



10-1-1995

Reno-Bentine Site

John Sterling Harris

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Recommended Citation

Harris, John Sterling (1995) "Reno-Bentine Site," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 35 : Iss. 4 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol35/iss4/13>

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Reno-Bentine Site

I'd read accounts of Custer—
 How he had courage
 But no other noticeable virtues.
 It made a moral tale—
 A proper comeuppance
 For white man's arrogance.

And I traced the route he took—
 As close as blacktop would allow
 From Fort Abraham Lincoln in Dakota—
 On his punitive expedition
 To make the Black Hills safe
 For proper gold seekers.

I came to the hills above
 The Little Bighorn before daylight
 On a clear summer morning.
 And passed the scattered stones
 That mark where Armstrong—
 As George was called by family—
 And his younger brother Tom—
 A hero in his own right,
 With two Medals of Honor—
 And the others went down—
 Outnumbered, outgunned,
 And outgeneraled, too—
 Shot, and then butchered
 By squaws' skinning knives.

On the hill beyond, Reno and Bentine,
 With other companies of the Seventh,
 Waited that hot June afternoon.
 They saw dust and heard shots and knew
 They were too late and too few
 To mount a saving charge.

And fearing for their own hair
 Dug rifle pits around the hilltop
 And waited for the dark.

The dark was safe because
 Indians who died in the dark,
 Went to a dark hunting ground—
 Or so it was said, but you never knew,
 So the night was long.
 I too waited for sunup—looking down
 On Little Bighorn Coulee.
 The willows along the winding creek
 The only green against the pale grass.

There are washes and draws
 Leading up from the river—
 A thousand places of concealment
 Just out of rifle range—
 And the memory of shots and dust
 And distant yells yesterday afternoon.

And five thousand Sioux and Crow
 And Cheyenne led by Sitting Bull,
 Crazy Horse, and Gaul waiting
 For just the right moment, and
 Trapdoor Springfields reload slow.
 The light came late.

It's a fearsome place to be
 Alone at summer dawn.

—John Sterling Harris

This poem is selected from *Second Crop*, a book of John Sterling Harris's poetry published by BYU Studies.