

Bells of Balangiga

Who does the Wyoming Veterans' Affairs Commission represent?

If they are supposed to represent the interests of Wyoming military veterans, they once again have put that charge in question.

At a recent meeting of the Veterans Commission, an old wound was reopened. What was the purpose? And does this group of bureaucrats appointed by the Governor understand what their mission and purpose are?

An ambush on the Island of Samar in the Philippines on September 28, 1901 precipitated a dispute that has festered for years. On that date, according to historical records, natives of the village of Balangiga attacked a recently arrived contingent of American soldiers.

An early morning attack on mostly unarmed American soldiers who were just beginning or ending breakfast, started when the town's chief of police attacked the sentry in the area from behind and that started the ensuing massacre. The sentry was Private Adolph Gamlin. He had his rifle taken and was hit in the head with the butt of it. A shot was fired in the air and a signal for the attack to commence was shouted.

At the same time, the church bells were rang and doors opened and a mob who had been waiting inside advanced on the soldiers - along with laborers in the streets who were armed with bolos, picks and shovels.

Soldiers, unarmed, who were in the mess tents were the first targets.

The above account is disputed to some extent by a group called "The Balangiga Study Group." A member of that group is Jean Wall-Fe, an American whose father was Private Adolph Gamlin.

By their account, "Adolph Gamlin recovered consciousness, found a rifle and caused considerable casualties among the Filipinos." He had become a hero.

The American soldiers escaped by sea and the townspeople returned to bury their dead, then abandoned the town, cited the Study Group's account.

Claiming that the bells were not rung to signal an attack, the group wrote: "As for the bell, it was not under control or direction of anyone in a command position and therefore could not have given the signal to initiate the attack. ..." The bell?

Another of the Study Group wrote that, "the police chief initiated the attack by assaulting Private Adolph Gamlin, who was on guard, shouting and waving a baton. Some undetermined time after this, a bell in the church tower was rung."

It appears that members of the Study Group have tried to dismiss the contention that the bells were a signal for the attack or somehow had come into play as being used to announce the attack.

According to this account, about four weeks later, the 11th Infantry took two of the town's bells and returned with them to the United States in 1904 to then-Fort Russell (in Cheyenne) and finally abandoned them there about 1913. A third bell eventually found a home in Korea, with the 9th Infantry.

The Group also is of the opinion that, "the attack was carried out in its entirety by the people of Balangiga and surrounding areas, that it was carried out for purposes of self-defense and survival in the face of the orders of Captain Connell and fear generated by the activities of Captain Glenn elsewhere on the island, rather than as a challenge to American sovereignty over the islands."

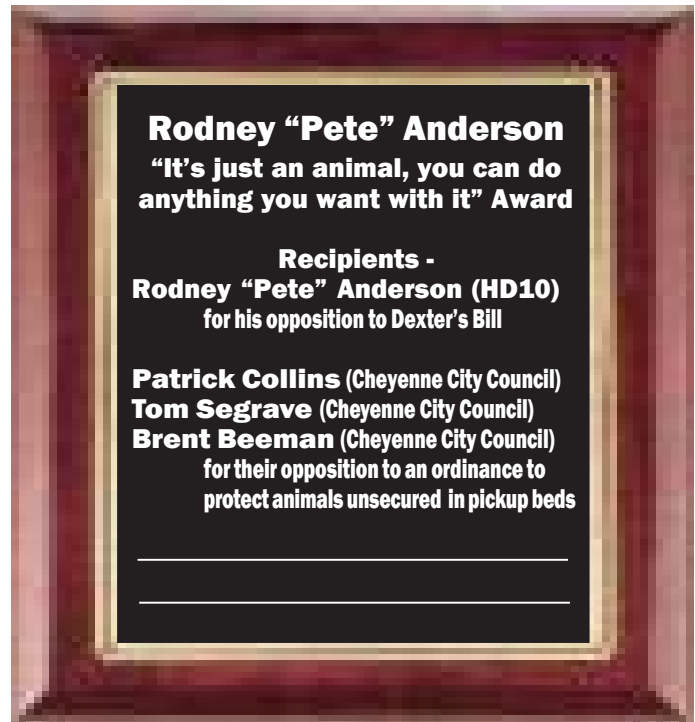
The relevance of the previous recitations is Jean Wall-Fe. The daughter.

At a recent meeting of the Veterans Commission, on March 26, 2005, in Casper, the issue of returning one or both of the bells found at F.E. Warren was addressed by the Commission. As a guest speaker, and the only speaker on the subject, Jean Wall-Fe was invited to make her case for the return of the bells to the Philippines.

This demand has been discussed and dismissed previously.

Yet, a group supposedly in existence to represent veterans' interests voted secretly (by secret ballot, specific votes withheld) to support return of the bell(s) to the Philippines. While a state agency like the Veterans Commission has no sway over a federal military installation like F.E. Warren, just the fact that a group purported to speak for veterans took a stance contrary to veterans groups of the past, is dangerous and undesirable.

Ms. Wall-Fe has "studied" Balangiga for nearly fifty years. In one of her writings, she referred to the massacre as a "small engagement," but acknowledges that the bells "signaled the natives to attack." Now, they are bells, plural.



She also wrote that the bells in Cheyenne, "have never been authentically identified as those that hung in the church belfry that signaled the attack on the American soldiers ..."

Yet she strongly advocates their return to the Philippines.

There was a time when the Philippines was a good ally to the United States. Then they took our naval bases (Clark and Subic Bay) and have become an alleged bastion for terrorism and the training of terrorists. There are those who now believe that the Philippines is deserving of no special consideration when it comes to our return of one or both bells. Most veterans probably feel that way and consider the bells as "spoils of war."

A Professor Borrinaga of the University of the Philippines Manila is a member of the Study Group and has written some of what was quoted earlier in this story. His writings include a supposed promise by President Bill Clinton to Philippine President Fidel Ramos in November of 1994, to return the Bells of Balangiga to the Philippines, "in the spirit of fair play."

Borrinaga views the massacre as, "a glorious moment in our history, which occurred in an obscure town in [the] southern part of Samar in September 1901."

Just as American military veterans hold diverse views about the ambush and the bells, so do Americans and Filipinos about the incident.

Professor Borrinaga wrote that Americans "have analyzed it (the attack) as a dastardly, cowardly act carried out against naive and kindly Americans" doing pacification work. The Filipinos, he wrote, "view the Balangiga attack as a courageous uprising against a cruel, foreign oppressor."

It should be noted that every single American officer at Balangiga was killed, only enlisted men were spared or survived - Private Gamlin being one of them. He was Jean Wall-Fe's father.

There are some that hold the opinion that the only real church bell from Balangiga is the one now in Korea. If that is so, why is there such a hue and cry about returning these - which some who demand their return consider imposters?

Mrs. Wall-Fe, the only speaker on the subject before the Wyoming Veterans Commission has said: "Those bells have so much historical value for the village of Balangiga, and ultimately for the Philippines itself, for Balangiga represented the only successful military engagement during the Philippine-American War, whereby the oppressed (sic) were driven out by force consisting of only the villagers themselves. There were no insurgents involved."

Veterans service organizations in Wyoming have opposed the return of the bells to the Philippines. But no one representing a VSO was invited to address the Commission with their views.

Jean Wall has said that these veterans groups and individuals who refused to return those bells to Balangiga do not have a thorough knowledge of those bells. "Today," Ms. Wall said, "we have identified two bells, as well as a third bell in South Korea with a Regiment with Ninth Infantry (Company C at Balangiga as part of the Ninth)." She added: "We know that the bells in Wyoming did not signal the attack on Company C and therefore cannot be claimed as instrument of war, as has been so classified by the veterans groups in Cheyenne." (Mrs. Wall in Los Angeles, California on September 29, 2001.) At least she has had her say. Veterans did not.



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