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attractions for the human spirit

THE WICHITA MOUNTAINS: A LEGACY IN GRANITE

By Jim Logan

Author's note: This is dedicated to a person, now in her eighty-ninth year, of truly remarkable love and kindness — my grandmother, Lila-merle Logan.

From a distance, they appear as gray bulges on the horizon. As one draws nearer, the Wichita Mountains, or Sierra Jumanos (Mountains of Mortals), as the early Spanish called them, rise abruptly and loom in stark contrast to the flat plains of Western Oklahoma surrounding them. Named for the Wichita Indians, whose history refers to the region as "from time immemorial" a part of their ancestral hunting grounds, the mountain range thrusts from near Lawton, southwestward through Comanche, Greer, Kiowa, and Jackson counties, ending a few miles northwest of Granite, and dominating an area sixty miles long and twenty miles wide. Composed of huge granite boulders and among the oldest mountains on earth, they are actually the crests of even larger ranges extending beneath the earth's surface and remain as graven testament to a monumental upheaval during the earth's infancy.

Mount Scott, named for General Winfield Scott of Mexican War fame, stands sentinel, from its 2467 summit, over a view of grassy valleys and tree-lined streams below, melting into a checkerboard pattern of farm fields in the hazy distance. According to Indian legend, the Great Spirit appeared at the top of the mountain thousands of years ago, following a devastating flood, calling his people to him and furnishing them with the means by which to survive. In the days before "manifest destiny" and the

ensuing encroachment, the broad expanses of grassy valleys between the mountains fed and sheltered deer, elk, and antelope. The buffalo grazed in countless thousands.

The first exploration of the mountains was by the Spaniards. They were drawn to the region by the same two forces which brought Spain to the new world; the desire for more souls for the Catholic church and more gold for the royal treasury. In 1629, some ninety years after Coronado's first contact with the Wichita Indians, and a century and a half before American Independence, Father Juan de Salas, escorted by an expedition from Santa Fe, journeyed to the mountains to form a mission among the Indians. They were hesitant to accept change and at times hostile. He abandoned the effort twenty years later. In 1650, Diego del Castillo and his soldiers foraged for a greater part of a year among the mountains in search of gold and silver. It is known that these adventurers did find some gold nuggets in the streams of the region. In 1956, researchers working along Cedar Creek near Saddle Mountain verified the existence of a Spanish arrastra, a circular ditch hewn from granite rocks through which large mill stones were pulled by horses to aid in the separation of gold ore from crushed rock. It lies today in silent seclusion beneath a stand of trees south of Meers. Although the date of its use is uncertain, it serves as a reminder

of the far-reaching effect of Spanish culture on the region. Natives have, for years, talked of an old trail which once skirted the base of Mt. Scott, and is said to have connected Spanish possessions east of the Mississippi with their southwest holdings. Rusty knives, pieces of armor, and other relics found there give credence to the tales. Today, legend in the area is rich with stories of "the lost Spanish mines in the Wichita Mountains."

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Kiowa, Comanche, and Wichita Indians and their allies, known collectively as the plains tribes, claimed what is now the western half of Oklahoma as part of their hunting grounds and shared the teeming wildlife areas in and around the Wichita Mountains region. In 1833, a warring band of Osage ranged southward into the area and surprised a Kiowa village located at the headwaters of Otter Creek, southeast of present-day Gotebo. The Kiowa men were away at the time on a hunting trip. In a savage display of inter-tribal warfare, the Osage war party attacked the inhabitants of the village — all of whom were women, old men, and children. The terrified villagers tried to escape to higher ground on a nearby hill but were run down and massacred. The Kiowa men, upon their return, were met by the sight of their loved ones' bodies. The heads had been cut off and placed in copper buckets, neatly lined up in the center of the

village. The area is known today as Cutthroat Gap, and the nearby hill as Decapitation Mountain.

In 1834, a United States Army dragoon expedition journeyed to the Wichita Mountains to explore the area and establish formal relations with the plains tribes. When General Leavenworth became ill and died, Colonel Henry Dodge assumed leadership of the group, described as "two hundred of the most daring, healthy, and select men of the corps, superbly mounted and equipped as an elite frontier force." The group was notable for the famous names in it — Nathan Boone, Daniel's son; Jefferson Davis, who would become president of the Confederacy twenty-six years hence; and George Catlin, the most famous painter of American Indians in history. The expedition learned, from Comanche scouts, of a large Wichita village in the mountains to the southwest. A few days later, the American force, low on food and with approximately half its original number dead from disease, located the village in Devil's Canyon, a few miles southeast of present-day Lone Wolf. Hugh Evans, a member of the group, wrote the following account of the moment:

On the evening of July 21st we reached the goal of our enterprise, the long-sought village. We approached a sweep of perpendicular mountains, whose tops are wholly inaccessible to the human foot from this side, and reached the village through leads to it, a narrow defile which one hundred good men, with a proper armament, would keep against the countless legions that Napoleon led to Moscow. After passing through this, we immediately entered the village situated in a beautiful bottom, on the margin of a river.

The artist, Catlin, gave further description in his diary:

...near the base of a stupendous range of mountains of reddish granite, in many places piled up to an immense height without tree or shrubbery on them; looking as if they had actually dropped from the clouds in such a confused mass, and all lay where they had fallen. We found here a very

numerous village containing some five or six hundred wigwams, all made of long prairie grass, thatched over poles which are fastened in the ground and bent in at the top; giving to them, in distance, the appearance of straw beehives. To our very great surprise, we have found these people cultivating quite extensive fields of corn, pumpkins, melons, beans, and squashes; so with these aids, and an abundant supply of buffalo meat, they may be said to be living very well.

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"THE HEADS HAD BEEN CUT OFF AND PLACED IN COPPER BUCKETS, NEATLY LINED UP IN THE CENTER OF THE VILLAGE."
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The dragoons met with the Wichita tribe for several days. They secured, in an emotional meeting, the release of a Negro man and a nine-year-old white boy, who had been captives for quite some time, in exchange for a Kiowa and two Wichita girls who had earlier been obtained in a trade with their Osage captors. During the council, over two thousand additional Kiowa, Comanche, and Waco Indians came to witness the meeting between the plains Indians and American forces. It paved the way for agreements and treaties essential to the ultimate settlement of a great part of the Southwest and as such ranks as one of the most important military expeditions in the history of the plains.

In 1869, the United States Army, in need of a secure command post in the Southwest to protect White interests and discourage Indian raids, primarily into Northern Texas, assigned General Phillip Sheridan to personally stake out the location of what would become Fort Sill, named for a Union Civil War officer. The first buildings were erected not far from Medicine Bluff Creek, below the sacred sheer bluffs, several hundred feet high, where the Comanches and other tribes had for centuries brought their wounded and sick to heal or

die. Over the next quarter-century, the fort would serve as a focal point of the deterioration of Indian-American relations, imprisoning such feared names as Geronimo and Satanta, the fierce Kiowa chiefs who committed suicide rather than exist behind bars. In its shadows are buried the great chiefs Lone Wolf (Kiowa), Geronimo (Apache), and Quanah Parker (Comanche).

In the latter half of the 1800's, the Wichita range was a part of the notorious Oklahoma badlands. Reports continually circulated of robberies, hide-outs, murders, and hoards of buried money associated with the Daltons, Youngers, and the James gang. Famed outlaw Bill Doolin was killed by a posse near Lawton in 1896. Frank James farmed not far from the mountains, outside present-day Fletcher, for a while.

It had long been known that granite was among the oldest rock formations on earth and that quartz veins were commonly found in the crevices between such formations. Where there was quartz, there was often gold or silver. Consequently, during the 1890's, prospecting got into full swing in the Wichitas, beginning in the Otter Creek area. Small mining towns such as Golden and Silverton sprang up as prospectors swarmed over the northern and western slopes of the mountains. In 1901, Lawton, Oklahoma's third largest city, was born practically overnight as two million acres of Kiowa-Comanche-Apache reservation land was opened to White settlement. Newspapers such as the OTTER CREEK MINER and MOUNT SHERIDAN MINER rang with such headlines as "The Wichita Mountains: Future Mineral District of America and the Coming El Dorado of the World." In 1901, digging was going strong at the Gold Blossom mine near Meers. A large mining camp was at the base of Mt. Sheridan. Practically every gulch had clusters of mining cabins, and the hills bristled with claim notices. In 1902, forty-three mines honeycombed the slopes between Lawton and Lugert. There were the inevitable exaggerated reports

of occasional strikes. Hope and greed ran rampant. In the end, however, no gold or silver was ever found in sustainable quantities. By 1907, it was over. Some moved on to mineral fields in the Rockies and westward. Others stayed to ranch or farm the surrounding land and raise families.

In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt, alarmed at the near extinction of the American buffalo and other once abundant animal species, set aside 59,000 acres as the Wichita Mountain National Wildlife Refuge. From a small starting herd of fifteen buffalo, the number has grown steadily into several herds. The elk population, hunted to extinction, was successfully re-introduced. Longhorn cattle, descendants of the first animals brought by Spanish conquistadores to the continent in 1521, were re-established from near-extinction, along with turkey and other wildlife. Native bluestem, Indian grass, switch, and buffalo grass grow once again in verdancy. Small blue lakes with names like Treasure, Caddo, Osage, Quanah, and Lost Lake catch the mountain runoff. Today, over a million visitors a year come to the area to catch a glimpse of what the natural scene must have looked like two hundred years ago.

"THE GREAT SPIRIT APPEARED AT THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO."

The beauty of the place is still present, as timeless as it has been through history. Each year, in late April, the redbuds, like early guests, still spring forth in exuberant pink contrast to the damp, dark backdrop of bark and granite. The rains still spangle wild daisies and asters and Indian blankets in hues of yellow and red and white over the hills and valleys. The viewer still marvels at the marked clarity of the streams. Mountain boomers scurry under

rocky overhangs adorned with lichen in shades of burnt orange and chartreuse. The late afternoon whistles of bobwhites still echo off the mountain walls, and the scissor-tails still dance in the sun. In the autumn, the sumac and cottonwood and Caddo maple leaves explode in gold and scarlet celebration of another season of life. The valleys still offer calm reprieve from the Oklahoma wind, and in them, in the evenings, when the light is right and the surrounding granite walls take on a rosy glow, a person senses that now, as then, for a short while, it is as if he and God have arrived at the same moment.

From the beginning, the mountains have attracted the human spirit. It was in them that Moses received the law. The early Indians came to them to fast, meditate, and absorb their magical healing power. Today, we often make long journeys to them for just a few days' peace and quiet. There seems to be a sense of awe in most people toward anything capable of surviving their own feeble mortality. The Wichitas are Western Oklahoma's unique legacy, seen today essentially as they were in the days of early human history. They have witnessed, in unlocked silence, the unfolding of the fabric of natural and human history, woven of threads of good and evil, joy and suffering, choice and chance. Nowhere in Oklahoma has there been a greater concentration of life and happening. A century and a half ago, an awed onlooker, viewing the Wichitas for the first time, wrote:

Here the gradual swell, the beetling precipice, the castellated battlement, the solitary tower, the glittering, roaring cascade, the shady vale and opening vista, disclosing in turn distant views of new grandeur; all the rich combinations of mountain scenery are here thrown together, in years to come, will be the goal of all travelers on earth.

The words may be a bit flowery by modern Western Oklahoma standards; but the viewer, in his wide-eyed reverence, possibly saw



Saddle Mountain, in the Wichita Range. Photograph by the author.

"THE DESIRE FOR MORE SOULS FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND MORE GOLD FOR THE ROYAL TREASURY."

something which too many people today take for granted.

My mother's parents farmed for almost half a century — through depression, dustbowl, and two world wars — within view of the mountains near Granite. Earlier, in the late 1800's, on my father's side of the family, my great-grandfather brought his family by covered wagon from Texas through the Wichitas to present-day Leedey, avoiding hostile Indians in the mountains and ultimately finding there water for his thirsty family. In a very real sense, through the genetic miracle that is seed, a small part of me (and of my children) was there. The mountains are today an affirmation, not only of roots and the essential merit and resurgency of life, but of our oneness with nature. They draw us somehow closer to our natural surroundings, to history and those who preceded us, to our Creator, and, ultimately, to ourselves. ■

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Illustrations by Sossee Eskidjian