



EPISODE 5 2004 - LITTLE BIG HORN BAYONET, COOKSTOWN, NEW JERSEY

Wes: Our last investigation reveals an untold story from Custer's Last Stand at the Battle of Little Big Horn. It's June 1876. Along the Little Big Horn River in Montana, George Armstrong Custer prepares to attack a village of plains Indians. Confident of victory, he rides into battle. But his 220 troops are outnumbered [by] 4 to 1, and are soon overwhelmed. This is Custer's Last Stand. A day that ends with the massacre of Custer and his entire force ... or does it? One story from this infamous battle remains untold ... the presence of a rear guard of 300 cavalymen, who are now in the sights of the charging Indian Warriors. Their survival rests in the hands of a young untested officer named Edward Settle Godfrey. Almost 130 years later that dramatic moment leads here, to a sleepy town in New Jersey - and a bayonet, local residents believe was used by this unheralded soldier. Sharon Atkinson is the Mayor of Cookstown, New Jersey, and custodian of the bayonet. It was found in this house - where Edward Godfrey retired in 1907. The town bought the house and is turning it into a museum.

Sharon Atkinson: The bayonet was found during the first stage of restoration when they were working on the roof, it was found stuck up underneath the rafters. It kind of calls to you and says where did I come from?

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan and I've come here to Cookstown to meet Sharon and investigate and investigate the local legend behind this town's treasured artifact and storied soldier .

Wes: Ah, there's the bayonet...

Sharon: Here you go.

Wes: Pretty primitive, huh?

Sharon: Yes it is.

Wes: But an effective weapon nonetheless. OK, what do you want to find out?

Sharon: OK, we know for a fact that general Godfrey fought at Little Big Horn and we'd just like to know if this is his bayonet and if it was used at Little Big Horn.

Wes: You think that this was used at Custer's Last Stand?

Sharon: Could've been.

Wes: That would be pretty remarkable if this was. What else do you have to go on?

Sharon: We really don't have a lot. We know that General Godfrey lived here up until the time he died and other than that, just a lot of stories.

Wes: It's not a lot but it's a start. A relic from Custer's Last Stand would be an amazing discovery. Weapons from the battlefield are almost unheard of.

Wes: This is called a socketed bayonet. A pretty common military item in the last half of the 19th century. For its age, it's in pretty good shape. The locking mechanism here is frozen, but a lot of these were used outdoors, so the rust is no big deal. Bayonet design changed over the years, so we'll need to check this one could have been used in 1876.

First, I'm curious to learn more about Godfrey and how the bayonet was found. So, I'm meeting Margaret

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Westfield, an architectural historian who's spent the last 5 years researching Godfrey. Wes: Listen, I have never heard of this guy Edward Godfrey, who was he?

Margaret Westfield: Well, he was involved in the Indian Wars. He fought alongside Custer, he was decorated, he taught at West Point and then he came here when he retired. He became a general he was honored for his service and he even volunteered to fight in WW1 when he was in his 70's.

Wes: This guy was quite a soldier. I asked Margaret to show me where the bayonet was found. So you found it up here, huh?

Margaret: Yeah, right in this area.

Wes: Right in here?

Margaret: It was kind of leaning on this nail and went behind the rafter.

Wes: You know this looks like a brand new, this looks like brand new decking, and I guess when the old roof was here, you could hardly see that, huh?

Margaret: Oh you couldn't see it at all. I think that's why it was undiscovered all those years.

Wes: But that's 75 years after Godfrey lived here, what makes you so sure this was Godfrey's bayonet?

Margaret: Well, I've researched the other occupants of the house and I don't think there's anyone who lived here who had an association with the military. That and the fact that right over in this room, we have what we believe was his study, and inside his study there were a lot of things that were his with his name on it. So even though the bayonet didn't have his name on it, we have carts and boxes and that's why we believe it might be his.

Wes: So you think the circumstantial evidence is pretty strong that this bayonet belonged to Godfrey?

Margaret: I do.

Wes: I can understand a career soldier like Godfrey keeping a souvenir, but did this bayonet [really] come from one of America's most famous battles? I've come to the Springfield Armory National Historic Site in MA ... where they have the largest collection of American rifles and bayonets in the world. I'm meeting curator, John McCabe.

John McCabe: Bayonets have been around for about 400 years and like so much military stuff it really originated with sportsman. If you wounded a boar, you'd want to (have) had something on the end of your gun to make sure you killed them because they would go after you.

Wes: By measuring the bayonet, John can tell when it was manufactured...

John: We've got a blade length of 18", socket three.

Wes: I bet you want to measure the diameter

John: Absolutely, this is the most important measurement because this is really telling me what type of muzzle

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this is fitting. Socket diameter around 3/4. the measurements tell us this is essentially made for a .58 caliber weapon, which means, it's probably a model 1855 bayonet. And first introduced for the model 1855 rifle musket.

Wes: How long were they used?

John: These were used throughout the Civil War and right up through the 1870's.

Wes: The Battle of Little Big Horn took place in June 1876. I want to see one of these things mounted on a rifle. Our bayonet is too rusted, so John shows me how an identical one mounts on the weapon it was made for...You know you had to be intimidated when you saw somebody fix a bayonet.

John: Especially a disciplined troop of soldiers.

Wes: Within the structure of the military, who was issued that bayonet?

John: This was infantry, these were the grunts, the soldiers on the ground.

Wes: You know John, as I recall it was the 7th Cavalry at the Battle of Little Big Horn not the 7th infantry, so the cavalry wouldn't have used a rifle and bayonet like that...

John: That's right Wes. The cavalry was at that time carrying a model 1873 Springfield carbine, this is essentially what the 7th cavalry had at little bighorn and these bayonets do not affix to carbines...as you can see that's not going on that gun...

Wes: The locking ring won't go over the site... does it mean that bayonets weren't used at the Battle of Little Big Horn?

John: it's possible, but not really likely...

Wes: [But] I'm not giving up. I'm heading to Alexandria, VA, to see Little Big Horn expert, Brian Pohanka. he was the historical consultant on the movie Cold Mountain.

I want to find out if there's anyway Godfrey could have had the bayonet at Little Big Horn. First I want to know about his role in the battle...and Brian has a surprise for me...a first-hand account of the fighting..

Brian Pohanka: Godfrey's diary is really a fascinating view of the campaign and of the Battle of Little Big Horn

Wes: It relates some of the engagement's most pivotal moments Godfrey didn't witness Custer's Last Stand. He had been riding to his aid, but was too late. Before Godfrey gets to the battlefield, Custer and his men are dead. According to Godfrey, the victorious Indian warriors then turn their attention toward him and the remaining cavalry. Fearing the worst, they begin a chaotic retreat.

Brian: Godfrey with his Company "K" decides somebody needs to cover this retreat. We can't just go stampeding back because the Indians will get in right amongst us. So what Godfrey does, is he dismounts his men opens fire and begins pulling back slowly, keeping the Indians at bay. And he describes this in his diary. The fire of the Indians was very hot and they sent many a bullet among us, but fortunately none of us was hit.

Wes: Oh and look at this, he says here, I was determined not to let them have any panic, many of them had not even been under fire before.

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Brian: He says he turned the air blue that he did some mighty tall swearing and I threatened to kill, to shoot, any man who ran.

Wes: Godfrey's actions allowed his troops to regroup and endure a two-day siege. So Godfrey really saved the day for these guys.

Brian: Certainly, I think you look at this fight and this retreat in particular and it could have been a real disaster and that really is Godfrey's finest hour.

Wes: you know this is a remarkable story, but it's a cavalry story and the bayonet is a weapon of the infantry...was there any infantry involved?

Brian: they arrived to pick up the pieces to bury the dead and so forth, so they're not involved in the fighting itself.

Wes: Brian, is there any way that Godfrey could have had this bayonet at the BLBH?

Brian: Probably not, we have to remember, the image of the bayonet fight at Antietam or Gettysburg from the Civil War is almost certainly not going to take place out in Montana fighting the Sioux and Cheyenne. You're never going close enough to an Indian to use a bayonet as you would a confederate. I can't see Lt. Godfrey carrying an infantry bayonet...

Wes: All this makes me wonder whether he would have ever used a bayonet in battle. I need to take a closer look at his military career. This is the Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania, home of the US Military History Institute, the leading research facility for army history in the country. I was hoping I would find some information about Godfrey's service in the military and guess what? I hit the jackpot. There are thousands of records here, mostly correspondence and personal accounts written by Godfrey. He served overseas in the Philippine insurrection in 1901 ... and the Spanish American War in 1898. And he fought in some of the most prominent battles of the Indian wars: Wounded Knee in 1890 – he participated in the massacre of nearly 300 Lakota Indians.

Here's our guy Godfrey again in another critical battle of the Indian Wars, The Battle of Bear Paw Mountain in 1877 against Chief Joseph. 25 Nez Perce dead. The Battle of the Washita, almost 10 years earlier, more than 100 Southern Cheyenne killed in a sneak attack. Reading this stuff, I get the impression that Godfrey was like a shadow following the American Indians, and darkening their days...during the first 10 years of the 33 which General Godfrey served in the 7th cavalry, he was in 40 Indian fights of varying importance. God this guy was just everywhere it seems like...But he was always with the cavalry. I can't find any mention of a bayonet. Then it struck me, maybe I've been barking up the wrong tree...What's this, Civil War, huh? What's this? Correspondence, 1861. This is interesting, Camp Poco, July 16th 1861. That's very early in the Civil War. He's obviously writing from a military camp...so..I guess he must have been in the Civil War...I think I'm onto something. I haven't found any other files relating to the Civil War, but the library has army registers dating back to the 1800's. Here it is (the) army register for 1908. Oh there it is..let's see, he began his career, V/O 1861...the 21st Ohio volunteer infantry. Godfrey was in the infantry during the Civil War. Dr. Richard Summers is [the] resident historian at the Military History Institute. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of the Civil War.

Richard Summers: Edward Godfrey was a private soldier in C.O.D. of the 21st Ohio.

Wes: Did the 21st see any action?

Summers: They were in a fight called Scary Creek on July 17th of 1861.

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Wes: What happened then? I never heard of this battle.

Summers: The 21st Ohio which was moving right along the river road nearest to the Kanawha, actually made a bayonet charge to drive the Confederates out of their advanced position on the left bank of Scary Creek ...

Wes: With bayonets...

Summers: With bayonets, they're infantry all shoulder arms, whether rifles or muskets were single shot weapons. So after you fire your first shot, there might not be time to reload. So to have a means to continue fighting, soldiers would use their fixed bayonets.

Wes: So as a member of the infantry, Godfrey would have been issued a bayonet...

Summers: He would have had a bayonet, yes indeed.

Wes: I wonder if this is the kind of thing he might have saved as a souvenir of that battle experience?

Summers: It could very well be... this is his first battle the first shock of combat; he came face to face with the reality of war.

Wes: Then Dr. Summers tells me something about the battle of Scary Creek that could explain the connection between Godfrey and, what's turned out to be his Civil War bayonet. Time to tell Sharon what I've found...

Wes: So the bayonet couldn't have been used the Battle of Little Big Horn.

Sharon: Very interesting.

Wes: But where was it, how did he get it? In the 40 plus years he was in the army there's only one time he could have had a bayonet and that was in 1861 Godfrey participated in a bayonet charge against Confederate forces.

Sharon: How about that. I never thought that the bayonet would have come from the Civil War.

Wes: But that's not all, at the battle of Scary Creek we found that at least one and maybe several of his relatives were killed. That I think is probably the best explanation we have for why he might have saved the bayonet...

Sharon: That's sad. He probably saved the bayonet as a memento but probably as a reminder of what war means...thank you Wes, that's an amazing story. Oh, well thank you very much, this is going to be great. We appreciate all your work. Come back again.

Wes: I will when the house is finished.

Wes: Godfrey's final resting place is here in Virginia at the Arlington National Cemetery.

Wes: He died in 1932 but not before trying to make peace with the American Indians he so long and determinedly fought. In 1926 Godfrey returned to Little Big Horn to mark the 50th anniversary of the battle - and to pray for everlasting peace with his former adversaries.

ENDS

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