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## California Joe's Whiskey Caper

*BY EDNA M. COUCH*

Astride his mule, riding bareback, woolly old California Joe hunched his shoulders as the mule jogged through the foot-deep snow toward Camp Supply. Joe was both cold and cold sober, for once. As they made tracks down the icy west bank of Wolf Creek, Joe felt under his salvaged army overcoat to make certain the important dispatches were still inside. It was Sabbath morning, November 29, 1868. He clutched the coat closer in an effort to keep out the bitter cold. He warmed a little when he thought about how glad Major General Phillip H. Sheridan, Commander of the Department of the Missouri, would be when he read the news.

California shoved the bedroll around to his back and warmed a shivering palm on the pipe he kept clenched between his teeth. He bit hard on the stem, so the pipe couldn't droop low and set fire to his unkempt bushy beard. The going was slow as man and animal continued eastward.

"Wake up, you stubborn offspring of a Missouri jackass."

Joe dug his boot heels into the flanks of his jaded flop-eared mule. He jerked the rope around the brute's neck. But the mule paid no attention. The stupid beast plodded along just as though the message under Joe's shirt meant nothing.

The ten o'clock sun sparked the snow banks and frosted the jackoak trees with a million jewels. THE GENERAL would be waiting impatiently, but the mule would not hurry.

From the top of the rise above Wolf Creek, Joe saw the tents of Camp Supply gleaming in the morning sun. Even rows of perfectly spaced tents around a new parade square half a mile south of Beaver Creek. THE GENERAL always is mighty particular about them rows of tents, Joe thought.

With cold-stiffened fingers, Joe combed prairie straw from his beard and hair, straw picked up from last night's bed when he rolled in a blanket for a few winks beside a little campfire. A man could freeze out in this weather without rations and not a drop of liquor to warm his

chilled bones.

Joe pulled a wad of gunny sack from his pocket and wiped his dripping nose. He needed to be presentable when he handed the dispatch to THE GENERAL. He urged the balky tired mule downhill toward Camp Supply, eager for something to assuage his demanding thirst, for warmth and for company in that order.

The headquarters tent was not hard to find with the stars and stripes snapping in the cold crisp wind overhead. Before Joe could dismount, Little Phil Sheridan strode out to meet him. That was uncommonly hasty of THE GENERAL, being so military and correct.

Joe stiffened upright, and throwing his leg over the mule — slipped to the frozen ground. He pulled the message from inside his shirt and held it out. The General snatched it eagerly from his grimy hand. While Sheridan read the dispatch to himself, Randolph Keim, the newspaper reporter from the New York Herald came over. They had met before.

"Well, Joe, what brings you back so soon; running away?" Keim joshed.

Joe bristled indignantly, "I've just made this old critter of mine get up and dust for the last thirty-six hours. I tell you it's a big thing." With rigid fingers he nudged Keim on the shoulder. "We just made them red devils git!" Joe answered, swallowing dryly, wiping his ragged cuff across his mouth.

"Was it much of a fight, Joe?" Keim asked.

"You can call it fightin' but I calls it whippin' out the varments!" Joe beamed, delighted to be the herald of victory.

The officers of Sheridan's headquarters staff materialized and gathered around as Sheridan read the message and looked up.

"On November 27, the day after Thanksgiving, General George Armstrong Custer and the Seventh Cavalry annihilated Chief Black Kettle and his band of devilish Cheyenne Indians on the Washita!" He told them briskly. "One hundred-three Indian bucks killed and fifty-three squaws and papooses captured." The announcement brought smiles and cheers from the men.

"Eight hundred Indian ponies and horses rounded up and shot; tepees, blanket, buffalo robes and food all destroyed." Joe winced, remembering the pony slaughter. He had orders to kill them poor critters.

After the reckless slaughter of the Washita massacre, the surviving Indians fled south. On December 7, 1868, General Sheridan and Custer followed with an army of 1700 soldiers, 300 teamsters and drivers and a dozen scouts including California Joe. They intended thrashing the Plains Indians into submission, and halt the raids and killings reported in the Kansas area.

California Joe was awed. He had never seen or scouted such an expedition before. The 4000 animals and 2000 men stretched for miles like a huge snake writhing through the foot-deep snow across the undulating hills and hollows of western Indian Territory. There were three hundred wagon loads of rations and forage pulled by double and triple ox and mule teams. Nine hundred of the Seventh Cavalry's brave soldiers were resplendent in dark blue blouses and sky blue pants with the yellow stripe down the side seams. Company mess wagons rocked along, mess attendants made campfires and served out rations at every stop. Fresh cavalry horses were herded in the train.

Governor Samuel Crawford of Kansas had resigned his executive office to lead the Infantry of the Eighteenth Kansas Volunteers. This contingent rode escort in wagons with guns bristling. They would fend off any Indian attack. In the middle of the wagon train, General Sheridan, his headquarters staff and journalist, Randolph Keim, rode in horse-drawn ambulances. Bringing up the rear, foot soldiers drove a herd of milk cows for milk or for meat if needed. If supplies ran out, or if buffalo and game became scarce, they could butcher the work oxen. The soldiers balked at eating horse or mule meat.

The summer of 1868 when little Phil Sheridan planned the winter campaign against the hostile Plains Indians, Fort Arbuckle, in the Chickasaw Nation, was designated as a supply center. Hay, grain, and commissary supplies and rations were shipped by flat-boat up the Arkansas river to Fort Gibson, then would be hauled overland by wagon to Fort Arbuckle.

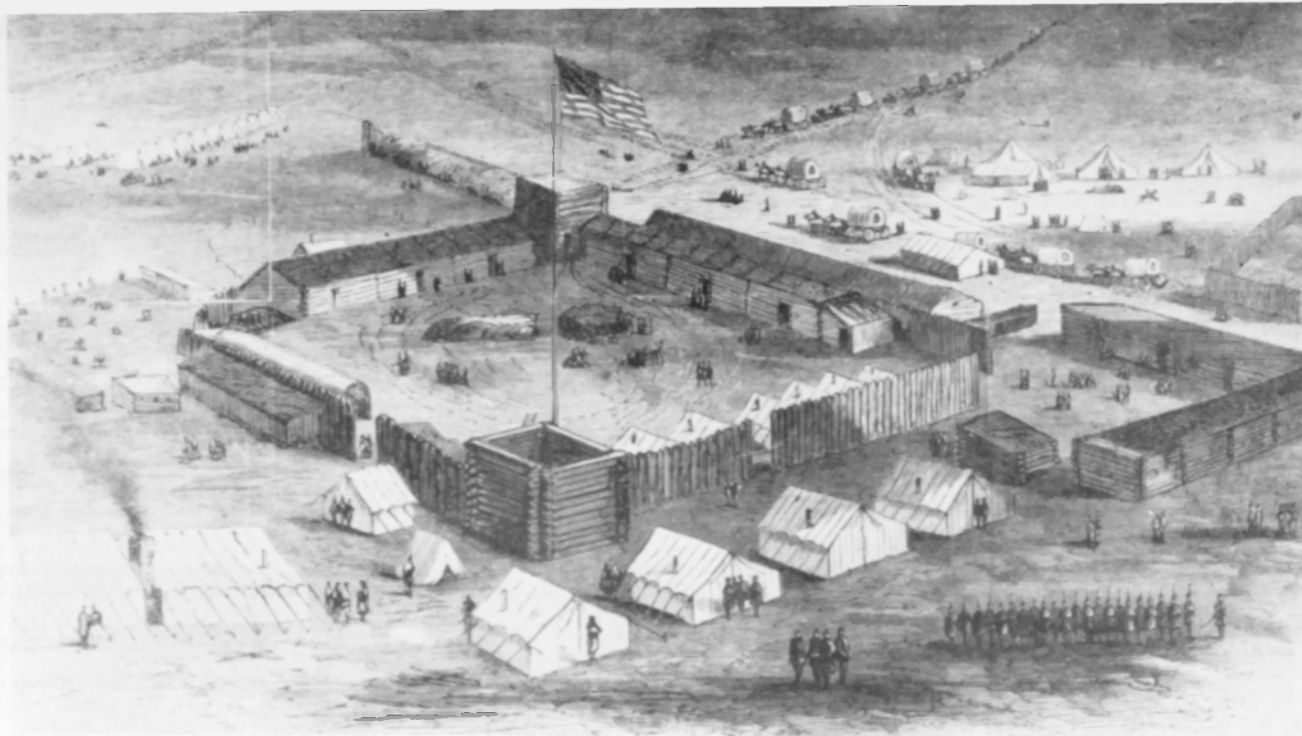
The expedition headed for Fort Cobb. Sheridan intended to reactivate the fort and reconstruct the dilapidated buildings which had been abandoned by the Union at the beginning of the Civil War. At Fort Cobb the shivering soldiers dug foxholes under their tents to escape the icy weather. On Christmas Day, a warm gentle rain set in, melting the snow, and promptly flooded the foxholes. In the middle of the night, the men grabbed up wet bedding and fled for their lives to high ground, like a flock of bedraggled roosters.

After this disaster, General Sheridan decided Fort Cobb was not a healthy location for a permanent fort. The military train writhed south, with military precision, in search of a more favorable site for a fort.



PHOTO COURTESY THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

General Phillip H. Sheridan



General Sheridan and his quartermaster, Col. A. J. McGonnigle, rolled east in a horse ambulance with California Joe along as scout and guide.

When Sheridan arrived at Fort Arbuckle, he found the military officials innocent of the delay. The foot-deep snow melted by the warm rain swamped the whole country. The swollen streams and boggy trails prevented the corn, hay, and rations from being moved from Fort Gibson to Fort Arbuckle. This situation even Sheridan could not remedy. But with his authority as Commander of the Department of the Missouri, he could do almost as well. From the Chickasaw Indians, he bought up all the corn in Pauls Valley and had it forwarded to the command at Medicine Bluff.

When the General prepared to return to the new Fort Sill, California Joe was missing. Nobody had seen Joe. Sheridan searched the scout bunk next to his quarters and found Joe lolling in bed, disheveled, gloriously drunk.

Since the sale of liquor was prohibited in Indian Territory, Sheridan could not fathom Joe's condition. Where could he possibly have gotten whiskey? Sheridan had to wait over another day to give his guide time to sleep off his overdose of liquid joy.

The next day, Joe was happy as a clam in high water, but there was no indication of a scarcity of alcohol. Joe quickly lapsed into a drunken stupor. The General faced real difficulty. He could not remain longer at Fort Arbuckle. He could not go on without Joe. He might need his scout service at any time.

By early January the expedition reached Medicine Bluffs, and the site for Fort Sill was selected. January 8, 1869, they drove the stakes marking the four corners of the parade ground and commenced to build Fort Sill. Supplies ran low, the soldiers, subsisting on half-rations of salt pork and hardtack, became gaunt and despondent. The big commotion of moving had scared near game away. The savage, angry Indians lurked on the fringe of the camp, making any hunting party dangerous. The horses were a pitiful sight, razor-sharp backed, down to boney nags without grain. Finicky cavalry horses would not forage on dry prairie grass. The mules and oxen fared better.

Supplies were not coming through on schedule from Fort Gibson. Messages sent to Fort Arbuckle brought no response. Sheridan knew there was one way to get

action, so he did not hesitate. He would go to Fort Arbuckle and set a fire under the laggard supply personnel.

Patience ceased to be a virtue. Sheridan ordered the unconscious Joe dumped like a sack of cornmeal into the ambulance. Sheridan jumped in beside his quartermaster and started off. They all reached Fort Sill the next day safe and sober. Joe was bent if not bloody.

Sheridan decided Joe must have gotten on too familiar terms with some of the Bowery Irishmen of the Sixth Infantry stationed at Fort Arbuckle. Years later Sheridan wrote in his *Personal Memoirs*:

"I was ready to return to Camp Sill. But my departure was delayed by California Joe, who. . . in some unaccountable way had got gloriously tipsy, which caused a loss of time and disgusted me greatly. . . I put off starting till the next day, by which time it was thought he would sober up. But I might just as well have gone on at first. . . the incorrigible old rascal was still dead drunk. How he managed to get the grog to keep up his spree was a mystery which we could not solve."

Time rolled on a year or two. California Joe stopped overnight at Dennis Collins supply camp on a Kansas trail.

"Where did you get the booze?" Dennis asked.

"Now Dennie, I couldn't tell you that!" He worked on a sanctimonious smile, then winked. "But one thing I will say, THE GENERAL always carried powerful good liquor in his jug!" ■

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