

Custer's Last Plant

In March 2007, a botanist named Roger Troutman visited the Kriebel Herbarium at Purdue University to examine specimens of *Liatris*. The label on one sheet identified the species as *Liatris punctata* Hook., collected in 1874 in the Black Hills, W.T. (Western Territory). The collector was simply identified as “Custer”. Some checking revealed that General George Armstrong Custer led a well-armed force of 1000 troopers into the Black Hills of what is now western South Dakota and eastern Wyoming in 1874. On July 25th, the expeditionary force entered what Custer named Floral Valley.

In a dispatch Custer wrote:

“Its equal I have never seen. Every step of our march that day was amid flowers of the most exquisite colors and perfume. So luxuriant in growth were they that the men plucked them without dismounting from the saddle...It was a strange sight to glance back at the advancing columns of cavalry, and behold the men with beautiful bouquets in their hands, while the head-gear of the horses was decorated with wreaths of flowers fit to crown a queen of May.”

Mr. Aris Donaldson was a Minnesota newspaperman who served as botanist, and would collect plants during the trip. Donaldson sent herbaceous specimens to John Coulter, then a professor at Hanover College in southern Indiana, for identification. When Coulter moved to Wabash College in Crawfordsville, he took his plant collections with him, including these Black Hills specimens. In 1994, Wabash College divested itself of its herbarium. It was transferred to the herbarium of the New York Botanical Garden. An article about the Wabash Herbarium was published in *Brittonia* in 1994 (43:211-224). Only 40 of the 74 specimens collected by the Custer expedition were included in the material from Wabash. The New York herbarium queried several other herbaria in the Midwest about the other specimens, but not Purdue. At that time Purdue had just begun to enter its higher plant collection into an electronic database and quickly found that seven specimens from the Black Hills 1874 expedition were in the Purdue herbarium. Using a complete list of species collected by Donaldson that Coulter published in the first issue of the *Botanical Gazette* (November, 1875), Purdue botanists, Shaner and Harby, discovered 5 more specimens in the Purdue herbarium. The labels on all 12 of these specimens state that they are from the herbarium of Charles Barnes. Barnes was born in Madison, IN. He and John Coulter met as students at Hanover College and became good friends. Barnes came to Purdue and was a professor of botany from 1882 through 1887. Perhaps Coulter sent part of the Black Hills collection to Barnes while he was at Purdue. All but one of the specimens designates Donaldson as the collector. This leads us to wonder if Custer, identified as the collector of the specimen, *Liatris punctata*, plucked these plants himself, maybe without dismounting from his saddle.

Two years later Gen. Custer's “last stand” occurred in 1876 at the Little Big Horn River.

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