Charlevoix's Captain Walter Clifford & Chief Sitting Bull, in Clifford's Own Words

by

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Capt. Walter Clifford, resident of Charlevoix

U. S. Army Captain Walter Clifford was a resident of Charlevoix between military assignments. Born Edward Walter Clifford Newman, he was a young member of our early Newman family after whom Belvedere Avenue was originally named, and narrow Newman Street between State and Lake Streets still is. (Lake Street marks the west boundary of the city of Charlevoix.)

For some reason he went by his two middle names, said to have been done when he joined the military in 1860. Not a West Point grad, the naturally brilliant enlistee rose through the ranks to become a highly respected officer and Indian agent, often butting heads with those officers who had gotten the prestigious military education but didn't possess his no frills, common sense abilities.

Charlevoix became Clifford's home when he was not on duty, which at the time could stretch over the winter months. So charismatic was the man, that when his scheduled arrival with his family, by boat, was announced, word spread around town and people went down to the dock for a meet and greet. A gregarious Clifford quickly became one of the most popular men in Charlevoix, the prime guest of many a social gathering with his stock of miliary tales, rich prankish humor, and somewhat loud singing voice.

Then came the assignment that connected Capt. Walter Clifford Newman to a major episode in American history.

The Battle of Little Big Horn

The famed Battle of Little Big Horn took place in Montana on June 25, 1876. Clifford was in the area that day, but did not reach the battlefield until after the massacre of General George Custer and his men. By then, Chief Sitting Bull and his people had fled north into Canada, where they remained in dire poverty and dire straits for the next five years. Canada refused to turn them over, but did little to help the starving people. Finally, on the brink of catastrophe, Sitting Bull realized that the only way for the remaining survivors to stay alive was to accede to the U.S. government's demand to surrender. In July of 1881, Captain Walter Clifford was the officer assigned to journey to the border to meet them, and bring Sitting Bull in.

Clifford had been a longtime friend of *Charlevoix Sentinel* editor Willard A. Smith. He wrote a letter to Smith immediately following the event in late July that year. Smith printed it two weeks later in mid-August, a heartfelt, insightful, compassionate, stinging indictment of not only the state to which these native people had been reduced, but also the state to which the natural resources of the west were being decimated. This is the first time the Charlevoix Historical Society has printed it in almost full, edited slightly for clarity and repetitions.

SITTING BULL'S SURRENDER

Fort Buford, Dakota Territories, July 28, 1881

"Dear *Sentinel*: On the 17th, I was ordered out to meet Sitting Bull, who, under the guidance of Mr. John Lewis Legare, had proposed to come to Fort Buford and surrender to the United States authorities.

"Mr. Legare had written to the commanding officer of Fort Buford saying 'I am on my way to Buford with Sitting Bull and 200 of his people, but it is a rough crowd and I am nearly out of food. Please send me rations. I don't know whether I will succeed in getting the old man in or not. He is very independent.'

"Accordingly, six wagons were loaded with rations and on the forenoon of the 16th started across the broken, hilly country back of Buford to meet the incoming or halting party of hostiles.

"I followed the next morning at half past two, with one white soldier, four half-breed scouts and one Sioux Indian. We were mounted.

"Affairs stood just this way: The party that went out with the wagon consisted of five soldiers, six teamsters and one interpreter (the teamsters were not armed). My party of six made my fighting force count up to 11. In Sitting Bull's party were 43 men; they were, however, poorly armed and I did not feel the slightest uneasiness. Mr. Legare, who is an Indian trader located just across the boundary line, was very much worried, but my arrival with the rations removed one source of his anxiety, though he was still fearful that Sitting Bull might fly off the track as he had so often done before.

"All the scouts and mounted men however were instructed that this great chief must never again cross the Canadian line until after he had visited Fort Buford. They each and all were told that he must be the first to fall in case of an outbreak. They are not to appear to be noticing him, but he must always be under surveillance. It will be unnecessary—The old warrior had yielded at last, not on his own account, but because of the hungry murmurings of his people. They were reduced to the lowest ebb, and

however obstinate and determined to hold out to the death he might be, the cries of his hungry women and children were too much for him. There are no sick in the party; the weak and ailing have perished. Only the healthy and strong have surrendered, and even these are dropping off one by one. Their favorite food, meat, has disappeared from the country.

"Where a few years since thousands of deer, buffalo and antelope used to roam, now not a solitary hooftrack can be seen. Another winter and there would not have been enough of them left to make a decent surrender.

"The Sioux troubles may be said to be done. The one hitherto unyielding spirit that has kept up an unceasing warfare for 19 years is broken at last. Deserted by his warriors, even the elements seemed to war against him. Two years ago his people lost over 2,000 head of ponies by disease due, they claim, to a minute insect. Pustules would appear, the hair fall out, and the stricken animal exposed to the intense cold of our rigorous winters would freeze.

"Sitting Bull does not strike one at first sight as an intellectual man but a little study reveals deep character in every line of his face. He is 50 years old, has a prominent nose, and the face of a miser. One of his feet is slightly deformed, but he does not walk lame.

"He is very proud of his family, and as far as his wives (he has two) and children are concerned, he is very generous. Some calico and blankets were sent out to him, he kept none for himself but gave to the needy ones of his camp. He is camped at Fort Buford under the care of Capt. Clifford, Seventh Infantry [Clifford oddly mentions himself by name here], and appears to be satisfied. The only complaint that he has made is that too many people come to look at him. He is compelled to remain in his lodge, and the curious attempt to follow him even there. This, however, has been stopped. As an evidence of his implacability and determination not to submit is shown by the fact of his trying to persuade his people, even after they had crossed the line, to go to Wolf Point, cross the Yellowstone, and go up to Tongue River into the mountains; 'there we can find plenty of game and hide from our enemies,' he said. Poor old fellow! He little dreams that the Tongue River country is settled, and game is as scarce there as the country he has been compelled to flee from. Many of his people have but one garment; some of them are naked, and what clothing they have is dropping off piecemeal. They are too indecently naked to send down the river.

"The supposition is that this party of 200 will remain here until the last remnant, now at Woody Mountain, consisting of 21 families come in, when they will be sent to the Standing Rock Agency.

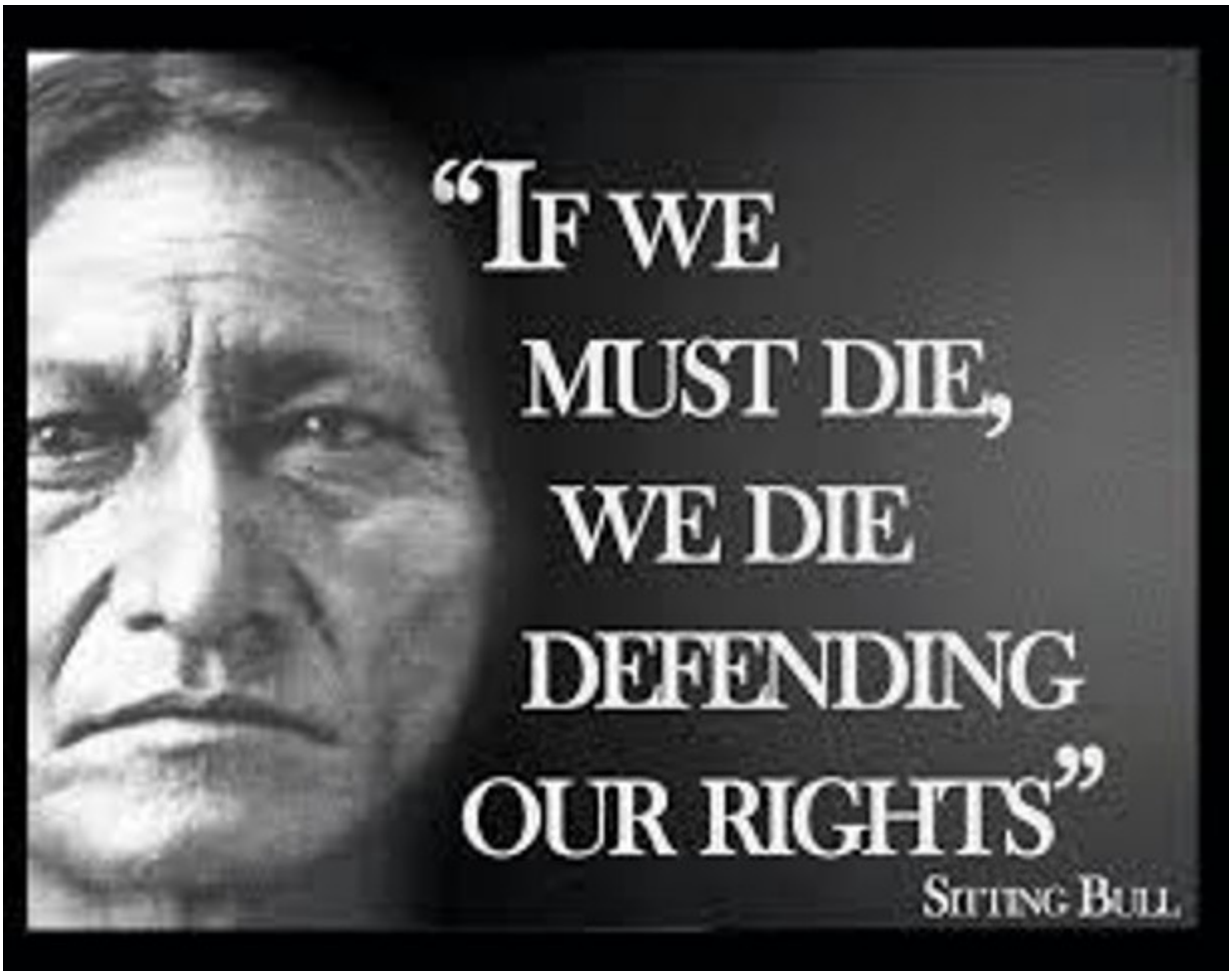
"Some mischief maker wrote the old man that his daughter was in irons at Fort Yates, and he reasoned thus: 'If they punish my daughter who has done no harm to anyone, what will they do to me?' He declares that he will take her away from her abductor as soon as he reaches Standing Rock. W. C."

Two years later, in early February of 1883, the *Sentinel* reported that "Capt. W. Clifford, U.S.A., has been during his leave of absence for the past three months, devoting himself to the introduction of his patent camp stoves [a personal invention]. A military board convened recently at Newport, Kentucky, to examine into the merits of the stove, and their report is a most emphatic recommend and testimonial to its perfection. The Government, on the strength of it, has ordered fifty stoves for use in the army, which is virtually the adoption of it in the army. The Captain is now engaged in securing a patent in Great Britain, Germany, Russia and Turkey, and that eventually it will be into the military service of those countries there is little doubt. The captain has a bonanza in this invention. He left here for Chicago yesterday to join his family, and from there he joins his regiment, at Fort Bridger, Wyoming."

But before his brainchild could make him a rich man, just days after he returned to duty in Wyoming, Capt. Walter Clifford unfortunately passed away on February 23, 1883, from the consequences of a campaign undertaken in bitter freezing weather. A year later an effort was made to remove his remains and monument from there to Charlevoix, but did not succeed.

Said the *Traverse Region—1884* book about Clifford's passing, "He was a brave, noble-hearted soldier, who by his ability, courage and integrity rose grade by grade from the bearer of a musket to the rank of captain in the United States army. He considered Charlevoix his home, and his death occasioned general sorrow in this place."

Quotation from Sitting Bull on following page


"IF WE
MUST DIE,
WE DIE
DEFENDING
OUR RIGHTS"
SITTING BULL