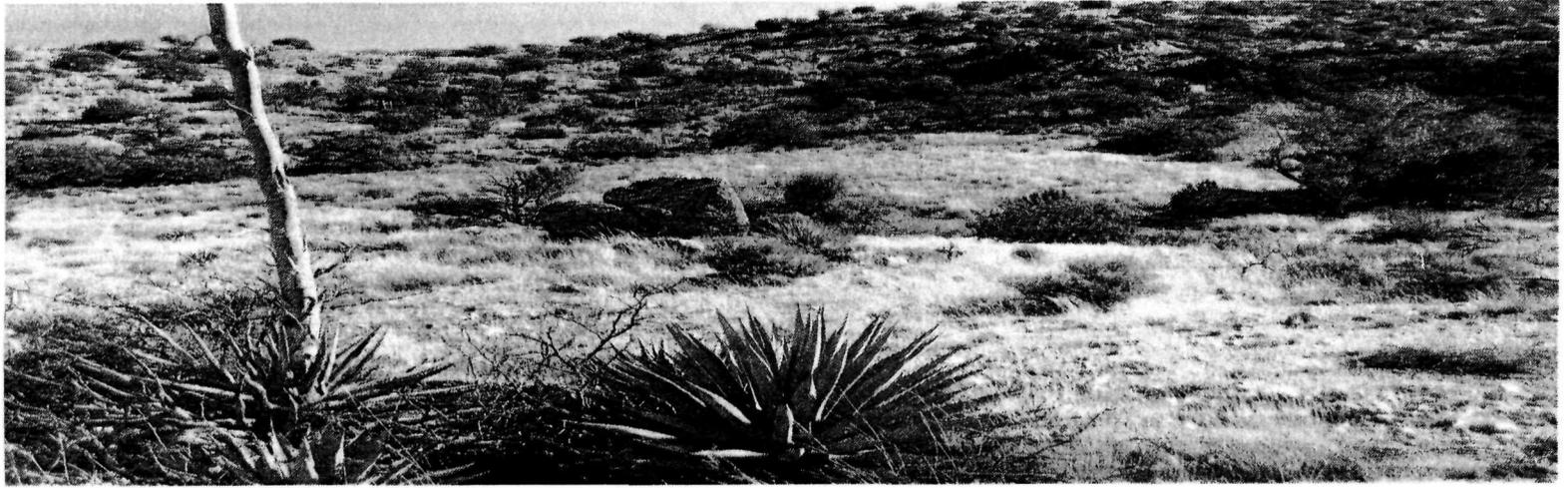




The Bascom Affair



Introduction

For two weeks in February 1861, Apache Pass was the setting of a confrontation between Chiricahua Apaches, led by Cochise, and a detachment of U.S. soldiers under the command of Lieutenant George Bascom and Overland Mail station employees. With the country already on the brink of civil war, the “Bascom Affair” would spark a war with the Apaches that would not end until 1872.

The Beginning

On January 27, 1861, two groups of Apaches raided the ranch of John Ward, located just south of Fort Buchanan. Ward would lose twenty head of stock and suffer the kidnapping of his 12-year old stepson, Felix.

The loss was blamed on the Chiricahua Apaches known to reside in and around Apache Pass. Since a preliminary investigation revealed that the raiders fled in that direction, Lt. George Bascom was sent with 54 men of the 7th Infantry to Apache Pass to “...recover the stock and the boy.” John Ward, fluent in English and Spanish, accompanied the column as the interpreter.

The military force arrived in Apache Pass and Bascom met with Cochise on February 4, 1861, in a Sibley tent. When Bascom, through Ward, accused Cochise of the January raid on Ward’s ranch, Cochise denied any participation but offered to find the boy within the next ten days. Bascom, also under orders to bring Cochise back to Fort Buchanan, balked at the offer and told him to have Coyunturo, Cochise’s brother, attempt to locate the boy. Insulted, Cochise cut the tent flaps with a knife and fled over the hills, leaving the rest of Cochise’s party, including Coyunturo, as Bascom’s hostages.

The Situation Escalates

The following morning while under a white flag, Cochise and Bascom met yet again. Furious at the previous day’s mistreatment, Cochise angrily demanded the hostages. Bascom demanded that any trade must include the Ward boy.

With the talks at a stalemate, three of the Overland Mail employees attempted to intervene. A few Apaches darted out of a nearby ravine and took the stationmaster, James Wallace, hostage. Another man was killed in the ensuing gunfire, and the third employee was wounded. Cochise attacked

and succeeded in taking additional hostages from a wagon train.

On February 8, with negotiations at an impasse, Cochise and 300 warriors attempted to free the Apaches by simultaneously attacking the soldiers at the spring and the stage station. They were successful in capturing 42 horses and mules, but failed to secure Apache prisoners. Frustrated, the Apaches left the pass after executing their hostages. Bascom, plagued with dead and wounded, now sent a message for assistance back at Fort Buchanan.

The Aftermath

On February 10, 1861, a party of ten men arrived from Fort Buchanan that included Surgeon John B.D. Irwin and three Apaches captured enroute. Seventy dragoons under Lt. Isaiah Moore arrived four days later to swell the military force to over 125 men. However, the Apaches were nowhere to be seen.

With the additional manpower, patrols of the pass were conducted over the next three days. On February 18, soldiers discovered the remains of the four hostages executed by the Apaches ten days earlier. With the Apaches gone there was no reason for the soldiers to remain, and the combined

command proceeded west out of Apache Pass on the 19th. After a short consultation, Surgeon Irwin and Lt. Moore decided to retaliate by executing the six adult Apache males in their custody. Bascom protested this decision, but the die had been cast, and the six men were hung near the site where Cochise had executed his hostages.

Cochise and his followers increased their attacks upon mail riders, ranchers, miners, and the military. These attacks would not cease until Cochise’s armistice with General O.O. Howard in the autumn of 1872.