

OF SNOW

MADE RED WITH BLOOD

ON A FRIGID MORNING IN NOVEMBER 1868, A GROUP OF SOLDIERS LED BY GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER BRUTALLY ATTACKED THE VILLAGE OF CHEYENNE PEACE CHIEF BLACK KETTLE BY THE BANK OF THE WASHITA RIVER IN WESTERN OKLAHOMA. THIS TRAGEDY, ITS GROUND NOW MARKED AS A NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE, CONTINUES TO ECHO 150 YEARS LATER.

BY JIM LOGAN

SHORTLY PAST MIDNIGHT on the morning of November 27, 1868, Lieutenant Colonel George Custer and his lead scout crawled through snow to the crest of a ridge overlooking the Washita River valley in what now is Roger Mills County. A half-mile below them was a herd of animals Custer thought to be bison. His Osage scout said they were horses. A tinkling pony bell confirmed the latter. The suspected village of the Cheyenne combatants they'd been tracking lay across the river, hidden by darkness and trees. As the two prepared to return to their fellow soldiers, the telltale sound of a baby's cry pierced the night air.



THE EVENTS LEADING to this moment had simmered for a quarter century. Since 1841, more than 300,000 white settlers had encroached onto lands that once had been the home of the Cheyenne, destroying grasslands, timber, and bison and often resulting in violent conflict. Cheyenne land straddled the Great Plains, including emigration routes to Oregon and California, and when the discovery of gold in present-

day Colorado brought more whites, the fighting intensified. The massacre of at least 150 peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho at Sand Creek, Colorado, worsened matters.

The Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867 assigned the Cheyenne lands between the Arkansas and Cimarron Rivers in present-day Oklahoma—an area one-sixth the size of that allocated to them sixteen years earlier—along with clothing, stipends for food and supplies, and access to prime hunting areas in southern Kansas, so long as they remained peaceful. Among those signing was Black Kettle, a committed peace advocate, whose band had been decimated at Sand Creek.

"[The Cheyenne] had no idea what they are giving up," wrote Captain Albert Barnitz in his diary soon after. "The treaty all amounts to nothing, and we will certainly have another war sooner or later."

The accord failed to settle conflicts in northern Kansas, where the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers attacked white villages in retaliation for a violent encounter with a white posse.

In this painting by James E. Taylor, the Seventh Cavalry, led by George Armstrong Custer, attacks a Cheyenne village.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Taylor Dec 25th 1878



To distance his band from the hostilities, Black Kettle moved his Cheyenne camp to the Washita River. He was unable, however, to keep some of his young men from periodically bolting north to join the Kansas raids.

As casualties resulting from these raids mounted to seventy-nine whites killed, thirteen women raped, and more than a thousand head of livestock stolen, General Philip Sheridan decided on a punitive expedition against the tribes involved. On Sheridan's orders of November 22, Custer's Seventh Cavalry force of 844 men rode out of Camp Supply. One of Custer's men happened upon a fresh trail in the snow, a find that eventually led them to the village of Black Kettle.



ON LEARNING SOME of his men had participated in the Kansas attacks, Black Kettle ripped his clothing and tore out clumps of his own hair in grief. Eventually, he journeyed to Fort Cobb to meet with Colonel William Hazen, the fort commander, and assured the colonel of his desire for peace. He asked to move his band to the safety of Fort Cobb, where many Kiowa and Comanche were camped for the winter.

Hazen denied the request. The army already was on the march, and Hazen feared Sheridan's desire to punish the Cheyenne might render his men unable to distinguish them from the Comanche and Kiowa camped near Fort Cobb. Black Kettle was told that he alone must make his case for peace with Sheridan.

The chief returned to his village and counseled with his leaders late into the night. They decided that, when the weather cleared, they would send messengers to meet with Sheridan. They also would move their village closer to the larger group of Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Kiowa camped a few miles downstream.

Today, the National Park Service maintains the site of the attack, which is a quiet spot on the Washita's south bank.



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The attack was controversial even among those who carried it out. Some of Custer's own soldiers were angry at him for leaving without Major Joel Elliott and the men who accompanied him.

A strange paralysis gripped Black Kettle's village through the night. Some passing Kiowas warned they had seen a wide trail headed toward the river. A Cheyenne warrior who'd fallen behind the returning war party thought he'd seen soldiers on the horizon. Both sightings were dismissed as doubtful in such weather. Black Kettle's wife implored him to break camp and move at once, but the men chose to wait until morning.



SHERIDAN HAD HANDPICKED Custer to lead the winter campaign. As a fearless cavalry commander in the

Civil War, he'd jumped four ranks to become, at twenty-three, the youngest general in the Union Army. However, in fall 1868, he was coming off a year's suspension following a court-martial for absence without leave and harsh treatment of troops. But Sheridan was in need of a daring and aggressive commander, and Custer—eager to redeem himself—was his man.

The village Custer and his scout observed from the ridge in the first hour of November 27 lay on the far side of the Washita, between gently rising ridges about two miles apart, in a crescent-shaped bend forming a sheltered pocket. The river, shallow at that time of year, was around ten feet across. Fifty-one

tipis housed approximately 250 villagers. Their ponies foraged nearby.

In the sub-freezing temperatures of early morning, Custer assembled his officers and sketched out the plan of attack, which called for splitting his force into four columns surrounding the village. They were to charge when the regiment band began playing the Seventh's marching song, "Garryowen." There was no time to reconnoiter. To preserve the element of surprise, they would strike at dawn.

Near daybreak, a woman emerged from a tipi, waded the river to gather ponies, and saw a column approaching from the north. Splashing back across the river, she ran through camp

screaming. Black Kettle fired a shot of alarm, buglers sounded the charge, and Custer's band struck up "Garryowen." Black Kettle lifted his wife onto his horse, climbed behind her, and galloped toward the river. Soldiers opened fire, killing them both.

Custer led his column's charge across the river from the northwest, streaked through the village with a scout, and ascended a slope to an elevated knoll to the south to observe the action. The camp erupted into a swirling cauldron of confusion with sounds of gunfire, screaming women and children, barking dogs, and pounding hooves. Villagers, many wrapped only in blankets, spilled from tipis. Army sharpshooters on the

north bank subjected them to a deadly crossfire, punctuated by the death songs of Cheyenne women.

So sudden and overwhelming was the four-pronged attack that Custer had possession of the village within ten minutes. The south column's approach failed to reach far enough to the east, leaving a gap in the encirclement. Major Joel Elliott sighted a group escaping through this gap and called for volunteers to accompany him in pursuit.

An officer rounding up ponies to the north topped a rise and saw miles of tipis stretching downriver containing Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache, and a few Comanche—and mounted warriors galloping his way.

He hurriedly reported his findings to a shocked Custer and told him of hearing heavy fire to the south, possibly from Elliott's missing unit.

Unknown to the rest of the command, Elliott and his seventeen men had unwittingly ridden into a large oncoming Native force from downriver camps, with another group blocking their retreat. The soldiers had dismounted and taken a circular defensive position, lying in tall grass. Within an hour, all eighteen had died.

Through the afternoon, groups of Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Kiowa from the other camps gathered on surrounding hills and watched as soldiers set about burning food, supplies, and tipis.

To cripple tribal mobility, Custer ordered the slaughter of more than eight hundred captured horses. Indian women hidden in tall grass would recall wounded ponies running frantically about, moaning much like human beings as they suffered amid the chaos.

"The snow on the whole bend of the river was made red with blood," recalled one of the Cheyenne women.

As sundown approached, there remained no word of Elliott's men. A search downstream had turned up nothing. Custer, now heavily outnumbered, decided on a strategic retreat. With smoke still rising from the village site and the band striking up "Ain't I Glad to Get Out of the Wilderness," the Seventh rode downstream in close marching order as if to attack other villages.

The ruse worked. The Indian combatants retreated to protect their families, who were already packing up. After moving down the valley toward them, Custer briskly countermarched and, under cover of darkness, headed back toward Camp Supply.

In his book *Washita*, Jerome Greene calculated the attack's Cheyenne death toll at 40 fighters, 12 women, and 6 children. Cheyenne captives, like these women and children, were taken to Camp Supply.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



WHILE INDIAN CASUALTY accounts vary, Jerome Greene, in his 2004 book *Washita*, acknowledges the impossibility of ascertaining the number of Cheyenne dead. Custer, for his part, reported 103 men killed and fifty-three women and children taken prisoner, though he later revised his totals to account for three hundred killed, wounded, and missing. No official count of the dead and wounded ever was made, but Greene notes that some Cheyennes estimated that at least a dozen Indigenous combatants were killed, along with an unknown number of noncombatant losses.

“We have cleaned Black Kettle and his band out so thoroughly they can neither fight, dress, sleep, eat, nor ride,” Custer wrote in a message he sent ahead with a scout to Sheridan at Camp Supply.

Considering he’d had the advantage of surprise and an eight-to-one numerical edge over Cheyenne fighters, Custer’s losses of twenty-two killed and thirteen wounded—including the yet-unknown loss of eighteen in Elliott’s group—was hardly cause for celebration. Three days later, the Seventh made a triumphal entry into Camp Supply. Sheridan was congratulatory at first, but news of Elliott’s disappearance dampened the elation.

On December 7, Sheridan and Custer, with 1,500 troops, returned to look for Elliott and engage any remaining combatants. A mile and a half from the village site, they found the frozen bodies of Elliott and his men.

Reactions to the attack were mixed. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs felt Custer’s offensive had amounted to a repeat of Sand Creek. Indian Agent Edward Wynkoop abruptly resigned. The Cherokee, Choctaw, and Creek nations protested it as “a brutal massacre of friendly Indians.”

The Washita Battlefield National Historic Site will remember the 150th anniversary of the attack with several events this fall.

LORI DUCKWORTH

“[Black Kettle] was a good man, he was my friend, he was murdered,” remarked Indian Agent Albert Boone after news of the fighting broke.

The Washita attack created pandemonium among the Southern Plains tribes. Most of the Cheyenne and Arapaho fled to the Texas Panhandle. Some Kiowa sought protective refuge around Fort Cobb. Others joined the Cheyenne and Arapaho in Texas. On Christmas Day, a Comanche village at Soldier Spring near the Wichita Mountains was attacked and destroyed by the Army. For many Cheyenne, the impact of losing their vital winter supplies—and the realization that they would henceforth no longer be safe in their winter camps—were two of many factors in their eventual acquiescence to reservation life. The feared Cheyenne Dog Soldiers were dealt a massive defeat at Summit Springs in eastern Colorado. In August 1869, President Grant declared a new reservation for the Cheyenne and Arapaho in Indian Territory.

While the Indian Wars in the American West would end twenty-two years later with the tragedy at Wounded Knee, the events of November 1868 in many ways signaled the beginning of the end.



UNFORTUNATE TRUTHS REMAIN. The Medicine Lodge Treaty was neither signed nor understood by all Southern Plains tribal leaders—a reality magnified by a nearly yearlong delay in congressional ratification and delays in promised annuities, provisions, and supplies. Some Native Americans fought to save their lands and way of life the only way they knew how—by attacking whites.

Greene points out that the Cheyenne and Arapaho were in violation of the treaty when warrior groups ventured north to join the fighting in Kansas. Ironically, some of them came from the village of perhaps the most ardent advocate of peace, Black Kettle. Sheridan’s policy—sanctioned by the War

Department—called for the punishment of an entire village for the depredations of a few. Yet controversy persists regarding whether the attack should be called a battle or a massacre.

“Unlike Sand Creek, where soldiers were encouraged to kill women and children, Custer took pains to spare non-combatants,” writes Peter Cozzens in his 2016 book *The Earth is Weeping*.

But in 1996, when the U.S. House of Representatives heard testimony in favor of House Bill 3099, which led to the area’s designation as a national historic site, Lawrence Hart, then a chief of the Cheyenne, took a different view.

“The word *battle* is not acceptable to the Cheyenne, for we view the initial surprise attack, in which women and children were shot, as another massacre,” he said. “To be sure, many battles did occur later that fateful morning when warriors from other camps came and engaged troops of the Seventh Cavalry.”

Hart also shared a profound perspective that tied the event to another Oklahoma tragedy.

“The ground on which the Murrah federal office building once stood has a sacredness about it . . . hallowed ground just as the site where the village stood at Washita,” he said. “It too is a holy place, for our ancestors died there.”

Today, the tranquility of the Washita site belies the happenings of that morning. Looking out over the land, it’s easy to see why Black Kettle chose it. It remains a place of quiet stillness and the immense sweep of prairie, of red hills and perpetual skies and the smell of earth and distance on the wind. It’s possible to feel time here, resonant still with voices past and the high costs of history. ■

GET THERE

WASHITA BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
 Open daily, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
 18555 State Highway 47-A in Cheyenne, (580) 497-2742 or nps.gov/waba/.