderly to Dr. DeWolf when he lost his life, although he, too, was a member of Troop K.

Even after the distribution, contributions continued to come in. On February 3, the aggregate of the fund was \$13,093.75, of which \$9,820 had already been distributed, leaving a balance of \$3,273.75, still to be apportioned among those entitled to benefit by it.

On April 28, 1877, the *Army and Navy Journal* reported receipt of nearly \$600.00 from the companies of the Fifth and Twenty-Second Infantry regiments, serving on the Yellowstone, the one based at Tongue River and the other at Glendive. Of this amount Matt Carroll, who had been master of

² The widow of the captain with three children was Mrs. George W. Yates. He commanded Troop F, was a fellow townsman of Custer, and had served with him during the Civil War. The First Lieutenant who left a wife and two children I have been unable to identify, but it was either Algernon E. Smith or J. E. Porter. Smith was regularly assigned to Troop A but commanded Troop E at the Little Big Horn. Porter was the regular lieutenant of Troop I. The Second Lieutenant leaving a wife and two children was Henry Harrington of Troop G.

transportation to the Montana Column, gave \$50.00. The contribution was accompanied by the explanation that the troops had been so constantly in the field that an earlier response had been impossible.

From Fort Buford, headquarters of the Sixth Infantry, came \$175.00. Of this amount, the post traders, Leighton and Jordan, had given \$25.00, while Colonel W. B. Hazen, who had had his difficulties with Custer in the past, was listed as personally contributing \$10.00.

Most of the other officers gave \$5.00, while the contributions from enlisted men were usually one or two dollars each.

From the Headquarters Staff, and Companies A, B, F and I, of the Fifth Cavalry, Colonel Wesley Merritt's regiment at Fort D. A. Russell came to nearly \$300.00. During the Civil War, a spirited but not too acrimonious rivalry had existed between Merritt and Custer.

Following the first distribution, according to *The Journal* of December 2, 1876, Mrs. Custer had written: "I can find no words suitable to express my appreciation of the evidence I have received of the sympathy of the Army and Navy. When the heart feels deeply words come slowly and seem constrained and cold. I can only beg you, through the medium of your paper, to thank them for me in your own language."

And in the same issue it was reported that the wife of another officer had written: "I hardly know how to express thanks enough to those who have been so kind and generous. The help I have received will be of great use to me in helping to educate my children, so they will, I hope, be a credit to their brave, young father."

ALTHOUGH CONTRIBUTIONS GRADUALLY decreased in number and in amount, they did not entirely cease. *The Journal* had hopefully announced that a final distribution would be made on the first of March, 1877, and requested that all contributions be in by that date. But it was not until the issue of November 17 of that year that the editor was able to report a final accounting. The total amount received was given as \$14,068.35. Of this \$7,476.50 was paid to the widows and orphans of the officers, while \$5,772.43 was distributed to the families of the enlisted men. The amount of \$810.00 had been paid by General Phil Sheridan directly to families in particular and immediate need, and the extremely modest sum of \$9.42 had been charged to sundry expense.

Once again, as it had done so many times in the past, and was to do many times in the future, the Old Army had lived up to its traditions and had taken care of its own.

The Army and Navy Journal expressed it best, perhaps, in its issue of June 30, 1877, when it said that the contributors would be more than satisfied if they could read all the letters of acknowledgment of the final settlement, and added: "The ladies included in the distribution have, in all cases, been greatly assisted, and in some cases saved from embarrassment with which we have been made acquainted, but to which delicacy forbids that we should specifically refer. One and all of them request that we should make known to the contributors how deeply they have been touched by the kindness shown them in this expression of comradeship, which is one of the noblest features of Army life."

EDGAR IRVING STEWART has appeared in these columns on at least a dozen occasions, writing on many facets of the Custer Battle, the events which preceded it and, in the present article, on one deeply personal aftermath. As we were preparing for this publication, we were informed of Dr. Stewart's death, on November 24, 1971, at Vancouver, Washington. Thus one of the last articles he wrote becomes, for us, a farewell to a valued colleague in the field of Western History. A native of Michigan, Edgar Stewart was the grandson of two men who served under George Armstrong Custer during the Civil War, and thus he developed a personal interest in the colorful commander early in life, an interest he carried through his long academic career. Holder of A.B. and M.A. degrees from the University of Washington, he earned his doctorate in history from the University of California. He was on the history faculty for many years at Eastern Washington State College in Cheney, retiring several years ago as Distinguished Emeritus Professor of History. Recently, he and his wife, Jane, also a competent writer and editor in the field, with whom he often collaborated, had made their home in Vancouver. Dr. Stewart is perhaps best known for his authoritative study, *Custer's Luck*, published in 1955 by The University of Oklahoma Press. But there have been many things from the Stewart pen and research, the most recent being *Penny-an-Acre Empire in the West*, which describes the conflict over western land values between George Custer and his military contemporary, William B. Hazen. The Montana Historical Society, which has become the repository for Dr. Stewart's library and research records, has benefited for many years from his well-reasoned counsels. We will miss him.

