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Washita River: Battle or Massacre?

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During my *Introduction to Public Speaking* 1313 (Speech) class with instructor Ms. Terry Ford we studied, among other things, inter-cultural and multi-cultural communications and interactions. One of my short essays, *Washita River: Battle or Massacre?*, follows. I chose to do my essay on this subject not only because this event occurred in our own backyard near Cheyenne, Oklahoma but also because of my interest in cultural relations between the new frontier Americans and Native Americans. Most tribes tried to live in harmony with the settlers, but once they realized that their beloved home was being invaded and taken away from them some began to retaliate and wage war with the U.S. Government. Because of this bloodshed the U.S. began a campaign to remove the Native Americans from their land by any means and take that land from them.

Chief Black Kettle was a plains Cheyenne Native American who realized what was happening and became more interested in saving his tribe's lives than fighting a losing battle. Chief Black Kettle's tolerance and painstaking diligence to avoid conflict was soon to be no more. Black Kettle's camp was apart from the other Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Kiowa camps nearby on the morning of November 27, 1868.

Lieutenant Colonel George Custer, a Civil War hero with no more battles to fight, led about 700 7th U.S. Cavalry troops to this Washita River Valley. They were part of Major General Philip Sheridan's "no tolerance" campaign to destroy or immobilize these Plains Native American tribes.

Washita River: Battle or Massacre?

The incident which took place on the Washita River in Black Kettle's camp so long ago should never be forgotten. Forgiven but never forgotten. When a group of armed soldiers attacks a sleeping camp of women, children, elderly, and disabled people in the pre-dawn light and kills them, leaving only a few of the women and children alive solely for the purpose of "showing mercy", it is a massacre.

Black Kettle's camp had few if any able-bodied warriors in it namely because Black Kettle had been rejected by the Cheyenne warriors as a puppet to the US Government. The nearby camps of Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Kiowa tribes did contain warriors, however, and when threatened with attack, battled and killed Major Elliot and his men; this is a battle.

Not only did Custer botch the attack and massacre the wrong village, he allowed a regiment of U.S. soldiers to be killed in a short but deadly battle. Custer left the area with out checking on Major Elliot and did not know if he was alive or dead until two weeks later. Indeed, Custer left enough witnesses alive to attest to the atrocities of that day!

Battle or massacre? There was both a battle and a massacre that cold morning on the Washita River. Let us remember the souls lost there and always remember them...

-Scott Albright

