

William Cooke

a soldier, not a gentleman

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By George F. Kush

I recently received a copy of an article that appeared in The Expositor under the headline Local Man To Be Portrayed In TV Special On Custer by Joanne E. McWilliam.

I read with bemused interest her glowing tribute to the life and military career of "Brantford's own" William Winer Cooke. Her article, although factual in many of its details, presented a rather one-sided and heroic image of a man who is obviously her own "beau ideal."

However, as with many popular heroes, her man Cooke had a darker and less gallant side to his character.

William Winer Cooke was born in the sleepy rural village of Mount Pleasant on May 29, 1846. The eldest son of a prominent Tory family, he fathered the illegitimate child of a socially less prominent neighbor's daughter, at the tender age of 16. Expelled from hearth and home, in true Victorian fashion, young master Cooke was sent to live with relatives in New York state. In December, 1863, at the age of 17 (not 18), he managed to secure a position in the newly-raised 4th New York Cavalry and was duly mustered into the regiment on Jan. 26, 1864.

Although his regiment left for the front in time to participate in the bloody battles of General Grant's spring campaign against Richmond, Second Lieutenant Cooke remained in New York as a recruiting officer and did not rejoin his regiment until early June. On the 17th day of that month, he was wounded in the left buttock by a shell fragment and dispatched to a military hospital at City Point, Virginia. After a two-week convalescence and with his posterior restored to working order, he returned to his regiment and was promptly transferred to the army Commissary Department.

Despite the fact that the 24th New York remained on active front line duty and suffered heavy casualties in officers and men through the balance of 1864, Cooke remained on detached duty. Charged with the operation of a commissary depot at Patrick Station, Virginia, he spent all but the last two weeks of the war supervising the distribution of hardtack biscuits, salt-pork and desiccated vegetables.

The 24th regiment had been badly used up with the rigors of hard campaigning and by March, 1865, there existed in the regiment a

serious shortage of company grade officers. With the war coming to a favorable close, Lieutenant Cooke was called to active duty and witnessed the last great campaign of the rebellion. Assigned to regimental headquarters as the "officer of commissary and subsistence," he saw little actual fighting.

In June, 1867, while serving with the 7th U.S. Cavalry on the Kansas plains, Lieutenant Cooke made a formal application to the War Department for three brevet (honorary)



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commissions, those of captain, major and lieutenant-colonel, based on vague accounts of conspicuous service rendered during the last hectic days of the war. The true nature of these conspicuous acts has remained a mystery and the 24th New York's war