

The Sivertsen Horse

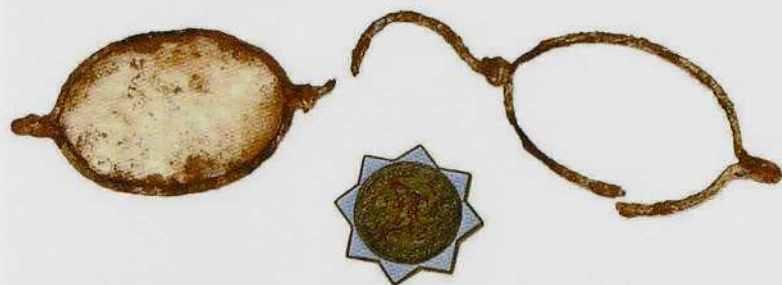


The horse bones that were found which led to the other articles being discovered. Most of the bones are bleached which would indicate that they've spent a number of years out, or, partially out of the soil. The insert on the right is the 45 caliber ball which was found in the horses skull.

John Sivertsen was a native of Jensen, Norway. He arrived in the United States in 1870 and enlisted in the 7th Cavalry in June, 1873 at the age of 31. He took part in the Yellowstone Expedition in 1873, the Black Hills Expedition in 1874 and the Sioux Campaign of 1876. He was a blacksmith by trade and was in Company M, commanded by Captain Thomas French. In 1916, while at the National Soldiers Home Sivertsen was interviewed for the *Teepee Book* by Colonel Henry Hall: "After we had forded the Little Big Horn, above the Indian village," he says, "Major Reno gave the command, 'Right into line! Load pistols! Gallop!' And away we went down the valley, the men shouting like Indians. Hi-Yah! Hi-Yah! Reno yelled, 'That's right boys!' We rode until we got pretty close to the Indian camp. By this time we saw Indians on the other side, the bluffs to the left being crowded with them. The command was given, 'Dismount and fight on foot!' and we did so, forming in skirmish line, five feet apart. The Indians were shooting at us from all sides. Then we went into a clump of timber. I was the tallest man in the troop—they called me Big Fritz, and I was number one in line, when we dismounted in the timber I gave my horse to number four, who held it with his own and two others."



Indications of the owner's identity. There are what appears to be three pins or pegs. These are possibly tent pegs. A well used farriers hammer, a rasp for trimming horses hoofs, a carbine tool and a small ax. Private Sivertsen was not listed as a farrier but he was a blacksmith and may have served as both.



Pocket watch with chain, spectacles, Civil War, Army-Navy veterans pin, (note the pin Sivertsen is wearing on his lapel in the upper right photo) pocket knife and harmonica. All of these items, along with others, were found in the same immediate area of the entire horse.

John Sivertsen, pictured above in later years continues his story: *"The fight in here was very hot and men were falling fast. We could not see the Indians, but they were signaling all the time to each other with their little bone whistles, and they seemed to be on all sides. Major Reno got alarmed about the horses and ordered a retreat, but Captain French changed the order to 'fall back with faces to the enemy'! I could find neither my horse or the horse holder when the order to fall back to the river was given, and so with about twelve or thirteen others, I stayed in the woods. Lieutenant DeRudio was with us and took command. Firing was still going on all around us, and we could hear the shots and shouts in the pursuit of our comrades to the river and up the bluffs. We hid ourselves in the timber as best we might and succeeded in staying out of sight of the Indians, but they kept on firing and were whistling all around us. Later, I can't tell how long afterward, things got quieter, and Lieutenant DeRudio said we must try to get upon the bluffs to the command. So we crept down to the river."*



"It looked rather deep and as I was the tallest man there, I was ordered to cross first and show the way. Sergeant White, who was done out, asked me to take his gun, which I did, and waded the stream carrying two guns and two canteens. I got over all right and was first to reach the other shore. A short distance up the hill I came across the body of an Indian. He was lying on his back with a carbine in one hand and a whip in the other. I felt his head and found that he had been scalped, so I suppose he was one of the Crow scouts that had joined us some days before, as none of our men had time to Scalp a Sioux if they had killed one in their fight up the bluffs. The first man I met on top the bluffs was Captain French. He was very much astonished and pleased. They had had a roll-call when they got on the bluff, and all who were not present were marked dead or missing. He shook my hand and said, 'Fritz, I'm glad to see you, you are on the list of dead, and here you are, back to life again. You're wet from fording the river. Go to the Sergeant and get a blanket and sit down by the camp fire,' so I found my troop, got a blanket and some food, partly dried my cloths, and got straightened out a little. The men knew nothing about Custer, but they had heard heavy firing when they reached the bluffs. I was put on the firing line. With my butcher knife, I dug a little hole behind a sagebrush and fought from there. The bush wasn't two feet high and I was the biggest man in the troop, but somehow that bush seemed to be a protection."



Opposite: Almost a complete set of saddle parts found with the Sivertsen horse. A few leather pieces survived from the bridle but none on the saddle. All metal parts were iron, indicating that this was probably the type of saddle authorized in 1872. Most were made by post saddlers and were Civil War, McClellan style saddles which were stripped and covered with black leather. The large cinch rings would indicate that this saddle used a wide horsehair cinch.

Above: Two of the horses hooves, a pair of sidelines or hobbles, the picket pin, an 1874 curry comb with hoof pick, three horse shoes and nineteen horse shoe nails also were found with the horse

"We were attacked many times that night and the next forenoon, but we held them off and once charged and drove them down the bank with a hurrah. The second day about noon, perhaps, we saw a body of men coming up the river valley. At first we thought it was more Indians, but as they came nearer we saw that they marched in order like soldiers, and soon the cry arose, 'It's Terry! It's Terry!' The few Indians that were still hanging around went off in a hurry, and in a little while General Terry and his command were up on the bluffs beside us. He came forward and Reno's remnant formed a circle around him and his staff and gave him three cheers. The gray haired commander took off his hat and wept like a child. Well, of course that ended the fighting there, and we were soon making friends with the relief party. And one thing more; after we left the battlefield and we went into camp, I saw my horse out on the prairie and went and caught him. He was just as I had left him when I dismounted in the woods the first day of the fight. My blouse was still strapped across the saddle and the saddle pockets were filled with ammunition. Evidently the Indians had not got hold of him. I tell you, I was glad to see him."



Right: A razor fragment and a small glass bowl which probably held soap for shaving



The ivory toothbrush with the initials "JS"



This clip would indicate that Sivertsen had at least one pair of suspenders.

A series of metal buttons, rivets and glass buttons. There are two pants buckles which indicates at least two pairs of pants. There could have been several shirts, one an 1874 gray pullover. One of the buttons still retains remnants of the cloth, top row, fifth from the left. The glass buttons indicate either a civilian type shirt or underwear.



The horse described on the previous page is probably this same horse which was found near the retreat route crossing in 1993. The Pitsch family owned a great deal of the property which was once the valley and timber fights of Major Reno's command in 1876. In the late 1980's, Jason Pitsch, a young man, took an interest in the artifacts that could be found laying here and there. Learning from individuals who would approach the family to get their permission to search the area for souvenirs, Jason's interest grew and he acquired a metal detector and began searching in earnest. Over the next several years a great deal of material from the battle was found. One of the great discoveries was what appeared to be horse bones which were slowly eroding out of the soil, near a point where the Little Big Horn once ran. Over a period of time, not only most of the horse appeared but also the personal effects of it's former owner.

A key artifact was found which could possibly lead to the identity of it's owner, that in the form of a toothbrush with the initials JS scratched crudely in the handle. Knowing that the horse was of the Custer period, all of the men of Reno's command with the initials JS were searched out. There turned out to be four. Three of them, Private John Seamens, Company M; Private John R. Small, Company G; and Private James Severs, Company M. These men survived the valley and hilltop fights. Private John Sullivan of Company A was killed in the retreat. Only Small and Sivertsen were in their 40's, and since a pair of spectacles were found among the personnel effects it would probably eliminate anyone in their twenties, as the rest were. Several other items were key as well. A farrier's hammer, a rasp, unused horse shoe nails and a spare horse shoe would indicate the owner was probably a farrier. Since Sivertsen was a blacksmith, he would be the strongest possible candidate. Although he said that he found his horse, there are other accounts that say that his horse was killed. When he made the report he was an older man and his memory could have been faulty.



Thirty-six 45/70 or 45/55 rounds, five 45 caliber Schofield rounds and five 45 caliber long Colt rounds. All of this ammunition was found near the horse skeleton among other artifacts. All of the troopers carried spare ammunition in their saddle bags. The 1873 Springfield carbine was usually issued the 45/55 ammunition. These cartridges used less black powder than the 45/70 ammunition which was issued to the Infantry for use in the longer rifles. Lieutenant Charles A. Varnum stated: *"I think and always have that the best guns were in the hands of the Indians, when the carbines and the 70 grain ammunition they got from the same source. We took, at least I think they all took, rifle ammunition instead of carbine 55 grain. On the hill, the bullets came in with a zip sound. When a zing-g-g sound came, that made you take notice."*