

THOMAS J. STOWERS

Source: Putnam County, Tennessee 1850-1970 by Mary Jean DeLozier

Pg. 50 – 52: War's Legacy



In the South, Tennessee, and Putnam County, the legacy of the Civil War and Reconstruction was a bitter one. It engendered hatred between Union and Confederate sympathizers which was to last for generations. As time passed the “Lost Cause” was glorified here and elsewhere in the South. Innumerable Confederate reunions, decoration days, political celebrations, and parades recalled a past that was – and never was, exalted the ex-Confederates, and deprecated the Yankees and those who sympathized with them. For Thomas Stowers, who had served in the Union Army, the antipathy toward him caused a strange twist in his life.

According to family tradition, when Stowers returned to Putnam County after

the war, the hostility of his neighbors in the Baxter area caused him to reenlist in the United States Army. He was assigned to a cavalry unit headed by General George A. Custer. In 1876 Custer was ordered to put down a Sioux uprising in South Dakota and Montana. He headed out with a small cavalry unit which included Stowers. The Putnam Countian however, in order to adjust a stirrup, pulled his horse from line and as punishment was ordered back to camp. Stowers thus missed the Battle of the Little Big Horn in which Custer and 265 other soldiers died. The lucky cavalryman later returned to Putnam County where he lived out his life and was buried in the Oddfellows cemetery in Baxter. The misleading inscription on the tombstone identifies him as the “sole survivor of the Battle of Little Big Horn.”



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“SOLE SURVIVOR OF GEN. CUSTER’S MASSACRE, JUNE 25, 1876”?

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This inscription on the tombstone of Thomas J. Stowers, in the Odd Fellow Cemetery east of Baxter, Tennessee, at the junction of the Buffalo Valley Road and the North-South Highway, is hard for most people to understand. The full inscription is, **“Thos. J. Stowers, Dec 3, 1848 – July 26, 1933 Enlisted**

Sept 3, 1864, Private, Co. D, 199 Regiment. Served in 7th Cavalry after Civil War. Sole survivor of Gen. Custer's Massacre, June 25, 1876.

Did this man from Tennessee survive Gen. Custer's Massacre, the most famous massacre in history?



Some Baxter residents still remember Thomas J. Stowers as a thin bald man, who lived with his sister and niece Mrs. Emily Watts. Totally deaf, he stayed mostly in his own room, where he read mystery novels and other books from his large collection. He would sometimes spend hours talking about his army days to local historian W. T. Sewell. Though he never married, he is survived by a number of grandnieces and grandnephews that remember Uncle Thomas J. Stowers war stories.

Mrs. Emily Watts recounts these events from Thomas J. Stowers stays and visits with her and her mother. "Uncle Tom was born in

1848 and too young to enlist in the Confederate Army. His older brother, John Turner Stowers, lost a leg while in the Confederate Army and had a wooden leg the rest of his life."

"When Uncle Tom was 15, he ran away from home to look for Uncle John. The Union Army found him and conscripted him into the Union Army even though he wanted to be a Confederate." Uncle Tom in telling the story in later years, would laugh and say that, whenever he was supposed to be firing at the Rebels, he would always shoot straight up in the air because he was afraid of hitting his brother. After his discharge, June 28, 1865, Thomas returned home from the war. His brother was chopping wood in the yard, "You can stay for supper," his brother said, "but you better be gone by sundown, I left a leg in the war and won't have you staying here."

The family indicates that Thomas J. Stowers reenlisted after the war because of hostility from family and neighbors for having served with the North. He returned to service in December 1, 1874 in Chicago and served in Company B of the Seventh Cavalry. Thomas did not claim that he was "sole survivor". His explanation was that he got drunk on the night before Custer and the others broke camp, and was placed in the guard wagon. In relating the story to family he would say, "If I had not gotten drunk that night, I would have been killed with Custer and the others."

In 1876, the army set out to force the last free-roaming Sioux and Northern Cheyenne Indians to move into reservations. On May 17, General Alfred Terry left Ft. Lincoln, Dakota, with a column that included the Seventh Cavalry. When they reached the junction of the Rosebud and Yellowstone Rivers in Montana, they were joined by Colonel John Gibbon's column. On June 21, the officers met to plan how they were going to find and destroy the large Indian encampment believed to lie somewhere on the Little Big Horn River. It was decided that Custer's regiment would march up the Rosebud, then cross over and approach the village from the south. Terry and Gibbon would move up the Yellowstone and approach from the north, hoping to arrive in time to assist Custer.

Custer marched out the next day. At dawn on the fourth day, June 25th, his scouts discovered the rising smoke campfires over in the Little Big Horn valley. Custer intended to wait and advance under the cover of darkness, but his plan was abandoned when he learned that the Indians had discovered his presence. Fearing they would break camp and escape, he decided to push forward immediately. While still fifteen miles from the village, Custer split up his twelve companies. One was assigned to escort the slow-moving pack mules. Three other companies, under Captain Frederick Benteen, were sent to look for Indians to the

left. Custer then led the remaining companies towards the village. As they neared the river two hours later, he ordered Major Marcus Reno forward with three companies to open the attack. While Reno crossed the river, Custer turned downstream with the last five companies to strike the lower end of the village.

As he neared the village, Reno halted and deployed his men to fight the Indians swarming out to meet him. Finding himself badly outnumbered and not knowing where Custer had gone, Reno decided to retreat to the bluffs across the river. When his battered command reached the top, Benteen's men joined it. The Indians broke off their pursuit and rushed downstream. Though heavy fighting could be heard downstream, Reno decided to wait for the packs to arrive before looking for Custer. Impatient with the delay, one company moved out without orders. When they reached a high point, they could see the Indians two or three miles away, riding around and firing at objects on the ground. When the other companies arrived, Reno and Benteen decided to go no further but to return to their starting place on the bluffs. Presuming that Custer had been driven off and had perhaps gone down river to meet Terry, Reno formed a circular defense to meet the Indians, who now hurried back to resume their attack. Despite strong assaults the rest of the day, and most of the next day, Reno held his position.

The Indians finally gave up and moved off to the south. On June 27th, Terry and Gibbon arrived, bringing the news that they had found the bodies of Custer's five companies four miles downstream. The next day, they buried the 210 men who died with Custer and the 53 who died with Reno. The wounded were loaded on litters, and on June 29th the combined command moved back to the supply steamer waiting at the mouth of the Little Big Horn.

Though he certainly was not the "sole survivor," this does not discredit the rest of his story. His name appears on the June 30 muster roll, which proves he was on the campaign with Custer. In addition, on July 4, he signed a petition to have the fallen officers replaced by men from within the regiment.

Military Records and records from the Western History Association provide the following facts:

Thomas J. Stowers, 7th Cavalry. Enlisted Sept. 3, 1864 at Norristown, PA as Private, Company D, 119th PA Infantry. Discharged June 1865. Enlisted 7th Cavalry December 1, 1874 in Chicago-joined Company B. At Little Big Horn Company B under Captain Thomas McDougall was left to the rear to guard the pack train, they joined Major Reno after his valley fight and were besieged on the bluffs for a day until rescued by General Terry's command.

While Thomas J. Stowers was not the "sole survivor", he witnessed and took part in some important national and historical events, and lived to relate some of the story from his fading memory.

He was appointed Corporal, March 7, 1879, and was discharged in November 30, 1879.

His army pension included disability pay for deafness, which he always believed was caused by the roar of artillery fire in the war. In 1918, he entered the National Military Home in Dayton, Ohio. From there, he took summer furloughs to visit his sister's family in Baxter. In about 1931, he moved in with them, where he lived until his death on July 25, 1933.

Thank you, cousin!

*See The truth about Thomas J. Stowers:

Herald Citizen Newspaper, Cookville, TN:

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