



The Life of Joseph Cramer

"I swore I would not burn powder, and I did not."- Joseph Cramer



No living image of Joseph Cramer is known at this point; his gravestone, however, stands in Dickinson County, Kansas.

Born in 1838 in New York, Joseph Cramer grew into a confident young man and respected officer. As a miner, soldier, officer, and sheriff, his vocations brought him into contact with some of the most powerful men in Colorado. Lieutenant Cramer earned their ire when he proved the power of conscientious objection to Sand Creek in 1864.

History shrouds the early life of Cramer, whose quest for wealth and prosperity led him to Colorado as one of the gold-seekers of 1859-1860. Living in the Central City area, Cramer's life in Colorado remained primitive, difficult, and poor. Few gold-seekers found the wealth they expected, but settlements in Denver City, Boulder City, Golden City, Auraria, and the mountain country continued to grow despite these hindrances.

Making a Life in Colorado

By the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, many of Cramer's contemporaries had grown sick and disheartened of the hardscrabble work and lack of pay in the gold mines. Cramer and his peers jumped at the chance for steady federal food, clothing, housing, and pay. These men formed the nucleus for the First Infantry Regiment, Colorado Volunteers (U.S.), known as "Gilpin's Pet Lambs" for the governor's enthusiasm for recruitment. Cramer's service in the Army immediately brought him into contact with warfare, the plains, pain, and death. The First marched south to Glorieta Pass almost as soon as it formed, where Union forces stopped a Confederate attempt to seize the Colorado gold fields in 1862. Cramer likely enlisted and served in the battle. Regardless, Cramer then helped guard Colorado trails as the First Colorado reorganized into a cavalry regiment. In 1863, Cramer received a promotion to 2nd Lieutenant and became an officer, illustrating his skill and expertise.

Lt. Cramer participated in the so-called Indian War of 1864, where escalating tensions led to attacks and reprisals from both sides. While pursuing a band of Arapaho led by Neva in August, Cramer's horse threw him and he suffered a significant back injury that would eventually help kill him. Ironically, Cramer chased Neva with intent to fight and kill, while Neva held back his men from annihilating the scattered troopers because of his peace mission, as he was carrying a letter from several Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs seeking peace.

Talks and Tragedies

Fortunately, other letters carried by Lone Bear and Eagle Head successfully made their way to Major Wynkoop in September, which led to an expedition to the Smoky Hill River. Cramer accompanied Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs to the Camp Weld Council, guarding the attendees while watching the peace talks. He saw Black Kettle's commitment to peace and Major Scott Anthony's later promise of safety. In late November, Lt. Cramer protested Colonel John Chivington's plan for an attack on the Cheyenne and Arapaho at Sand Creek because of these peace overtures. In response, Major Anthony and Colonel Chivington guaranteed safety for the peace chiefs.

Despite these promises, Lt. Cramer watched with horror as U.S Army troops swarmed onto Sand Creek, murdering men, women, and children without hesitation. Not only did these men butcher peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho, but then mutilated the bodies, looted the village, and killed prisoners. Cramer and his men refused to participate.

After testifying against Colonel Chivington in Denver in the spring of 1865, Lt. Cramer mustered out of the regiment and moved back east, where he married Hattie Phelps. The newly married man sought a career as an Indian agent, but eventually moved to Solomon, Kansas and found a position as a clerk. There, Hattie died three years into the marriage. Following his wedding to Augusta Hunt in 1869, a bedridden Joseph Cramer passed away from his back injury at the age of thirty-three, shortly after election to the Sheriff's office of Dickinson County, Kansas

Ft. Lyon, C. T.
December 19, 1864

Dear Major:

This is the first opportunity I have had of writing you since the great Indian Massacre, and for a start, I will acknowledge I am ashamed to own I was in it with my Co. Col. Chivington came down here with the gallant third known as Chivington Brigade, like a thief in the dark throwing his Scouts around the Post, with instructions to let no one out, without his orders, not even the Commander of the Post, and for the shame, our Commanding Officer submitted. Col. Chivington expected to find the Indians in camp below the Com---- (commissary) but the Major Comd'g told him all about where the Indians were, and volunteered to take a Battalion from the Post and Join the Expedition.

Well Col. Chiv. got in about 10 a.m., Nov. 28th and at 8 p.m. we started with all of the 3rd parts of "H" "O" and "E" of the First, in command of Lt. Wilson Co. "K" "D" and "G" in commanding of Major Anthony. Marched all night up Sand, to the big bend in Sandy, about 15 or 20 miles, above where we crossed on our trip to Smoky Hill and came on to Black Kettles village of 103 lodges, containing not over 500 all told, 350 of which were women and children. Three days previous to our going out, Major Anthony gave John Smith, Lowderbuck of Co. "G" and a government driver, permission to go out there and trade with them, and they were in the village when the fight came off. John Smith came out holding up his hands and running towards us, when he was shot at by several, and the word was passed along to shoot him. He then turned back, and went to his tent and got behind some Robes, and escaped unhurt. Lowderbuck came out with a white flag, and was served the same as John Smith, the driver the same. Well I got so mad I swore I would not burn powder, and I did not. Capt. Soule the same. It is no use for me to try to tell you how the fight was managed, only that I think the Officer in Command should be hung, and I know when the truth is known it will cashier him.

We lost 40 men wounded, and 10 killed. Not over 250 Indians mostly women and children, and I think not over 200 were killed, and not over 75 bucks. With proper management they could all have been killed and not lost over 10 men. After the fight there was a sight I hope I may never see again.

Bucks, women, and children were scalped, fingers cut off to get the rings on them, and this as much with Officers as men, and one of those Officers a Major, and a Lt. Col. cut off Ears, of all he came across, a squaw ripped open and a child taken from her, little children shot, while begging for their lives (and all the indignities shown their bodies that was ever heard of) (women shot while on their knees, with their arms around soldiers a begging for their lives.) things that Indians would be ashamed to do. To give you some little idea, squaws were known to kill their own children, and then themselves, rather than to have them taken prisoners. Most of the Indians yielded 4 or 5 scalps. But enough! for I know you are disgusted already. Black Kettle, White Antelope, War Bonnet, Left Hand, Little Robe and several other chiefs were killed. Black Kettle said when he saw us coming, that he was glad, for it was Major Wynkoop coming to make peace. Left Hand stood with his hands folded across his breast, until he was shot saying, "Soldiers no hurt me - soldiers my friends." One Eye was killed; was in the employ of Gov't as spy; came into the Post a few days before, and reported about the Sioux, were going to break out at Learned, which proved true.

After all the pledges made my Major A- to these Indians and then take the course he did. I think as comments are necessary from me; only I will say he has a face for every man he talks. The action taken by Capt. Soule and myself were under protest. Col. A- was going to have Soule hung for saying there were all cowardly Sons of B----s; if Soule did not take it back, but nary take a back with Soule. I told the Col. that I thought it murder to jump them friendly Indians. He says in reply; Damn any man or men who are in sympathy with them. Such men as you and Major Wynkoop better leave the U. S. Service, so you can judge what a nice time we had on the trip. I expect Col. C- and Downing will do all in their power to have Soule, Cossitt and I dismissed. Well, let them work for what they damn please, I ask no favors of them. If you are in Washington, for God's sake, Major, keep Chivington from being a Bri'g Genl. which he expects. I will send you the Denver Papers with this. Excuse this for I have been in much of a hurry.

Very Respectfully,

Your Well Wisher

(signed) Joe A. Cramer

(postscript)

John (Jack) Smith was taken prisoner and then murdered. One little child 3 months old was thrown in the feed box of a wagon and brought one days march, and there was left on the ground to perish. Col. Tappan is after them for all that is out. I am making out a report of all from beginning to end, to send to Gen'l Slough, in hopes that he will have the thing investigated, and if you should see him, please speak to him about it, for fear that he has forgotten me. I shall write him nothing but what can be proven.

Major I am ashamed of this. I have it gloriously mixed up, but in hopes I can explain it all to you before long. I would have given my right arm had you been here, when they arrived.

Your family are all well.

(signed) Joe A. Cramer