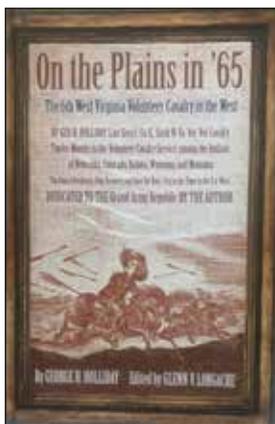


## REVIEWS FROM THE TRAIL



ON THE PLAINS IN '65:  
THE 6TH WEST VIRGINIA  
VOLUNTEER CAVALRY  
IN THE WEST

By George H. Holliday

Edited by Glenn V. Longacre

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Reviewed by Charles E. Rankin

In 1865 young George Hayes Holliday and his West Virginia cavalry regiment were assigned to post-Civil War duty on the western trails. They served there nine months and enjoyed—and in many instances merely survived—a variety of harrowing exploits. Some seventeen years later, Holliday wrote up his adventures and issued them in an apparently self-published book, titled *On the Plains in '65: The 6th West Virginia Volunteer Cavalry in the West*.

Holliday clearly hoped to produce a thrilling tale (it is compelling, often breathless), but the book subsequently fell into almost complete obscurity. *Almost*. Urged on some years ago by Scott Forsythe, archivist for the Great Lakes Branch of the National Archives in Chicago, editor Glenn V. Longacre, an archivist there himself and a West Virginia native, has now resurrected Holliday's work and published it with the Ohio University Press under the auspices of the press's War and Society in North America series.

Prior to going west, Holliday served two years in the Union cavalry. He enlisted in 1863 at age fifteen, having lied to recruiters that he was eighteen, and did the same again more than a year later when he and most of his comrades re-enlisted for three-year terms. Little did they foresee that their re-enlistment would commit them to post-war service on the Platte River Road and Bozeman Trail during a chaotic time of escalating Indian-white conflict.

Many in Holliday's regiment felt deceived

when not mustered out immediately following the war, and more than half the regiment had either deserted already or would mutiny once arrived at Fort Leavenworth. But not the seventeen-year-old Holliday, who viewed the new assignment as a heaven-sent opportunity for adventure. "Visions of 'scalps,' wild 'ponies,' 'buffalos,' and love among the little 'squaws' perhaps marriage among some of the dusky daughters of the Rocky Mountains"—these were his lusty visions.

Reality was less erotic but adventurous just the same. Buffalo hunts in the Wind River Valley, stampedes of wild horses through camp, rattlesnakes in their boots, deadly poker games, and sanguine encounters with Indians who did not want them there all provide the grist for some of his best stories. No less compelling but a caution to the modern reader are his accounts of robbing Indian graves and other insolent encounters with Native tribes and individuals. In this, the book says far more about white racist attitudes than about Native peoples. It makes all too plain the pervasiveness of white contempt for Indians at the time.

Longacre suspects that Holliday's application for a federal pension occasioned his penning the book. His disability, he told authorities, related to having frozen his feet while on wood-cutting detail out of Fort Caspar, but that was a dodge. He did freeze his feet slogging through drifts and extreme cold but did so while on an unauthorized buffalo hunt that Holliday admits violated Indian treaty rights.

Hello Bob,

My compliments for the extensive and interesting articles in the Overland Journal. While reading the 2021 summer edition, I noticed that the map on page 81 shows “NB” to indicate the state of Nebraska. The common abbreviation is “NE”. My question is if the use of “NB” has any historical significance, or is it just a slip of the pen? Thank you and best regards,

PETER KROUWEL  
The Netherlands

*Thanks for catching this, Peter. The map was drawn in 1993 when William Barnett’s article was first published. You are correct, NE is the proper abbreviation for Nebraska.*

*At one time Nebraska did have NB as the abbreviation, but in 1969 the U.S. Post Office changed the abbreviation to NE at the request of the Canadian postal administration to avoid confusion with New Brunswick, Canada.*

*The map may have been drawn before 1969, or the cartographer may have made the mistake unintentionally or been resistant to change.*

Bob



Dear Mr. Clark,

I am very glad to see that Irene Dakin Paden was selected for induction into the Emigrant Trails Hall of Fame. Irene is personally responsible for me being a long-time trails enthusiast.

Irene and Bill Paden were my grandparents’ best friends in Alameda, California, for many years. In the early 1960s, my grandmother moved into Irene’s house; both had been widowed for some years. On my first visit there to visit my grandmother, Irene asked me if I’d like to see the basement. I said “Sure,” puzzled at what could be so interesting in the basement of an old house.

Well, in that basement was the collection of the many relics and artifacts that Irene and Bill had collected over 40 years of trail research. Pots, pans, plates, wagon parts, furniture, rifles and pistols, clothing, saddles, and everything else imaginable was there. She also had an amazing library of books about the emigration, including diaries. I returned to write a term paper on the Oregon trail in that library and have been a trail enthusiast ever since.

Thanks to OCTA for honoring a person very special to me.

JOHN ZUMSTEG  
Renton, Washington

*Editor’s note: The Paden trail artifacts and books were donated to OCTA in 1990 and are housed at the National Frontier Trails Center in Independence, Missouri. *

As editor Longacre notes, Holliday was guilty of other inaccuracies as well (dutifully described and noted in the editor’s extensive annotations). Which makes one wonder just how reliable Holliday was. Perhaps in emulation of Jim Bridger–like tall-tale telling, Holliday also includes what must be apocryphal anecdotes gleaned from old-timers. Despite the pronounced political incorrectness and Holliday’s infatuation with youthful enthusiasms, much of what is here has the ring of authenticity.

One could wish for more commentary about the emigrants who traveled the trails and the trails themselves, and the reader will need a magnifying glass to use what otherwise appear to be very good maps. Also included is a welcome and detailed introduction, appendices, and a fair complement of photographs. In one likeness, taken about 1890, the reader may be struck by how closely Holliday resembles Wyatt Earp in his prime.

Holliday eventually got his pension. Mustered out in May 1866, he returned to Ironton, Ohio, where he married, settled down with a wife and children, and did well in stove manufacturing. Later, he served one term in the Ohio legislature and later still, he moved to Tennessee, where he worked as a customs surveyor, dabbled in newspapering, and sold real estate. He died in 1919, the dramatic story of soldiering on the western trails hidden away, until now. 