

The Lost Years of Billy Battles

Book 3, Finding Billy Battles Trilogy

Ronald E. Yates

Foreword: Ted Sayles

When Book Two of the *Finding Billy Battles* trilogy ended, the year was 1910 and my great-grandfather, William Fitzroy Raglan Battles, was living in Chicago with his wife Katharina and his daughter, Anna Marie. Billy and Katharina had recently celebrated their eleventh anniversary, and Anna Marie, Billy's daughter from his first marriage, was a twenty-year-old student at Northwestern University in Evanston.

Billy and Katharina met in 1894 aboard the SS *China* headed for the "Mysterious East." Both were despondent strangers fleeing tragedy. Billy's first wife, Mallie, had passed away during an influenza epidemic six months before, leaving Billy with a four-year-old daughter and a broken heart.

The Baroness Katharina von Schreiber was a recent widow, but unlike Billy's wife, her husband did not die of illness. She had, in fact, killed him. However, Katharina was no murderer. There were mitigating circumstances, which Katharina managed to explain convincingly to Billy.

After an uncertain beginning, their relationship grew and intensified, tempered in the crucible of calamity and danger. Trouble and misfortune shadowed them everywhere.

However, the five years between 1905 and 1910 were, without a doubt, the most tranquil and nonviolent in their chaotic lives. Billy was an editor at the *Chicago Record-Herald*, and Katharina was a successful author with a focus on international current events. Life was pleasant and comfortable, and for the first time in years, Billy and Katharina appeared to have left trouble far behind them.

That was about to change. As I examined the journals and other materials great-grandfather Battles left me, it was evident that by 1914 adversity and misfortune were about to reappear in the lives of Billy and Katharina.

But more important, Billy himself was about to vanish, and he wouldn't resurface for several years. For his friends and family, it was an enduring and impenetrable mystery. Eventually, everyone assumed Billy was dead. He wasn't.

But where did he go? What happened to him? Why did he disappear? I found the answers to those questions and several others in great-grandfather Battles' journals.

What follows is Billy's improbable and astonishing story in his own words.

Ted Sayles, Kansas City, Mo.

Chapter 1

You would think when a man entered the sixth decade of his life that he would be settled and reasonably contented. I thought I was that man. I was wrong.

When I turned fifty in 1910, I was living comfortably in Chicago with my wife, Katharina, and my daughter, Anna Marie. I had a fulfilling job as an assistant managing editor at the *Chicago Record-Herald*. We lived in the city's Astor Street District in a magnificent three-story Germanic-style manor on Schiller Street that Katharina inherited from her German parents.

Life was good, but as I was about to learn, it was too good to last.

Trouble was a constant companion in my life. It began more than thirty years before when I was just 19. Two companions and I were forced to defend ourselves against a clan of criminals that was squatting on my family's homestead in western Kansas. In the skirmish, I accidentally shot and killed the malevolent matriarch of the band when she unintentionally stepped into the line of fire. Then, one of my companions killed one of her two sons. Consequently, the clan spent the next ten years pursuing me and almost killed me one morning in Denver, Colorado.

After I recovered from that gunshot wound, I realized I had to finish the vendetta once and for all or spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder. With my cousin, Charley Higgins, and a posse of vaguely deputized men, we tracked the deadly clan to New Mexico and then back to western Kansas where we fought a pitched battle. I was wounded again, but when the smoke cleared, the clan was permanently eliminated.

At last I was sure my life was finally on track and moving toward a little happiness. As my cousin Charley used to say when life was going tolerably well, I was "steppin' as high as a blind dog in tall grass." But it wouldn't last. My wife, Mallie, passed away from the influenza epidemic of 1894, and I was so miserable that I cut my picket pin and drifted to the Far East, leaving my four-year-old daughter, Anna Marie, with my mother. I know today that it was an unpardonable act, but at the time I wasn't thinking rationally.

I wound up in French Indochina during the first anti-French rebellion by the colony's indigenous people. A few years later I was in the Philippines. While there in 1898 and 1899, I found myself reluctantly serving as a captain in the US Army—first fighting the Spanish and then clashing with Filipino insurgents in the Philippine-American War. I managed to come through both scraps relatively unscathed.

But perhaps the most significant event during that stage of my life was my marriage to the Baroness Katharina von Schreiber. We were married in the Philippines, and I am convinced that it was the most providential decision I ever made. I could count on Katharina to keep me on a tight rein when I had a tendency to react too quickly to a slight or a confrontation. But more than that, we were perfectly matched, and not many couples can say that.

So, here it was, 1914, and the world was changing in ways I never imagined possible twenty years before when I was in the Far East. In August of 1914, the Great War began in Europe. Newspapers were chockablock with stories of men dying by the hundreds of thousands every month on the bloody trench-furrowed battlefields of France and Belgium, their lives squandered by generals imprudently employing nineteenth century tactics in a twentieth century war with its merciless mechanized weapons. America initially remained out of the fray, and there was no reason to think that we would ever get involved in Europe's conflict.

As for me, I had no intention of ever again firing a shot in anger.

That all changed one Saturday morning in mid-March 1914 when the telephone rang while Katharina and I were having breakfast.

"William Battles?" the voice on the other end asked.

"Yes."

"Please hold on. I am connecting you to General Funston."

General Funston? I thought to myself. *What could he possibly want with me?*

When I first met Frederick Funston in 1898, he was a colonel and in command of the storied Twentieth Kansas Volunteer Infantry during the Spanish-American War and the ensuing Filipino insurgency. I had sailed to the Philippines to assist Katharina's brother, Manfred, who operated a lumber export business there and who had been arrested by the Spanish authorities just prior to the outbreak of war between Spain and the United States.

After securing Manfred's freedom, the general in charge of American troops in the Philippines persuaded me to accept a temporary commission as a captain and serve eight months as a liaison officer between him and the Twentieth Kansas Volunteer Infantry. That's how I came to serve with Funston.

Funston was a five-foot, four-inch package of ferocity and fearlessness who relentlessly led his men into battle waving his hat and yelling, "Follow me!" He seemed impervious to harm, and eventually his men began calling him "Fearless Freddy," out of awe and respect.

"Who is it?" Katharina asked as I held the phone to my ear.

"It's Frederick Funston."

"Funston? I thought he was in Asia."

In fact, Funston had served three years as Commander of the Department of Luzon in the Philippines and then was briefly shifted to the same role in the Hawaiian Department from 1913 to 1914. Now he was back in the US where he was a brigadier general in charge of the US Army's Southern Department along the Texas-Mexico border.

"No matter what he wants, tell him no!" Katharina said. "Wherever that man is there is bound to be trouble."

I held my hand over the mouthpiece. "What could he possibly want from me? The man's a general, and I am just a newspaper scribbler."

Then it dawned on me. He was probably inviting me to come to the Texas-Mexico border to write about the ongoing bandit war that had been raging there since

the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Funston was adept at acquiring newspaper exposure.

I was about to mention that to Katharina when the phone crackled, and I heard Funston's familiar voice on the other end.

"Captain Battles," Funston said, "are you hale and fit?" It was not an unusual way for Funston to begin a conversation.

"As well as can be expected, I guess. How about you?"

"Fit as a fiddle and twice as loud," he replied. "But I didn't call you to share details about our mutual health."

"I didn't think so."

"How soon can you get down to San Antonio?"

"San Antonio? Why?"

"I could use your help."

"My help? In what way?" Now I was intrigued.

"I can't discuss it over the telephone. But let's just say things are about to get serious with our neighbor to the south, and I need someone I can trust unreservedly for a vital job."

By now, Katharina was standing next to me, her ear close to the receiver. She backed away a few steps and shook her head.

"No, William. No," she whispered.

I put a finger to my lips and held my hand over the mouthpiece.

"By all means, bring Katharina with you. Eda would love to see her again." It was as if Funston could see Katharina standing next to me indicating her annoyance with his entreaty.

After several unsuccessful attempts to wheedle more information out of Funston, Katharina and I reluctantly agreed to take the train to San Antonio two days later.

"I'm sure it can't be anything dangerous," I said. "After all, he invited you to come too."

But Katharina wasn't having any of it. "The man's a magnet for trouble, just like your cousin, Charley. He has something up his sleeve."

The next day I advised the paper's editor-in-chief that I was going to San Antonio to spend time with General Funston and to gather information for a series of stories about the ongoing problems along the US-Mexico border.

We took Illinois Central's "Panama Limited" to St. Louis, switched to the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad's "Texas Special," and arrived in San Antonio on the afternoon of the third day. When we stepped from the train we were met by a lieutenant named Walsh and a sergeant named Lopez. They ushered us to an open-air Dodge Brothers touring car.

As Katharina and I settled into the backseat, she wondered out loud about our luggage.

"We are bringing it by truck to General Funston's quarters, ma'am," the lieutenant said.

"My God, we don't have *that* much luggage, do we?" Katharina asked.

"No, ma'am, but there is no boot on this car."

"I was only chaffing you, lieutenant."

The car lurched forward as the sergeant put it in gear. The lieutenant smiled and then turned back to me.

"The general tells me you helped him whip those Filipinos back in '98 and '99."

"I'm not sure I was much help," I replied. "But General Funston was a terror."

"He still is. He's always looking for a good scrap."

"He may be looking," I said, "but there is nothing going on down here that would satisfy his appetite for a skirmish."

"Don't be too sure about that, sir," Lieutenant Walsh said. "Villa and his men have caused quite a ruckus on the Texas-Chihuahua border, and now there's another problem."

"Another problem?" I leaned forward in my seat.

"I best let the general tell you about that, sir," the lieutenant said.

Several minutes later we arrived at the gates of Fort Sam Houston.

Funston's quarters turned out to be a substantial white, two-story house with wraparound verandas on both the first and second floors. As our car pulled up, the general's wife, Eda, was sitting in one of several green rattan chairs on the front porch. When she saw us, she put down the book she'd been reading and hurried toward our car.

Eda was a stunning and spirited woman in her late thirties, some twelve years younger than Katharina. She was about an inch shorter than the general with coffee-brown hair and intense hazel eyes that flared when she talked. The last time I saw her was in 1910. She and General Funston had dinner with us in Chicago on their way to Manila where he had been appointed governor-general.

Like Katharina, Eda's parents, Otto and Teresa Blankart, were German-born. Both were accomplished musicians and music teachers. Eda grew up in San Francisco where the Blankart home was a magnet for musicians and music. In fact, her father established the city's first string quartet, and Eda developed into a gifted musician.

"Katharina," Eda said, embracing her. "It's so good to see you again. You are more beautiful than ever."

"What about me?" I asked, feigning a fit of piqué.

"You too, William. But as I always say, wealth, beauty, and fame are transient. When those are gone, little is left except the need to be useful."

"Well, as long as he's useful I guess I'll keep him around a while longer," Katharina said.

Eda laughed. "Come on in and let's get you settled."

The Funston house was expansive, to say the least. Just off the main hallway was a forty-by-fifty-foot parlor dotted with islands of couches, chairs, and coffee tables. I was marveling at the size of the chamber when Eda grabbed my arm.

"We don't use that room except when Frederick entertains," she said. "Come with me. We have a much cozier area where we prefer to gather."

The room she led us to was a smaller, screened-in back porch overlooking countless trellises of red, yellow, and pink roses, a dozen or so queen palms, and several beds of flowers.

"Oh, this is lovely," Katharina said, stepping into the porch. "And your garden is exquisite."

"Well, it's not as grand as the one we had in Manila," Eda said. "That garden was a tropical paradise, except for the occasional cobra or yellow pit viper. Did you know one of our maids was bitten by a cobra and almost died?"

"Well, all you have in Texas are those nasty rattlers," I said. "And they aren't as poisonous as cobras or yellow vipers."

"Yes, well so far I haven't seen one, and I don't relish doing so either."

"At least they give you a warning before they strike."

"You two sound like herpetologists," Katharina said. "Can't we talk about something more pleasant than venomous vipers?"

Eda laughed, her eyes sparkling. "Yes, it is a morose topic, isn't it?"

Moments later, a Mexican woman appeared with pitchers of iced tea and lemonade.

"We have something stronger if you prefer," Eda said, looking at us.

"Not for me," Katharina said. I concurred.

Just then, the clock on the mantle chimed. "Five o'clock already? Where did this day go?" Eda said. "Frederick should be home any time now."

We talked a few minutes more. Eda updated us on their activities during the past four years.

"Frederick has done very well for himself in the Army," I said. "I can tell you from experience, he was without doubt the most audacious commander in the Philippines during the insurrection."

Eda brightened. "Frederick speaks fondly of you and Katharina's brother. He says you and Manfred were both intrepid officers who the men would follow anywhere."

"I don't know about that." I felt a tinge of embarrassment and found myself looking at the floor. Then, looking up, I said, "I think both of us were just relieved to have survived the war with minimal damage."

Moments later we heard the front door open, and the sound of Funston's stentorian voice immediately filled the house.

"I know that troublemaker Captain Battles and his beautiful wife are here somewhere. Come out, come out wherever you are."

Eda grinned and winked at us. "You'll just have to come find us," she said.

"Marvelous," Katharina said in a deliberately loud voice. "I've never witnessed a brigadier general engaging in a game of hide-and-seek."

"And you won't today, either," Funston said as he entered the room, a broad smile on his face. He was dressed in khaki pants and tunic with a single gold star on both shoulders, signifying his rank as brigadier general. He walked directly to Katharina, who was standing next to Eda, and hugged her. I couldn't help but be amused. At five feet, ten inches, Katharina towered over Funston, and the scene reminded me of a boy in a soldier suit hugging his mother.

Eda looked at me and smiled as though she knew what I was thinking.

"Hello, my dear," Funston said as he hugged Eda and kissed her on the cheek.

Then, turning to me, he said, "Captain Battles . . . have you put on some weight?"

I had, and I acknowledged as much. "Too much German food," I said. When I last saw Funston in 1910 I weighed about 198 pounds. Not bad for someone six foot, four inches tall. Now, I weighed close to 220 pounds.

"And not enough physical activity, I'll wager," Funston said.

"Possibly," I replied. Funston had put on a few pounds himself and didn't look at all like the man who had run wildly through six-foot-high blades of cogon grass in the Philippines chasing insurgents and urging his men forward.

"Well, we will have to get you out on the drill field so you can lose that bulge you've developed amidships."

"I'm sorry to say that our dinner tonight won't be much help," Eda said. "We're having a traditional German meal or, as the German's say, '*ein gut bürgerliches deutsches Essen*.'"

She wasn't jesting. Dinner consisted of *Rouladen*, a roulade of bacon and onions wrapped in thinly sliced beef; *Semmelknödel*, dumplings made with flour and cubes of bread; *Leipziger Allerlei*, a vegetable dish of peas, baby carrots, white asparagus, green beans, and broccoli; and for dessert, coffee and *Prinzregententorte*, seven thin layers of sponge cake interlaid with chocolate buttercream and a topping of apricot jam, all covered with a dark chocolate glaze.

"*Na ja, du hast dir den Bauch vollgeschlagen*," Katharina said to me after I put the last of the *Prinzregententorte* into my mouth.

Eda chortled at that. Both she and Katharina often spoke in German, and to hear Katharina accuse me of stuffing myself made her laugh.

"*William hat einen süßen Zahn*," Eda said, nodding at my empty dessert plate. "Right, William?"

Funston looked at me. "I have no idea what they are saying. Do you?"

"I'm afraid so. Let's just say I stuffed myself and satisfied my sweet tooth at the same time."

"Well, once in a while won't hurt," Funston said. "That was a fine feast you rustled up, Eda."

"Thank you, dear. But don't get used to it. You could stand to lose a few pounds yourself."

"Quite so, quite so," Funston said. "Now, would you ladies excuse us? I want to take William here for a stroll in the garden."

"How romantic," Katharina said. Then she shot me a worried look, and her expression seemed to say, "Agree to nothing."

Funston and I walked a few minutes and entered a white gazebo. The two of us settled onto a bench. Funston cleared his throat.

"I'm sure you must be wondering why I invited you and Katharina down here."

"It had crossed our minds."

"Yes, well, I best acknowledge the corn about that. How would you and Katharina fancy a little vacation in Mexico?"

I looked at Funston with a puzzled expression, but before I could respond, he continued.

"A working vacation, I should add."

"What kind of work? And where in Mexico?"

I didn't know it at the time, but, as my mother used to say, I was about to go up Fool's Hill on the slippery side.

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The Lost Years of Billy Battles

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Review

"A rewarding and eloquent ending to an epic adventure and well-lived life. This final account of Billy Battles does not disappoint." **Carrie Meehan, - Chanticleer Reviews**

Review

The Lost Years of Billy Battles concludes the 'Finding Billy Battles' trilogy with an exploration of years of kidnapping, deception, political intrigue, and adversity in the early 1900s. Billy's story and his globe-hopping adventures, narrated in a series of candid, engrossing descriptions, will lead any newcomer to look for the other books in the trilogy while providing prior fans with a satisfying, gripping conclusion to the saga of Billy's life and its many unexpected turns.

One pleasure of this book (and the series as a whole) is that Yates doesn't just *tell* Billy's story. He recreates Billy's voice and perspective to craft a saga that is thoroughly engrossing and vivid: *"You would think when a man entered the sixth decade of his life that he would be settled and reasonably contented. I thought I was that man. I was wrong."* Its chatty, homespun narrator's voice cements events with an original perspective often tempered with a dose of humor: *"I didn't know it at the time, but, as my mother used to say, I was about to go up Fool's Hill on the slippery side."* **Diane Donovan, Senior Reviewer, Midwest Book Review**



Gwendolyn Plano

[5.0 out of 5 stars](#) Another five star winner

Format: Kindle Edition **Verified Purchase**

This is the third book of the Finding Billy Battles Trilogy, and what a book it is. I thoroughly enjoyed the entire series. It kept me thinking about the storyline even when I was not actively reading. I suffered a huge letdown when the story ended because I was very engaged with the story and wanted to read more. The characters are very easy to get to know and to become

attached to. Their adventures provide a great history lesson. Prior to reading the series, for instance, I was totally unaware of the US involvement in the Philippines and the 'invasion' of Veracruz. I am wondering and hoping that there will be a follow-on book.

Heidi Mastrogiovanni

[5.0 out of 5 stars](#) I loved all three of Ronald Yates' books

Format: Kindle Edition [Verified Purchase](#)

Why does a trilogy only have three books! I was absolutely heartbroken to see Billy Battles' story end. I loved all three of Ronald Yates' books. His prose is exquisite. He transports the reader to so many different times and places; it's a cliché, but you really do feel as though you are there in all these distant places with the characters. The characters will stay with me always, especially Billy. The books in this trilogy are epic and absorbing. They are all page-turners. I never wanted any of them to end.

CHERYL A.ADAMS

[5.0 out of 5 stars](#) Awesome!!!

Format: Kindle Edition [Verified Purchase](#)

These are great books that should be made into a movie! I see Tom Selleck in the title role! Wonderful history books!

Scott Skipper

[5.0 out of 5 stars](#) [A Long Strange Trip](#)

Format: Kindle Edition [Verified Purchase](#)

As Europe plunges toward war, German agents manipulate competing political factions in Mexico to draw Washington's attention to its southern border. Kansas sand cutter, William Fitzroy Raglan Battles, who spent the first half century of his life fighting outlaws in the American west, rebels in the Philippines and in Vietnam, settled into a life of peace and harmony in Chicago with his second wife, Katharina. However, in Billy Battles' life, adversity always arises. A phone call from his old friend and commanding officer, General Funston, lured him and Katharina to Veracruz on a mission to mingle with the German community in the hope of gaining intelligence regarding Germany's meddling. The pair, being both German speakers, soon had knowledge of the Kaiser's plan to arm the Mexican rebels in the north under Carranza, Villa, Zapata, and Obregón. They also unwittingly thwarted the delivery of a submarine load of gold and silver bars.

Villa's incursions into the United States drew Billy back to the border, and he even joined Pershing's expedition into Mexico in search of the rebel general. In the meantime, war erupted in Europe, and the neutral U.S. was unable to return the interdicted gold and silver to its rightful owner. General Funston entrusted Billy with the task of stashing it in a secret bunker on a nascent military base in New Mexico. Only Funston and Billy had a key.

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