

The truth about Thomas J. Stowers – or part of it

Jill Thomas

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Was Thomas J. Stowers of Baxter really the 'only survivor' of the Battle of the Little Bighorn -- 'Custer's Last Stand'?

According to the notation on his tombstone in the Odd Fellows' Cemetery off Buffalo Valley Road, just east of Baxter, he is.

But the old soldier's great-great nephew, Ron Whitehead of Baxter, laughs and says: "Well, Uncle Tom wasn't above stretching the truth." *Pictured left is Thomas J. Stowers, photo by Shawn Sidwell.*

A 30-year-old newspaper article from the Herald-Citizen quotes Stowers' niece, Emily Watts, as saying that each year at Christmas time Stowers would retell the story.

A more recent article in the H-C, published this past Sept. 5th, recounts the Stowers legend which some apparently accept as fact.

The tombstone, placed in Odd Fellows Cemetery at the time of Stowers' death in 1933, briefly reports that story and has apparently been the basis of most of the mythology surrounding the man who did in fact serve in both the Civil War and the Sioux Wars later in the 19th century.

But Ron Whitehead has been digging into the story, researching his great-great-uncle's history -- and indeed finding some surprises.

"The true story about Uncle Tom is better than the ones that were made up," he said.

Thomas James Stowers and his older brother, John Turner Stowers, were born in Baxter or that area in the 1840s. When the Civil War started, John joined the Confederate Army but Tom was only 13. In 1864, though, Tom couldn't wait any more and the 15-year-old went to join his brother.

But according to Whitehead, northern soldiers captured Stowers and inducted him into the Union Army.

"The records say he enlisted in Morristown, Penn.

"Pennsylvania! There's no way he was ever in Pennsylvania when he was that young," Whitehead said.

"I think the story of forced conscription is still one to be written. You might say it has been a 140-year government cover up," he said.

At any rate, the younger Stowers as a Union soldier found himself between a rock and a very hard place because his brother was somewhere fighting as a soldier on the Southern side.

"My great-grandmother said that Uncle Tom said he never fired at the enemy during the war because he was afraid he'd be firing on his brother. He'd shoot above their heads or into the earth," Whitehead said.

Apparently this ploy didn't impress Tom's brother who had lost a leg at the Battle of Atlanta.

And the fact that Thomas Stowers was present at Appomattox as part of the Union Army when Lee surrendered did nothing to close the rift between the two brothers.

According to family members, the two never made up, and records indicate that big brother John moved to Nashville after the war. Little brother Tom is reputed to have stayed with his sister in Baxter for a while, but was apparently 'encouraged' to leave Putnam County by Southern sympathizers displeased that he had fought with the Yankees.

"According to Mary Jean DeLozier, author of the history, *Putnam County, Tennessee -- 1850-1870*, the hostility of neighbors and family caused Uncle Tom to reenlist in the United States Army," Whitehead said.

But where he spent his time between 1865 and 1874, when he wasn't being thrown out of Baxter, is one of the continuing mysteries about Thomas Stowers' life.

"There's an ongoing thread through my uncle's life relating to Pennsylvania. He fought in the Civil War as a private with Company D in the 199th Pennsylvania Regiment. It may be that the men he fought with became his friends and he went up north to see them when he had to leave Baxter," Whitehead said.

But records show that Stowers was in Chicago when he reenlisted using a new name, James Thomas, and giving his place of birth as Bucks County, Pa.

"A lot of men changed their names when they enlisted," Whitehead said.

"Usually it was to get away from family members or creditors."

Custer's Last Stand

So, in 1874, Thomas Stowers, aka: James Thomas, rode out to Ft. Lincoln, Nebraska, to serve under the authority of Gen. George Armstrong Custer who had been making his reputation as an Indian fighter.

On June 25, 1876, with Capt. Frederick W. Benteen and Major Marcus A. Reno and their troops, Custer headed into the plains of Montana to round up some Sioux and Cheyenne to put them on reservations.

Depending on which source you read, before the battle Stowers:

- * Was drunk, was tossed in a wagon to dry out and was still there when the soldiers left the next day for the Little Big Horn;
- * Hid under a big iron cooking pot and was overlooked by the Indians;
- * Pulled his horse out of line to adjust a stirrup before the battle and was sent away from Custer's company to serve with Reno as a punishment;
- * Or was a bugle boy who adjusted his stirrup and was sent away.

According to official records, though, none of these stories is true. Stowers was assigned to the pack train bringing ammunition and supplies under Maj. Reno and, along with over 130 other soldiers, was pinned down for 36 hours on Reno Ridge by Indians who were protecting Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull as they attacked Custer about four miles away.

For whatever reason, that group of soldiers was not wiped out but one officer was killed, two enlisted men were killed and five men were wounded.

It's on the official record at the US National Park Service that, sometime after the attack ended, Stowers was one of the men assigned to bury the remains of the soldiers under Custer's command who had been killed by Sioux warriors.

What's not on the record is where the native Tennessean spent the next 40 years after he was honorably discharged "as a corporal of excellent character" from the Army in 1879.

As far as anyone has been able to learn, Stowers never married.

No one knows where he lived or what work he did but on sketchy records that have been found, he was listed as a laborer and then as a farmer.

Whitehead doesn't know where his great-great uncle got the money he used to buy two houses in Baxter.

The next time Stowers became involved in his family's life was after his retirement.

"We know he entered the National Military Home in Dayton, Ohio, in 1918," Whitehead said.

"And from then until he died in 1933, we think he divided his time between the home in Ohio and his sister's home in Baxter."

But that doesn't quite compute. Records include two addresses for Stowers in Nashville during this time.

"That's where his brother lived. But we have no evidence that the two actually met or made up," Whitehead said.

In addition, Stowers sent his niece, who was Whitehead's grandmother, a series of little childrens' paper books that were issued in the Juvenile Section of the *Public Ledger* newspaper in Philadelphia.

"We always thought he was in the National Military Home when he sent those. But they were published in 1916. Does that mean he was in Philadelphia before he went into the home?" Whitehead asked.

The old soldier eventually stayed with his family in Baxter most of the time. By then the octogenarian was deaf and bald and had a tendency to simply wander away from the family home.

"They used to find him as far away as Algood!" Whitehead said. "We think now it was probably something like Alzheimer's."

Whitehead's mother, Magdalene Whitehead, was about nine-years old when Stowers would visit.

"I remember him as a small man, and he seemed nice, but I don't remember much else," she said.

Magdalene was already taking care of her mother and her five brothers and two sisters. But she remembered they kept a special room for Stowers that was filled with books.

"He loved reading. He was deaf but we wrote notes and he could read lips a little," she said.

"And he loved doing figures. We found these pieces of paper in his room with long columns of numbers on them."

When Stowers' died at the age of 84, the legend of his being the only survivor at the Battle of the Little Big Horn was immortalized in his tombstone.

"Now we just want to find the truth out about this man," Whitehead said. "There are almost more questions now about his life than before we started this."

Whitehead has done all his research the old-fashioned way.

"I hate computers. I don't care at all about learning how to use one," said the former truck driver.

Instead he phones and writes to sources and does much of the legwork himself -- visiting libraries and using Congressman Bart Gordon's office contacts and going in to the State Archives in Nashville to check out the account of his ancestor by the daughters of Thomas's brother, John -- Katherine and Adelle Dudney.

"But they seem to have simply passed along the stories they heard," Whitehead said.

"I still think we can track down those 40 years where everyone lost touch with Uncle Tom," he said.

"It's just a matter of being patient."

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Relatives of Thomas J. Stowers stand in Odd Fellow's Cemetery near Baxter, TN with his tombstone which declares that he was the "sole survivor" of 'Custer's Last Stand' or 'the Battle of the Little Big Horn' when Gen. George Armstrong Custer and 264 soldiers of his 7th Cavalry were killed by tribes of the Sioux Nation on the plains of southeastern Montana on June 25, 1876. In the photo are, from left, Eudora Shanks, Stowers' great-niece; Ron Whitehead, a great-great nephew of Stowers; and Magdalene Whitehead, Ron's mother and another great niece of Stowers, all of Baxter. At right is the gravestone as it currently appears in the Odd Fellows' Cemetery; and above is Stowers in a studio portrait believed to have been made in the 1870's.

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