

**The Custers in Monroe**

by  
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and  
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PREFACE

The name George Armstrong Custer will always be identified with the battlefield in Montana that has justly been named after him. Still, for many of us, this aspect of the Custer story is not the most interesting **part** of the saga that was this man and his times. I've always been much more interested in the personalities involved in this continuing story; especially the two principals:

"Autie" and his wife Libbie. It is people who give life to history, but writing history of this sort requires much travel and research.

When my friends, the O'Neils, asked me to review this book, I was hoping to find something of the nature of the Custers as to what made them so unique and interesting. Monroe, Michigan has always been a fascinating place for me for if any one location can be said to be the home of the two Custers it is this city.

Today, more than a century after their residence, it still contains much of their spirit. Tom and Alice have done their usual splendid work in capturing this spirit of the people and the city. One can only hope as I do that his book is just the start of a story that needs relating; it is worth knowing and a vital part of our history.

John M. Carroll  
Bryan, Texas



**DEDICATED TO: DR. LAWRENCE A. FROST**

Larry Frost was without question the most dedicated and knowledgeable scholar of the Custer saga. Larry was famed for his famous "five cent" tour of Monroe during which he pointed out not only various "Custer sites," but told a wealth of anecdotes of them that brought everything to life. Simply, he was a treasure house of

Custer lore, and with his passing went much of that story. This monograph is dedicated to him in the hopes that much of what he passed on will be preserved here. What he gave to future generations was a story of dedication and love - a very rich part of our heritage as a nation.

Autie and Libbie would have been very proud.

## SPECIAL THANKS

W. Donald Horn who kindly lent permission for the cover art, "The First Star," to be used.

Monroe County Library System and especially curator Carl Katafiasz for all the time and cooperation to make this book a reality.

Joan Croy of the Monroe County Historical Society, who was never too busy to do long distance research and the myriad tasks graciously.

## FOREWORD

When Tom and Alice O'NEIL undertook to write *The Custers In Monroe*, both John Carroll and Dr. Lawrence A. Frost were still alive. Each provided help and encouragement as the authors diligently researched material for this manuscript. The endeavor was to provide the visitor to Monroe with a brief but stimulating history of General George Armstrong Custer's ties to this quaint little town.

So strong is the association of Custer and Monroe that there are many who think he was born there. But to the few who see his statue and think this is the only physical representation, this book may help guide them down the path of serious research in the future.

Both the General and Libbie were real darlings of the town of Monroe. Dr. Frost in his many years of research kept that spirit alive. So many thoughts and remarks he made were never committed to paper. I remember when he and I, while on one of our "nickel tours," stopped into the Museum. As we spoke briefly with Wilma Price, she began taking notes. So many wonderful things came out of Dr. Frost's vast knowledge of the Custer story, but unfortunately many will be lost forever.

Tom and Alice have successfully filled that void left by the passing of "Doc." I was fortunate to have the opportunity to know Dr. Frost, and to have taken this tour with him a number of times.

Although he is gone, his spirit lives in this wonderful monograph that traces the lives of two people who were so desperately in love and played such an important role in the history of Monroe and the United States.

Steve Alexander  
Jackson, Michigan  
October, 1990

## THE CUSTERS IN MONROE

George Armstrong Custer's older half sister, Lydia, was destined to meet and marry Mr. David Reed of Monroe, Michigan. As with many new brides it was not long before she missed her family back in New Rumley, Ohio, and especially her young brother "Autie" on whom she had constantly doted. Typical of a big sister she had spoiled young Custer, and now saw that Monroe could offer him splendid educational opportunities that simply did not exist in their hamlet in Ohio.

The youngster was soon on his way to make a new home with the Reeds little realizing the great importance this newly adopted town would have on his future. In effect, the die had been cast; Monroe would from then on be his home town although he would briefly return to Ohio for other opportunities; the most important of which was to obtain a commission to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. Yet, for all the practical purposes Monroe was now his one true residence.

The future general was first enrolled at the New Dublin School. Here he was to continue his education; that is when he was not involved in some school pranks. Mischief and Custer seemed to go together, and young Armstrong (as he was called by other boys) had a delightful sense of humor that permeated all aspects of his life. Some of his free time was spent fishing along the banks of the River Raisin with other boys and his brothers when his family moved from Ohio. Doubtless, many tales were told and visits made to sites along the river where the terrible massacre of Americans had happened during the War of 1812.

One day while walking down the town's main street (now Monroe Street where the Museum sits today), the young Custer approached the home of the town's most prominent citizen, Judge Daniel S. Bacon. An equally young daughter of the judge, Elizabeth Bacon, was out playing and spotted the approaching Autie. While swinging on the gate of the fence surrounding the house, she called out, "Hello, you Custer boy!" At that time their families were separated by the social norms of the time. Stunned by her own audacity, Libbie ran into the house before Autie could reply. So began the relationship of George and Elizabeth - one that would grow into one of the greatest romances in history. In the years ahead both would come to believe that theirs was a love that neither time nor distance could separate - a belief that was fulfilled until her death over a half century after his.

Yet, at that time the two young people were of different ways of life. The Bacons were well-to-do; the Custers by comparison poor. Libbie was a Presbyterian; Custer was nominally a Methodist. Today, in a more "democratic" age, we tend to forget the deep chasm differing

religions created at the time. Had the times been different the greeting at the gate may well have been their only contact; forgotten by both. Ultimately, it took the nation's greatest tragedy, the Civil War, to bring them together.

At the commencement of the Civil War, Custer was appointed an aide on General George McClellan's staff; quite an honor for one so young. Home on leave, Custer was invited to a Thanksgiving Day party at Boyd's Academy, the local school for girls. Captain Custer came without an escort, doubtless hoping to charm one of the many pretty young girls for which Monroe was noted. It is reasonable to suspect that many of the young ladies hoped to attract the attention of the dashing young Captain.

Ironically, yet fortunately for the young cavalier, Libbie had a date for the evening. For some reason she became upset at her attendant, and to placate her he decided to introduce her to the man in Union blue. Each exchanged only a single sentence: she remarking on his rapid promotion; he stating that he had been very fortunate. Still, that was enough to start them on the road to an eventual love that would be one of the most widely admired of the day; one that would transcend all time and distance.

That night Libbie may have been little impressed with this officer in the Army of the Potomac, by he was certainly smitten with her. Never one to do things half-way, Custer set upon a campaign to win her heart that was as audacious and hard as any cavalry charge he was to lead in the war.

As time passed, Libbie's interest in her "Beau Saber" grew but there was one major snag - one that nearly put an end to their romance before it could even bud: her father, Judge Bacon. The Judge was totally against the two young people being other than nodding friends if even that. With the aid of Nettie Humphrey, a mutual friend, the two youngsters began a letter writing campaign with Nettie as the go-between. As Custer's fame spread in the northern press for his exploits in battle, and with his rapid promotion to Brigadier General, Judge Bacon became reconciled to the fact that he was going to lose his Libbie to the "Golden Cavalier." The Judge was really not opposed to Custer the man but to his occupation as a soldier. Fiercely patriotic, he felt Libbie could be left a young widow. This fear would someday prove sadly true.

At 6:00 P.M., February 9, 1864, the young couple were wed at the First Presbyterian Church; so began slightly over twelve years of marriage with a love that seemed to grow more tender and deeper as each year passed.

Libbie's honeymoon was spent in the muddy soil near Virginia battlefields; after that the two were seldom separated if they could avoid it.

After that tragic day of June 25, 1876, at the Little Big Horn River Valley in Montana, Libbie had over half a century of life left to her. Autie, in death, seemed to become even more of a hero to her, and she would devote those remaining years to the preservation of his memory. Probably no man in history had a greater champion than Autie had in his beloved Libbie.

In April, 1933, just a few days before her 92nd birthday, Elizabeth Bacon Custer passed away at her apartment in New York City. She joined her husband in eternal rest at the military cemetery at West Point, New York.

Many vestiges of their times still remain in Monroe; indeed, in many ways the town is little changed from their time there. For those of a romantic bent and young of heart it is still easy to visualize them today. Their love has indeed spanned the generations, and is still burning bright. It is to their devotion to one another that this book is dedicated. They are still with us as their spirits walk the streets of this town along the shores of Lake Erie.

"Hello, you Custer boy!" still has a ring to it in today's Monroe.