

The Battle of the Washita, Revisited

A Journey to a Historic Site in 1933

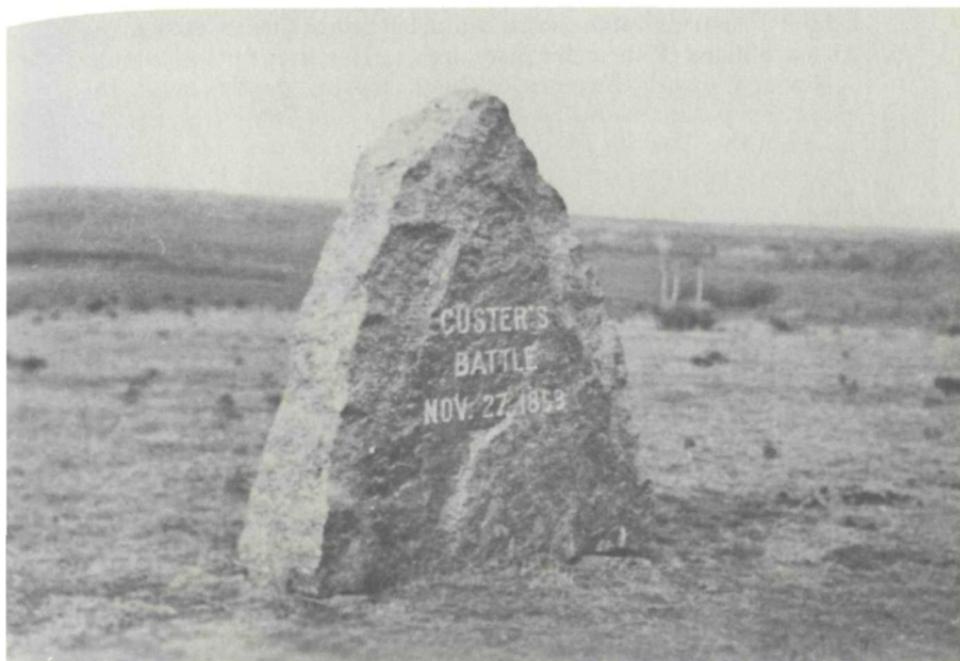
*By Howard F. Van Zandt**

In the fall of 1933, the author, while a graduate student in the History Department of the University of Oklahoma at Norman, journeyed to the site of the Battle of the Washita. His objective was to examine the area on the 65th anniversary of the fight and determine if there was anything about the land and vegetation that would shed light on the events, and also, hopefully, meet and interview survivors.

Unforeseen circumstances prevented going to the battlefield on November 27, the anniversary, but on December 1, the journey across the plains to Cheyenne, Oklahoma, was made. The author was fortunate to have as his companion, Guy W. Lanman, who as a result of his study of Indian lore, and familiarity with western Oklahoma, made the excursion more interesting.

The historical account of the battle was well known to us. The War Department, following Indian raids on frontier settlements in the Saline and Solomon river valleys of Kansas, had decided to send a punitive expedition into the Indian Territory. General George A. Custer, who commanded the Seventh Cavalry, was ordered to Camp Supply in northwestern Oklahoma where he was joined by infantry and other cavalry units. The supply train alone consisted of 450 wagons.

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This monument, as seen in 1933, was erected in memoriam to an unidentified Indian at the battlesite where Gen. George Armstrong Custer led an attack on the village of Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle (All photos in this article were taken by Howard Van Zandt in 1933).

Winter set in early that year, and the Indians made camp on the banks of the Washita about 80 miles from Fort Cobb. Black Kettle, the Cheyenne Chief, then made a trip to Fort Cobb where he informed General Hazen, the military agent, that his tribe was at peace with the white man, and was complying with treaty terms by making camp in the Indian Territory.

Knowing the approximate location of the Indian villages, Custer set out from Camp Supply down Wolf Creek on the morning of November 23 with a force of twelve companies of the Seventh Cavalry and a band of Osage trailers. On November 26, near the Canadian River, they struck a trail of about 100 Indians. Since the trail was only twenty-four hours old, it was decided to make a quick pursuit, leaving the slow moving supply train behind. Captain Louis McLane Hamilton, grandson of Alexander Hamilton, was supposed to stay

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behind in command of the wagon train, but talked Custer into leaving a snow-blinded officer in his place, freeing Hamilton for the pursuit.

Moving through the snow, without stopping for the night, the expedition passed below the Antelope Hills and finally reached the valley of the Washita River. At 1:30 A.M. an Osage trailer named Little Beaver discovered the horses of an Indian camp in the distance. The force halted and Custer with several officers crept up to the edge of a knoll overlooking the valley. Next to the river, about half a mile below them, they sighted moving objects which they took at first to be buffalo, but the faint tinkling of bells soon assured them that they were looking upon the pony herd of an Indian village. Then a baby cried out, and looking in the direction of the sound, Custer was able to make out lodges along the river's edge.

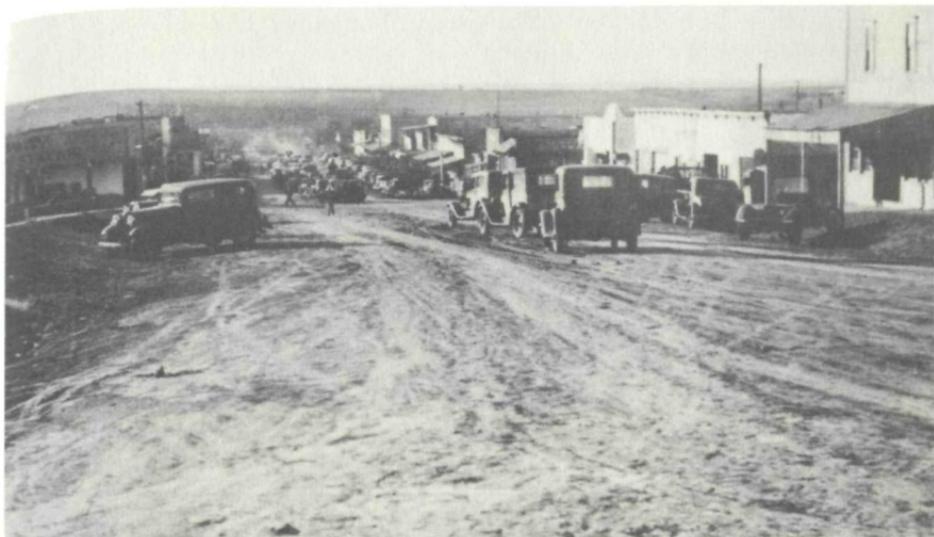
At the break of dawn, Custer attacked. Of the six cavalrymen killed in the assault, one was an officer, Captain Louis Hamilton. The loss of life among the Indians was twenty times heavier, and among them was Chief Black Kettle.

After the village had been taken, the ponies of the tribe were rounded up a short distance east in a narrow stretch of land between some hills and the river. Here three companies spent an hour and a half at the unpleasant task of killing the beasts. In justification of the slaughter, it was pointed out that had Custer tried to take the horses back to Camp Supply he would have invited an attack, and had he left them behind it would have enabled the Indians to pursue more easily. There were nearly nine hundred horses and mules; only enough of them were spared to transport fifty-three prisoners, all women and children. In the village Custer's men found four white captives. One of them later described the battle.¹

A few Indians escaped during the fight, and Custer in an effort to head them off sent Major J. H. Elliott with fourteen men in pursuit. The cavalrymen were soon overtaken by reinforcements of Arapahoes, Kiowas, Cheyennes, Apaches, and Comanches from three large villages to the east. Elliott and his little group were surrounded and forced into a semi-circle on the banks of a small stream. Soon all were dead. Sergeant-Major Walter Kennedy was the last man to fall, and in his memory the little creek that flows nearby was named Sergeant-Major Creek. The Indians lost only one man in the engagement.

The reinforcements which met and destroyed Elliott soon moved west and surrounded Custer's main force, shooting down from the heights overlooking the valley. When the Indians finally withdrew, Custer ordered his men to commence the return march to Camp Supply.

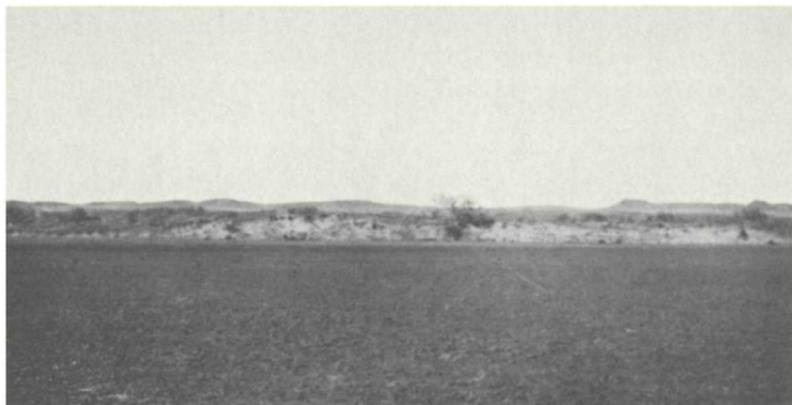
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Main Street of Cheyenne, Oklahoma, as it appeared in December of 1933 when visited by Van Zandt, a graduate student at OU. The battlefield, his objective, can be seen on the distant horizon.

Sixty-five years later, with the memories of that engagement urging us on, we decided to visit the site. The drive from Oklahoma City started unpropitiously, in a bitter rain propelled by a strong wind. Once during the night a timely flash of lightning enabled us to see an Indian lodge of tree limbs and brush not far off the road. By the time we reached the little cattle town of Cheyenne the storm had passed and in the light of the moon we could make out the low range of hills on the north side of the Washita River over which Custer and his company had ridden sixty-five years before. Driving through the slumbering town we found a narrow road leading to the west, and after following it for a couple of miles we realized that we were looking upon the site of the Battle of the Washita. We noted in the distance across the river the moonlit slopes of the hills behind which Custer had camped his column; in back of us was the low-lying range of hills mentioned in his narrative from which the Indian reinforcements fired on his men. In the immediate foreground was a monument which had been erected several years before our trip in honor of an unknown Indian whose skeleton had been disinterred fifteen years prior. Other than this there were no permanent markers on the historic spot.

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On the morning of November 27, 1868, Custer charged the Cheyenne village over this ridge. During the raid, Captain Hamilton was killed at this location.

Driving along the lonely road we turned north and crossed the Washita at a point perhaps a quarter of a mile from the battle field. Stopping the car a full half a mile north of the river we got out and searched for a knoll which would correspond to the one described in the narratives of the fight as having been the point from which Custer and his officers studied the Indian camp. We soon came to a small hill and there at 1:30 A.M. on December 2, 1933, sixty-five years and five days after Custer had made his reconnaissance, we crouched behind what was probably the same hill and reviewed the site of the village of Black Kettle. It was an emotional experience, for the night was much like that reported by the General, differing chiefly in that on our visit the temperature was twenty degrees less cold. The moon lit up the whole valley beneath us so clearly and brightly that we were able to discern the old river bed and the brush that marked its path. There were occasional fast moving clouds overhead, and this, coupled with a bitter cold wind, made our visit seem like that reported by General Custer.

Standing silent, and deeply moved, we were not aroused for perhaps twenty minutes when the low moo of a cow grazing over the battle field brought us to the realization that we were exceedingly cold. The fact that the animal, although fully half a mile away, sounded clear on the night air, proved to us that the tinkle of the pony bells, and the cry of the Indian baby three score and five years before could have been heard by the attentive officers. As we thought of the

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baby's cry and its dramatic consequences we felt sad at the thought that events could occur that would send soldiers of any race or nation to a fight which would involve helpless women and children. At this point we began to question Custer's tactics, for in the dark of the night it is unlikely that he could have known the strength or identity of his opponents. It was merely a trick of fate that he struck Black Kettle. Had any of the other three camps down the river been attacked instead of Black Kettle's it is possible that Custer and his men would have been annihilated, for the Indians there were in large enough numbers to repel an assault.

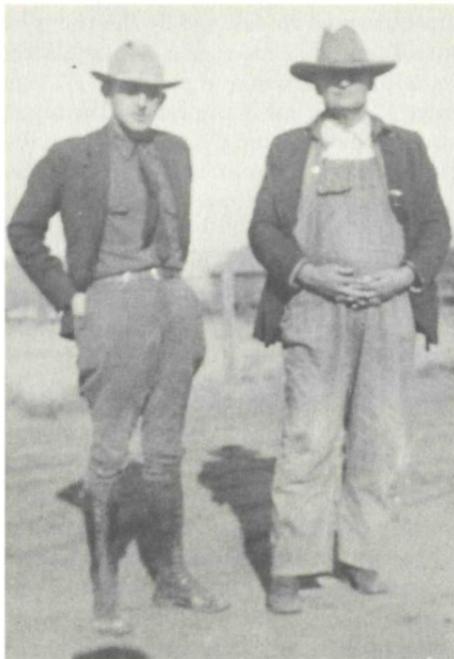
With reluctance we finally left our chilly lookout and returned to the village of Cheyenne where we roused some cow punchers who were reclining on the floor and chairs in the "lobby" of one of the town's two hostelrys. Explaining the reason for our presence at such an odd hour of the morning we found among them some eager narrators. We heard for instance, tales about the women and children who fell in the battle; we also learned that one of the men had seen a pile of bones that covered an area a full quarter of a mile in length. This was evidence of the slaughtering yard where the 800 odd horses had been killed, so we carefully obtained directions as to where it was and how it could best be reached.

Soon after sunrise we were out again on the battle field, this time in the company of J. H. Williams, the rancher on whose land it was located. We learned that in the fall of 1930 Indian survivors including



When Van Zandt and his companion visited the historic site in 1933, they discovered that most of the battlefield had been plowed. This view looks southeast over the site.

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On his visit to the battlefield, Van Zandt was accompanied by Guy W. Lanman (left) and J. H. Williams, the rancher who owned the land where Custer's attack was made.

Chief Magpie and Little Beaver, both Cheyennes, had come to the site. The river channel had been diverted long after the battle to run north of the old stream bed perhaps a quarter of a mile, and because it looked strange, the efforts of the survivors to relocate the actual site of the village were at first unsuccessful. The white men who accompanied the ancient Indians had argued that the battle field must have been somewhat north and east of the point where the survivors thought it was located. Taken to the spot chosen by the white men the Cheyennes studied long and carefully and then shook their heads. Again and again the spot was visited, but the Indians remained unmoved, convinced that they were not at the right place. Williams, quizzing the old men as to what land mark they were seeking, learned that there had been a tall tree next to Black Kettle's lodge, and that it leaned to the north. A little further down the stream, Chief Magpie explained, was another tree, this one on the north bank leaning south. Without a moment of hesitation Williams led the men to the stump of an old monarch of the plains he had cut down himself several years before. When another tree trunk was observed a few yards

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As Cheyenne survivor, Chief Magpie, pointed out to Williams, this was the thicket where he was wounded (right). Magpie also located the exact spot (below) where Chief Black Kettle and his wife were shot.



down stream Chief Magpie gave a grunt of satisfaction, and pulling out a map that he had sketched, went up to a high point and scanned the entire field. Coming down after a few minutes he announced decisively that Black Kettle's tepee had stood only a few feet from the stump on the south side of the old river bed, and that the chief and his squaw had been shot from their ponies as they climbed up the river bank along-side of the other tree.

The old stumps were still visible in 1933 and although the trees that marked the river's edge in 1868 had been chopped down, there

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were enough stumps remaining to prove that here might once have been the woods that sheltered Black Kettle and his Cheyennes from the chilling blasts of the north.

Lanman and I had lunch in the ranch house with Williams, who pointed out that a few feet from where we were eating, in making the excavations for the room, the body of an Indian had been uncovered. Since the building was situated on the battle field, it was possible that the skeleton was of one of the Cheyenne dead. When we had finished eating, Williams took us to a thicket which Chief Magpie had pointed out was the place to which he had crept during the battle. It was north and west of the ranch house. Here he had been run down by a company of soldiers, and although seriously wounded by a shot in the leg, managed to escape capture.

Williams was generous with his time, and guided us to every place in the area that had been identified by the Cheyenne party of survivors.

As we took our leave we were pleased when he presented us with an unexploded bullet he had picked up off the battle field. It could have



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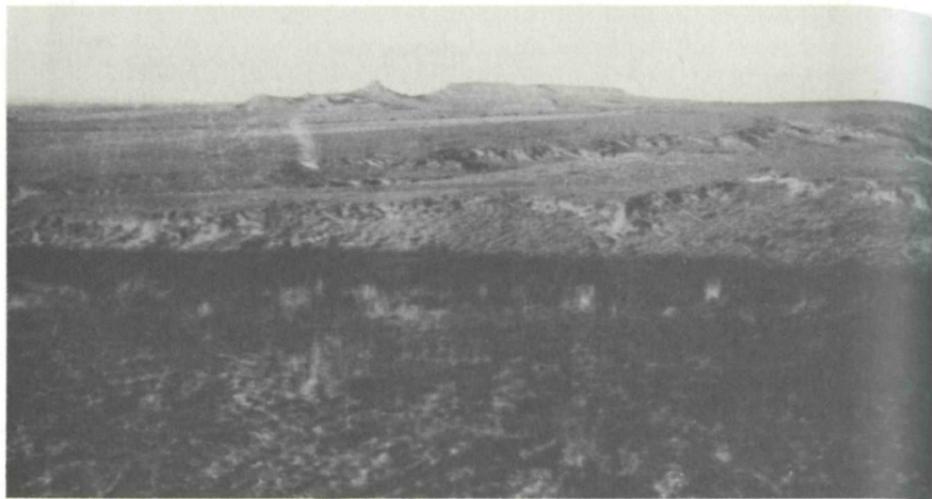
Van Zandt (left) found widely scattered skeletal remains of the Cheyenne pony herd destroyed by Custer's men. Sergeant Major Creek (above), marks the location where Major Elliott and his fourteen men were killed.

belonged to one of the participants in the memorable fight or may have been part of the Indian supply which was destroyed after the village had been taken.

Following the instructions that we had received in Cheyenne in the small hours of the morning from a cowboy story-teller, we walked east of the battle field, and after a few minutes stopped below a hill which loomed up above the river bank on the south side of the stream. Before us, half covered with underbrush, for a distance of several hundred yards, were bones of every description. Skulls, legs, vertebrae, every kind of bone known to a horse was present. We had read that the remains had been carried away by freighters and shipped to Texas many years before to be ground up into fertilizer.² Whereas many of them were no longer rotting in the valley of the Washita, there were still enough left to leave proof that there once lay the equine victims of Custer and his band.

We then visited the place where Major Elliott and his fourteen men had met their death. It was in a little bend of Sergeant Major Creek close to the town, and not far from where the creek pours into the Washita. The point where the men were surrounded and killed looked peaceful the afternoon of our visit, for five or six cattle grazed in quiet contentment over the historic ground.

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The Antelope Hills, a famous landmark seen by Van Zandt as he traced the path of Custer's return march to Camp Supply.

In our desire to check Custer's strategy more fully, we decided to follow his course back to Camp, now Fort Supply. Leaving Cheyenne, we headed northwest to the Antelope Hills. The country was wild, and practically the only industry cattle-raising. The plains were not covered with a luxuriant coat of grass such as one finds in central and eastern Oklahoma, but sage-brush and cactus.

The Antelope Hills consisted of four or five large buttes whose flat topped heads rose nearly a thousand feet above the broad Canadian River which had been forced by them to make a wide loop in its eastward course. These great landmarks could be seen for many miles in nearly every direction, and were first reported by Spaniards over three hundred years earlier. Reaching the base of the highest, a short time before sundown, we decided to climb it. From the top we were thrilled by the view of a golden sunset over country as wild and grand as any we had ever known. For fifty miles we could see the winding river as it flowed slowly out of the plains of Texas, and beneath us we picked out a point where Custer may have left his supply train the day before his fateful encounter. A full moon rose only a few minutes after the sun had fallen below the horizon, and had it not been for a cold wind blowing hard from the north we would have been tempted to spend the night on top of the great butte. Chilled to the bone we descended and made our way back to our car.

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Two hours later, hopelessly lost, we discovered a lonely ranch house, the only sign of life we had passed since sundown. Explaining that we wished to follow Custer's path to Ft. Supply, we were directed down a narrow wagon trail that led to the river. After we had travelled for a few minutes, and before we could save ourselves, the car plunged over a little bluff into a pile of loose sand on the river's edge. Before us lay the Canadian River, at this point a mile wide and half full of water. Behind us lay a forbidding climb back up the bluff over sand that we knew would never permit an automobile to get traction. Lanman volunteered to perch on the front fender and with the aid of the head lights direct us as we ventured into the unknown depths of the river. Fortunately, after taking frequent soundings we were able to maneuver ourselves across. Only once did the water cover the fenders, and then, to our relief, the weight of the rear of the car pushed the engine above water and enabled us to pull out. Following Custer's route as closely as the road would permit we struck Wolf Creek a few minutes before midnight, and after tracking the General for another thirty miles, left his trail a little distance short of Ft. Supply and drove into Woodward.

The next day after a trip through the badlands of northwestern Oklahoma we reached Geary, a little town in the center of the Cheyenne-Arapahoe country. Here we inquired of an Indian for directions to the lodge of Little Beaver, one of the Cheyenne survivors who had visited the battlefield in 1930. It was not long before we found ourselves driving along a narrow wagon road that appeared unused to the tires of a modern automobile. Several times we nearly turned over, and once we stopped and debated about going back; but as we were considering our plight we noticed on the road a hundred yards ahead an Indian walking along with the steady but cautious legs of an old man of the plains. White hair flowed from beneath his headgear, and from his dignified carriage we figured that we must be approaching the person we sought. At first he refused to talk, but after we pointed down the road to a house and tepee a few hundred feet ahead he seemed to catch our point, and beckoned to us to follow. We were soon standing before the lodge of Little Beaver, probably the last living survivor of the Battle of the Washita. His son, Little Beaver, Jr., met us, and explained that his father spoke practically no English. His mother, Turtle Woman, likewise could converse only in Cheyenne, so we were forced to rely upon the abilities of our interpreter for the information we hoped to glean from the venerable old couple.

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Little Beaver, who survived Custer's charge as a young boy, and Turtle Woman, who lived in a nearby village at the time of the battle. Van Zandt interviewed them on his historic visit.

When we showed our camera and asked permission to take a photograph, Turtle Woman gave us a broad smile and disappeared into the house from which she emerged a moment later with a new blanket around her shoulders and a smear of bright red paint upon her face. Feminine vanity apparently was not lacking even in a Cheyenne mother of seventy-five summers.

With the aid of our interpreter we were able to have Little Beaver outline to us his story of the battle. It seems that Little Beaver's father had accompanied Black Kettle to Ft. Cobb to visit General Hazen a few days before the battle, and had returned on the tragic night that Custer discovered the sleeping village. On the ground before us Little Beaver drew with a stick the outline of the encampment as it had been sixty-five years before, pointing out the tepees of

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his father, Wolf-Looking-Back, and Black Kettle. He affirmed the location of the two trees that marked the lodge of the chief, and the point of his disaster, and added that a small creek had flowed through the village and into the Washita. Asked how he had escaped the guns of the soldiers, he showed us on his crude map how he, then a boy in his early teens, had crawled to the south of the river and across the plain to the hills beyond.

Turtle Woman, although a Cheyenne, was not a native of Black Kettle's village, but was living at the other camp of the tribe further down the river when the battle occurred.

After hearing the tale from the lips of the old man we inspected his living quarters. There were three structures on the place: one a frame dwelling which housed the son and his wife; another, a tepee in which the ancient Cheyenne and his squaw lived except in the coldest weather; and a third, an arbour, a sort of outside living and dining room. The latter was built of brush and the limbs of trees, and measured approximately ten by twenty with a height of about six feet. The family was cooking its evening meal there when we arrived, and apparently made much use of the structure. There were two small frame "sweat tents" which they used to give themselves steam baths. The frame work for these odd bath rooms was not over three feet in height, and was made of thin tree limbs. In the center in a small excavation in the ground were piled a dozen round stones. We were told that the bather would enter the tent which was covered with skins and canvas, and pour a kettle of boiling water upon the stones which meantime had been heated to a high temperature. The ensuing steam would give a pleasant "Turkish" bath.

The sun was nearly down when we left. As we drove the car out of black-jack woods that surrounded the home of the old Cheyenne and his family and headed for Oklahoma City, we had a feeling that for two days we had been face to face with the spirits, both living and dead, of participants of a battle that had been fought long before.

ENDNOTES

* Howard F. Van Zandt is a retired professor of history now living in Richardson, Texas.

¹ "The Battle of the Washita" by Tahan (Joseph K. Griffis), *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. VIII, No. 3. Another description of the battle appeared in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, April, 1924, under the title "Battle of the Washita" by Paul Nesbitt.

² "The End of the Cheyenne Trail" by Charles J. Brill, *Daily Oklahoman*, November 23, 1930.