

For use: Friday, August 25, 2000 and thereafter

Future Shoes: "They Died Off the Walkway "

by Michael Finley

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Several years ago over, my family took a Labor Day week trip out west. The high point was visiting the Little Bighorn Battleground in Montana. It was a working vacation for me. I was powering up my Toshiba 1000 laptop at filling stations to add details to stories, and scrounging for phone plugs in motels to phone my work in.

Because I was preoccupied with deadlines, I did less teaching about the history of the west than I probably should have. My children, Daniele, 9, and Jon, 6, had to figure out for themselves what a wapiti is, who Rain In The Face was, and so forth.

It wasn't until we set foot on the site of Custer's Last Stand that I reassumed the mantle of Great Wise One. I had visited the park years earlier, when it was known as Custer Battlefield National Monument. Political correctness had since intervened, and the place had been redesigned with the Indian sensibility in mind. The National Park Service guides pretty much ridiculed the impossible position the 7th Cavalry allowed itself to be put in that day.

I tried to explained the seminal details of the battle to the kids as we got out of the car, but Jon was more interested in his Ninja Turtle figurine than in me going on about fine points like who did what to whom, and where, why, and when.

So we're walking up the hillside to the site where the 7th Cavalry fell, Jonnie's tiny hand in mind. "Look at this," I say to him, as we pass a sign put up by the Park Service:

**PLEASE STAY ON THE BLACKTOP WALKWAY.
RATTLESNAKES ARE COMMON IN THIS AREA!**

Now Jon is suddenly engaged, looking this way and that. Historical markers come and go, but rattlesnake are the bomb. There could be one -- right there! We make our way up the hallowed hill, and we begin to pass little crosses, marking where cavalymen fell to Sioux arrows. "Here's where one fell," I told Jon, "and here's another. All these crosses show where soldiers were killed."

We even found the name of a "Jere. Finley" on the big marker at the top of the battlefield, where about 60 men died. Someone with our family name, some scared kid, died up there with his boots on. I became somber at that thought and we walked down the hill in silence.

Which was when I remembered my historical responsibility. "So Jon," I asked my little boy, "do you think you understand what happened here, and why the soldiers were killed?"

Jon paused for a minute, before setting forth his considered opinion, like a gambler putting everything on number twenty two.

"Yes," he finally said, displaying a sense of history worthy of Hollywood. "The soldiers got off the path, and they were killed by rattlesnakes?"