

BATTLE OF THE WASHITA CENTENNIAL, 1968

*By Francis Thetford**

Like the original battle itself, the Battle of the Washita centennial observance has become a part of Oklahoma history. Unlike the epic conflict of November 27, 1868, however, the pageant in which Colonel George A. Custer's attack on Black Kettle's little Cheyenne village was re-enacted was observed by an estimated 3,500 chilled spectators.

Temperatures which hovered in the mid-30s, augmented by a biting north wind, lent a touch of realism to the 1968 spectacular, presented one hundred years to the day from the time Custer led his troops of the U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment in a charge across the waters of the Washita River.

Setting for the pageant, one of the highlights of the solemn, day-long observance at Cheyenne, was the approximate site of Chief Black Kettle's village. The battle area is now an official National Historic Landmark, a site about two miles northwest of Cheyenne, in Roger Mills County.

Nucleus of the pageant's attacking force was an organization of young Californians operating out of Los Angeles County under the formal name of U.S. 7th Cavalry Association, Grand Army of the Republic. Reactivated. Members of the Cheyenne Centennial Committee brought seven of the unique organization's members to Oklahoma for the 100th anniversary event, for the express purpose of adding authentic color to the observance.

Equipment of the now-vanished 7th Cavalry Regiment — including Spencer .50 caliber carbine rifles, saddles, harness and military uniforms of a century ago — was brought along by the Californians. The troupe, although not officially associated with the historic horse cavalry, has appeared in numerous pageants all over the U.S. where there has been a need for the "cavalry."

Throughout two days of public appearances — at Woodward, Fort Supply and Cheyenne — the uniformed visitors never permitted themselves to get out of character. The unit leader, Captain Eric Saul, as well as other members of his troupe, is an honorary member of the 1st Cavalry Division Association and the 7th Cavalry Association.

Community actors in the Cheyenne area joined the "7th Cavalry" in their mock attack, staged in the early afternoon of November 27, 1968. The Oklahoma riders' uniforms closely re-

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(Photograph courtesy of The Daily Oklahoman)

**AUTHENTIC EQUIPMENT OF U.S. 7TH CAVALRY REGIMENT, GRAND ARMY
OF THE REPUBLIC**

Carried by Californians participating in Oklahoma's recent Centennial Observance in 1908. Unit Leader, Captain Eric Saul, appears at left, bugler Chuck Paulu, at extreme right. This photograph was taken on the west bank of Wolf Creek, near present Fort Supply, from which point Colonel George A. Custer and men of the famous 7th Cavalry Regiment began their march on November 23, 1808, in search of hostile Indians.

sembled the authentic "horse cavalry" uniforms of the Californians. Blue denim trousers had a broad yellow stripe stenciled down each leg, and blue denim jackets bore stenciled arm patches similar to the 7th Cavalry's shoulder patch.

The Californians earned their pay. On the afternoon of November 26, they mounted horses on the west bank of Wolf Creek, southeast of Fort Supply, and started a symbolic campaign southward toward the distant Antelope Hills. On November 23, 1868, Colonel Custer led eleven companies of the 7th Cavalry out of Camp Supply, along the same creek, on the start of a thirty-day march against what General Phil Sheridan considered "hostile" Indians.

Custer launched his march in a wintry storm. The Oklahoma weatherman cooperated on the afternoon of the symbolic march, too. Overcast skies and a bitterly cold north wind added to the realism, causing spectators gathered along Wolf Creek to shiver and seek shelter behind each other from the cold. Some 211 students from the Fort Supply School were among those who turned out to see Captain Saul lead his small force down the sandy bank of Wolf Creek thence to the south.

Accompanying Saul to Oklahoma to play cavalry roles were Sergeant Chuck Paulu, Corporals Robert Baron and Bill Zito. Private Ed Green and Indian scout Stewart S. Hoffman, the latter an Arapaho whose Indian name is Young Wolf.

For the most part, the audience that watched the re-enacted Battle of the Washita unfold was a quiet and pensive crowd, their thoughts doubtlessly going back one hundred years, to the time the scene was a grim reality and not harmless pageantry.

Another solemn occasion came later in the afternoon, when, in an Indian burial ceremony in the flag circle of Black Kettle Museum in Cheyenne, the skeletal remains of an Indian unknown were laid to rest. The skeleton, unearthed during a bridge excavation project on the Washita River near Cheyenne in 1934, was thought for years to be that of Black Kettle. Experts said otherwise, so the inscription on the granite marker in the flag circle reads: "The unknown who lies here is in commemoration of Chief Black Kettle and the Cheyenne tribal members who lost their lives in the Battle of the Washita."

Interment services were directed by Lawrence H. Hart, Clinton, himself a Cheyenne, an ordained Mennonite minister and a member of the Oklahoma Indian Affairs Commission.

A tribal blanket covered the handsome little bronze casket containing the remains. Hundreds watched in respectful silence

as Cheyenne bearers carried the casket from the museum to the flag circle, chanting the tribe's funeral cry as they walked.

Captain Saul's men presented arms in a military salute as the casket was lowered into the ground, then fired their antique carbines in a parting, three-volley salute to the dead.

"It is a Cheyenne tradition, after a funeral, to hold a give-away," Hart explained to the assemblage. One of the Cheyenne bearers then stepped forward and draped the blanket from the casket around the shoulders of Captain Saul in a touching gesture of eternal peace between the tribe and men of the 7th Cavalry.