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 back 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 mountains were visible. Custer 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 site 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.