



## The John G. Maher Hoaxes

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

This article is copyrighted by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society). You may download it for your personal use.

For permission to re-use materials, or for photo ordering information, see:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/re-use-nshs-materials>

Learn more about *Nebraska History* (and search articles) here:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine>

History Nebraska members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* annually:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/get-involved/membership>

Full Citation: Louise Pound, "The John G. Maher Hoaxes," *Nebraska History* 33 (1952): 203-219

Article Summary: Colonel Maher, a prominent Nebraska citizen, invented and circulated tall tales. Pound includes some of his best-known stories.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: John G Maher, Mari Sandoz, John O'Neill, Sitting Bull, James McLaughlin, G F Royer

Nebraska Place Names: Platte County; Chadron, Dawes County; Alkali Lake (Walgren Lake), Sheridan County; O'Neill, Holt County

Keywords: John G Maher, Mari Sandoz, Spanish-American War, New York *Herald*, Fenian (Irish-American) Brotherhood, sea monster, ghost dances, "watch stuffing"

Photographs / Images: John G. Maher

## THE JOHN G. MAHER HOAXES<sup>1</sup>

BY LOUISE POUND

**J**OHN G. Maher, in later life usually known as Colonel Maher, should not be recalled primarily for his flair for tall tales and hoaxes. He was a prominent figure in Nebraska newspaper, business, and political circles and was in general a helpful citizen. He volunteered in the Spanish-American war and he was an important figure in the military world of the first European war. He deserves and should be given space in the annals of Nebraska history. The following paper will be selective, however. By invitation it will attempt to record his folkloristic and related exploits while they can yet be recalled.

Maher's father took up a homestead claim in Platte County, Nebraska. He was a member of the state senate, 1888-89, and he is credited with being the first to bring winter wheat to Nebraska. Young Maher was educated in pioneer schools and at the Columbus high school and he attended the Fremont Normal school. He taught in Platte County a few years, went into government mail service between Columbus and Atchison, Kansas, and in 1887 opened a government land office at Chadron in Dawes County in northwest Nebraska. He was to spend much of his young manhood at Chadron. Most of his hoaxes were associated with that area, which is adjacent to the sandhill region and is near to the Sioux Indian reservation on the South Dakota border. For several

---

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Western Folklore Conference, University of Denver, July 17, 1952.

years he was a court reporter in Dawes County under Judge Moses P. Kinkaid of the Kinkaid Homestead Law fame. He was clerk and registrar of deeds in Dawes County for a few terms. Meantime he studied law with his deputy, Andrew D. Morrissey, later chief justice of the supreme court. He was admitted to the bar and to practice before the supreme court. Maher went with the U.S. troops as a special correspondent of the New York *Herald* during the Indian Ghost Dance excitement in northwest Nebraska. He volunteered and served as a private during the Spanish-American war of 1898. Some persons recall interesting controversial publicity, mostly humorous, concerning his use of his typewriter in his work as a stenographic clerk. Maher served on the Mexican border under General Pershing when U.S. troops were sent in 1916 to search out Pancho Villa, the revolutionary general who crossed the border, raided and partly burned a town, and killed a number of citizens.

Maher volunteered again in World War I, 1917, and was at once commissioned a major and assigned as chief officer for fourteen states of the middle west with headquarters at the quartermaster's office at Omaha. Next he was sent to France where he became the chief disbursing officer of the American Expeditionary Force in charge of finance. His office was in Paris and he had responsibility for the handling of more than \$500,000,000. During the war period he served in Germany, Romania, Italy, and Belgium. In 1919 he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel and given honorable discharge. In the United States again, he was appointed Nebraska delegate to the national advisory committee of the Secretary of War, organized to assist soldiers returning from overseas. In 1933 President Franklin Roosevelt appointed him state adviser to the board of Public Works Administration. He with others recommended useful projects to be carried out. Maher was always active in party politics. He was a good speaker. According to A. E. Sheldon, former secretary of the State Historical Society, some termed him "Nebraska's ablest and most elegant orator," a characterization usually reserved for W. J. Bryan. Maher was a close associate of U.S. Senator George Norris.

Prior to his service on the Mexican border Maher engaged in the real estate business in Lincoln. He helped found the Old Line Insurance Company in Lincoln in 1913 and he became its first president in 1916, the year before he volunteered in the European war. After the war he spent much time abroad and from the early '30's onward he lived with his wife and daughter in Rome, returning to Lincoln for several months each year. In 1938 he was on a Mediterranean cruise with the former King Alfonso of Spain. He died of heart failure June 10, 1939, at the age of 70. His body was brought to America and buried at Arlington. One of his last newspaper contributions was to the *Omaha World-Herald* advising this country to stay aloof if war broke out.

Maher was the leader and past president of the Friends of the Irish Republic, a local branch of the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic. He served as president of the Nebraska Progressive League, was one of the organizers of the American Legion and its first department commander and he was a past commander of the Spanish-American Veterans and acted as aide-de-camp on the staff of the commander-in-chief.

Many of Maher's ingenious ventures gained wide currency through their appearance in the *New York Herald*, for which he was a western correspondent. The newspaper was not so reliable historically then as it is now. Under the editorship of James Gordon Bennett it opened its columns to the sensational. It seems to have encouraged highly colored western contributions such as those sent in by Maher. Eastern newspapers in general were interested in the plains region, in Indian fighting, natural phenomena, newly explored areas and bad lands and unusual happenings. To meet this demand Maher often supplied fabricated occurrences to help out the real happenings he reported.

Following are some of his leading exploits. How many more there were I do not know.

### *The Petrified Man*

My best account of the petrified man found near Chadron comes from Mrs. J. G. (Florence Tierney) Maher. It was

sent me from Lausanne, Switzerland, in April, 1949, in response to an inquiry from me regarding it. In men's minds in those days were the striking discoveries of dinosaur eggs and skeletons in the Gobi desert of central Asia. Mrs. Maher said, "The story of the petrified man as I remember it from dinner table conversation and an incident or two during my time in Lincoln runs about thus:"

An eastern archaeologist, Dr. Hatcher,<sup>2</sup> had found dinosaur material near Washington in 1887. The American Press gave it great publicity. Mr. Maher thought of it as a great overstatement, especially when the New York press referred to the dinosaur remains as being "a million years old," and he and some others wondered why they never found any "million year old" human skeletons. From these remarks came the idea of creating an ossified man, and as Dr. Hatcher had come out to the bad lands to dig for fossils the temptation to "plant" an ossified man in the path of archaeologists finally became a reality.

They selected a gigantic young colored man from the Ninth Cavalry at Fort Robinson as a perfect specimen and made a plaster cast of him from which they did in solid cement or concrete the figure of a man. His feet were made flat by the use of shingles, as flat feet were supposed to be the mark of prehistoric man. After he was completed in secrecy he was hauled by a dray wagon to the bad lands and planted not far from where the archaeologist and his men were digging. One rainy Sunday morning he was found half uncovered in the clay and an astounded group of onlookers pronounced him an ossified man and classified him in a prehistoric century.

After the tests had shown the calcium content and structural arrangement to be correct the "man" was pronounced genuine and was exhibited in a sort of carnival way in towns in Nebraska and in large areas of the United States. After a while Mr. Maher's lawyer, D. W. Sperling of Chadron, who had taken the "man" on tour, wrote that the enterprise was getting out of hand and the exhibitions should be stopped. So the petrified man was laid away respectfully in a vault in Champaign, Illinois. In the later '30's Secretary A. E. Sheldon asked Maher to find out what it would cost to bring him to Lincoln for the Historical Society. The

---

<sup>2</sup> John Bell Hatcher (1861-1904) made extensive collections of fossils in western states for Yale University. After his finding of dinosaur material in 1887 he discovered, 1889-92, important fossil remains in Wyoming and, 1893-95, made explorations in Utah, Wyoming, and South Dakota. Later Dr. Hatcher led three expeditions to Patagonia, which had never before been entered by white men. He became known as "the foremost collector of the remains of prehistoric animals in America."

expenditure would have been too great for something of no historical or educational value and the matter was dropped.

A few newspaper notices may be cited.

The Dawes County *Journal*, October 14, 1892, tells of "Chadron's Petrified Man," discovered October 10.

Ed Rossiter and his father and brother have collected many valuable petrifications and fossils from the bad lands in this vicinity, but the former stumbled onto the greatest curiosity ever found last summer—it being nothing less than the petrified corpse of a man. . . . The two Rossiter Bros were collecting fossils about 3 miles from town in a strip of bad lands at the Natural Wall when Ed discovered what he at first thought to be a bone projecting from a bank of clay. A little digging brought him to what he found to be the hand of a man. He called his brother Clyde to watch the treasure while he came to the city for help. That evening the valuable find was safe at the Rossiter hotel and after the clay was partially removed from the body it was placed on exhibition.

A minute description of the body follows.

The face resembles that of a Negro . . . but his shapely heels indicate caucasian blood. . . . The medical fraternity and all others who have seen the specimen laugh at the idea that it is not genuine. It is undoubtedly the most perfect specimen of the kind ever discovered, and is worth many thousands of dollars. Mr. Rossiter intends taking it to the Chicago World Fair.

Then follows a learned account of the geology of the region.

No relic of the human family has ever been found in so early a geological formation as this. It lay solidly imbedded in a greenish stratum of butte clay, with the remains of creadons, retotheriums and turtles. The stratum belongs at the beginning of the Miocene age, in the tertiary period. Originally the body must have been 200 feet below the surface. The face of the cliff above the greenish stratum where it lay shows twenty-four distinct strata, and as all are composed of sedimentary deposit there can be no doubt of the immense antiquity of the find.

. . . There are also three layers of rock above the stratum in the butte clay cliff in which the man was found, one a thin layer of agate, the others sandstone. Local geologists believe the stratum of green butte clay must have been deposited at least a million years ago. There seems to be no escape from the belief that the man was in some way buried in that deposit when it was

soft and yielding. There were no signs of a disturbance such as volcanic action would produce. Neither is it possible that the caving in of the cliff in modern times could have buried its victim, as such a landslide would certainly have disturbed the well marked geological formation, and the greenish stratum is only two and a half or three feet in thickness. Scientific men will certainly be interested not only in the specimen itself, but also in the location in which it had been found.

The West Point *Republican*, November 4, 1943, under the heading "50 Years Ago" had:

The petrified man discovered recently at Chadron, Nebraska, is on exhibition in this city today. It is an object worth seeing. . . . By the head one would judge it to be the body of an Indian. The form is about 6 ft 4 in. long and is solid stone weighing several hundred pounds. The finder has been offered \$10,000 for the curiosity.

### *Soda Springs Near Chadron*

One of Maher's minor hoaxes was his "soda springs" venture. Many people about the Chadron region were going to Hot Springs, South Dakota, or to Thermopolis, Wyoming, and drinking "bad water." Why should not Chadron capitalize on this? There are two boiling springs near Chadron. Maher and his cronies sank sacks of soda in the bottom of the springs. On Sundays people came to try the water. Evidence of persons who drank it and "threw away their crutches" and similar testimonies had been prepared. Stories about the springs were told for some years.

### *Threat of British Reprisals up the Niobrara*

O'Neill, the largest town in Holt County and its county seat, was named for its first settler, John O'Neill (1834-1878), a soldier and Fenian leader who came from Ireland to America in 1848. He became currently known as General O'Neill. The Fenian or Irish-Republican Brotherhood had for its purpose the overthrow of British rule in Ireland. O'Neill, a cavalry lieutenant in the Civil War, interested himself in a plan to invade Canada and acted as a Fenian organizer. He led a raiding party across the Niagara, seized a Canadian village, then escaped before British troops could

capture him and his men. In the United States again, O'Neill and his raiders were charged with breach of neutrality and arrested but they were soon released by the courts. Shortly afterward he was appointed "inspector general of the Irish republican army." He prepared another attack on Canada. It was abortive and he was again arrested and again released, this time pardoned by President U. S. Grant. He made two other vain attempts at invading Canada, meantime quarreling with his associates.

There were Fenian groups in Denver at this time. One of the things the Fenian movement needed most, O'Neill thought, was some western outposts, these for the invasion of Canada all along its border. After his last release from jail he served as agent for land speculators who wished to settle Irish in Holt County, Nebraska. He himself was the first settler in the town of O'Neill, May 12, 1874, when the town site was platted. In 1875 he platted an addition to the town site and brought there a colony of Irish from Scranton, Pennsylvania. The town was named O'Neill perhaps by himself, perhaps by others. He was successful in establishing two other colonies, one at Atkinson in the same county and the other in adjacent Greeley County. All this is history, not hoax, strange and futile as the idea may seem of winning freedom for Ireland from Britain by the invasion of Canada. The Fenian cause lost in Ireland and lost sympathy in this country. O'Neill's prestige failed. Drought and grasshoppers and hard times came to the Nebraska region. The O'Neill and Atkinson colonists, too poor to get away, stayed and from them came the numerous Irish in Holt County today.

I have vague memories myself of the Fenian movement. Patrick Egan, a prominent Irish expatriate, lived in my juvenile days not far from the Pound home, with his family of twelve children. He was deeply committed to the cause of Irish freedom. And John Fitzgerald, at that time a wealthy railroad contractor, lived more than a mile away in the opposite direction from the Egan. Whether there were military supplies at the Egan home seems doubtful. At Fitzgerald's death several hundred guns were found stacked away on his premises and were confiscated.



With this background to build on after the petrified man and the soda springs ventures had run their course, the Nebraska Fenian doings seemed to Maher and his cronies fine material for launching new tales. Nebraskans were warned through the newspapers that the British would surely exact reprisals for the invasion of Canada and would seek out Valentine and O'Neill. Their plan was, said Maher, to send the British navy up the Mississippi and up the Missouri, then to steam up the Niobrara to Valentine. Valentine would be taken easily and the Irish there "made to cry uncle." A landing party would be sent to capture O'Neill, the former center of preparations for Canadian invasion. The story of the imminent coming of the British navy up the Niobrara for reprisals went to the New York *Herald* and down the Nebraska newspaper line along the Northwestern railroad from Valentine to Ainsworth and O'Neill. It was kept up jocularly for the next ten or fifteen years.

Mari Sandoz recalls hearing, as one feature of the tale, that "Maher sent a big box apparently containing rifles to the Irish in Valentine. The box was one such as government arms came in and it was well labeled. But inside were a lot of Irish clubs cut, I hear, along the brush of Bordeaux creek in Northwestern Nebraska."

### *The Spanish Prisoner Hoax*

This tale is also known as "The Man Who Blew Up the Maine." Presumably it was perpetrated sometime between 1902 and 1913, the period of much interest in the Maine incident and the raising of the sunken ship. In most versions the man involved was a Spaniard. In some he was an American. A few persons, among them Herbert Kelly, formerly of Lincoln, now of the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*, recall Maher's telling of the story informally following a dinner of newspaper men held probably in honor of Charles Ryckman who had won a Pulitzer award for an editorial in the *Fremont, Nebraska Tribune*, November 7, 1930. Possibly, Mr. Kelly says, the occasion may have been another one that year. This time, in the traditional version of the tale, Maher became involved with the government.



JOHN G. MAHER  
(Courtesy Townsend Studio.)

Maher sent a short item to the New York *Herald* about the discovery of the man who sank the Maine. He followed it with running wire reports about falling in with the man by chance, the chase, how the man was found in Louisiana, his confession, details of how the destructive bomb was attached and the like. As the reports continued great excitement arose. Other newspapers suspected a hoax and sent a man down to find the Spaniard. Accounts ran on for about a year and finally aroused the government. It thought that if the man was found who caused the Spanish war the matter should be inquired into. Maher went to Louisiana, got a cadaver and put it in an old ruined Spanish prison outside a town, then set fire to it and produced the burned corpse. "He had been walled up to hold for the government and some one had set the place afire." The government proved that the remains had been dead a long time and the matter was dropped. In another account the finale may have taken place not in Louisiana but in the Southwest.

This is the story as it reached me in tradition. The authentic story of the hoax as remembered by Florence Tierney Maher is briefly as follows. It is no less interesting than the folklore version.

John was employed at his daily work, which was clerical, and the New York *Herald* from time to time wired him to ask for news of some sensational rumor. He used his evenings to originate hair-raising replies for which he received space-rate pay and usually a request for "more." One day there appeared in Chadron a Spanish-speaking man who was arrested as a vagrant and requested to leave town instead of being sent to jail. He said he was a Cuban soldier and wanted to stay in the United States, but he was forced to leave anyhow. It came to John's imaginative mind that this Cuban must have been a fugitive from justice, and the idea of a "man who blew up the Maine" emerged forthwith. John made up a name for him, Captain Manuel de Silva Braga, an officer in the Cuban army; and he manufactured a story of a shady record, a reprimand from a superior officer, a dismissal from the army, and an urge for revenge against those who had wronged him. Next John pictured him as deciding to blow up the Maine lying at anchor in the harbor at Havana, as doing so, then escaping to the United States and fleeing to the mountainous northwest for safety. With that sequence in mind he wired the editor of the *Herald* to say that Captain Manuel de Silva Braga, late of the Cuban army,

supposedly the perpetrator of the bombing of the Maine, had passed through northwest Nebraska seeking refuge. He asked if a full account was desired.

The reply came back at once, "Send all you can get." So each evening John sent off a story, rather short but full of suspense, to the effect that a posse was hot in pursuit of the criminal, that one night he was practically surrounded, and that the next day he was still at large. To add to the interest John implied that the renegade Captain had on his person documents to show that he had intimate knowledge of the structure of the Maine and other related details. Finally the *Herald* wired "Spare no expense, ask whatever assistance is necessary, surround and capture the criminal." As the story had gone on long enough John was strictly on the spot to bring it to an end. So under the date line of a small place in the Black Hills he wired that the man had taken refuge at night in an abandoned cabin of gold prospecting days; that the posse, of which John, according to his account had become a party, covered the ground rapidly, surrounded the cabin and determined to wait till morning to close in to force a surrender. But just before dawn the Spaniard decided that escape was impossible for him and he simply burned the cabin, his papers and himself, to ashes. When the imaginary posse reached the spot there was nothing there at all. The government entered into John's story only as investigating and verifying the existence of Captain Manuel de Silva Braga (purely a fabrication) and admitting that there had been such a man in the Cuban army and that his "present whereabouts were unknown."

An examination of the files of the New York *Herald* would be of especial interest for this yarn. But they are far from Nebraska, are not indexed for the older periods, and to see them has been impracticable.

### *The Alkali Lake Monster*

Tales of water monsters seem to have existed at all times and in many places. Yet to find them associated with our mild Nebraska lakes and rivers is unexpected. There have been several, however. That most widely circulated and still recurrent has for its locus the Alkali Lake at the far end of Mirage Flats near Hay Springs in Sheridan County. It was from 1885 onward that pioneers came to the region. The lake now goes by the name of Lake Walgren after a family of landowners who settled there in 1886. It is now reached by a graveled highway. Mari Sandoz states that she has known all her life gossip stories of a "big sea monster" inhabiting it.

There is a reference to the monster at the end of her book about Old Jules, her father. There were, then, early stories of a creature suggesting a prehistoric dinosaur. Their heyday, however, came in the 1920's. Mary M. Mielenz of Stanton, for instance, states that "In the '30's Nebraskans were interested in newspaper tales of the lake emanating from Hay Springs. Several persons of the little western community testified to seeing in the waters of the lake there a strange monster of pre-historic kind. Most hearers were highly skeptical. Though they scoffed, many of them drove for miles to view the lake to try to glimpse the monster, were there one. Some talked of draining the lake. In time the story quieted."

The Nebraska folklore pamphlet of the Federal Writers Project (No. 13, July, 1938) recounts some of the reports of the gigantic creature, giving as a rule no dates or sources. "Its head was like an oil barrel shiny black in the moonlight." "Its flashing green eyes spit fire." "When it roars and flips its powerful tail the farmers are made seasick." "It eats a dozen calves when it comes ashore." "It flattens the corn-fields." "The gnashing of its teeth sounds like a clap of thunder." "Once an unbelieving man from Omaha went alone to spend the night at Walgren lake. When he returned his hair was white and he looked haggard and worn. Three days later when he recovered his voice he said that the monster was 300 feet long and its mouth large enough to hold the Woodmen of the World building."

The exaggerated whoopla about the monster in the '20's was undoubtedly really started by Maher. Accounts from his hand of its fearful doings and depredations got into the New York papers, the *Herald* especially. The *Pathfinder* ran a series of letters about it and the *Minneapolis Journal* had an article on it (1923) but mistakenly gave it the wrong location. Even the *Boston Transcript* took up the story. The testimony of E. W. Bowman and J. G. Gilmore of Hay Springs who kept a scrapbook of clippings is that letters about the monster came from all over the world. From Maher surely came the account and the picture of the monster printed in the *London Times* (1923):

By far the most vivid picture of the actions and features of a mediaeval monster which for three years has been terrifying the natives of the vicinity of Alkali Lake near the small town of Hay Springs, Nebraska, U S A, was received from our Omaha correspondent today.

The London picture, a curious one, was reproduced in the Nebraska folklore pamphlet, probably from the scrapbook of Messrs. Bowman and Gilmore.

The Alkali Lake must have been fairly large at one time. One statement is that it covered 120 acres. Drought years such as the early '90's and the 1930's left it only a small puddle. After the rains came again it looked like a large body of water. By the present time a small stream has been turned into it to help it out.

In the 1920's an investigation of the lake was ordered at Hay Springs, apparently planned as a money-making adventure. It was proposed to drag the lake and to charge admission for watching the process. The project was not carried out since nearby land owners asked too high a price for leasing the ground. The cost of dragging the lake would have been about \$1,000 and \$4,000 was asked for a three-months' lease of the ground.

Following are a few newspaper testimonies:

If the land owners consent and it is possible for the townspeople to finance the undertaking—which will take from \$800 to \$1,000, the work of capturing the monster will proceed . . . it is a big undertaking to drag a lake  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile wide and nearly a mile long . . .  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles in circumference.<sup>3</sup>

Hay Springs Investigating Association has, after due consideration, practically given up the idea of dragging Alkali Lake in an effort to locate the sea monster which has been seen by several of our citizens on various occasions. Land owners want \$4,000 for three months lease and certain per cent of exhibition money of animal if found. Considered excessive and Investigation Association concluded to go no farther.<sup>4</sup>

Have a tip that Bruce Hewitt and J. Mayes of Rushville solved the Hay Springs Lake mystery by finding a mermaid frozen in ice of the lake. Wire 300 word story if above is correct, also rush photo of mermaid. Editor

---

<sup>3</sup> Hay Springs News, March 23, 1923.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., July 6, 1925.

Hays wonders "if John has been playing jokes on us again."<sup>5</sup>

A letter from Lincoln, Nebraska, November 19, 1925, apparently to a Norfolk paper runs, "I note by an article in today's *News* [that a mermaid has been caught in Alkali Lake]. I am much pleased to learn this since we recently delivered a large consignment of fish to be planted in this lake and it is a well known fact among fish culturists that fish will not thrive or propagate in waters infested with mermaids."

The *Rushville Recorder*, September 2, 1937, printed a "Historie of Ye Lake or Adventures of Ye Sea Monster" by Mary Jane Barnes. It tells much about the lake, using archaic spelling only in the title.

### *Indian Ghost Dances and Government Troops*

In her prize-winning biography of Jules Sandoz (1935), his daughter has, "On Pine Ridge in 1890 the Messiah craze was spread among agency-starved Sioux. An holy man had risen far to the west, one who promised the old buffalo days again with the white man swept from the earth as the chinook clears the snow from the red grass. John Maher of Chadron kept the New York papers full of stories of depredations and atrocities. Jules complained, 'Eastern people don't know better. They believe them.'" Old Jules, whose attitude toward the Indians was in general a sound one, seemed to think that it was Maher's tales that brought on the killing—some called it the "assassination"—of Sitting Bull, the famous chief at Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, which was followed by the wholesale massacre at Wounded Knee Creek of the Sioux of the Pine Ridge Reservation near the Nebraska border. Old Jules lived near Pine Ridge and knew Maher's flair for exciting newspaper reports. It was not, however, manufactured newspaper tales that brought on the death of Sitting Bull and the massacre. The troops came at the request of the United States agents at the

---

<sup>5</sup> *Rushville Standard* quoting from a telegram from Omaha *World-Herald*, November 20, 1925.

reservation. Local civil authorities, not the government under pressure from newspapers, were responsible. The government was, indeed, reluctant to send troops. The whole tragic story is no credit to the white race. Far from it. It contributes another chapter in the story of our stupid and often brutal treatment of our Indian wards.

Examination of sources such as James Mooney's exhaustive investigation of "The Ghost-Dancing Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890" (Fourteenth Annual Report of the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology to the Smithsonian Institution, Part II, chapter III, Washington, 1896) and Stanley Vestal's sympathetic life of Sitting Bull (1932) makes clear that there was little or no connection between Maher's highly colored newspaper reports and the bringing on of the tragedies. Apparently they would have taken place had Maher not existed, although his lurid reports as correspondent for the New York *Herald* could have done nothing to allay excitement, rather the contrary. The ghost dances of the Indian tribes everywhere in the west and northwest were peaceful, were indeed religious. The Indians had no hostile intentions, rather taught non-resistance, as they danced within their reservations to bring on the messiah they awaited. Only from Standing Rock and Pine Ridge were troops asked for. Sitting Bull, says his biographer, had nothing to do with instituting the dancing. His arrest and slaying came from other causes.

The Indian agent at Standing Rock, Major James McLaughlin, was a man of above the average ability as an agent but he was not always infallible. Sitting Bull was a conspicuous and influential figure among the Sioux and McLaughlin tired of his "domination." Among other things the chief had opposed the further cession of Indian lands. Like most outstanding personages he had devoted friends and bitter rivals. He came to be looked on as a leader in incitement on the reservation. McLaughlin complained of his influence and was backed more or less by settlers, missionaries, and traders. His name was forwarded to the government with that of other "disturbers." It seemed wise to McLaughlin to remove the chief elsewhere. Mooney reprints McLaughlin's order for



Sitting Bull's arrest. The agency's Sioux Indian police force, no white man among them, was sent to carry out the arrest. Midnight was the time fixed for it. In an ensuing *melée* between the chief's friends and the Indian police one of the latter shot and killed Sitting Bull and an Indian panic followed.

The Pine Ridge reservation on the Nebraska border was the largest of the Sioux reservations, numbering 6,000 Indians. Dr. V. T. McGillicuddy, a man of unusual ability, had managed the Indians for seven years without a soldier on the reservation. After a political change of administration he was succeeded by an agent named Gallagher and then in 1890 by G. F. Royer, whom Mooney describes as a man "without experience, force of character, courage, and sound judgment." Royer was frightened at the ghost dancing, although it was really harmless enough, and always confined to the reservation. He reported to the government that more than half of his 6,000 Indians were dancing and that they were beyond control and suggested that it would be necessary to call out the military. On October 30, thoroughly alarmed, he wrote a long letter to the department at Washington stating that the one remedy was the use of soldiers and that about 600 troops would be needed. Also many telegraphic reports were sent. On November 15, Royer was finally instructed by the government to report the condition of affairs to the commander at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. That same day Royer telegraphed that the Indians were wild and crazy and that 1,000 troops were needed. So at last troops were ordered to the reservation and nearly 3,000 were soon in the area. The flight of the Indians became a stampede and an inexcusable massacre by an uninhibited soldiery not only of Indian braves but of women and children followed.

### *"Watch Stuffing"*

In earlier days in Nebraska and other States "watch stuffing" was listed in law books alongside stealing, picking pockets, swindling, assault and numerous other punishable offenses. Sometime in the '30's when the Laws of Nebraska were being revised at the State Capitol, a letter was sent me

asking whether I knew what was meant by the unfamiliar term "watch stuffing," not to be found in dictionaries. I did not know and neither did my brother Roscoe nor anyone else I consulted. I learned at last what "watch stuffing" meant from a philologically inclined convict in the state penitentiary at Richmond, Virginia. "Watch stuffing" is now entered in the *Dictionary of American English* (Vol. IV) of 1944 and is mentioned briefly under "stuffer" in the *Dictionary of Americanisms* of 1951.

Whether or not John Maher knew the name, he knew the practice and made use of it in the last of his hoaxes that I shall mention here. Again Mari Sandoz is my authority. She once heard, she told me, that Maher on a certain special occasion formally presented a handsome watch at a dinner to a dignitary being honored. The watch was of beautifully shiny brass outside and looked like gold. Inside was an old Ingersoll watch that would not run.

### *Interview with Colonel Maher*

The following is an informal account by Mari Sandoz of an interview with John G. Maher.

Along about 1930 I went up to John Maher's office in Lincoln to ask him about the Old Jules trial for leading a vigilante group that hung a man. Maher was court reporter at that trial and was in a particularly good position to give me a good version of the day if he would, and to certify or discount what I had accumulated.

But Mr. Maher never seemed to listen to anyone, and although I said who I was, he paid no attention to anything beyond the one name that he somehow recalled, Jules Sandoz. He was off into a fantastic version of the snake bite incident, stating how the rugged old pioneer had been bitten by a rattler. "In the midst of his numerous family and before the white horrified faces of his wife and small children about to be robbed of their father by a dastardly snake, he grabbed up his thirty-thirty Winchester and shot off his hand—"

All this time I was trying hard to interrupt because he did have so much important information if I could get him down to facts, and I didn't want to embarrass him when he finally understood that I was one of the daughters of the Old Jules he was talking about and had to admit that he was caught in a fantastic fabrication.

But I didn't need to worry. When I finally did get John Maher stopped and made to understand who I was

he looked at me.

"You're the girl, the daughter who was with him when he was bitten." Yes, I was.

He laughed, his fine eyes merry and unabashed. "Well, it was a damn good story the way I was telling it, wasn't it?"

Fortunately he settled down then and gave me at least two hours of time, going over what I had on the court scene word for word, checking, adding, etc., and all without any more of his exaggeration. I had the complete scene from a dozen others and from the court records, and he was very helpful.

This account is of interest as showing the two sides of Colonel Maher, his love of the tall tale and his spontaneity in creating one, and his ready helpfulness when he turned serious. Miss Sandoz added when she read this article, which she prompted me to write, and let me have her story of the interview, "I am happy this much of the fabulous man is to be set down before any more is forgotten. He is so distinctly a man of the later frontier."