

Payne County Historical Review



Payne County's Parotte Cemetery, where
William Nugent, of Company A, 7th Cavalry, is buried.



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The *Payne County Historical Review* welcomes readers' comments, news, or requests for information. Family histories, photographs, or maps are also welcome. No payment is made for articles published in the *Review*. For more information about the Payne County Historical Society, visit the Society's web site at:

www.cowboy.net/non-profit/pchs/

I grew up in Edna, Kansas, and spent my summers on my grandparents' farm in Oklahoma. Those are some of my fondest childhood memories. I graduated from Labette County High School in 1968 and then attended two years of college. I served six years in the Kansas National Guard. My wife, Debra, and I have been married for 37 years. My wife and I dragged my daughter, Marie, to so many battlefields and museums that she got her masters degree in Museum Science a few years ago. I worked as a metallurgical technician for John Deere and recently retired after 32 years of service.

I became interested in William Nugent when I came upon his name in Kenneth Hammer's book *Men With Custer* and discovered that he had lived within just a few miles of where I was born and lived. I had to know more about him.

The photo is of me at Tom Custer's grave in Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery. Tom was originally buried on the battlefield, but was exhumed the next year and reburied in Fort Leavenworth. There is a stone marker at the Little Big Horn Battlefield on Custer Hill that marks the place where his body was discovered alongside his brothers, George and Boston Custer.

William Morgan



William Morgan is shown at the Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery. His interest in George Armstrong Custer led him to the story of Ripley's William Nugent.

The photograph on the cover is of Morgan at Parotte Cemetery southeast of Ripley,



WILLIAM DAVID NUGENT

Private Company A, 7th Cavalry

by

William Morgan

The notice in the newspaper read "WM. D. NUGENT DEAD." The short obituary in the *Coffeyville Daily Journal* of November 16, 1934, of the 82 year old man could have been overlooked in favor of the Will Rogers article under it. However, at a second glance you would have read "Former Soldier Under Gen. Custer Succumbs in Home of Daughter. Mrs. Roll Clark, Near Here."

The following is the remainder of the front-page article from *The Coffeyville Daily Journal*, November 16, 1934.

WM. D. NUGENT DEAD

Former Soldier Under Gen. Custer
Succumbs in Home of Daughter,
Mrs. Roll Clark, Near Here.

“William David Nugent, 82, who as a young man served as a soldier under General Custer, died at 5 o’clock yesterday afternoon in the home of his daughter, Mrs. Roll Clark, eight miles west and two miles north of Coffeyville. Mr. Nugent had been in failing health several years.

“Mr. Nugent, who was born in Kentucky Nov. 5, 1852, had served in General Custer’s command as a member of Company A, Seventh U.S. Cavalry. Later he pioneered in Oklahoma and lived in the vicinity of Cushing for many years. He retired nineteen years ago and made his home near here since.

“Mr. Nugent’s only immediate relative surviving is his daughter, Mrs. Clark. Mrs. Nugent preceded him in death thirty-eight years ago.

“The body will remain at the Skinner funeral home, where friends may call, until 11:30 o’clock tomorrow morning. At 12:24 o’clock tomorrow afternoon it will be sent by way of the M-K-T (Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad, ed.) to Cushing, and will be removed from there to Ripley, Okla., where funeral services and burial will take place. Arrangements for the funeral at Ripley were not definite today.”

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Who was William David Nugent? When I came upon his name in Kenneth Hammer’s book *Men With Custer* and discovered that he had lived within just a few miles of where I was born and lived, I had to know more about him.

Battle’s Basics

On Sunday, June 25, 1876, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer divided the 7th Cavalry into four columns and rode over the divide of the Wolf Mountains at 12:05 and into the valley of the Little Big Horn. Custer retained companies C, E, F, I,



Parotte Cemetery, Ripley, Oklahoma

and L. Custer and his 215 men rode along the bluffs towards the Indian encampment. Captain Benteen received companies D, H, and K. Benteen, with his 113 men, was ordered to proceed to the left, scout the bluffs about three miles distant and report to Custer. Captain McDougall and company B were to escort the pack train. Major Marcus Reno led companies A, G, and M. Reno and his 131 men crossed the river at 2:30 and charged down the valley towards the Indian encampment. Among the troopers in company A was Private William David Nugent. (Custer attained the rank of "Major General of the Michigan Wolverine volunteers" during the Civil War. Following that conflict, he was returned to the permanent rank of captain in the regular army, climbing to the

rank of lieutenant colonel at the time of his death.)

When they reached the village, Major Reno ordered his men to dismount and set up a skirmish line, with every fourth man leading the horses to safety in the timber at the river. As the Indians began to circle to the back of Reno's command, he ordered the men to fall back to the timber. As Reno was discussing the situation with Bloody Knife, "Custer's favorite scout," a bullet struck Bloody Knife in the head and splattered Major Reno in the face. Shocked, Reno shouted to his men, "Any of you men who wish to make your escape, follow me." Instead of coordinating an orderly military retreat and keeping the Indians at bay, Reno dashed from the timber in a mad flight to safety. The loosely formed column began to break apart under the pressure of bullets singing all around. Most of the casualties among Reno's cavalymen occurred during this mile run

for the river and the bluffs beyond.

Major Reno cast a strained eye around the bluffs as one by one the troopers reach the crest and fell in their tracks. Capt. Myles Moylan and Capt. Thomas French came up the bluff, both going to Major Reno. "We had better arrange a defense here," said Capt. Moylan. "The Sioux will reform and attack."

Thus was Bill Nugent present as one of the actors in that opening scene of the Custer tragedy at the Little Big Horn on that hot June day in 1876, an event that was to remain imbedded in his memory all the years of his life.

Much of the following is from Hammer's book *Men With Custer* and Daniel E. McClure's book *Two Centuries In Elizabethtown*. McClure's father was the first cousin of Bill Nugent, who often visited their home. Daniel recalled that as a youngster he "delighted in listening to Bill's stories of his experiences as a Trooper of the 7th Cavalry in the Indian campaigns."

Nugent's Roots

William David Nugent was born in Grayson County, Kentucky, November 5, 1852, a son of Hamilton Nugent and Zerilda McClure Nugent. His mother was a daughter of William McClure and Polly Cryer McClure, early residents in that area, which had been settled around 1790.

William D. Nugent was a young boy at the time of the Civil War. He doubtless was interested in the war and military life as his uncles, Daniel, Alexander, and Laban were wearing the blue uniform of the Union. His youngest uncle, Laban, was killed at Chickamauga. Listening to the stories told by his uncles on their furloughs home, young Bill had a desire to wear the uniform. He was nineteen when on August 5, 1872, he enlisted in the Seventh United States Cavalry, some units of which were at the time stationed in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, under command of Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer.

On the same day that Nugent enlisted, John J. Thomas also enlisted in the same Company A, but whether he and Nugent were friends and joined together or if it was only coincidence that the two joined the same unit on the same day, is not known.

Little is known of Bill Nugent's activities while stationed at Elizabethtown. He told of much drilling and training during the months prior to the command leaving the town in 1873. The Adjutant General's Office in a report dated October 27, 1885, states that the Muster Roll for Company A for September and October 1872 reported Bill Nugent as "present-sick in hospital – nature of illness not stated."

The Command under Custer left Elizabethtown in February 1873, with orders to reunite with the balance of the regiment at Memphis, Tennessee, and then proceed to the Dakota Territory. The Seventh Cavalry moved by rail to Louisville and then on to Memphis.

From Memphis three steamers moved the regiment to Cairo, Illinois. From there they traveled by rail to Yankton, just inside the Dakota Territory. At Yankton, the regiment mounted and with a long wagon train of supplies moved to Fort Rice, arriving there June 10, 1873. "Libbie" Custer rode with her husband at the head of the column.

The Indian Wars

Bill Nugent enjoyed telling of his experiences during his years of service with the 7th Cavalry. He told of the First Yellowstone Expedition in 1873, which started from Fort Rice, with the purpose of guarding the surveyors of the Northern Pacific Railroad; of the Black Hills campaign of 1874; of barracks life at Fort Abraham Lincoln and other assignments in that area; and later of the Second Yellowstone Expedition in 1876, which culminated with the Little Big Horn tragedy.

Bill told of how the men were dismounted and fought on foot in the valley for about a half hour, when Reno gave the order for the men to "charge" out of the valley, cross the stream and gain a position on the bluffs overlooking it.

Nugent's description of the ride out of the valley, the crossing of the Little Big Horn, and the struggle up the bluffs with the Indians closing in and fighting all the way was always very vivid. He told of the suffering of the men trapped in their position on the bluffs, with Indians firing into the men from their higher position around the soldiers and also of hearing the firing from Custer's men on the hill a few miles up the river from their position. The men on the bluffs were relieved with the arrival of Terry's troops on

the morning of the 27th of June. Nugent was in the party sent to bury the fallen men of Custer's force. He told of actually helping bury Custer.

Nugent's Luck

In George Bird Grinnell's book *The Fighting Cheyennes*, "The Indians say that a soldier stripped to his underclothing ran down the hill to the river, and the Indians began to shoot at him. In one hand he held a quart cup, and in the other a canteen. When he reached the river he threw himself down in the water, filling his vessels and drinking at the same time. Half the time they could not see him because of the water splashed up by the bullets. After two or three moments he rose and ran up the hill again, entering the breastworks unhurt, though they had been firing at him all the time."

Bill Nugent, in *Winners Of The West*, June of 1926, and in Stewart's *Custer's Luck*, claimed that he had been that trooper who had gone down to the river with others to get water.

McClure wrote, "Nugent enjoyed telling of how he was 'wounded' in the Little Big Horn battle. After being pinned down on the bluffs by the Indians, the men were soon out of water and as the day wore on and the hot June sun continued to beat down, the plight of the men, especially the wounded, became critical. A group of volunteers gathered as many canteens as they could carry and a few cooking kettles, made their way through a ravine to the stream, under constant fire, and returned with enough water to ease the thirst of the wounded. A few of the volunteers were wounded but none seriously. Others went to the stream for water after nightfall. Bill Nugent was one of those and it was at the water's edge that he was 'wounded.' When he reached the edge of the water, he dropped the canteens he was carrying and then bent down to gulp the first water he had since before the fighting started. The Indians kept up a steady rain of shots, which were striking all around.

"Nugent felt a blow on his forehead that stunned him, he touched his hand to his face. it came away covered with blood. He thought for a moment that his end had come,

and then realized what had happened. A shot from the Indians had struck a canteen cork floating on the water, the force of the bullet had torn the cork away and driven it against his head. Bill Nugent gathered up the canteens with their precious liquid and scurried back up the bluff. Apparently this was the only 'wound' he suffered during his almost six years service with the Seventh Cavalry in the Indian campaigns."

Ending His Service

The Muster Roll for Company A for the months of July and August 1877 reports Nugent discharged August 5, 1877, by reason of expiration of service, Station of Command, Fort Rice, Dakota Territory. He re-enlisted the following day in the Seventh Cavalry. On the Muster Roll for March and April 1878, Bill is reported, "sick in hospital; disease consumption; contracted in line of duty." Copy of Muster Roll for months of May and June 1878, report him, "Discharged on Surgeon's Certificate of Disability, May 1, 1878 – A private," station of Command, April 30, 1878 and at date of discharge, Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory. He had gray eyes, brown hair, dark complexion and was 5-foot-8 and a half inches tall.

Nugent apparently was good-natured and got along well with his comrades and officers, as there is no record of any misconduct or punishment for such.

Government pension forms indicate that William Nugent was married in September 1883 to Mollie V. Keller, at Bentonville, Arkansas. She died January 5, 1885. On the same form he lists his second wife's name as Mary J. Wells, married by a Reverend Mulkey, July 18, 1889 at Saline, Indian Territory. Her gravestone reads "Josie M. Nugent, B 6-8-1839, D 1-14-1900" (the S in Josie is backwards on the stone, by the way).

Their children were: Myrtle V. Nugent, born August 31, 1891; Mable G. Nugent, born December 3, 1895; and Gladys Nugent, born January 4, 1900 (she died five months later on June 20, 1900). Note that Josie died ten days after Gladys was born.

Bill Nugent was a farmer for 20 years and retired in 1914, residing in Ripley, Oklahoma. Until his death, he resided for 19 years with his daughter, Mrs. Roll Clark, in Fawn Township, eight miles west and two miles north of Coffeyville, Kansas.

Bill received a pension of \$45 per month from June 25, 1917, for deafness and senility. Bill Nugent died at age 82 at 5 p.m. on November 15, 1934, at his daughter's home. Cause of death was carcinoma of the stomach.

Bill was buried on November 17 in the Old Parotte Cemetery alongside his wife, Josie, and their daughter Gladys, near Cushing, Oklahoma.

Memories of Bill

William Nugent's grandson Harold Clark related the following story to me on May 17, 1998:

"During the Yellowstone Expedition in 1873, Bill Nugent and another trooper rode up over a ridge and came upon two Indians kneeling down to get a drink at a stream. The troopers pulled out their rifles and shot several rounds over the Indians' heads. Bill said that the bullets would zing over the Indians' heads and splash in the water, and then the Indians would duck. The two troopers thought this was very funny.

"A few weeks later some of the mules got away with their packs of survey equipment. Bill and several other troopers were sent out to retrieve them. They recovered the mules after several miles and headed back to camp when a band of Indians attacked them. They rode back to camp as fast as they could with the pack mules. The warriors were firing their rifles at them all the way. Each time a bullet would zing past Bill's head, he would duck the same way the two Indians did a few weeks before. Bill said that this time it was not as funny. All the troopers and the mules got back to camp safely."

In 1921, 45 years after the battle of the Little Big Horn, Bill Nugent wrote down his memories of the battle in what he called "From Memory's Store." He also wrote a three-page letter, also describing the battle. Bill had a friend type up both documents for him. Unfortunately, Bill's hand-written original copies have been lost. However, the typewritten copies are at the Caney Kansas Historical Society. Bill recalls one trooper in a letter to the magazine *Winners of the West* – August 1925.

"In Troop A there was a private by the name of Reeves. When the Indians almost completely surrounded Reno's command, the shooting was carried on from all sides. Reeves was shot through the belt from the front, the bullet passing out within an inch

of his backbone. He was knocked from his saddle, but with bull dog grit he held to his horse and recovered his seat in the saddle.

“Once again he was shot, this time through the thigh near the body. He held his seat, crossed the river and reached the top of the bluffs without assistance.

“His comrades were all very much interested in Old Sim, as he was called. Nearly all knew he had a widowed mother, but none knew her address.

“We knew he was bound to die, therefore we went to him with offers of writing to his mother, his friends, or doing anything else for him. His reply to all was ‘No, no.’

“After being turned down, all gave up except his Bunkie. He went to his wounded comrade the following morning and found him to be very low.

“In answer to his offers of aid, the wounded soldier replied, ‘No, no writing. If you really want to do me a favor, will you get the pound and one-half of tobacco I have in my saddle pockets. Please bring it to me as I am afraid some of those “blankety-blank” fellows will steal it.’

“Did he die? No. Two years later he was doing duty at Fort A. Lincoln.”

In a second letter to the *Winners of the West* – June 1926, Bill described going down to the river to get water for the wounded.

In a third letter to the *Winners of the West* – February 1927, Bill responds to an article about the mutilation of the dead at the battle.

“It would be very difficult to convince one of the burial details that there could have been more mutilation perpetrated.

“Unfortunately I was one of that number and will give the names of a detail, and if any of that number are living, I feel assured they will corroborate my statements. Sergeant Alcott, and four privates Johnson, Harris, Allen and Nugent, all of Company A, composed one of the details. All of the bodies we heaped mounds of earth over were mutilated more or less, mostly more.

“Will give a description of the first we buried. First he was scalped; the skull was bare to the ears; the crown of the head chopped out; his cap put into the cavity. The body was nude between the waist and throat; there were twelve or fifteen places where

no doubt a spear or knife had been thrust to the hollow. Blunt arrows were driven in and left in the wounds.

“I saw others cut and maimed in ways that I would not care to name in private, much less in print.”

Editor’s Note: The story of Bill Nugent and his years with the 7th Cavalry is a fascinating one. It is also a story that provides much food for thought. We deeply appreciate William Morgan’s willingness to share the results of his research with us. The final resting place of William Nugent is in the Parotte Cemetery, which is located two miles south of Ripley on Highway 108, one mile east on Highway 33, and one mile south on Parotte Road. The small cemetery is on the west side of the road.



Stillwater
Historical Hall of Fame Inductees
2008

James Langford Mathews

by

Adelia Hanson

James L. Mathews was born in Indiana in 1840. He moved to Missouri in 1879 and from there came to Oklahoma in the fall of 1889. He homesteaded in Henry township. Around the time of statehood he bought a farm in Rose township, northwest of Stillwater, where he lived until he died in 1910. He had a wife and three daughters.

His name may not be instantly recognizable as significant to the development of Stillwater. Yet his assistance was essential to Stillwater's early success. Having already had experience in the Indiana Legislature, he won the election for representative in the first Oklahoma Territorial Legislature of 1890, then again in 1901 and 1903. His important contribution in the First Legislature was to push through the House the legislation to establish the Agricultural and Mechanical College in Stillwater.

Stillwater's town boosters were sure they wanted a state institution to be located in Stillwater, but were divided over which. The Board of Trade wanted the penitentiary, but another group composed of Lowry, Dr. Murphy, Swiler, McGraw, and Wikoff agreed with their Territorial Councilor George Gardenhire's recommendation to ask for the land-grant college.

Gardenhire was President of the Council (as the Territorial Senate was named) and he introduced a bill to establish the college in Payne County in that chamber. Councilors Ira Terrill and James Mathews both introduced the same bill to the House

chamber. These passed but Governor Steele refused to sign it because he incorrectly believed a Territorial government did not qualify for Morrill and Hatch Act funds. Gardenhire introduced another bill on the same subject which also suffered political delays.

Meanwhile James Mathews on November 20 introduced House Bill 82, titled "An Act to locate and establish an agricultural college in Payne County, Oklahoma Territory." This bill lingered in committee for a month and then was brought to a House vote on December 17. It passed by a 14 to 2 vote. On the 19th Gardenhire got the bill through the Council by another large margin. Governor Steele signed it on Christmas Eve, the last working day of the first Legislative Session.

When the time came to pick the location of the College, James Mathews, along with John Clark, George Gardenhire and Frank Wikoff, was on the committee to find land to offer. They convinced the holders of four contiguous claims to each contribute pieces of land to become the college.

When Mathews was elected to the Legislature in 1901 he again served the interests of the new, struggling A&M College by securing the first 3 mil territory levy for its support.



The Abercrombie House

William Wiley Abercrombie

by

Adelia Hanson

William W. Abercrombie was born on a cotton plantation in Georgia, April 16, 1846, and died in Stillwater, Oklahoma, March, 1, 1908. He fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War, moved to Kansas in 1869, to Texas in 1887, then to Oklahoma territory in 1892. In Stillwater, with his wife Elizabeth, he built the brick home at the corner of 7th and Lewis street, still called the Abercrombie House.

Abercrombie and his son-in-law Peter D. Miller, established a meat, egg, and produce market in the 700 block of S. Main Street. In 1896 the two men built Stillwater's first cotton gin and a small electric plant to power it on Lewis Street. Before the arrival of a railroad, Abercrombie and Miller also operated a horse and wagon freight business to carry cotton bales to the railroads at Perry or Stroud, thus helping local cotton farmers find markets for their goods, and giving jobs to teamsters.

When the railroad came through town in 1900, Abercrombie and Miller built a new gin near it on east Sixth Street. They also built a larger power plant using Stanley dynamos that supplied electricity to the city. Eventually he gave the plant to the city.

When William Abercrombie died in 1908, obituaries in the town newspapers extolled him as one of Stillwater's "most progressive and enterprising citizens, who never stood back when anything was undertaken to forward Stillwater's interests." In Stillwater Abercrombie belonged to the Commercial Club, the Masons, the Frontiersmen, the OES, and the Baptist Church.

William and Elizabeth had six daughters and three sons, mostly grown by the time the parents moved to Stillwater. One of the daughters married Charles Babcock, and another married L. L. Sennet of Glencoe. One of the Sennet's grandchildren is Van Grooms of Grooms Furniture Co.

Myrtle, another daughter, married John F. Vaughn, who was elected Payne County Attorney for 1920-1921. Their daughter Gertrude Vaughn Karr continued to live in Stillwater until her death in February 2008. She preserved the lintel stone of the Abercrombie store in her front yard at 811 North Washington. Shortly before the house was razed, the stone was removed to the Sheerar museum, where it can be seen in the heritage garden.

Payne County Historical Society Annual Report 2007

Officers for the year 2007 were:

President, Jim Showalter
Vice President, Alice Cussner
Secretary, Adelia Hanson
Immediate Past President, Barbara Dunn
Treasurer (an office with a three year term), Elvis Howell

Directors:

Elvis Howell, term expires 2010
Kent Carmain, term expires 2009
Twylla Berger, term expires 2009
Reta Crotzer, term would have expired 2009
Lawrence Gibbs, term expires 2008
Alvena Bieri, term expires 2009

During the year we suffered the loss through death of Reta Crotzer. Lawrence Gibbs resigned. At the January 2008 meeting, Alvena indicated she may need to resign because of her health. We asked her to stay and come when she feels like it.

The Annual Meeting for 2007 was held at 2:30 p.m., January 14, at the Sheerar Cultural Center Auditorium. The program, "Oscar Ameringer, Entertaining Oklahoma Socialist," was presented by Alvena Bieri. There was an election of officers, and a call for nominations from the floor. There being none, the recommended slate was approved unanimously.

- Among the projects or participation in projects that the PCHS did during the year were:
- Contributed \$500 for Pleasant Valley School Foundation for re-roofing the school.
 - Wrote a letter on behalf of Dale Chlouber's project of designating and marking a "Washington Irving Byway."
 - Nominated Raymond and Eula Bivert to the Chamber of Commerce for the historical division of the Stillwater Hall of Fame.
 - Contributed an article to the *Stillwater NewsPress* special "Progress" edition in May. This briefly recapitulated the history of the Historical Society, the Sheerar Museum, and the Washington Irving Trail Museum.

May public meeting featuring a program that had official OK Centennial Funding: "OK Women Speak," written by Pat Jaynes and Avis Rambo, and presented by a group they organized.

- Issues of the *PCHS Historical Review* in spring and fall.

- The November public meeting was timed to coincide with Oklahoma's Centennial of Statehood. Titled "The Way We Were: Payne County at Statehood." Moderator Jim Showalter introduced and asked questions of three presenters: David Sasser, representing Perkins, Twylla Berger, representing Yale, and Dr. Bill Bryans, representing Stillwater and the county in general. Local historian Earl Newsom created a county historical quiz with answer sheet as a hand-out for the audience.

Payne County Historical Society

The Payne County Historical Society is organized in order to bring together people interested in history, especially the history of Payne County, Oklahoma. The Society's major function is to discover and collect any materials that may help to establish or illustrate the history of the area.

Membership in the Payne County Historical Society is open to anyone interested in the collection and preservation of Payne County history. All members receive copies of the *Payne County Historical Review* free. In addition, the Society sponsors informative meetings and historical outings several times a year.

Yes, I want to be a member of the Payne County Historical Society. Enclosed is my check for:

- \$15.00 for Individual Membership
- \$25.00 for Family Membership
- \$20.00 for Institutional Membership
- \$100.00 for Life Membership

(Membership includes subscription to the *Payne County Historical Review*.)

Name _____ Telephone _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Mail to:

Payne County Historical Society
P.O. Box 2262
Stillwater, OK 74076



Payne County Historical Society
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