

Custer's Last Stand:
Music Man, Dry Martini, Count No-Account, and the Others
A Two-Part Series on Italians Who Served with Custer
at the Battle of the Little Big Horn and More
By Salvatore Martoche

Recently my wife and I traveled to the Midwest. She wanted to attend her 55th high school reunion celebration and also visit with family in North Dakota where she was born and raised. We decided to couple the trip with an adventure that would fulfill a couple of items on my Bucket List. We travelled to Mount Rushmore, which we found to be a wonderful experience. Mary Dee had been there but for me it was the first time. It's one thing to see a photograph, but no matter how majestic the imagine might be I can see from first-hand experience it pales at the site of this huge mountainside with the likenesses of four great U.S. presidents, Washington, Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt, and Lincoln. It was exciting to learn some important facts about the mountain that I never knew before. In this time of political unrest and division in our country it was a wonderful and uplifting experience.

We then went to the Battle of the Little Big Horn which is better known as Custer's Last Stand and since that will be the emphasis of this essay, I will go back to that part of the journey later.

We concluded our trip at the Teddy Roosevelt National Park. Live bison, magnificent wild horses, tons of prairie dogs, and other animals roaming freely and providing an extraordinary view of why Native Americans protested so vehemently the changes that would take place in the years to follow which would destroy much of that. We saw and went through the tiny cabin that TR built and used when he went to the Badlands in an effort to deal with his grief at the loss of his mother and first wife on the very same day. His wife Alice died in childbirth. Fortunately, the only child of that marriage, a daughter, survived. It was obvious where TR learned his great love for the outdoors and the rugged individualism that was to mark his life and presidency. I hope that someday you will all have an opportunity to take a trip like this and see for yourself.

It was, however, in the middle of this great treasure trove of American history that we were both moved and uplifted the most. We went to eastern Montana, just across from what is now North Dakota. I learned and re-

learned some important facts and some terrible truths about the Battle of the Little Big Horn. I recalled again how dangerous it is for us to allow self-interest and greed to overcome kindness and brotherhood. I sadly recalled the tremendous damage done to the psyche of native people and the manipulation of so many patriotic and well-intentioned young men who were loyal to a leader who placed his own glory and perceived destiny before their welfare. The excellent presenters at the battle scene, all volunteers who obviously love what they're doing made it all seem so real, so immediate and close-at-hand. I will never forget seeing the markers that had been placed where brave men fell on both sides in this battle. The red ones marking where the Native Americans fell and the white ones where the U.S. Army troopers fell. I was surprised to learn that nearly half of the troops in the 7th Cavalry with Custer were foreign born. British, Irish, and German troopers made up the majority of that group. I was equally surprised that there were as many as eleven Italians in the 7th Cavalry and that they were among the bravest and most colorful in the group. To no one's surprise at least three of them were musicians in one way or another practicing their art.

JOHN MARTIN/GIOVANNI MARTINO...DRY MARTINI

One of the most famous men at the battle was identified as John Martin, but his name was actually Giovanni Martino although those troopers who knew him thought it was Giovanni Martini. This was probably a result of the fact that he spoke very broken English and that his spelling was probably not the greatest. Giovanni Martino was born in Sala Consilina, Campania, Italy in 1852. We do not have an exact date for his birth because Martino was a foundling. He had been left in the "wheel" at a local church which was common in those days



for out-of-wedlock children. (*If you have not read "Our Lady of the Wheel" the wonderful short book written by Angelo Coniglio, you should do so. It offers great insights into the Sicilian and Southern Italian culture during that era.*) Martino lived in an orphanage until he was 17 years of age, but when he was 10 he witnessed a parade with Garibaldi's men marching through the streets and he was so impressed that he asked to meet the leader and apparently did in fact have a brief meeting and implored Garibaldi to allow him to accompany the Italian Freedom Fighters. Garibaldi smiled at the boy and told him to come back when he was a little older and ask again. That's exactly what Giovanni did when he was 17 he became one of Garibaldi's "drummer boys."

This experience for the young Giovanni Christomo Martino allowed him a way out of the abject poverty that was in store for him if he tried to grow up alone, uneducated, and without any guidance in his home town. After spending a number of years in the service of his old country he eventually returned to his home town and again was faced with the reality that there was no future for him there. In 1873, he boarded a ship in Naples that would take him to New York City. After arriving in what he dreamed would be the land of milk and honey he soon came to the realization that the future was bleak even there for Italian immigrants who had little or no education and no preparation in the skilled trades. He labored at the most menial of tasks making the most meager of wages for a year or so and then decided to do the only thing he really knew he could do well and he enlisted in the United States Army. He reasoned that this would provide him with a decent job, an opportunity to learn to speak English more fluently and, along with giving him the adventure that he yearned for would also provide an opportunity for him to become a United States citizen and he believed, incorrectly, that he would face less prejudice in the armed forces than he had faced on the streets of the City of New York.

Martino received his permanent assignment to the 7th Cavalry Regiment lead by Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer in 1876. He was attached to Company A, but on the morning of June 25, Martin was temporarily assigned to serve as one of Custer's bugler-orderlies. As Custer and nearly 210 troopers and scouts began their final approach to the massive Indian village located in the Valley of the Little Big Horn on the edge of the river Martin was dispatched almost immediately as hostilities began with an urgent note pleading for reinforcements

and ammunition. It is speculated that the note was issued because Custer did not trust Martino's English to be clearly understood by Captain Benteen, who was the intended recipient of the note. History refers to John Martin as the last white man to see Custer alive and as the sole-survivor of the massacre. He and the remaining 7th Cavalry Company not riding with Custer were trapped at a nearby hill and fought off repeated attacks for over 36 hours until their rescue by another U.S. Army column. Martin had ridden his spent and wounded mount through a hail of bullets and wild charges by Native American warriors. These warriors were armed with repeating rifles and rode fresh horses. It is clear that Martin's bravery did not go unnoticed and those who referred to him as "dry Martini" in a derogatory manner would change their tune and treat him with extreme respect for the rest of his long military career once this battle was concluded. He earned that and they knew it.

GIOVANNI CASELLA aka JOHN BOX

John Box was yet another musician who was at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. He was born in Rome, Italy in 1848, and according to some researchers he played in Italy in various bands during the late stages of "Il Risorgimento" and immigrated to the United States as an unskilled worker. He became a miner and a merchant and finally enlisted in the armed forces in 1872, under the name John James. While it's not clear what his motivation was for joining, it was probably the same as the others, \$13 a month, along with three square meals a day, and the possibility of U.S. citizenship were all motivating factors. John Box was assigned to Company E in the 7th Cavalry and on the day of the great battle he got lucky and was spared certain death since shortly before the regiment attack on the Native American camp of Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, Sergeant Riley, on orders from Custer took five men and the stock tanks and headed the horsemen towards the Little Big Horn where he left a group, including Box, along with Agostino Luigi Devoto behind to care for the animals and protect the supplies. We are not certain of anything else about Box, including when or where he died.

In the next issue we'll learn about the Music Man, Count No-Account, and some of the others.