

Miss Daisy's Silver Concho by Karen Gonzales

Artifacts of the past can do more than teach us about how our ancestors lived. Some of these items have the power to spark our imaginations, ignite our curiosity, and even evoke feelings about, and for, those who lived in historical times.



Underside of concho with the word "America" still visible.

Such is the case with a decorative piece of silver, known here in the west as a “concho” currently on display in the visitor center at Fort Bowie National Historic Site. Made from a silver U.S. 50 cent piece, this concho was donated to the fort in 2007 by Mrs. Fae Kettering of California, who reported it was given to her great-aunt, Daisy Robinson Wunschow, by Lieutenant Charles Gatewood, at a local dance in the early 1880s. According to Kettering, Gatewood told Miss Daisy that Geronimo had given him the concho.

Southeastern Arizona in the early 1880s was a tumultuous time for all who lived here. Geronimo, an influential Chiricahua Apache medicine man and fearless warrior, discontent with life on the San Carlos Reservation, left several times and led a band of warriors on raiding parties along the border. Early white settlers to the region lived in constant fear of attack, while the U.S. Military conducted an all out campaign to hunt down Geronimo, Naiche (son of Cochise) and all other Chiricahua Apaches not on the reservation.



Lt. Charles Gatewood

One very effective way to accomplish this goal was to enlist the help of Apache scouts, who knew Geronimo's hideouts and how to track him, even to the most remote and rugged spots, like the Sierra Madre mountains of Mexico. Lt. Gatewood served as a scout officer under General George Crook during the Geronimo Campaign and “had become well and favorably known to Geronimo and other Apache leaders,” according to author Robert M. Utley in his book *A Clash of Cultures, Fort Bowie and the Chiricahua Apaches*.

Later, working under Brig. General Nelson A. Miles, who took over the campaign after Crook asked to be relieved, Gatewood, with two Chiricahua Apache scouts, Kayitah and Martine, entered Geronimo's camp and after two days of tense conversation, was able to convince Geronimo and the other warriors to surrender unconditionally to Miles, thus ending the Indian wars of the southwest.



Chiricahua Apache medicine man and warrior, Geronimo, wearing two conchos on his jacket.

Why Geronimo may have given Gatewood a silver concho remains a mystery, since there is no known mention of this gift in the lieutenant's letters or written documents known to have survived. Perhaps Geronimo respected him for the courage he demonstrated during the tense negotiations, although it is unknown when this gift was made. Chiricahua Apaches did often decorate themselves, as well as their horses, with conchos. Many historical photographs have shown this. Maybe Geronimo gave Gatewood the concho simply to show the lieutenant he appreciated his integrity. One can only wonder.

Why Gatewood then gave this concho to Miss Daisy is another mystery, though one that might be a lot easier to solve, considering that the young woman, as one of the very first school teachers in Cochise County, was highly respected and also very pretty.

Throughout her teaching career, Miss Daisy gained a reputation as a person who inspired her students. In the spring of 1954, Lillian Erickson Riggs, who was then operating the Faraway Ranch, near the entrance of Chiricahua National Monument, remembered her most favorite teacher ever during a talk she gave at the El Dorado School, where she and her brother and sister had attended while growing up at Faraway.

She spoke of how Miss Daisy taught at what may have been the very first school house in the Sulphur Springs Valley. Located on the property of one of the earliest cattle ranches of our area, owned by Brannick and Mary Riggs, a small school was built by Brannick to educate the couple's children. The school was known as the "Home Ranch," and Miss Daisy lived with the Riggs while teaching there in the early 1880s. Years later, after the first public schools in the area were built, she taught at several, and it was at the first one that Lillian met her. She remembered that small school in her talk.

"This first schoolhouse was a small two-room affair. A solid partition separated the front from the back room... The back part was occupied by a cowboy; the front room by the school. The cowboy got up early, as all cowboys do and went out to ride or look after cattle or horses. Along about eleven o'clock, he would come home and start cooking his dinner. The children would smell the coffee and even hear, as well as smell, the bacon frying. It used to make them so hungry that their mouths fairly watered and they could scarcely wait for the noon hour. Later, the cowboy part was done away with and the whole building was used as the first neighborhood school."

Of her favorite teacher, Lillian recalled, "I never saw her when she was not as neat and clean 'as if she had just stepped out of a band box' as my mother used to say. She had lots of black hair

and it was piled high on her small head. She had black eyes which could flash dangerously if she became angry. She was very pretty.”



Miss Daisy Robinson (right), pictured here with her sister Florence.

But there was more to Miss Daisy than just a pretty face, as is revealed by Lillian’s continued recollections of her first impressions. “But the same shy glance of the pupils at their new teacher, also took in something else that was new – and not so pretty. It was a plain, rather heavy walking cane that was suspended crosswise on two nails just above the teacher’s head. There were some boys in that school much bigger than the little teacher. On the playgrounds at recess, there was laughing and joking among them about that cane.”

“The little folks were just plain scared. There was no joking and laughing in the school room. No whispering at all. Our little teacher was a strict disciplinarian. But, we learned early, too, that she was our true friend. This teacher seemed to have one idea that has since been completely given up. She believed that any pupil could learn. If he or she did not learn, it was because they did not want to learn. She was there to teach them, so she sometimes used that cane – to pound knowledge into them, as it were.”

Fae Kettering, Miss Daisy’s great-niece remembers family stories of how Daisy often taught with a rifle across her desk, during the time that Geronimo and his band were on the run and that during one scare of reported Apaches sighted in the area, she took the school children to a nearby ditch and hid them until the scare was over.

Kettering remembers her great-aunt as a woman who saved things. Shortly before her death in 1951, at the age of 88, Daisy moved in with Fae’s family in Bisbee. “ She had sacks and sacks of hair combings. She had long grey hair and saved all of it. (Making things out of human hair was once popular.) When she came to live with us in 1950 she had a trunk full of corsets, with whale bones etc. She didn’t wear them but kept them.”

Kettering also recalls her great-aunt’s charm. “Auntie Day was about 4’ 8” and I was even taller than she was. She had a keen wit and a twinkle in her eye. Every morning for breakfast she had olive oil with a raw egg in it. But she liked her tea strong and with canned milk.”

Daisy taught at many rural schools across what we now call Cochise County, in the Territory of Arizona, before and after it became a state, shaping many young lives and gaining a reputation as a superior teacher who greatly inspired her students. She left her niece the “Geronimo Button,” as the family called it.

“My mother kept it under glass or plastic to help preserve it,” Kettering said, adding “She gave it to me and said it belonged in the museum at Fort Bowie.”

The concho possibly has returned to a place it once was, since Fort Bowie served as the nerve center of the military’s campaign against Geronimo and the Chiricahua Apaches. Lt. Gatewood

was there often. Geronimo was brought there after his final surrender. Did the dance where Gatewood gave Miss Daisy the concho take place at Fort Bowie? Possibly. Dances were held there.

One can only imagine what might have been on his mind when he decided she should have the concho. Did they share a dance together before he gave it to her? Did he slip it out of his pocket and think of its historical significance, or perhaps its personal importance, before pressing it into her palm? And what did Miss Daisy think of such a gift? Was it a token of admiration from a handsome lieutenant, or merely a sign of respect? All that remains is a small piece of polished silver with a big story, a simple artifact which offers us a mere glimpse into past lives and leaves us with more questions than answers.