
On the Plains in '65: The 6th West Virginia Volunteer Cavalry in the West

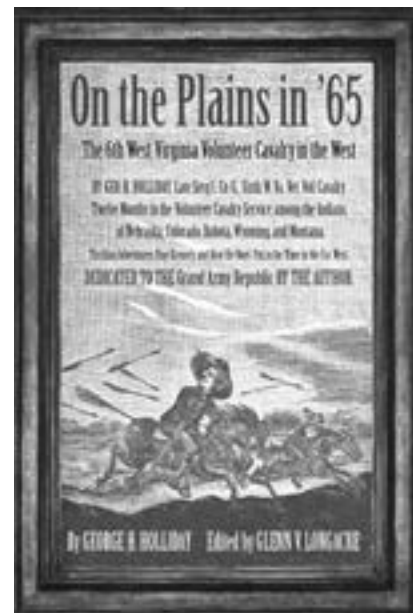
by George H. Holliday; edited by Glenn V. Longacre

xxxviii + 220 pages, appendices, notes, bibliography, index.
Athens: Ohio University Press, 2021, paper, \$49.95.

On the Plains in '65 is the personal narrative of U.S. Army soldier George H. Holliday, who served in the Plains Indian Wars from June 1865 to May 1866. In 1863, he was an underage volunteer who enlisted in a West Virginia cavalry regiment to fight for the Union. In February 1865, after eighteen months of service, he reenlisted as a “three-year man” with the rank of sergeant. Expecting to be mustered out after Lee’s surrender, Holliday was stunned when his regiment was posted to the Great Plains instead. Under the federal government’s “reservation” policy, adopted in 1850, the U.S. Army forced Plains Indians to surrender most of their tribal lands, forgo hunting, and practice sedentary agriculture instead. During the Civil War, the government had recalled most of its forces from the West but now sought to resume its campaign of dispossession on the Plains.

Their unexpected transfer prompted most of Holliday’s regiment to attempt a mutiny on the grounds that “we had not enlisted to fight Indians” (p. 20). The cavalrymen ended up spending the next year patrolling the military road connecting Fort Leavenworth in Kansas with Fort Caspar in present-day Wyoming. Their formal mission comprised manning forts and blockhouses, maintaining overland stage routes and telegraph lines, carrying the U.S. mail, and facilitating the passage of westward settlers. However, those official duties subsumed a host of ill-defined responsibilities and spontaneous everyday challenges—from the mundane to the terrifying—that included a head-on train wreck, a deadly stampede, near starvation, and a killing frost in the foothills of the Rockies.

Holliday wrote *On the Plains in '65* retrospectively from memory and published it in 1883, amid a veritable publishing frenzy that both stoked and quenched the reading public’s thirst for Civil War memoirs and regimental histories. His narrative stands out, however, for its focus on the Plains Wars rather than the Civil War, a choice that may have contributed to its contemporary obscurity—the editor of this republication believes that the book was likely self-published—but makes it all the more distinctive and valuable for modern readers. Its paramount quality is the candor and clarity with which Holliday has written his personal narrative. Far from attempting a regimental



history, Holliday occupies center stage throughout, relating his own experiences, behaviors, emotions, and attitudes from his own perspective, forthrightly and with no hint of rhetorical flare or patriotic fervor and only an occasional tinge of bravado. His unvarnished prose, however, betrays the mentality that underlay the U.S. military presence on the Plains and Manifest Destiny more generally, including the era’s popular prejudices toward Indigenous people, African Americans, and immigrants, particularly the Irish, Germans, and Chinese, who appear as derided stereotypes and speak in dialect. Yet Holliday acknowledges that the Great Plains witnessed “a new kind of warfare” (p. 7), and his dispassionate depiction of the devastation that dispossession inflicted on Natives is horrifying. The ultimate result is a thoroughly subjective but apparently forthright depiction of the Plains Wars from the perspective of a veteran who never wanted to be there and openly admits that “I felt sick—sick of everything” (p. 35).

Ohio University Press’s rendering of *On the Plains in '65* is superlative. The editor, Glenn V. Longacre, a certified archivist with the National Archives at Chicago, provides the historical context that is missing from Holliday’s account. His preface, epilogue, and meticulous annotations are well worth reading in their own right and represent a model of historical editing. Finally, this republication retains the nine original illustrations that the editor suspects Holliday drew himself, supplemented by sixteen contemporary images gleaned from archival collections.

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Winkle, *Thomas C. Sorensen Professor of American History, University of Nebraska–Lincoln.*