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Left Hand: Friend To Chisholm

By Bob Turpin

Although Jesse Chisholm is given credit for having established the West's most famous cattle trail, he was primarily known as a trader not as a trail blazer.

In 1830, members of the Chisholm family arrived in Northwestern Arkansas and settled near Fort Gibson. In 1838, at the age of 32, Jesse Chisholm established a trading post in Southeastern Oklahoma.

The venture proved more successful than he thought it would, and in 1850 he established a second post near present Purcell, Oklahoma. Eight years later, he went on to build his most important post at Silver City, near present Yukon, Oklahoma.

From 1861 through 1867, he operated the post himself and was liked and trusted by the Indians. The trading post proved especially valuable to the Wichita Indians who lived in the Fort Cobb area.

Then came the Civil War and all Federal troops were ordered to leave Oklahoma. The job as guide went to Black Beaver, a Delaware Indian scout. He was to lead the troops north to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Jesse Chisholm and many of the Wichitas traveled with the troops as far as Wichita, Kansas, where they spent most of the war years.

After the war was finally finished, Joseph McCoy, a Kansas cattleman from Abilene, contacted Chisholm. He asked Jesse to re-travel and mark the trail he had traveled earlier with the soldiers. Chisholm did so and later his name was given to the famous trail.

In the years following the war, millions of cattle were driven over the trail to the Kansas railheads. The Chisholm Trading Post at Silver City was near the trail and became a well-known stopping place for the hundreds of drovers who accompanied the great herds.

The Oklahoma Land Run in 1889, however, marked an end to the huge herds which once traveled the Chisholm Trail.

In early 1868, Chisholm had become seriously ill and had gone to Chief Left Hand's camp at Raven Springs. The camp was located on the north bank of the North Canadian River, eight miles northeast of present Geary, Oklahoma. The friendship between Chisholm and the Arapaho chief was well known. Here, historians claim, Chisholm died on March 4, 1868. Left Hand buried his friend on a knoll near the spring. The spring was renamed for Left Hand;

Chisholm's grave and the spring can still be seen there today.

Left Hand or "Nawat" was born in the spring of 1840 west of Fort Supply. His reputation as a buffalo hunter and warrior was gained while he was still a very young man. By this same courage, he was made a chief second only to Little Raven, head chief of the Southern Arapahoes.

His first serious trouble with the white man came in April, 1860. While camped near Denver, Colorado Territory, a group of whites led by a man called Big Phil came to the camp. While there, they raped several women; when they left, they also took a number of stock. At the time, Left Hand was away on a hunting trip. Upon returning, he wanted to take a war party on a revenge raid. Old Jim Beckwith, a close friend of the tribe, got word of it and hurried to the camp. After a long, pleading talk, he was able to convince Left Hand not to take to the warpath. He knew that it would lead to trouble with the soldiers.

Later, Beckwith wrote a harsh letter to the ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS. He denounced the act and warned that the deed and other incidents were going to lead to big trouble with the Indians. His warning, however, like so many others, fell on deaf ears.

On October 23, 1860, Left Hand led a forty-man raiding party against their age-old enemies, the Pawnees. The raid proved a failure, and the Arapahoes returned to their new camp near Bent's Fort with only one scalp. The scalp provided them with an excuse for a victory dance, however, and the drums sounded far into the night.

In February, 1861, the Arapahoes, along with most of the Plains tribes, signed the Fort Wise Treaty. They agreed to stop their raids and live in peace. They had no way of knowing that later the act would cost them their homes and land.

In September, 1863, the Arapahoes under the leadership of Left Hand and Little Raven moved their camp near Fort Lyon. There were some two thousand in all, and most were diseased, destitute, and hungry. For weeks, the Sioux had been trying to unite them with the Kiowas, Comanches, Apaches, and Caddos. This was in preparation for their planned raids along the Platte and Arkansas Roads.

The Arapahoes were still more interested in peace and were trying to grow crops. Their efforts proved

fruitless, and by mid-winter they were starving. There was nothing left to do but continue the raids. They did so with regret.

These conditions continued until the spring of 1864. At this time, old Jim Beckwith's prediction came true. It began when two cases of cattle stealing were reported to the soldiers at Fort Lyon. It was the Cheyenne who were responsible, but every Indian in the area, including the Arapahoes, was blamed.

Up to now, Left Hand had been a man of peace, but even now he was seriously thinking of joining the Sioux in an all-out war.

In July, the Kiowas invited the Arapahoes on a raid with them against the soldiers. The raid was to obtain horses from the large herd at Fort Larned. After some thought, Left Hand declined, knowing the act would bring on even more trouble.


The Kiowas led by Satanta went on with the raid. A post sentinel was wounded, and a number of horses were stolen.

From this point on, Left Hand was involved in a number of peace attempts, but the skirmishes continued--evolving into the Sand Creek Massacre and followed by the Medicine Lodge Treaty and the Arapahoes being moved to Oklahoma.

After Little Raven died in 1889, Left Hand became principal chief of the Southern Arapahoes. About the same time, the Ghost Dance Movement was started in Nevada by a Paiute medicine man called Wovoka. Wovoka claimed to be the Indian Messiah and predicted that the Great Spirit would bring back the buffalo and return the land to the Indians.

For a while, Left Hand was caught up in the movement; then when it collapsed, he returned to Christianity. He occasionally preached the gospel until he was forced by blindness to give it up. He also gave up his authority as Chief of the Arapahoes in early 1900.

If the Cheyenne-Arapaho success in adapting to the white man's ways was not complete, it wasn't the fault of Left Hand. Although his accomplishments were many, he wasn't well known or remembered by history for his deeds. His people, however, knew him for what he was--a man of peace, all-knowing, all-forgiving, and above all a man of great honor.

Left Hand died in 1911 and was buried near his friend Chisholm. The graveside memorial service held by the Chisholm family and friends on the eve of Jesse Chisholm's death was for the purpose of honoring both frontier leaders. 

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