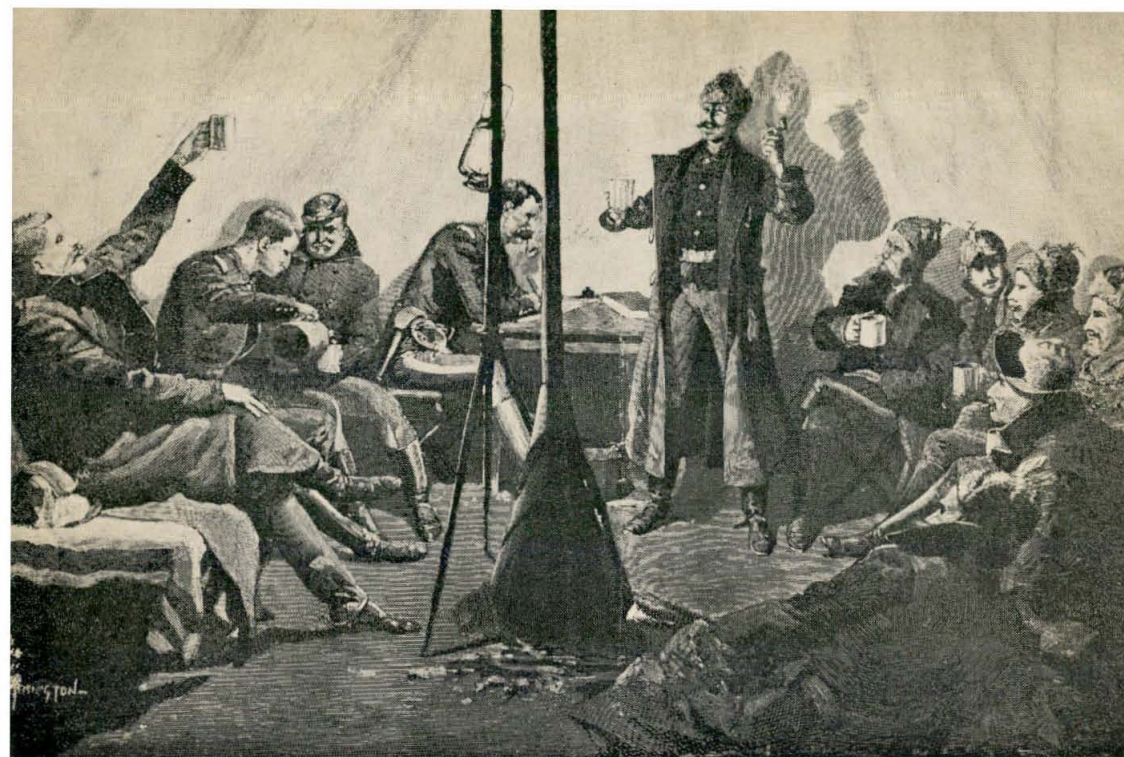


“A Merry Christmas in a Sibley Tepee” is here reprinted for readers of *North Dakota History* from *Pony Tracks* by Frederic Remington (1895) through the courteous permission of Long’s College Book Company of Columbus, Ohio.

— *The Editor*



THE TOAST: "MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

A Merry Christmas in a Sibley Tepee

By FREDERIC REMINGTON*

*Edited by: THE REV. LOUIS PFALLER, OSB.

⁹Frederic Remington (1861-1909) was the well-known artist of the West who produced no fewer than 2,739 pictures in his 48 years. He made illustrations for many magazines and books, but principally for *Harper's Weekly*. He was especially interested in depicting Western scenes, but since he was an Easterner, it was necessary for him to make excursions Westward to insure accuracy of detail. In 1890 he came to South Dakota at the height of the Ghost Dance Scare. General Nelson Miles was in charge of the troops sent out to arrest Sitting Bull and to check the activities of the excited Ghost Dancers. Through the instrumentality of General Miles, Remington was allowed to join one of the scouting parties camped near the Bad Lands of South Dakota. The first camp he made with the soldiers was on Christmas night, with the thermometer well below zero. When he later returned to New York he sketched, among other pictures, "A Merry Christmas in a Sibley Tepee." It was printed as a full-page illustration in the December 5, 1891 *Harper's Weekly* with Remington's explanation given here. We reprint it in this issue of *North Dakota History* for the light it throws on one phase of army life on the frontier. (Edited by Rev. Louis Pfaller, O.S.B.)

"Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die." Not a good excuse, but it has been sufficient on many occasions to be true. The soldier on campaign passes life easily. He holds it in no strong grip, and the Merry Christmas evening is as liable to be spent in the saddle in fierce contact with a blizzard as in his cozy tepee with his comrades and his scant cheer. The jug containing the spirits of the occasion may have been gotten from a town fifty miles away on the railroad. It is certainly not the distillation of the summer sunlight, and it is probably "tough" enough stuff to mingle naturally with his surroundings, but if one "drinks no more than a sponge" he may not have the jaded, retrospective feeling and the moral mending on the day to come. To sit on a camp chest, and to try to forget that the soldier's quart cup is not filled with the best in the market, and then to enter into the full appreciation of the picturesque occasion, is to forget that long marches, "bull meat," and sleepless, freezing nights are in the background. Pleasant hours sit so nicely in their complimentary surrounding of hard ones, since everything in the world is relative. As to the eating in a cavalry camp on campaign, it is not overdone, for beans and coffee and bacon and bacon and coffee and beans come round with sufficient regularity to forestall all gormandizing. The drinking is not the prominent feature either, but helps to soften the asperities of a Dakota blizzard which is raging on the other side of the "ducking." The Sibley tent weaves and moans and tugs frantically at its pegs. The Sibley stove sighs like a furnace while the cruel wind seeks out the holes and crevices. The soldiers sit in their camp drawing-room buttoned up to the chin in their big canvas overcoats, and the muskrat caps are not removed. The freemasonry of the army makes strong friendships, and soldiers are all good fellows, that being part of their business. There are just enough exceptions to prove the rule. The cold, bloodless, compound-interest snarler is not in the army, and if he were, he would be as cheerless as a damp evening as he would in a fight. One man is from Arizona, another from Washington, and the rest from the other corners of Uncle

Sam's tract of land. They have met before, and memory after memory comes up with its laughter and pathos of the old campaigns. One by one the "shoulder straps" crawl in through the hole in the tepee. And, mind you, they do not walk in like a stage hero, with dash and abandon and head in the air; they prostrate themselves like a Turk in prayer, and come crawling. If they raise the flap ever so much, and bring company of the Dakota winds, they are met with a howl of protests. After gaining erectness, they brush the snow from their clothes, borrow a tin cup, and say, "How! How!"

The chief of scouts buttons up to his eyes, and must go look after his "Inguns"; the officer of the day comes in to make his papers, and if he keeps the flying jokes out of his statistics, he does well enough. The second lieutenant, fresh from West Point, doesn't hesitate to address the grizzled colonel of twenty campaigns — nay, he may even deign to advise him on the art of war; but that is unsatisfactory — the advising of colonels — because the colonel's advice to the sub has always to be acted upon, whereas the sub's advice to the colonel is mostly nullified by the great powers of discretion which are vested in the superior rank. The life-study of a sub should be to appear like the cuckoo-bird in a German clock — at the proper moment; and when he appears at wrong intervals, he is repaired. Colonels are terrible creatures, with vast powers for promoting happiness or inflicting misery. If he will lend the moderating influence of his presence, it is well; but if he sends his man around to "present his compliments, and say that the d — row will immediately cease," his wishes if not his personality are generally respected.

It is never a late evening, such a one as this is; it's just a few stolen moments from the "demnition grind." The last arrival may be a youngster just in from patrol, who explains that he just "cut the trail of forty or fifty Sioux five miles below, on the crossing of the White River;" and you may hear the bugle, and the bugle may blow quick and often, and if the bugle does mingle its notes with the howling of the blizzard, you may discover that the occasion is not one of merriment. But let us hope that it will not blow.

The toasts go around, and you use your tobacco in a miserly way, because you can't get any more, since only to-day you have offered a dollar for a small plug to a trooper, and he had refused to negotiate, although he had pared off a small piece as a gift, and intimated that generosity could go no further. Then you go to your tepee, half a mile down the creek at the scout camp, and you stumble through the snow-laden willows and face the cutting blast, while the clash and "Halt!" of the sentinel stop you here and there. You pull off your boots and crawl into your blankets quickly before the infernal Sibley stove gives its sigh as the last departing spark goes up the chimney and leaves the winds and drifting snows to bellow and scream over the wild wastes.



Copyright © 1968 by the State Historical Society of North Dakota. All Rights Reserved.

The letters of Private Thomas F. Morton, Company C, Seventh Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, provide interesting and valuable historical material for our understanding of the common soldier in blue during the Sibley Indian Expedition of 1863. Dr. King received his Ph.D. in 1962 from the University of Nebraska, and is the author of *War Eagle, A Life of General Eugene Carr* (1964). He is currently working on a biography of General George Crook. The author of numerous articles on the Civil War and western military frontier, Dr. King is Associate Professor of History at Wisconsin State University in River Falls.