

## CUSTER'S LAST (REVIEWING) STAND

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Americans love a parade. From the start of the republic and on into the 21st century, we have always loved to gather and celebrate by marching down main street. And those parades can happen in Lisbon Falls for Moxie Days or in NYC to celebrate astronauts. In particular, we celebrate our military with such parades. Always have, and I suspect, we always will. This is a story about one parade and a dashing cavalryman by the name of Custer.

After the hostilities of the Civil War had ceased in the spring of 1865, it was decided that the victorious federal troops should be feted with a grand parade in our nation's capitol. The review would honor all those who had served. Thousands gathered to celebrate those battle-hardened troops. They would parade past members of government and the men who had led those courageous lads into battle. But a pall hung over the joy. Flags still were at half mast in memory of President Lincoln, who had been murdered just as the war drew to a close. But nonetheless, on the morning of May 23, 1865, the Army of the Potomac started the procession, from the capitol building down towards the Executive Mansion.

Thousands of soldiers made their way down Pennsylvania Avenue to pass before the reviewing stand. Among the early groups coming down the way was the Cavalry Corps of the Army of the Potomac. And of those, one formation stood out in particular. Wearing red neckties in honor of their fearless leader, Major General George Armstrong Custer, the men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Division looked quite impressive. And with a slouch hat, long flowing golden hair, and a matching necktie, Custer was the most impressive of all!



Washington, District of Columbia. Grand review of the army. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Civil War Photographs, reproduction number LC-DIG-cwpb-00588. Cropped.



Gen. George Custer, U.S.A. [May 23, 1865]. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Civil War Photographs, reproduction number LC-DIG-cwpbh-03110. Cropped.

Astride a horse, Don Juan, that he had only recently acquired, Custer led his men towards the assembled dignitaries. As he drew near, a young lady stepped out of the throng and tossed a garland at Custer. As Custer grabbed the wreath in midair, it scared the horse and it bolted. Custer lost his hat and sword as the horse galloped toward the reviewing stand. As the horse took off, Custer, with one hand holding onto the garland and the other pulling on the reins, worked to bring the beast to bear.

In the hands of a lesser skilled individual, disaster would have been the hallmark of the day, but Custer made it look easy. As the crowds provided him with three cheers and a thunderous applause, Custer took his place back at the head of his column. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division proceeded along the route. Their leader had led them with great skill (and flamboyance) in battle and they probably weren't surprised that he did so again, one last time!

The author's interest in the Custer story is rooted in family history. Two distant relatives were killed with Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn in June of 1876.