

EYE WITNESS TO SAND CREEK

By Dave Hughes

I reported recently on the celebrated 'Paleontologist' Charlotte Coplen Hill, whose adult life started in Colorado City in 1863, and who is now credited with drawing national and scientific attention to the Florissant Fossil Beds 40 miles west of Colorado Springs, now a National Monument.

But she also had a brother, John D Coplen, five years older than she was. Who was involved in separate family enterprises near Florissant.

While researching Charlottes family history as a descendent of a very long line - back to the Battle of Hastings in 1066 - of prominent persons named Ballou, I made a significant discovery related to local history, buried in a 1,200 page 1888 - privately and expensively printed - Ballou Family Genealogy.

John D Coplen, at 20 years old, was not only actively present at the 1864 Battle of Sand Creek between the Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians and in Colonel Chivington's command, but in the most forceful language later utterly dismissed the long held myth that it was just a 'massacre' of Indians by white Colorado Territorial soldiers. He was a very credible source unknown or ignored by historians.

As a historian of early Colorado City and Colorado Territory and the actions of the 1st and 3d Colorado Cavalry at both Glorieta Pass and at Sand Creek, I had never seen Coplen mentioned before. I had to dig his name out of Greg Micheno's encyclopedic 320 page 2004 classic

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"Battle at Sand Creek: the Military Perspective." There Coplen is duly listed in the complete roster of Company G, 3d Colorado Cavalry - 18 of whose members were men from Colorado City, several quite prominent.

One of the 18 from Colorado City, Irving Howbert, who also was a Corporal in that Company and engaged in that battle, was outspoken all his life that Sand Creek was NOT a 'massacre' and its military actions were fully justified. He wrote extensively later on that battle. And he was eye-witness too.

Now here is another, very separate voice from a man who enlisted in Company G from the Arkansas Valley at Fort Lyon and came independently to the same conclusions.

I do not think any historian has ever read what eye-witness Corporal Coplen wrote about Sand Creek. He is a credible source. I think that because Copelan was writing to the editor of the Ballou Family History in 1887 who was rigorously collecting the life stories of all family members, including of President Garfield, a distant family member. John knew his words were going to be published, so he was not writing informally or privately, but to relate his own proud life's record. He was passionate about his opinions about Sand Creek where he, unlike armies of later second guessers, was a participant and Eye Witness, not a Hearsay rumor-peddler who still repeat falsehoods today.

That Ballou, very limited circulation, prominent family, book and Coplen's comments had remained, uncirculated, in the Wisconsin State Historical Society archives the last 100 years until it surfaced this year through the Google Book project involving scanning-in long hidden and out of copyright books. It was unearthed by a scholar researching

Charlotte Coplen Hill's family history.

This is what Adin Ballou editor-author and Coplen himself wrote on Page 943 of that massive volume directly quoting John Coplen.



" John D. Coplen, Esq., is a man of marked ability and notable life-experiences. He has done business for himse1f since the age of 15 years. In the spring of 1861 he enlisted in the Union Army at Leavenworth, Kansas, but was rejected as too young-being only 16. He returned to the new Territory of Colorado, where he engaged in mining and other pursuits.

Later he enlisted in Co. G, Third Regt. Colorado Vol. Cavalry, and plunged into the then raging frontier Indian war. Among other perilous

conflicts with the hostile Indians, he participated in the famous so called "Sand Creek Massacre." Concerning this bloody battle he says.-

" In justice to myself and comrades, I must brand that charge of massacre a stupendous falsehood, conceived in jealousy and envy, as a few of the facts will amply attest. Our forces numbering 500, after an all night's ride from Fort Lyon, at sunrise on the 29th Nov. 1864, encountered the Cheyennes and Arapahoes, numbering 1000 or more at their camp. Although surprised at the discovery of our approach, the Indians advanced to meet us, and by firing upon us engaged us in a conflict that lasted until late in the afternoon. Eleven of our comrades were killed and forty wounded, some of whom subsequently died of their wounds. The Indians had extensive fortifications, fresh made, consisting of long deep cuts in the sand, and under the then dry Sand Creek. Scalps of men, women and children, recently taken from our white neighbors, were recovered. The number of Indians killed was not definitely known, but the majority of them retreated and made good their escape. As to the killing of squaws and pappooses, only a few were killed, and that mainly the result of accident; the squaws fighting as desperately as the males, and in a dress and equipage scarcely distinguishable from that of the men. Thus the battle was calumniously christened "a massacre," not truth- fully but falsely and enviously by military and political aspirants for influence, office and commanding power on the general frontier."

Such is Mr. Coplen's vindication of himself and comrades. against obvious slander and injustice.

When again in private life John D. Coplen continued on the tide of stirring activity and success. He was called to fill numerous minor

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territorial offices in the County of Bent, Colorado, and was at length tendered the Judgeship. But he declined and be- took himself to broader fields of enterprise. "

End of extract, above, from the Ballou Genealogy. John D Coplen lived a long life in Colorado as a wealthy man from successful gold mining in the San Juans in the 1870s, and became prominent in public affairs in Denver. He died in 1929.

So here is another early El Paso County resident (Teller County was part of El Paso County until 1899) who willingly fought the Plains Indians who had massacred white settlers before Sand Creek, and continued to do so after Sand Creek - killing Colorado City children in 1868. And he had no apologies for it.