



**BLACK KETTLE'S TREE, AND VICINITY**

January, 1891. Photo by Lieut. H. L. Scott, 7th Cavalry. Washita river on the left, under the banks of which the Cheyennes fled and using them as breastworks made their final stand.

## THE BATTLE OF THE WASHITA

By LEWIS N. HORNBECK

FOR some reason there exists in the popular mind but little clear, definite knowledge of this battle, due, doubtless, to the fact that it occurred in what was then only vaguely known as the Indian country, and during the days of frequent conflicts on the frontier. Later events in the Territory, and now the state of Oklahoma, of a pushing character and intense, widespread personal interest, have combined to cause forgetfulness of the past where it was only slightly known, and to blunt all desire for a knowledge of things previous to the sudden and sweeping occupation of the land by the white man and consequently we find the impression too commonly accepted that

the history of the land began with its opening to settlement, and that prior to that event there is little of interest or of value to the present inhabitants.

For years after the Civil War the frontiers of Kansas and Texas were continued scenes of rapine and massacre, perpetrated by the different tribes of the West, who persistently refused to abide their respective treaties, and defiantly abandoned their reservations for bloody havoc among the unprotected settlements. The worst tribes among the southwestern Indians were the Cheyennes, Arapahoes and Kiowas; the Kiowas perhaps the worst of all. The Comanches were the terror of the Texas frontier, but rarely

committed outrages north of Red river, while the others raided promiscuously from Western Texas to Nebraska, sparing neither age, sex nor condition in their murderous fury. In 1868, and following an unexampled series of outbreaks and wanton massacres on the part of the Indians, the government tardily determined to abandon the method of a miserable and misguided milk-and-water policy in the more sensible attempt to teach these murderous tribes that their game was one in which two could play.

It was almost useless to chase Indians with an army and a wagon train in the summer, when grass was abundant for their ponies and the herds of fat buffalo furnished all the commissaries the Indian needed. Wisely, therefore, it was decided to attack him in the winter, when the chances were more evenly divided.

In pursuance of this plan, Gen. George A. Custer, with the Seventh cavalry and a body of infantry, left Fort Dodge early in November, and started South. After a march of five or six days the command reached the junction of Wolf and Beaver creeks, which, together, form the North Canadian river. Selecting a suitable site between the two creeks, a little above the junction, a permanent camp was established as headquarters, known then and afterward as Camp Supply. Here a large supply of provisions, clothing and ammunition was deposited, the place fortified and the body of infantry left to guard it. On the morning of November 2, 1868, in a furious and blinding snowstorm, Custer and his forces started out in dead earnest on the raid for Indians. He had with him about 850 men of the Seventh cavalry, a detachment of scouts, a band of Osage guides, and wagon train. It is not often that snow falls so deep or so early in the season as it did on that occasion, getting nearly knee-deep on the level

prairie. This made traveling, camping and cooking a bitter job in an unknown country without roads or trails; and, to make matters worse, when the snow ceased to fall, the weather turned freezing cold, a crust forming on top of the snow. However, Custer was game, as he always was, and his men followed without complaint. The snow was yet on the ground, deep as ever, when the command struck the South Canadian



Monument erected by Lieut. H. L. Scott, 7th Cavalry, January, 1891, to mark the battlefield of the 7th U. S. Cavalry, under Gen. G. A. Custer, with Black Kettle's band of Cheyennes, Nov. 27th, 1868. The skulls are those of some of the 700 ponies captured by Gen. Custer and destroyed to prevent recapture.

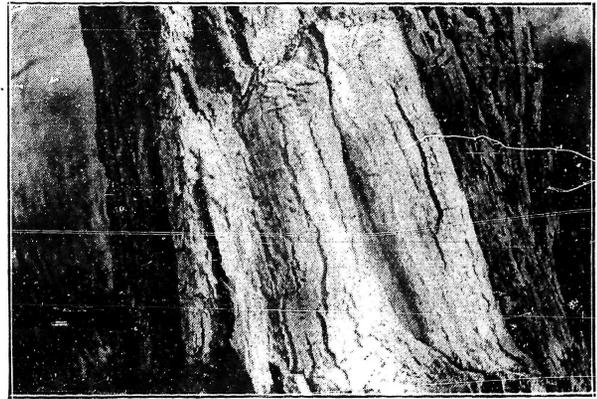
river and crossed near the Antelope hills, on the south bank of the river. This is up near the line of the Panhandle of Texas, and is a noted landmark. They had been out for three days now with no trace of hostile Indians. In a very general way Custer was heading for the Upper Washita, in the hope of striking some Kiowa or Cheyenne camps, but not a white man in the entire command had ever been in the locality before. His Osage guides had some little knowledge

of the country, but not much. His interpreter, a gay, half-breed Mexican, by the name of Romero (facetiously changed by the command to Romeo), was also at a loss to locate the situation beyond the Antelope hills. Major Elliott, with a detachment of troops, had been sent on a scout up the Canadian before the command crossed, and while Custer was vainly trying to locate a route toward the Washita, a courier from Major Elliott arrived, saying that a fresh trail of a large party of Indians had been discovered in the snow, leading south after crossing the Canadian, and that Elliott was following them. Here was the opportunity looked for, as it was plainly evident the Indians were returning from a foray, and were hurrying to the winter camp of the tribe. Now to catch up with Elliott and follow the Indians in. The courier was sent back on a run with instructions, the wagon train was ordered to follow on as fast as it could, the cavalry was lined up, and a rush was made to intercept the trail and find Elliott. After a ride of several hours the trail was found, sure enough, and it was also discovered that Elliott had passed some time before. They had fallen in behind him. Some of the best scouts were sent rapidly forward to overtake him, as he evidently thought Custer was ahead on the trail somewhere and was trying to come up with the command. Before night the scouts had reached Elliott and stopped him, and Custer coming up, the entire command was together again. At a distance a dark line of timber could be seen, stretching east and west, but whether it marked the Washita, or not, none could tell. It was now getting dark, on the evening of November 26. The trail had been growing fresher all day and showed that the Indians were not far in advance, even if they kept on without

camping. The scouts and guides were all of the opinion that the main camp lay somewhere in the line of timber before them, and Custer planned for a surprise. Putting the Osage guides in front to follow the trail and give warning of anything seen or heard, Custer followed them with the scouts, while the troops were far in the rear. It was near midnight when an Osage guide crept swiftly back to say that an extended Indian village had been seen but a little way off in the timber. Here was the game, tracked to its home on the Washita, though Custer did not know until afterward that it was the Washita. In whispers the officers planned the attack, which was to quietly surround the camp in the darkness and open the battle at the first streak of daylight. This was a hazardous plan, and a little later proved a far more dangerous one than any of them anticipated, from the fact that the troops were encountering an enemy of unknown numbers and on ground entirely unknown to them. With even numbers the advantage was all with the Indians; with superior numbers, at home, and fighting in a single body, it had been a miracle for the troops to escape a massacre. It came dangerously close to this, anyway, and Custer's fate was barely transferred from the Washita to the Little Big Horn. The plan was carried out, during the bitter cold of the night, and at daybreak the battle was on. The first shot of the battle was fired by Black Kettle, chief of the Cheyennes, who was awakened by the approach of the soldiers, already in the camp. He sprang to the door of the tent, rifle in hand, and fired at the troops. He was shot dead and fell at his door. The fighting became general at once, all over the scattered village, soldiers and Indians firing and charging everywhere. The Indians fought steadily and desperately, even the boys and

squaws doing effective service, but they were outnumbered and finally broke to flight. One small band took refuge by lying in a buffalo wallow and there fighting steadily until the last one was killed. For men, no quarter was asked and none given. Custer had attacked the main village of the Cheyennes, but was not then aware of the trap he was in. Immediately below them lay the full Kiowa tribe, then the Arapahoes, then more Cheyennes, then the Comanches and Apaches. Nearly all the hostile tribes of the country were there, camped together for strength and safety. The woods were full of Indian camps for ten miles down the river from where he attacked the upper camp. The battle was over in two hours, but only for a brief time until the other tribes could arm and get to the scene. The Kiowas under Sattan-ta and Lone Wolf; the Arapahoes under Little Raven, and the Cheyennes under Little Robe, after the death of Black Kettle. There is little to show that the Comanches and Apaches took any active part. The hills around the battlefield were swarming with desperate, well-armed Indians. And the fight was opened again, this time with Custer on the defensive. The Indians surrounded the troops and attacked from all sides at the same time. Custer was in a trap. He was outnumbered, cut off from his wagon train, his troops weary and hungry and half frozen in the deep snow. Something had to be done. His men had been fighting on foot for the last two hours, and kept busy checking the continual fierce charges of the Indians. He mounted them again, and by charging in a solid body succeeded in clearing first one position and then another, until the Indians gradually backed off and left him more room and a breathing spell. The terrible work done by the troops early in the

morning evidently had caused the Indians to dread a close onslaught, and this dread was perhaps all that saved the entire command from an overwhelming and exterminating final rush by the Indians. The fighting was ended. Custer rapidly carried out his plans for escape. He had captured fifty squaws and children, eight hundred ponies, eleven hundred robes, five hundred pounds of powder, one thousand pounds of lead, and four thousand war arrows, and had killed one hundred and three Indians. His loss was nineteen soldiers and two officers—Major Elliott and Captain Louis Hamilton, a



**BLACK KETTLE'S TREE**

At the foot of which he was killed in battle with the 7th U. S. Cavalry under Gen. G. A. Custer, Nov. 27th, 1868.

grandson of Alexander Hamilton. Major Elliott and fourteen men had been cut off by the Indians in the first of the battle, and their fate was not certainly known until a second campaign, a month after the battle. All had been killed and mutilated.

The ponies were rounded up and only reserving enough to carry the prisoners, the rest, nearly eight hundred, were all shot to prevent the Indians getting them again. All tents and equipments of the captured villages were piled up and burned. Custer then put up a bluff that won handsomely. Indians were yet in sight all around, watching proceedings. He formed his men in fighting line,

mounted the prisoners, and with bands playing started boldly down the river as if to attack and destroy the other camps. Alarmed at such a prospect, and amazed at the boldness of the man they thought they had safely trapped, the Indians fled hurriedly to protect or remove their villages. This was what he wanted, and after going a mile or so and finding the Indians all gone he changed his course and hurried rapidly back over the battleground and on toward his wagon train. He was safe, out of the dangerous trap whose bloody jaws could have easily closed and crushed him had they dared. He was not even followed, reached his wagons at ten o'clock on the morning of November 28, and took up his triumphant march back to Camp Supply.

A month later he was back over the same ground, this time with about eleven hundred troops, further increased by a battalion of Kansas volunteers, one company of which was commanded by the immortal David L. Payne, of original Oklahoma fame. It was then that the bodies of the brave Elliott and his fourteen men were found—all horribly mutilated. In the Kiowa village, and at the camp of Chief Sa-tan-ta, now deserted, were found the scalped remains of a young white woman and a small white child. The woman had been but recently captured, and a neat pair of new cloth slippers were yet on her feet. Evidently she was killed to prevent her falling into

the hands of Custer with her damning story of outrage and suffering at the hands of her captors.

Though no actual fighting was done this second raid resulted in suppressing both the Cheyennes and the Kiowas, and in recovering from the Cheyennes two more young women who had been captured in Kansas, and restoring them alive to their families.

The scene of the battle of the Washita is situated in what is now Roger Mills County, Oklahoma, and not far from the town of Cheyenne.

In 1891, twenty-three years after the battle of the Washita, the renewed Seventh cavalry was stationed at Fort Sill. Among its officers was Lieutenant Hugh L. Scott, a man whom I am yet proud to number among the many friends I had, and still have, in that locality. Lieutenant (since captain) Scott was detailed with an escort to visit the battleground, in the year mentioned, and to locate certain spots thereon, and to preserve such mementos of the battle as he could. On his return he sent me the three photographs which appear as illustrations in this article. One showing the cottonwood tree at the foot of which Black Kettle fell, and which was marked by the Cheyennes after the battle. Another showing a partial view of the battlefield as it appeared in 1891. Another showing the monument raised by Capt. Scott on the site of the battlefield, and also showing some of the skulls of the ponies killed by Custer.

