Prospect Hill Address
Memorial Day, May 30, 2022
"Some People I'd Like to Have Met"
by
Paul L. Hedren

Good morning everyone.

We come to cemeteries like this for many reasons. Today is special, and we understand that and are drawn to these places to remember those who have sacrificed so much for America…for us. And we come today, and sometimes on other occasions, to honor our own families, or pay respects to forebearers, or to individuals perhaps unknown to us but who have made important contributions to our past, whether here in Omaha or elsewhere in America or in the Old West. I'm drawn to Prospect Hill for that reason.

I'm an Omahan by recent choice. I'm a Minnesotan originally, and have lived all over the American West. I was introduced to Prospect Hill Cemetery long before I moved here. I was told that some interesting Nebraskans are buried here, characters I had learned of and was coming to care about, figures that had a role one way or another in the history of American West that I was writing about. I'm prone to stopping rather frequently these days, usually leading a friend to graves here that I find quite compelling. I've done so twice this spring already, This morning, I'd like to introduce you to a few of these favorite characters of mine, people I've come to know something about, and people I'd love to have met.

I'd first lead you to the grave of Henry Brown, just over the hill to the east of us. Friends and associates in his time knew him as "Stuttering" Brown. We don't use that term much these days, but in his time it was common, and he apparently didn't mind. Brown was a mid-nineteenth century Omaha entrepreneur with the foresight to purchase a plot here, for that sometime moment in his future. We know that for a while Brown ran a roadhouse out west on

the Overland Trail near Chimney Rock, where he provided meals and service on that great road to the Far West. We know that he later contracted for the Union Pacific Railroad as it built its way west through Nebraska in the mid-1860s. He was a dirt man then. His crews moved dirt, and lots of it, a necessary step before rails could be laid down. By 1876 Brown had relocated to Salt Lake City, where he was employed by the Gilmer and Salisbury stage and freight company, and specifically that spring of 1876 engaged by the company as a section superintendent when they commenced stage service between Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Custer City, in the booming days of the Black Hills gold rush. The segment in Brown's charge was the most treacherous leg on the road, that piece of the line north of Fort Laramie to Custer that was continually plagued by road agents. And there was Brown's downfall.

In the line of duty in April 1876, Brown confronted a known rustler at the company's Cheyenne River station, warning him to steer clear of stage company stock. Now this was a notorious man, a known murderer and horse thief by the name of Persimmon Bill Chambers, and that night under the cover of darkness Chambers shot Brown dead. As you might imagine, this was big news in Cheyenne and Omaha. Brown's body was taken to Cheyenne where it was met by company officials and Brown's wife and a child, all having come from Salt Lake City, and they accompanied the body to Omaha, where at trackside downtown a Methodist preacher conducted a service, and Stuttering Brown was brought here for burial, just over the hill.

Brown's wife by then was living in Salt Lake City, and she and her son returned there and in due course disappeared into history. The grave here was never marked, but the Omaha Corral of the Westerners, a group dedicated to the study matter of this sort, saw the need and in 2011, not wishing to forget this notable Omahan and Plainsman any longer, placed a stone on his grave. Henry Brown made a difference in his day. I've studied him and his time for a long while. I'd like to have met him. He lived a compelling life in the Old West.

I take my guests to the grave of Major Thomas Thornburgh of the Fourth Infantry, just over the rise to the north of us. The Fourth Infantry regiment then garrisoned Fort Omaha. Many of you know that Prospect Hill served as Fort Omaha's post cemetery. Thornburgh and elements of his regiment were called to duty in the Ute Indian Uprising in Colorado in 1879,

those people caught up in wretched affairs at their agency, and where Thornburgh and his troops were sent to quell the disturbance, and where he and thirteen of his men were killed in action that September. Like occurred with Henry Brown, Thornburgh's remains were returned to Omaha and interred here just weeks later, and a sizeable granite obelisk placed atop his grave, the stone doubtless paid for by the men of his regiment. Thornburgh, you should know, also was memorialized in the Episcopal Cathedral downtown with a beautiful stained glass window on the south wall. You see it there yet today, and if you haven't, by all means find the time to do so. It's fabulous. But Thornburgh wasn't long for Prospect Hill. In 1903 his remains were reinterred in Arlington National Cemetery, a fitting move, I'd say, for one who gave his life to the country. But that magnificent stone here was not moved, perhaps simply because the grave also marks the burial place of a young son. A new stone, equally impressive, marks Thornburgh's grave at Arlington. The old stone is here and is worth seeing, if only to respect the heroics of an illustrious soldier who gave his all.

I take my guests to the Collins Family plot just on the other side of the roadway, right over there. I'm particularly drawn to the grave of John Collins, another prominent Omahan, a friend of President Grant, who in 1876 operated a saddlery in Cheyenne during the peak of the Black Hills gold rush, and also served as the post trader at Fort Laramie, his store a critical last stop for Black Hills bound prospectors. That store exists today at Fort Laramie. You've perhaps seen it. It's refurnished as if we are all still bound for the gold country in 1876.

But I merely pass through the Collins plot seeking the grave of William Rogers, Captain William Rogers of the Ninth Infantry, located straight west of us. Rogers was an honored Gettysburg veteran and after the Civil War a long serving officer in the Fourteenth and Ninth Infantry regiments. That service itself was notable, what with Rogers's time in the Civil War and Indian wars, but here's why I especially care.

In July 1876 in far northwestern Nebraska a clash occurred between elements of the Fifth Cavalry commanded by Wesley Merritt, and Northern Cheyenne Indians led by chief Dull Knife. Those Cheyennes were fleeing the Red Cloud Agency, in the Pine Ridge Country west of today's Chadron, bound for the Powder River country, likely to hunt buffalo and almost certainly intent

on joining Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse in their fight for the right to maintain a life in the buffalo country. There's a larger story here of an Indian war, and Crook and Custer, and I'm fascinated by all of it and write about it. But there's also this little episode occurring in northwestern Nebraska in July 1876, an episode known as the Skirmish at Warbonnet Creek.

We particularly remember that little fight because Merritt's chief scout on that campaign was none other than Buffalo Bill Cody. It was a quick little fight. No soldiers were killed and but one Indian, a Cheyenne warrior named Yellow Hair, shot off his horse by Bill Cody. Cody then dismounted, stepped forward, and scalped Yellow Hair, raising that scalp aloft as soldiers rode by and proclaimed "The First Scalp for Custer." We don't like talking about his very much anymore, it's all very distasteful, but this really happened. I've been to the field. I've seen that scalp. I've held it in my hands. And this really was the first clash between the army and Indians after Custer's Last Stand.

And here's where Rogers fits into the story. When those Cheyenne Indians took the trail that morning and came upon Warbonnet Creek, they couldn't see those companies of Fifth Cavalry that had been tucked tight against the tall cut banks of the creek. But in the distance they could see Merritt's supply train as those wagons rolled eastward on high ground several miles beyond the soldiers, and coming their way. Those Cheyennes saw an opportunity--wagons, supplies, horses--but before they could spring on that train shots rang out when Merritt's troopers sprang out of the middle ground and surprised them. There's where the Buffalo Bill Cody episode occurred. This really happened.

And those same shots triggered action at the wagons, too. Commanding the little infantry escort for Merritt's train that day was then First Lieutenant William Rogers, of the Ninth Infantry, who promptly deployed his small command and secured that train. Rogers witnessed the action at Warbonnet Creek. He had his own small role in the affair. In its day this little skirmish was big news…it made Omaha and Chicago and New York newspapers within days. Cody, the showman, of course helped make that so. Many individuals later told their own versions of the story, Indians and whites alike, and often those stories conflicted, and there are some of us who collect and study those stories. But no one ever seems to have asked Lieutenant

Rogers for his account of the episode, and I'll bet he had a good one. I'd like to have had a talk with Captain William Rogers.

I'd like to have met George Hyde too. Hyde is buried a couple hundred yards southwest of here, in the southwestern corner of the cemetery. Some of you here, in fact, may have known him.

Hyde was a unique individual, handicapped in multiple ways, but a gifted scholar wonderfully adept at researching and writing history. He focused exclusively on Indian history, particularly the Indian history of Nebraska, and you may have heard of or perhaps even have read some of his books, titles like *The Pawnee Indians*, *Red Cloud's Folk*, *Spotted Tail's Folk*, *A Sioux Chronicle*, among many others, books that are indispensable to folks like me who write this kind of history today. Hyde was uniquely of that generation of writers like George Bird Grinnell and Nebraska's own John Neihardt and Mari Sandoz who interviewed the old Indian Long Hairs who lived the very history that he and these others were writing about. And Hyde didn't do this conventionally…he couldn't hear…he was legally blind…he didn't travel. He did it all by correspondence, using intermediaries on that end. He'd write out his questions. They'd collect answers and provide him with responses. For those Indian informants, this was their history, and many were glad to share it and have it recorded. We can't do this today. The old people are long gone. Hyde's books are treasures. We use them constantly. Virtually all are in print to this day.

George Hyde resided with his sister, a school teacher I believe. He lived to old age, never married, there were no other siblings or family members, and his sister died very shortly after he did in 1968.

The Omaha Westerners marked his grave too. Turns out, he was an early member of our Corral. We raised the money by subscription, just as we did with the Brown gravestone. We thought it fitting that we do this. And as we raised those moneys in this instance we thought we had a special angle. We figured that his publisher, who keeps all of Hyde's books in print to this day, had been living free off of George for way too long. We made an appeal to the press. Help us in some way, but were flat-out ignored. We raised the money ourselves, but never lost an

opportunity to besmirch that press, those shameless freeloaders, we called them! And I must tell you that it's our own University of Nebraska Press!

Well, I happened to be telling this little Hyde story one day to a friend at the Omaha Public Library in the downtown branch and was jolted by what I heard in response. In an almost lecturing tone, that librarian told me: "Well, Paul, you may not know it, but ***We*** receive all of Hyde's royalty monies." I was dumbfounded. Indeed, it had been arranged before his death that all of George Hyde's book royalties were bequeathed in perpetuity to the Omaha Public Library, where to this day one sees Hyde memorial bookplates in history and genealogical volumes that are added to the shelves every year. Isn't that something? Isn't that extraordinary?

I'd like to have met George Hyde. He was an honorable man whose scholarship has been so lasting and impacting, and this despite his infirmities. And there he was, thoughtful to the very end. I'll bet George Hyde was a man with a good story to tell…about research, and the old Long Hairs he connected with out on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations, about the craft of writing, about perseverance.

Now you've heard me mention the Omaha Corral of the Westerners several times this morning. Believe it or not, but here in town there's a crowd of people just like me who care about the history of the Old West. We meet over dinner monthly, and always have a good history speaker, sometimes on city history, sometimes Oregon Trail history, or maybe on cowboys, or Indians. If you share this spirit and might be interested in sitting in some time, catch me afterward and I'll share a couple of details.

I take my guests to other corners here at Prospect Hill too, but for now I'd say that my time is up. I think what's important here is that we care to remember these people--whether old pioneers, or army officers, or a near contemporary Western historian, or a spirited women who we'll hear about in just a little while. It seems to me that this is what Memorial Day is all about.

Enjoy.