A Deathly Quiet

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The day was November 27, 1868, and morning was approaching. The weather was cold—bitter, bone-chilling cold. A heavy snow had fallen a few days earlier, and the camp of the Cheyenne Indians was deathly quiet. The village of about fifty-two lodges (tepees) was situated in a level place on the south bank of the Washita River in a large bend of the river, and heavy timber surrounded the campsite.

Inside the lodge of the principal chief, Black Kettle and his wife, Medicine Woman Later, were sleeping—the uneasy sleep of those who do not know what danger lies ahead. Chief Black Kettle had returned a few days before from a meeting with Indian Agent General William B. Hazen at Fort Cobb, some eighty miles farther down the Washita. It had been an unsatisfactory meeting. Black Kettle and those with him, including Little Robe (also of the Cheyennes) and Big Mouth and Spotted Wolf, of the Arapahoes, had hoped to make a lasting peace with the whites. They had asked to be allowed to move their lodges down nearer Fort Cobb, so they could be safe from the army troops that were trying to capture those renegade braves of both tribes who just wouldn't stop their raiding and plundering of white settlements in Kansas.

Gen. Hazen, though he felt these Indians to be sincere in their wish for peace, had been given no authority by his superior, Gen. Philip Sheridan, to allow the lodges to be moved to Fort Cobb. Also, he had been told that young Cheyene warriors had been bragging that in the spring they would go on the warpath and "clean out the country." Hazen told them to go back to their villages and wait until he could get orders from Gen. Sheridan which would allow him to accept them at Fort Cobb.

Black Kettle and the other chiefs returned to their villages. Black Kettle himself had some fifty lodges in his village, and down river from him were other Cheyenne villages—as well as those of the Arapahoes, Kiowas, Comanches, and Apaches, all of whom had been promised permanent reservations by the Medicine Lodge Treaty over a year before.

Just a few hours earlier, Black Kettle had invited the principal men of his own village to meet with him in his lodge. Medicine Woman had made a big pot of coffee, and the men sat cross-legged on the ground around the fire, drinking coffee as they discussed the situation. They finally decided that in the morning they would take down their lodges and move farther down-river, so they would be closer to the other friendly tribes, and they would send runners out to find any army troops which might be headed their way and talk with them to let them know they were friendly and would cause no trouble.

The men tramped through the deep drifted snow to their own lodges after appointing two young boys to watch the pony herd. Soon all was quiet as the smoke from the dying fires drifted up and out of the lodges into the winter sky. As the night grew darker and colder, the boys went back to their own lodges and to their warm beds. No sentry was left on duty, for no one dreamed there were soldiers nearby in such weather.

Meanwhile, up-river, units of the 7th Cavalry Regiment were making their way toward the Indian village. Gen. George A. Custer had started out from Camp Supply on
November 22 during a heavy snowstorm. For four days they pressed onward through the snowdrifts. Now, on the evening of the 26th, the sky had cleared and a bright moon was shining. Briefly, Gen. Custer allowed his men to rest, give the horses some oats, build a small fire, and make coffee. By ten o'clock they were on their way again.

Slowly and carefully they went. No one was allowed to speak above a whisper; only the sound of the horses’ hooves in the snow and the creaking of the saddles could be heard. Every so often, scouts were sent forward--Custer didn’t want to come suddenly upon the village, if there was one found, lest the Indians have a chance to escape. Just back from a year-long suspension from active duty following a court-martial for misconduct and bad judgment in earlier Indian campaigns, Custer was anxious to redeem himself in the eyes of his fellow officers and justify the trust of Gen. Sheridan, who had placed him in this command. He had been a brilliant and courageous officer during the War Between the States, but he just didn’t know how to catch Indians! He was determined to succeed this time.

Suddenly, Custer’s two Osage Indian scouts came back with the news that a village had been sighted a few miles ahead. Custer went forward with them, on horseback at first and then very quietly on foot. Just over the crest of a hill, they found a herd of Indian ponies, meaning that a village was near. Soon, they heard a dog barking (a sure sign!), and then the sound of a baby crying drifted up from the valley below.

Custer left the two scouts as look-outs and went back to the regiment. The supply wagons and two troops of soldiers were stopped and camp was made two or three miles from the village. Custer brought his other troops forward and very stealthily placed them at strategic points surrounding the village. The regimental band came forward and stood, on their gray horses, just behind Custer. The moon was shining and the tops of the Indian points surrounding the village. The regimental band came forward and stood, on their gray horses, just behind Custer. The moon was shining and the tops of the Indian lodges could be seen among the trees. All was quiet.

Everything and everyone was ready--it remained only to wait out the few hours until dawn. It was very cold. Some soldiers stayed near their horses for warmth--some even managed to catch a few minutes sleep.

As dawn approached, a heavy fog rolled in through which a morning star shone brightly in the east--a good omen for Custer?

Daybreak, and the time had come! Custer turned in his saddle to give the attack signal to the bugler and to the band, which was to begin to play the tune “Garryowen.” Just at that moment a shot rang out. What had happened? It was learned later that an Indian had left his lodge to see what was causing a dog to bark. At the same moment, a soldier had struck his head up to take a look. The Indian saw him and fired a shot to warn the village. Immediately, Custer gave the signal, the bugle sounded, the band began to play, and the soldiers rushed forward from their positions around the camp.

Men, women, and children poured out of the lodges, terrified. The warning shot allowed some of the warriors to start the women and children down the valley toward the friendly Arapahoe village. When they arrived, the Arapahoes jumped on their own ponies and went to help the Cheyennes. The battle was fierce. Bullets and arrows were flying in every direction. The women and children who had not been able to get away were shot, and within minutes the cavalry was in control of the village.

Black Kettle had tethered his horse close to his lodge, as was customary for a chief. When he saw they had no chance against the enemy, he and his wife got on the pony and started across the river. They didn’t make it. A bullet struck Black Kettle in the back, and he pitched forward into the river--dead when he fell. His long role as peacemaker for his Cheyenne band had ended. Beside him in the icy water lay the body of Medicine Woman, also shot to death. It was there that friends found them after the soldiers had left. Also killed in the battle was Little Rock, second chief of the Cheyennes in that village.

When the battle was over, Custer reported 103 warriors killed and about fifty women and children captured. The surviving Indians said that thirteen men, sixteen women, and nine children had been killed. Of the soldiers, twenty were killed and fourteen wounded. Custer also said that he recovered two white children who had been held captive by the Indians. He ordered the Indian lodges to be burned (saving one for himself as a keepsake!), along with all the personal belongings of the Indians. Soon there was nothing left but a pile of ashes. Some eight hundred Indian ponies were rounded up. The best were given to Custer’s officers and scouts, some were kept for the captives to ride, and the rest were ordered shot. From the surrounding hills, a great number of outraged Indians from the other villages watched the senseless slaughter.

Custer had his victory, so he decided against going on down-river to attack the other villages. Since he was surrounded by hostiles, it was a wise decision. One wonders why the Indians didn’t attack the long columns of soldiers as they left the battle scene. Perhaps they feared what would happen to the captive women and children.

Custer began a roundabout return to Camp Supply. He didn’t want to go back the way they had come, for he didn’t want the Indians to learn the location of the train of supply wagons he had left behind. At Camp Supply he was granted a hero’s welcome as all hands turned out to welcome the troops back to camp.

And what of the Indians? The war continued all winter, but by spring all the tribes, except the Quahada band of Comanches, had surrendered. The Comanches, Kiowas, and Plains Apaches were forced to move to lands near Fort Sill. The Cheyennes and Arapahoes returned to their reservations near Camp Supply. For the next six years there was much trouble with some of the Southern Plains Indians, but never again were these Indians hostile after Custer’s campaign of the winter of 1868-1869.

An infamous event is now part of Western Oklahoma history. This battle is considered now to be one of the most important ever fought on Oklahoma soil. One may visit the scene of the Black Kettle Massacre northwest of present-day Cheyenne, and in Cheyenne itself is the Black Kettle Museum with its relics and artifacts and a semi-circular diorama of the battle. For a complete account of the Battle of the Washita, see the book THE BATTLE OF THE WASHITA by Stan Hoig.

CREDITS: Muriel H. Wright’s THE STORY OF OKLAHOMA; George B. Grinnell’s THE FIGHTING CHEYENNES; Current, Williams, and Freidel’s AMERICAN HISTORY, A SURVEY; Virginia C. Trenholm’s THE ARAPAHOES, OUR PEOPLE; and Stan Hoig’s THE BATTLE OF THE WASHITA.