

It was a family secret for over a century. Elder Oswald McKay from Sioux Valley Dakota Nation addressed a gathering of history enthusiasts in Deloraine this past March. He spoke of a great victory by Dakota Nations over the USA cavalry at Little Big Horn in 1876. That's the battle in which Lt Colonel George Custer died, along with his entire seventh cavalry. Much history has been written about that day. But Elder McKay spoke about his family's unwritten history, their oral history, regarding that battle. The story his mother Eva told him.

Lt Col Custer underestimated the battle preparedness of the Lakota/Dakota Nations that summer. Through the 1880s, the USA had signed treaty after treaty with Dakota Nations, but then broke each of those treaties as settlers moved onto Dakota Territory. The Dakota People were frustrated and angry. Chief Sitting Bull's Council decided to call up their warriors, along with those of their Cheyenne allies. Warriors converged, from across the Great Plains. To defend their land.

One of Sitting Bull's Cheyenne scouts came up to Canada to recruit Elder McKay's grandfather, named Wakpa; inviting him to join the Dakota Resistance. This scout was a blood brother of Wakpa. Together, the brothers went south to join Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and others. Custer blundered on that fateful day. The seventh cavalry was greatly outnumbered. And yet they advanced without backup near by. The battle began with bows and arrows on the Dakota side. But as cavalry soldiers fell, more guns became available. As bullets ran out, soldiers and warriors fell into hand to hand combat. When the battle was clearly lost, Custer hid behind his horse, desperately pointing his empty revolver.

As the McKay family tells the story, Wakpa and his brother saw Custer's magnificent horse and realized the man behind it must be Custer. They advanced, as soldiers and warriors, do. The battle site is now a national park. And Custer is buried, where Wakpa saw him fall.

Wakpa took hold of the horse's reigns, and with another horse in tow, returned to Canada. There was great concern in Sioux Valley, though. His neighbours didn't want Wakpa and their community to be linked to the shooting of

Custer. They feared Canadian authorities. But they feared American authorities even more. Wakpa was convinced to take the evidence, Custer's horse, away to be traded. Elder McKay says their family believes the horse eventually made it to George Custer's grieving wife. The lingering fear of retribution, though, was not so easily removed. For more than a century, the family avoided having the story written down. It remained alive, though, in their family's oral history.



*Artist's Interpretation of the battle.*

It's of interest to this story, that the Supreme Court of Canada, in 1997, decided on the standing of oral history. Indigenous Oral History was used as evidence in a land claim, to prove that land being clear cut by a logging company was actually owned by the Indigenous Claimants. The Supreme Court agreed, and, further, said that from now on in Canada, oral history is to be on "equal footing" with written history.

Like Elder McKay says. His mother didn't lie.

*"Oral History" was inspired by Elder McKay's presentation and on an interview of Elder McKay by Leona Devuyst.*

*Vantage Points Flashbacks were written by David Neufeld with help from Betty Sawatzky. They were originally aired on CJRB Radio out of Boissevain, Manitoba in the early 2020s.*