

The Old West

Tragic Eyewitness: The Photography of Ridway Glover

by *FREDERICK CHIAVENTONE*

He was born in New Jersey in 1831 and died horribly and alone — ambushed by Lakota and Cheyenne warriors on a dusty trail a few hundred yards from Wyoming's Fort Phil Kearny on September 16, 1866. His beginning and end are documented, but his life and work remain one of the great mysteries of the American West.

Ridway Glover, the scion of a prominent Quaker family, became enamored of the fledgling art of photography and by 1865 was establishing himself in the new field with images of Abraham Lincoln's funeral procession. Glover's driving ambition, though, was to head out West to photograph the frontier all the way to the Pacific; he especially longed to photograph the Rocky Mountains. With support from the Smithsonian Institution providing that he photograph Native Americans, Glover also acquired backing from the Department of the Interior. The government supplied transportation and covered his expenses from Omaha, Nebraska, to Fort Laramie for the 1866 Fort Laramie Council. At the gathering, which was intended to be an Indian peace conference, Glover busied himself making exposures of the participants — Civil War hero William T. Sherman and great chiefs like Dull Knife, Spotted Tail, and Red Cloud among them — and discovered that many of the Lakota and Cheyenne feared the “soul-capturing medicine” of the camera.



But it was perceived treachery, not Glover's camera, that took peace off the table. When Col. Henry B. Carrington arrived in the middle of the council with 2,000 troops to begin constructing posts along the proposed Bozeman Trail through the heart of Indian territory — a part of the treaty that had not been explained to the Lakota and Cheyenne — Red Cloud and his followers walked out on the proceedings.

It is known that Glover sent his negatives back East for publication, but no one knows what became of the 22 hard-won exposures. Nor did anyone know what the strange gentleman photographer looked like until Paula Richardson Fleming acquired some Glover family photographs from an auction in Canada.

Fleming, a photo archivist who spent her career as a specialist in 19th-century photography at the Smithsonian and who has authored several books about early photographs of American Indians, had been tracking the elusive Glover for years. She knew exactly what these images were — and their significance. Here, after nearly 150 years of mystery, were actual photographs taken by Glover. Among the photos was a copy of an original portrait of a serious young man with a striking resemblance to Kirk Douglas. The refined Easterner in the photo looks nothing like the intrepid — or foolish — frontier photographer of our imagination who so loved the wilderness and the excitement of photography that he failed to heed advice never to wander alone and unarmed. Glover's journals sent back to Philadelphia describe treks into the wilderness, sometimes days at a time, and the awe-inspiring land and wildlife (a grizzly once) he encountered. Accompanying Col. Carrington to Fort Phil Kearny, Glover even had to be prevented from photographing an actual Indian attack on their Army column at Crazy Woman Creek.

His disregard for his safety ultimately was his undoing: Glover, out of photographic chemicals but not out of curiosity, was discovered not far from the fort,

face down on a path, his flowing hair scalped, his back split by a tomahawk.

The Fort Phil Kearny State Historic Site recently acquired a large tract of surrounding land that includes the old post burial ground. While the remains of the soldiers were transferred to the national cemetery at Little Bighorn, several civilians remain interred along Piney Creek. In a final mysterious postscript on his unfortunate life, we may never know if Glover's remains are among them.

• **Info:** For more information on the fort, Col. Carrington, and the attack at Crazy Woman Creek, visit wyoparks.state.wy.us and philkearny.vcn.com.