

THE BATTLE OF THE WASHITA

BY TAHAN

This Kiowa story of the Battle of the Washita comes to us as a sort of sequel to the Story of Tahan, the white Kiowa captive, published in this number of the "Chronicles." It was written by Joseph K. Griffin, the real Tahan of the story. We did not receive his letter containing his account of this historical episode of Indian warfare in western Oklahoma until after the Tahan story was in type, but we are delighted to have the opportunity of presenting Tahan's own story. Perhaps it may, in the minds of our readers, help solve the mystery of Tahan himself.

There have been many accounts given of the so-called "Battle of the Washita." The military commanders from Sheridan to Custer have all given their version of Custer's great victory over Black Kettle, the Cheyenne chief, that cold November morning in the year 1868. In our own beloved Chronicles there has been published more than one story of this fight, but they have all been the white man's story. I think that our friend, Paul Nesbit, perhaps, wrote the most elaborate, if not the most graphic, of all stories told of the Custer-Black Kettle fight. General Custer was Mr. Nesbitt's military hero and he did not fail to give Custer all the glory of what was called a victory over savage Indians.

Now, for the first time we have a man who is telling the story of the battle, or, rather the massacre of Indian women and children, by troops under the command of General George A. Custer, from the Indian standpoint. Believe it or not, we should at least hear the Indian's version.

D. W. P.

Vergennes, Vermont,
September 4, 1930.

Secretary of the Oklahoma Historical Society,
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Dear Sir:

On May 6th of the present year I visited members of the Oklahoma State Historical Society, and before leaving the office which was located in the Capitol Building, I promised to write an account of the so-called Battle of the Washita for the Society. This promise I am now able to fulfill, having been very busy all summer. This authentic account of that affair I am enclosing with an apology for the poor workmanship of it. But the facts which could be elaborated, are there.

I had an enjoyable visit with a most delightful gentleman whose name I cannot recall, and have misplaced the card he gave me bearing his name.

Since my visit in Oklahoma I have had several letters from a foster aunt which has refreshed my mind concerning the far back beyond time. Many changes have come to the Kiowas, a people who have been much maligned by nearly every one having to do with them. But as I knew them they are or were, the greatest people which I have had the privilege of meeting. If I am spared, it is my intention to write a history of the tribe, dating back many years as a beginning.

It is my hope to visit some of my old friends during the coming fall and may drop in at your office.

Cordially yours,

JOSEPH K. GRIFFIN.

On the twenty-seventh day of November, 1868, soldiers of the Seventh United States Cavalry under command of General George A. Custer killed one hundred and three peaceable Indian men, besides a number of women and children in their camp on the Washita River, Indian Territory. For more than sixty years, this bloody deed has stood out on the page of history as "The Battle of the Washita," and a notable victory over blood-thirsty, red savages. The leader, under whose direction the killing was accomplished, has been lauded throughout the land as a brilliant military officer, strategist and hero, and to his memory a monument in imperishable stone has been erected.

This writing by a warrior, who had a part on the defensive side of that so-called battle, tells the true story of it. If one would seek a motive for the regrettable, inexcusable and bloody deed committed under orders of the highest military authority, he might find it in the political situation, the spirit of the times and place, and especially in the disposition of the officer responsible for the details of it.

From the earliest appearance of the Kiowa and associated tribes in the state of Texas, then a part of Mexico, there had been conflict between the white inhabitants and the Indians. When the state became politically independent, and later, a part of the United States, the Indians never became aware of the facts. Hence, the hostilities between them continued. Moreover, during the Civil War between the North and the South, officers of the Federal army urged the Indians to do all the harm they could to the people of Texas because they were enemies of the United States.¹ And after the War between the States had ended, the Indians, unaware of the fact, continued their retaliatory raids upon the Texans. The Kiowas always believed that the Texans were a people different and distinct from the

¹The intimation that officers of the United States Army had sought to incite the Kiowa and Comanche Indians to hostility against the people of Texas, during the course of the Civil War, is probably not warranted by the facts. The Indians of these tribes had always claimed to be at war with the people of Texas, both before and after that great conflict. Moreover, they were hostile to the people and government of the United States, much of the time, and consequently were not susceptible to the influence of officers of the Federal Army.

Americans. They called the former Tahaneko. The Americans, they called T'o T'a ka-i.

And now, be it remembered that the Civil War had just ended. The people generally were still war-minded. Especially so were certain young officers of the United States Army, who still in the service, and still suffering from the intoxication caused by success and promotion rapidly won and eager to further display their military genius. And the only people left over whom they might show their superiority in the art of war, were the Indians!

Along the border of the state of Kansas as well as that of Texas there was conflict between the Whites and the Reds. When Whites would steal horses belonging to the Reds, who would go on their trail seeking to recover their property; reports would be sent to the military posts that the Indians were upon the war-path. Then soldiers would be sent after them. Thus the thievish Whites would not only escape with the horses of the Reds, but they were protected by the soldiers. Indeed, all along the frontiers of the day, the idea prevailed that the Indians had no rights that the Whites were bound to respect. To kill an Indian was not considered a crime.

The United States Government tried to be just and fair with the Indians and desired peaceable relations with them. To this end, it sent representatives to Fort Larned, Kansas who called a council of the tribes involved, to consider the matter. The council comprising the five tribes, probably the largest gathering of the kind ever held on these prairies, met on a stream, called by the Kiowas, Oyo dalte P'a—Timber Hill Creek and which was called by the Whites, Medicine Lodge Creek, at a place about two days' travel by horse southeast of Fort Larned, in the fall of 1867.

The officer who commanded the soldiers on the occasion was a very large man.⁷ On each of his shoulders he carried

⁷The military escort of the Government Peace Commission, at the Medicine Lodge Council, was composed of two troops of the 7th United States Cavalry, and was commanded by Major Joel H. Elliott. One of the notable figures of the occasion was Colonel Jesse H. Leavenworth, who was present as the agent of the Comanche, Kiowa and Prairie Apache tribes, who had held the rank of colonel of volunteers in the Union Army during the Civil War, but he had been mustered out of the military service more than four years before and it is scarcely probable that he wore a military uniform during the council. All other officers and former officers of the army present at that council had held rank either above

the picture of a bird. This fact interested the Kiowas greatly. For they believed that at times a great bird, which they called Thunderbird, ruled the sky and made the thunder by flapping his wings. In this way he let everybody know that he was ruler. And, surely, thought the Kiowas, this big man with the bird on his shoulders must be the one who made the big noise at the councils—spoke with authority. For this reason they named him *Tene posat-gya-to*, which means Old-Man-Thunderbird. And, it is a lamentable fact, that what was spoken at that council has thundered down the years and has been the means of great changes for the Indians. Few of them, if any, realized at the time that what was done, then and there, was the beginning of the end of their free, untrammelled life on their prairies; that, thenceforth, their existence was to be endured on a limited spot of land called a reservation—the last frontier.

At the close of the council everybody was happy. For among the stipulations of the signed treaty, the Government agreed to supply the Indians with clothing and food during a period of thirty years, and there was to be no more war. But hardly were the ink marks dry which the chiefs and the Government men made on the paper, when dastardly white men violated the treaty. A number of them basely ill-treated and murdered a number of Indian women in their camp, where their men had left them and gone on a buffalo hunt. This foul deed called for retaliation and at as long a distance as possible between the Indians and the forked-tongue Whites, which was accomplished. Then they heard the voice of Old-Man-Thunderbird again:

“Come in and camp on the Washita River,” were the words he sent to the five tribes, “or you shall have neither food nor clothing.”

But, mindful of the massacre of one hundred and twenty peaceable Indians in their camp under protection of the

or below that of colonel at the close of the War, so it is difficult to account for the presence of anyone wearing eagles on his shoulder-straps, during the sessions of the peace council at Medicine Lodge.

²The summons sent to the Indian tribes of the Southern Plains, by General William B. Hazen, who had been assigned to duty as special Indian agent, in the autumn of 1868, asked them to gather in the valley of the Washita, at or near Fort Cobb.

United States flag, on Sand Creek, Colorado,⁴ by soldiers, and the more recent outrage added was no inducement for compliance. A like fate might await them on the Washita.

"We can live without your stuff," they flung back defiantly, "and we will not sit down on the Washita. Bring out your soldiers and fight us like men."

Once again did "Old Man Thunderbird" speak. This time he sent Masap, a Caddo Indian chief—Caddo George—whom everyone respected, with the assurance that there would be nothing but good will on the Washita. They believed the Caddo. After a good buffalo hunt the Cheyennes, Arapahos, Kiowas, Comanches and Apaches, with their loads of skins and meat, camped on the Washita River above Fort Cobb. Smiles were on the faces of the people, young and old. There was much social visiting among the tribes; there was feasting, game-playing, singing and dancing all along the valley.

A small party of Kiowas including the Captive, visited in the Cheyenne camp of Black Kettle, which was farthest up the river of any of the camps. Came the Geese-going-Moon. (This Moon began about the middle of October. And it brought the breath of the Cold Fire People, of the North, to the Washita. Let it blow; there was plenty of fire wood at the doors of the lodges. Piles of snow came down from the clouds. Let it come; on the meat-poles there was plenty of meat. The wild wind of the North came and danced his whirling dances around the lodges and shook them with his war whoop. Let him dance and whoop; there was joy and courage in the heats of the young men and women which he could not chase away. Nor could he still the tongues of the old men who sat beside the fires and told tales of the heroic past.

On that never-to-be-forgotten night, the Captive and his Kiowa friends, together with a company of young Cheyenne men and women were in the midst of their merriment, when the flap of the lodge was thrown back and an aged Holy Man entered and held up a hand. At once there was silence, and every eye was fastened upon him as he turned an ear to the wind, his eyes fixed as though seeing something out beyond.

⁴The Sand Creek affair was commonly called the Chivington Massacre, because the responsible commander of the troops involved was Colonel John M. Chivington, of the 1st Colorado Cavalry. It occurred November 29, 1864.

He spoke no word. But when he lowered his hand he went silently out into the snow. In the pause in the midst of the merriment which ensued, the young people looked questioningly at each other. A kind of spell, as though something dreadful was about to happen, seemed to grip them. What else could be the meaning of the Grandfather's visit and manner. Through long fasting and prayer the Holy Men acquired, among other things, the ability to sense approaching danger, it was believed. And now if only these young men had not allowed the charms of the moment to blind them—had they but given due heed to the warning!

If only they had done so!

For the eight hundred blue-clad soldiers, who were even then creeping through the snow upon them, would not have found a camp sleeping in the sense of security. Those soldiers had been drilled and coached for this night's work. Forty of the best shots in the regiment had been chosen, excused from camp and guard duty, and formed into a company of sharpshooters, in order that all their powers might be concentrated upon the art of killing; and this desire, wrought to its highest pitch was shared by the rest of the eight hundred men who were creeping silently around the camp where not only men, but women would feel the power of the bloody hand. Had those warriors but known, the "Battle of the Washita" would have been a far different story.

The dashing young General had waited for just such a night, when "winter in all its bitter force should come," so he afterwards wrote in his book, "My Life on the Plains." And the trap had been most skillfully set. The longed-for time of red blood-letting had come. The camp of Black Kettle slept. From his place in the eastern sky the Morning Star in all his beauty looked down upon the white coverlid of snow which wrapped the peaceful camp on the Washita.

Suddenly, the whitened hills broke loose from their places. They came rolling thunderingly down to the river banks. They broke into pieces. They shook the earth. The loud long scream, deep throated and terrible (this was made by a regimental band, it was afterwards discovered), brought the sleeping camp to its feet in an awful awakening. The crackling, volleying guns, the twanging of bowstrings, the yells, whoops, the screaming of children, the clattering of iron shod hoofs, all comingling, gathered into one terrific

blood-letting **THING**. On it came, raging, blazing through the camp, scattering the snow like froth from the lips of a monster, trampling women and children into the long sleep. It was like the doings of the fabled monster of Kiowa mythology, with his long death-dealing horns and the light between them, his big hooked teeth, dripping red with blood—the Zemoguani.

Out into the cold wind and frozen snow rushed the warriors, naked, some of them, to meet the blue-coated raiders in the death grapple. Although taken by complete surprise, there was no flinching. Above the din and roar, the voice of Black Kettle could be heard at first giving orders and encouraging to his strong hearted warriors who rallied to him only to go down under the hail of bullets from the rifles of the crack-shots of the enemy who, afoot, did their bloody work.

The mounted cavalymen had dashed clear through the camp, whirled and came back. The Captive, together with the other Kiowas headed by their chief, Zepkoeta knelt together in the snow on the river bank and waited for the horsemen to come out of the woods into the open where they would be in range of their guns. As they came near one of them chased a woman, with her baby in her arms, around a lodge and down into the river. Here, in the icy water up to her arm pits, the mother turned at bay and threw up an arm to shield her child. The soldier struck the arm down with his gun and raised it for another blow. Among the Kiowas, a gun blazed. The rider slumped from his saddle. The riderless horse floundered up the opposite bank.

The Kiowa chief called to his men to hurry with him to their own camp, further down the river, as firing was heard in that direction. Together, the little company ran for a distance of probably two miles, when they were confronted by a detachment of the cavalymen. Throwing themselves under a shelving bank, the little band of Kiowa warriors opened fire upon them. In an open space, the soldiers dismounted and fired their guns without taking aim. They appeared very greatly excited. It was daylight now, and the Kiowas continued to fire, making nearly every shot tell. Within a few minutes every man and horse of the detachment lay stretched in the snow.¹ Not a Kiowa was touched by a white

¹The little group which was thus wiped out by the Kiowas who had been in Black Kettle's village, was composed of Major Joel H. Elliott,

man's bullet. At this easy victory the victorious warriors raised their voices together in a long exultant shout. This, the chief quickly stilled, saying that many soldiers remained in the woods, farther along. But that shout of victory was repeated by a company of Cheyennes, hastening to the aid of the Black Kettle's band, and it was heard by the battling warriors in that camp, when it strengthened their hearts, so it was afterwards told by the women. Those warriors asked no quarter. None was given. Not a warrior surrendered. Every man died fighting at the doors of the lodges, did the one hundred and three of them, outnumbered eight to one as they were.

The Kiowa chief sent the young warriors who were with him to his own camp. But by the time the sun was half way up to the middle of the sky, Custer had sacked and burned the village of Black Kettle and had slaughtered nearly nine-hundred horses belonging to the Cheyennes. By that time, also, their scouting parties from the different camps which were scattered along the river below, were gradually working their way around the soldiers in every direction.

Set T'ainte,' a chief of the Kiowas seemed to have assumed the leadership of the associated tribes. He had succeeded in concentrating most of the warriors at a given point by the middle of the afternoon, small parties of warriors meanwhile harrassing the soldiers at many points. The great difficulty was for Set T'ainte to get the chiefs of the different tribes to agree upon a plan of action. At one time it seemed that everything was ready for a charge upon the soldiers and he ordered the Kiowas to mount and stand ready for the assault. And now came that fine body of fighting men, the Koetseko, an order of warriors who always stood ready to die in defense of the tribe. Across their breasts, were the sashes of Elk-skin, some red, some yellow, some black. The great chief Set Ankya's own sash was black.' Out he rode with his

four non-commissioned officers and ten private soldiers of the 7th Cavalry, who had started to follow some of the Indians who were carrying the word of the attack to the camps down the river.

'Set Tainte (White Bear), was known to the white people as Satan-ta. He was prominent in Kiowa history during the ensuing six years. He was sent to the Texas Penitentiary for the part he played in a raid into that state, in 1871, and died there, by suicide, in 1878.

'Set Ankya (Sitting Bear) was known to the white people as Santank.

feathered lance in his hand. All were chanting the song of the order:

"Oh, Sun! the Koetseko must die, but you go on forever.

Oh, Earth! the Koetseko must die but you go on forever."

It was Set Ankyea's place as chief of the order to lead in the charge. During the battle his place was to drive the spear into the ground. It was never to be pulled up until the battle was won. The Koetshko must win or die.

About that time Custer headed his soldiers down the river, and his brass band, which had been playing, stopped. His command stopped and some of the cavalymen dismounted and deployed as though to fight on foot. These actions greatly puzzled the Indians. After a short time, as neither soldiers nor Indians had made a move, the soldiers again started down the valley. The Indians now completely surrounded the soldiers. The soldiers proceeded on their course until after dark, and toward the other camps. The Indians now concentrated at a place of a natural ambuscade, intending to fall upon their enemy when they should reach the place. But, late at night, the soldiers suddenly whirled about and started on the retreat up the valley, the Indians following.

During the night, the Kiowas captured one of Custer's scouts. From him they learned that the General, now knowing the strength of the Indians was hastening toward a place of safety. Neither his horses nor men had eaten since the early morning before they attacked the camp, and they were weak and hungry. They continued to retreat until they reached the place where they had left overcoats and sacks of food, on the river, above Black Kettle's camp, and it was nearly morning. But the Indians had captured the food and coats. After a brief rest the soldiers were again in their saddles and on the retreat. But for certain religious beliefs of the Indians, they would have destroyed the entire command that night. So great was his haste and harrassed by

He was killed near Fort Sill, in 1871, when he became unruly, shortly after a military escort had started to take him to Texas for trial by the civil courts for the part he had taken in a recent raid in that state.

*When the Indians rushed ahead of the column of troops advancing down the valley, it was believed that they were chiefly concerned for the safety of their camps and villages, which were scattered at intervals for twelve or fifteen miles down-stream. This writer's statement that the warriors were concentrating for an ambuscade is important, since it throws a new and interesting light on the situation.

the Indians as he was, that Custer could not take time to find out the whereabouts of one of his officers and a detachment of his soldiers. He left them to their fate while he hurried on to Camp Supply.*

Custer's booty of that raid netted him several hundred buffalo robes, much buffalo meat, a number of guns and bows and arrows, many saddles and lariats and a small quantity of clothing. He slaughtered about nine hundred horses and captured fifty-three women and children. Among his prisoners there was not a single man. Not a man surrendered. They all died fighting in defense of their families and homes, did the one hundred and three warriors! And among the killed were a number of women and children. General Custer's own losses were two officers and nineteen enlisted men killed, and three officers and eleven enlisted men wounded.

In the light of these facts, what becomes of the "Battle of the Washita," and the "notable victory won the Washita?"

The Indians had no publicity agent. The young General had attached to his headquarters an experienced reporter of one of America's great dailies. The Indians had no one capable of writing an account of the massacre in a book. The young General afterward wrote "My Life On The Plains," in which he attempted to justify himself for the inhuman deed.

*The withdrawal of General Custer and his command, without putting forth any effort to ascertain the fate of Major Elliott and the little detachment of soldiers accompanying him, was the occasion of severe criticism at the time and ever afterward and, it seems, its significance was apparent to the Indians as well.