



More Italians who served with Custer at the Little Big Horn

By Salvatore Martoche



Felix Vinatieri: The Music Man

Felix made a name for himself as the Bandleader for the 7th Cavalry. He was a fine classically trained musician and composer. His renditions of the 7th Cavalry's famous theme song "Garyowen" made even the great Native American warriors stop to enjoy the music. And once peace broke out the Lakota developed an appreciation for classical music as a result of listening to Felix Vinatieri according to James McLaughlin the agent at Standing Rock Reservation at that time.

Felix was actually born to a French father and an Italian mother who happened to be a talented harpist. Felix's father died when he was a very young child and two years later his mother married famous piano builder Enrico Vinatieri. Felix loved and respected his stepfather enough to take his surname. As with many fellow Italians Felix and his opera singer sister Ammelia were strong supporters of "Il Risorgimento" and the unification of Italy. In 1859, he immigrated to the United States and became a music teacher in Boston. He enlisted as a bandmaster with the Union forces during the Civil War. After the war the Army sent Felix to Fort Sully in Dakota Territory. He settled in Yankton where he met and married his wife, 16 year-old Anna Frances Fejfar, the daughter a Bohemian (Czech), Joseph Ward the founder of Yankton College and a Protestant minister who would perform their marriage ceremony.

It was in April 1873, while Custer and his beautiful wife Libbie were attending a military ball at which Vinateri was the bandmaster and coronet virtuoso that Custer became infatuated by not only the great talent he exhibited but also for his enthusiasm which Custer believed got the best possible performance out of the musicians and would have much the same effect on his troopers. Custer immediately offered him the post as chief musician, a warrant officer's position. On May 7, 1873, the band rode out of Yankton bound for Fort Abraham Lincoln and riding the lead horse was a proud Felix Vinatieri.

In 1876, the band lead the 7th Cavalry out of the expedition to return hostile Native Americans to the reservation but

it never got to play at the Little Big Horn itself. The musicians last saw Custer when they played a farewell concert the night before he confiscated the band's horses to give to troopers under arms and instructed the musicians to follow upriver on the steamboat "Far West". Custer unwittingly did the band a big favor. A few days later Felix and his fellow bandsmen were on the "Far West" helping to nurse 52 survivors of the battle they were forced to miss. As soon as Felix's three year enlistment expired, and with Custer now dead, he did not seek reinstatement as bandmaster of the 7th. He spent the rest of his life giving music lessons, conducting and composing. By all reports he enjoyed great respect and prestige and became something of a local dignitary, not just through his relationship with Custer, but because of his gifts as a truly wonderful musician. For those who are interested it should be noted that the placekicker for the Indianapolis Colts and six-time Super Bowl participant Adam Vinatieri, who was born in Yankton, South Dakota is the great-great-grandson of Custer's bandmaster!

AGOSTINO LUIGI DEVOTO

Agostino was born Borgonovo, Liguria, Italy on February 27, 1851. He would die in Tacoma, Washington on November 3, 1923. Agostino was six years of age when he came to the United States with his father. They settled in New York City, but his father would soon abandon the boy and leave for South America after a few years. Luckily, by the time he left, Luigi had obtained his U.S. citizenship. He was, however, disadvantaged by being alone in this country and he enlisted in the service of the United States Army in October, 1873.

Devoto would discuss the history of this service with historian Walter M. Camp on October 1, 1917. In a detailed written statement he indicated that he was with Company B commanded by Captain T. McDougall and on the day of the battle he was attached to the baggage and mule column at the rear of the hostilities which were already underway. He claims to have been with Captain Benteen when John Martin delivered his famous message. He tells us that three compa-



nies gathered and tried to resist the Native American warriors who were attacking them in overwhelming numbers from the riverside and that the battle continued all day until sunset. The following day he claims the warriors returned to attack the station and while a firefight raged the command required volunteers to go down to the river to bring water to the wounded. Devoto was one of the brave soldiers that endured that dangerous mission on more than one occasion that day under heavy enemy fire.

When the battle ended he joined the other soldiers all exhausted but willing to look for the body of Lieutenant Hodgson and when they found it near the river wrapped him in a blanket and transported him to a nearby field and buried him. Afterwards, these two acts of bravery were to have earned Devoto and his comrades a medal that disappointingly never came. In 1880, upon completion of his military service, Devoto would move to Atchison, Kansas where five years later at age 35 he would marry Theresa Bonetti and together they would raise four children. In 1907, his family moved to Tacoma, Washington where he died on November 3, 1923, from heart disease.

COUNT CARLO CAMILLO Di RUDIO aka COUNT NO-ACCOUNT

Di Rudio was the only Italian aristocrat among the troops at Little Big Horn. He was a soldier of fortune, adventurer, and would-be assassin of Napoleon III. Born in Bullumo, a city surrounded by the Dolomite Mountains, he was the son of the Count and Countess Aquila Di Rudio. At 15 years of age, after having attended a military school in Milan, he left to join the Italian patriots in the 1848 uprising and participated in the defense of both Rome and Venice against Austrian invaders. He would be shipwrecked in Spain in an aborted attempt to sail to America. By 1855, he was living in East London, England where he met and married a 15 year-old Eliza. They would have five children and his name was changed slightly when they immigrated to the United States.

He entered the military in New York City in 1860, when he joined as a private in the 79th New York Volunteers, known as the "Highlanders" he served for a few months in the Union forces efforts in the Civil War between August and October, 1864 and in November of 1864 he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the 2nd U.S. Colored Infantry.

Di Rudio served with the 2nd U.S. Colored troops in Florida until he was mustered out. He soon requested appointment to the regular army and received his commission as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 2nd Infantry in August, 1867. He would serve at Little Big Horn as a 37-year-old Second Lieutenant. Initially, he was assigned to Company H commanded by Captain Frederick Benteen, who nicknamed him "Count No-Account" because of his braggadocio and storytelling.

It has been suggested that there may have been some prejudice involved in the characterizations of Di Rudio, particularly by those close to Custer. He was constantly disparaged and mocked. In spite of this he was apparently a good officer and as historian Charles Mills wrote "he was not a chronic drinker or gambler. He did not absent himself from his duty station for trivial reasons. He did not shirk duty assignments and above all else he knew what he was doing at the head of a column of enlisted men." He was clearly a brave and smart leader and his men respected him. In one skirmish at the Little Big Horn Di Rudio lost his horse and was left behind in the timbers on the western bank of the river. For 36 hours Di Rudio and Private Thomas O'Neill remained hidden, alternating between hope and despair while witnessing the mutilation of dead soldiers by enraged Lakota women. Despite a few close calls the two were able to conceal themselves until the early morning hours of June 27, when they were finally able to cross the river and join Major Reno. Di Rudio's account of this story garnered much media attention and in the New York Herald on July 30, 1876.

SOME OF THE OTHERS:

FRANCESCO LOMBARDI, ALESSANDRO STELLA, JOSEPH TULLO, JERRY LACY, AND THE UNKNOWNNS

These are the others who fought at Little Big Horn and there are a few whose names have been lost in history partly because there was nobody to speak for them and partly because they were just swallowed up on the battle. Much of the information I have obtained for this article came from Vincent A. Transano, a naval facility's engineering command historian in an article he wrote entitled "Among the Troopers Advancing with Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer on the Little Big Horn in June 1876, were First Lieutenant Charles Di Rudio and Privates John Martin and Agostino Devoto."