



Cheyenne Oral Account of the Attack at Washita

When the Tsististas (Cheyenne), Hinono'ei (Arapaho), and other tribes encountered English-speaking people, they could not clearly communicate with one another. This language barrier contributed to the cultural conflict that led to the tragedy of Washita. At treaty deliberations, for example, interpreters were necessary to translate statements between the groups—and the translations were too often incomplete or inaccurate. To illustrate how language can be an obstacle to communication, an audio recording describing the attack in the Cheyenne language was created for this exhibit. The following text translates this recording to English.

My name is Lenora Hart Holliman. My great-grandfather—a man named Afraid of Beavers—was at the Washita Massacre. Our grandfathers and grandmothers who survived the attack passed down stories about what happened that day in November 1868. These are stories not told in history books, but rather through the oral tradition of the Cheyenne people.
[trickling sounds of the Washita River, horses, children playing]

We made our winter camp along the Lodge Pole River white men called the river, “Washita.” Fifty-one lodges were spread among the cottonwood trees on the south side of the river. For our people, winter was a quiet time—our camp a sanctuary.
[a distant coyote]

That morning was still and bitter cold. The sun was not yet in the sky. Our people were sleeping.
[dogs barking]

But then some of our dogs—they began barking.
[the barking becomes more intense, snorting of a horse in the distance, hooves breaking through the snow and ice]

The sound awakened one of our women. She emerged from her lodge to check on the animals. . . .
[sounds of horses drawing nearer]

Across the river, was a sight she could hardly believe. . . . soldiers!

They were charging down the ridge straight towards our encampment! Leading them was the man who would become known to all Cheyennes as “Yellow Hair”—Custer.
[thundering hooves coming closer]

The woman awakened our Peace Chief, Black Kettle, who then fired a single shot, warning us of an attack.
[Thundering hooves, shouting soldiers, rifle and pistol shots hitting the tipis]

It all happened so fast, we didn’t have time to get our horses.
[soldiers shouting, guns firing, screaming of women and children]

Four years earlier, at Sand Creek in Colorado Territory, Chivington attacked Black Kettle’s sleeping village and massacred our men, women, and children. Black Kettle’s wife, Medicine Woman Later, was wounded nine times but somehow survived. Now it seemed to be Sand Creek all over again! Only this time, it was Yellow Hair who was attacking our camp.
[guns firing, screaming of women and children]

Some of our people say their relatives tried to raise a white flag—just as Black Kettle did at Sand Creek. But the soldiers kept shooting.
[warriors sounds]

Our warrior societies began fighting back with any weapon they had—guns, bows, and arrows. A young teenager named Magpie ran out with his single shot pistol.
[the boy huffs as he runs through the snow,]

A cavalry officer spotted Magpie, drew his saber, and began to chase Magpie down.
[thundering hooves of a soldier’s horse]

Magpie was running, but could hear the horseman bearing down on him.
[hooves getting closer, cry of the soldier as he swings his saber]

The soldier swung his sword. Magpie ducked and turned, pointing his pistol at the officer.
[dramatic gunshot echoing across the valley]

The soldier was wounded badly, shot in the stomach. Magpie escaped on the officer’s horse. Our oral tradition tells that this soldier had a special insignia. We think his name was Captain Barnitz.
[women and children running, screaming, soldiers shouting]

In our village, there was great confusion. One of our women was running from the camp when a soldier caught up with her. This soldier used the butt of his carbine to hit the woman in the jaw.
[sound of a woman screaming, horse running off]

She fell in the snow and the soldier rode on, thinking he had killed her. She laid there, pretending to be dead—then got up when it was safe and ran into a grove of trees near the river. Despite her injuries, she survived the attack. From that day on, she was known by our people as “Broken Jaw.”
[warriors fighting back]

The courage of the warriors allowed many of our women and children to escape. It was a mad dash. Mothers ran with their children towards the river. Some dug holes in the riverbanks to escape the flying bullets. Others simply jumped into the icy water, sheltered by the river’s steep banks. Many had their legs and feet cut by the jagged ice.

One of those running away was White Buffalo Woman.
[snorting horse, officer shouting at her to stop]

A soldier on horseback spotted her running with two children. He captured them.
[soldier orders her to surrender]

White Buffalo Woman saw that Arapaho warriors from down the river were riding towards the Cheyenne camp. She distracted the soldier, pointing to cuts on the children's feet.
[sounds of approaching Arapahos]

Hearing the Arapahos, this soldier whirled about, fired his carbine then took off.
[galloping horse, then a couple of gunshots]

Our stories tell us that the Arapaho warriors quickly caught up with him and counted coup.
[desperate Cheyennes running in snow]

Those of our people who didn't hide near the river escaped to the surrounding hills. An orphaned teenage girl named Moving Behind was hiding in the tall grass with her aunt when they were spotted by a soldier.
[sounds of snorting horse moving through the grass]

Moving Behind and her aunt, Corn Stalk Woman, waited for the soldier to fire.
[snorting horse, gallops away]

But instead of shooting, the soldier took pity on the two.
[soldier's horse gallops away]

But most of our people weren't so lucky. When Yellow Hair first attacked, Black Kettle and his wife, Medicine Woman Later, mounted their horse, which was tethered nearby. As she and Black Kettle tried to cross the river, the soldiers caught up with them...
[gunshot, the cry of a wounded horse]

...and shot them in the back. Our great Peace Chief, the man who followed the teachings of Sweet Medicine, was dead, along with his wife.
[Custer ordering soldiers]

The history books say that 53 Cheyenne women and children were captured by the soldiers. Around noon, Yellow Hair ordered his men to gather all of our belongings. Everything we had—buffalo robes, weapons, our tobacco—was tossed into a giant pile. Even our winter's supply of food was thrown into this pile. And then Yellow Hair gave another order. To burn it all.
[sounds of crackling fire]

But the biggest blow to our people was still to come.
[angry horses being rounded up]

The soldiers rounded up more than 800 of our ponies...
[gunshots, cries of the horses]

...and began shooting them.

The horse enabled us to follow the buffalo herds. The horse was a symbol of wealth. To the Cheyenne people, the horse was like part of our family.
[more cries of horses]

That day at the Lodge Pole, we witnessed our horses shot, one by one. Our relatives say that as they were dying, these horses were screaming like people. Today, during special ceremonies, we can still hear the cries of these horses.
[final dramatic gunshot]

At the Lodge Pole, Yellow Hair claimed a great victory. But many of our people escaped into the nearby hills. Some went down river to the Arapaho camps.
[trickling of Washita River]

Later on the day of the attack, my great-grandfather, Afraid of Beavers, was with a group who discovered the bodies of Black Kettle and Medicine Woman Later. Our oral tradition tells how they were lying face first in the river—the waters of the Lodge Pole running over their bodies. My great-grandfather took Black Kettle's body to a nearby cottonwood tree, laying him on a red and blue blanket. Black Kettle, our great peace chief, a man who followed the teachings of Sweet Medicine, was buried in the nearby hills. The exact location is something that we don't know today.
[sounds of attack at Little Big Horn]

Magpie, the boy who shot the officer off the horse, had one more encounter with Yellow Hair—eight years later at a place called the Little Bighorn. He returned to Indian Territory—the place we today call Oklahoma—and became the Keeper of the Arrows. Magpie, White Buffalo Woman, and Moving Behind lived here for many years—part of the Red Moon Band of Cheyennes.
[distant sounds of pow wow singing]

Every spring, the Red Moon band still holds their yearly pow wow. It's held not far from here, the place where Black Kettle, Medicine Woman Later, and many of our people were killed along the Lodge Pole River.
[pow wow singing becomes louder]

After the Lodge Pole massacre, the white man thought the Cheyenne people would go the way of the buffalo. But like the buffalo, the Cheyenne have survived. We are a strong and resilient people who continue to follow the teachings of Sweet Medicine.



Illustration NPS/Steven Lang

An artist's depiction of Chief Black Kettle helping Medicine Woman Later, his wife, climb aboard a horse during the attack.