CAUSES OF THE DULL KNIFE RAID

1878

By James Warren Covington

The successful flight by a band of Northern Cheyennes from Indian Territory to Montana Territory was one of the few Indian triumphs against Federal bureaucracy. Historian and novelist have related the saga of the Cheyennes' victory over red tape Gordian knots, and capable blue-clad soldiers. This study is not so much concerned with the account of their flight across several states during which they fought several engagements against frightful odds, but in the reasons why these Indians left Oklahoma.

The Cheyenne Indians are an important tribe of the Algonquian family. Their name is a corruption of the Sioux Shahiyena, "people of alien speech." They originally lived in Minnesota but were forced westward by the Sioux and became buffalo hunters. They allied with the Arapaho, and the two tribes lived harmoniously together for many years.

The separation of the tribe into the Northern and Southern divisions began in 1830 and was hastened by the building of Bent's Fort in Colorado two years later. Constant communication was carried on between the two divisions, and they regarded themselves as two different camps of the same tribe. One part of the tribe, therefore, lived in Montana and the other in Colorado and Oklahoma.

One war-party of the Northern Cheyennes led by Dull Knife planned and executed the Fetterman "Massacre" in Wyoming. This took place near Fort Phil Kearny during December, 1866. Captain William Fetterman, with eighty men, was led into a trap and all were killed. Little Wolf, a brave Cheyenne chief, was one of the ten men who acted as the decoys.

In 1876, the Northern Cheyennes, including Dull Knife's band, joined the Sioux and Sitting Bull in the Sioux War of 1876 and 1877 during which they took part in the Battle of the Little Big Horn against Custer. The Cheyennes fought Custer's men while the Sioux drove Reno away, and then both tribes joined forces and destroyed Custer and his entire command.

General Ronald McKenzie, in a November surprise attack, weakened the Cheyenne martial spirit by destroying 173 lodges and

*James Warren Covington was born in Fulton, Missouri, educated in the public schools of St. Louis, received B.S. in 1941 and M.A. 1943 from St. Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri. Is at present a graduate student in the University of Oklahoma working toward a Ph.D. Degree. His special interest is Indian History.—Ed.


capturing 500 horses after a bitter fight. This blow forced them to spend the winter in Crazy Horse's village with the Sioux. When spring came, the Cheyennes surrendered to McKenzie at Fort Robinson, in Nebraska in April, 1877 because Crazy Horse had not given the homeless and naked people a cordial welcome. Crazy Horse desperately needed clothes and ammunition in his struggle with the whites and thus, could not give aid to his needy allies.\(^3\)

In the treaty of 1868, signed with the United States, the Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians were given the choice of three places for a home. The treaty provided:\(^4\)

That within one year from this date, they will attach themselves permanently either to the agency provided for near the mouth of Medicine Lodge Creek, or to the agency about to be established on the Missouri River near Fort Randolf, or to the Crow agency near Otter Creek, on the Yellowstone River. . . . It is hereby expressly understood that one portion of said Indians may attach themselves to one of the aforementioned reservations, and another portion to another of said reservations, as each part or portion of said Indians may elect.

General Sherman overlooked the Cheyennes and Arapahoes when the treaty stipulations were to be fulfilled by not designating any reservation for their home or even mentioning them to the agents.\(^5\) The Interior Department finally located the missing Indians in 1873 and invited them to join the Southern Cheyennes and Arapahoes but they declined the invitation. In 1874, 1875 and 1876 Congress, acting like a spurned suitor, prohibited the delivery of annuities and supplies to them until they went south.

The Sioux Commission in 1876 negotiated with the Indians for a cession of the Black Hills. Since many Cheyennes and Arapahoes had intermarried with the Sioux, they did not want to go to the Indian Territory or live on the Crow Reservation but wished to be incorporated into the Sioux Nation. Finally, it was agreed that a delegation of Indians should visit the Indian Territory and see if a suitable location could be found. Two delegations were well pleased by what they saw in Oklahoma but Congress eliminated the article permitting the Cheyennes to go south when it ratified the agreements made by the Sioux Commission.\(^6\)

After Dull Knife's band had been defeated, Generals McKenzie and Crook held a council with them. Crook told them that they might have one of three choices: go south, go to the agency at Fort Washaki, or stay at Fort Robinson for a year. If they choose the latter, the government officials would determine where the Indians

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3 Oliver Otis Howard, *My Life and Experiences Among Our Hostile Indians* (Hartford, 1907), 522.
5 George W. Manypenny, *Our Indian Wars* (Cincinnati, 1880), 323.
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were to go at the end of the year's time. The Cheyennes wished to stay at Fort Robinson and selected Standing Elk to speak for them. Much to their horror, he stated that all were willing to go south. They were very confused; no one objected and thus, the Indians accepted the removal.7

In spite of the dispute concerning the disposition of the Cheyenne Indians, several bands had been sent to the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Agency in Indian Territory and by July, 1876, one hundred and ninety-eight had arrived there. General Sheridan telegraphed General Sherman that the Northern Cheyennes desired to go to the Indian Territory.8 The Indian Office received the request on May 17, 1877 and, the next day, advised the adjutant-general that the request was approved. The Northern Arapahoes, however, were sent to the Wind River Reserve in Wyoming.

The exact date of the departure is not available but on May 29, Lieutenant H. W. Lawton, (later General) telegraphed that he was enroute to the Indian Territory with nine hundred and seventy-two Northern Cheyennes.9 An escort of troops accompanied the Indians during the first day and then left them. Lawton, in charge of the group, had five soldiers as guards, some packers, and a civilian interpreter, and some wagons and a pack-train. A writer who met them on the way said that they traveled "quietly and mournfully, for events had forced them to this choice, and they had left their home with the choice of the emigrant. The bucks were mostly mounted. Many of the squaws, however, carried their papooses on their backs, and led ponies that hauled the travois."10 They arrived at Fort Reno on August 5, 1877 and, two days later, were presented to Agent John D. Miles of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Agency located at Darlington, Indian Territory. Nine hundred and thirty-seven Indians, including two hundred and thirty-five men, three hundred and twelve women, three hundred and eighty-six children, three Arapaho men and one Arapaho woman, arrived at Darlington, but, enroute from Nebraska, thirty-five Indians had disappeared.

The Southern Arapahoes and Cheyennes said that they received their northern relatives with warm greetings and invited them to a feast, saying "we are glad you have come to make this your country, to live with us as one people."11 Chief Wild Hog of the Northern Cheyennes asserted that they were called Sioux (due to the large

7 Grinnell, op. cit., 385.
8 Grinnell reported that the Cheyennes had traveled for seventy days. Since they arrived at Fort Reno on August 5, seventy days before that date would be approximately May 26, 1877.
9 We used Grinnell's version here, but many Indians stated that they had no choice but to come to the Indian Territory. Others said that they were lured by enticing offers of money, food and clothing.
10 Manyenny, op. cit., 335.
amount of intermarriage with the Sioux) by the Southern Cheyennes and no attempt at friendship was made. Agent Miles said, "Some of them became acquainted and seemed to feel at home here almost right away; others more gradually, until about 600 of them became affiliated and thoroughly identified with the Southern Indians." The bands of Dull Knife, Wild Hog, and Little Wolf did not stay near the others but camped by themselves four or five miles from the Agency.

The manner of issuing rations was the first cause of trouble between Miles and the Indians. Miles had issued rations to the heads of families but the "Dog Soldiers," a Cheyenne military and police society that regulated tribal assemblies and hunts, wished to do the job. Miles found that these men took an unequal share of the beef, so he allowed only his employees to handle the ration distribution.

Both Cheyennes and Arapahoes complained about the food and McKenzie at Fort Sill ordered Colonel J. K. Mizner of Fort Reno to make an investigation. Lieutenant Lawton investigated and found that the rations were entirely insufficient and of poor quality though it was not the fault of the agent. Sugar was of an inferior quality, dark and wet but had been received in this condition. The weight of the flour was merely estimated. Such calculations resulted in hardships for some people. The beef was very poor in quality and Lawton did not think that people would pay money for it. The manner in which the meat was distributed was also a cause of complaint. It was not weighed but given one animal to a band of less than forty-six members and two for a group of forty-six or more. Thus a band of twenty often would receive a large beef while a band of forty-five would receive a very small cow. In consequence, the shares of persons would be unequal.

Lawton checked the ration tickets with the amounts actually received and found, for example:

"Plenty Bear's ticket: 5 people, 7 days, 35 rations. Sugar and coffee, 3 pounds; deficient 1% pounds. Flour, 16 pounds; deficient 1-1/4 pounds.

"Goes in the Willow's ticket; 2 people, 7 days, 14 rations. Sugar and coffee, 1 pound; deficient ⅛ pound. Flour, 5 pounds; deficient 2 pounds.

"Walking Woman" : 4 people, 7 days, 28 rations. Sugar and coffee, 2 pounds; deficient 1½ pounds. Flour, 3½ pounds; deficient 5½ pounds."

Wild Hog, as spokesman for the entire group, related his troubles to Lawton. He told about the black flour that would not

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12 Ibid., 55.
13 Ibid., 58.
14 Ibid., 268.
15 Ibid., 269.
16 Ibid., 271.
rise; of no issue of corn, hard bread, hominy, rice beans, or salt and of very infrequent issues of soap and yeast powder. The sugar, coffee, and beef issued for a period of seven days were all consumed in three. Lawton concluded his report by stating that the quantity of food issued was about two-thirds of what had been stipulated in the treaty.17

Agent Miles testified that in 1877-78 the supply of rations was three-quarters of the full amount guaranteed by the treaty.18 This deficiency was common and the Indians, as usual, had to go on a buffalo hunt to make up the deficiency. They left on the hunt about November 15, 1877 but found no game and even had to eat their horses in order to stay alive. The food supply for the fiscal year of June 30, 1878 to June 30, 1879 was more adequate, but below treaty stipulations, and issues were irregular.19 Miles believed that the beef was adequate, but other supplies did not meet the quota.20

William Leeds, chief clerk in the Indian Bureau and Acting Commissioner of Indian Affairs during the absence of the Commissioner, saw how figures concerning beef could lie.21

I made up that statement in the Commissioner's report, so many pounds of beef, and put the pounds down net beef—not merchantable beef; that showed a deficit that the Indians had not received the amount promised them in the treaty. It was discovered that by calling it gross beef and doubling the figures, the doubling increased one side a great many more pounds than the other side . . . the excess of beef charged over against the other rations at three pounds instead of one and a half pounds, and that excess, instead of being food, half of it consisted of hides, horns, and refuse, so that there really is a deficit instead of a surplus as appears by the Commissioner's statement.

Colonel Mizner, commander at Fort Reno, did not think the Indians were receiving full rations. He found the amount of beef furnished was 3,000,000 pounds and required was 4,320,870 pounds; a deficiency of 1,320,000 pounds. 720,145 pounds of flour were needed and 200,000 pounds were furnished; 576,111 pounds of coffee were needed and 260,000 pounds were provided; 115,222 pounds of sugar needed and 44,019 pounds furnished; 143,929 pounds of beans needed and 45,657 furnished; and finally, 14,393 pounds of salt required and 8,849 pounds furnished. He sent in the report describing the deficiency, but nothing was done to correct the evil.22

One doctor attempted to care for the needs of five thousand people and his supplies were inadequate. It was very common for northern Indian tribes to become ill when they first settled in the

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17 Ibid., 276.
18 Ibid., XVI.
19 Ibid., XIV.
20 Ibid., 76.
21 Ibid., 176. See how this was done in the Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1878, page XXII.
22 Ibid., 115.
Indian Territory. Many Poncas and Pawnees died during the first year of their stay; the Northern Cheyennes were no exception. The Agency exhausted the supply of medicine when hundreds became ill from malaria. The Indian Bureau at Washington was bound by regulations and could not send supplies in answer to this appeal by Miles:23

The sanitary report herewith transmitted shows over one hundred cases of sickness successfully treated; but the number treated shows only a portion of those applying for treatment. Fully as many if not more cases have been turned away, by reason of the supply of proper remedies being completely exhausted, so that the agency dispensary presents only a beggarly array of empty shelves and the good resulting from the successful practice is more than overcome by reiterated refusals to render medical aid.

Many people were dying for lack of medical supplies and Miles appealed again and again to Washington for aid. Since it contained no medicine to supply the sick, the dispensary closed its doors.24 One-half of the Indians suffered from malaria but the total number of deaths was not known though forty-one Indians died during the winter of 1877-78.25 An Arapaho chief, Powder-Face, testified that the children of his tribe had been well when they were farther west, but now they always seemed to be sick. Ample medical supplies arrived in January, 1879, three months after the Cheyennes had decided to seek death by the bullet instead of the malaria germ. They did not know how to face the germ for it was new to them, but the whine of the bullet was an old story.

It was apparent that the obligations of the Treaty of 1868 had not been fulfilled. Each male person was promised a suit of good substantial clothing but never saw it. Each woman was to receive a flannel skirt, a pair of woolen hose, twelve yards of calico, and twelve yards of cotton domestic. They did not receive these articles but did obtain their equivalent. The sum of five hundred dollars was to be given in presents to those who excelled in agriculture but Miles did not think that anyone deserved a prize.26 Each “roaming” Indian was promised ten dollars and each Indian engaged in agriculture was to receive twenty dollars. These sums of money were not given to the Indians either in whole or in part. Each Indian was promised a good cow and a well-broken pair of American oxen when he commenced farming, but this was another broken promise. A few tried to farm but were discouraged due to lack of proper equipment.

During the summer of 1878, Miles withheld coffee and sugar from the Northern Cheyennes under the authority of the Interior Department (circulars of March 1, 1878 and April 15, 1878). Ac-

23 Ibid., Monthly Report, July 1, 1878, 295.
24 Ibid., 296.
25 Grinnell, op. cit., 385.
26 Senate Report No. 708, 18.
According to Miles the Northern Cheyennes would not work or try to do anything that could be construed as labor. He did not think too highly of the regulation for it made the Indians discontented. When events came to a climax and revolt brewed, Miles abandoned the regulation.\textsuperscript{27}

Whirlwind, a Southern Cheyenne leader, presented his many complaints to the agent. Some Indians wanted to farm and only a small portion received plows and farming implements for the agent explained to Whirlwind that the supply had been exhausted. He wanted to make a shirt so he asked for an issue of calico and was given a piece the size of a handkerchief. Whirlwind wanted ammunition to kill antelope and fill the three meatless days of the week but the Government would not allow him to buy any ammunition; thus, his rations were always short.\textsuperscript{28}

The entire Cheyenne-Arapaho Agency at Darlington, I. T., had one instructor in farming. He did his best but the Indians showed little interest in agriculture. Many regarded farming as a woman's job. The Northern Cheyennes had been shooting at Custer in June, 1876, and the Indian Bureau expected them to be expert farmers by June, 1878.

Tents were a good place where one could brood—Achilles probably was the first famous person to brood in a tent. The Northern Cheyennes, like Achilles, had much to worry about in their tepees. Many of them had told the Southern Cheyennes that they had come to Oklahoma only as a trial and if they did not like the place, they were going back to Montana. Dull Knife, Little Wolf and Wild Hog saw the many troubles that engulfed them. Their neighbors were not friendly and the amount of food was so small that slow starvation ensued. The United States Government had not kept its treaty obligations. People were dying from strange diseases which their medicine man could not cure and the agency doctor was not able to cure for lack of medicine. They had been well and happy in Montana; only death and despair gripped the Indian Territory. It was better to die on the way home than in this place; the Northern Cheyennes began to plan for the journey to that place where they had known only happiness—where people were well fed and died only of old age.

All did not want to take the long journey. Standing Elk and many others liked their neighbors and preferred the Indian Territory to an uncertain home in Montana. These people mingled with the Southern Cheyennes and used farm implements when they could be obtained.

Many horses had been taken from the northern Indians when they had arrived at Darlington and sold for the purchase of breeding

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 83.  
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 36.
cattle. Now, Southern Cheyennes and Arapahoes began to lose their horses. They knew Indians were stealing them for only the best ones were taken and white men stole in wholesale lots. Miles, investigating the matter, asked Dull Knife about the horses—he knew nothing. The Indians needed more guns besides the ones obtained from Custer. They could not get any from the whites but did buy some from the Pawnees. The agency doctor gave them a small portion of medicine when the Indians told him that they were moving and needed the medicine since the doctor could not visit them so far from camp.

On September 5, 1878, the Southern Cheyennes located their stolen horses on the Cimarron and so informed the agent. They also told Miles that three Northern Cheyennes had already started north and the young men of Dull Knife’s band were guarding the stolen horses. Colonel Mizner was informed of the movement, and he sent Captain Rendlebrock with two companies of cavalry to camp within four miles of Dull Knife’s village.

Miles asked the Indians to come in and be counted September 7, but they decided to wait for twenty-five men who had gone on a hunting trip. Little Wolf, Wild Hog, and Old Crow visited Miles and Colonel Mizner on September 9, and Miles threatened the Indians if they did not return to the Agency. He wanted ten men as hostages for the three who departed and if no hostages were surrendered, the Indians would not receive any rations. Little Wolf refused to give up the men. According to Little Wolf, he told Miles and Mizner that he was going back to Montana and if they wanted to fight, they should let him go some distance from the Agency for he did not want to have blood spilt around Darlington.

The three leaders went back to the Cheyenne camp and prepared for a quick departure. Little Wolf took the lead for he was recognized as the leader in war and Dull Knife’s reputation had been won in time of peace. They decided to depart at night and to leave their tepees standing in order to mislead the nearby soldiers. The three hundred and fifty-three Northern Cheyenne Indians, including ninety-two men, one hundred and twenty women, sixty-nine boys and seventy-two girls left their encampment at ten p. m. September 9, 1878 and headed north. Some Indians, led by American Horse, did not want to leave the reservation and stayed in their tepees. The chief of the Indian police and American Horse woke Miles at three a. m. and told him the news. Colonel Mizner was informed of the Indians’ departure and troops were sent after the fugitives.

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29 Ibid., 63.
30 Ibid., 61.
31 Grinnell, op. cit., 387.
32 Ibid., 388.
Like the mighty Mississippi flowing to the sea, the power of the United States Government was irresistible in its policy of Indian removal. Thousands of Indians had been moved to the Indian Territory. They had come over “trails of tears.” Many had suffered from cruel treatment at the hands of government and private agencies. The Cheyennes were a tribe that had suffered and refused to suffer any longer—the Northern Cheyennes were going home.

Many traps were set for the fugitives by the Army, but Little Wolf battled his way through Oklahoma, Kansas and into Nebraska. The group divided into two bands in Nebraska and Little Wolf led his section into Montana where he surrendered to Lieutenant W. P. Clark, a trusted friend. They were allowed to stay in Montana and served as scouts in later Indian campaigns.

Dull Knife’s band was captured and taken to Fort Robinson. The soldiers tried to persuade the Indians to return to the Indian Territory but Dull Knife refused, saying, “No, I am here on my own ground, and I will never go back. You may kill me here; but you cannot make me go back.”

The baffled military men found that the Cheyennes would not return. Finally, their rations were stopped and for five days the Indians starved. After singing their death songs the Cheyennes broke out of their barracks on the fifth night and escaped. For five days the troops searched for them and on the sixth day the surviving Cheyennes were located in an old buffalo wallow. They refused to surrender and all were killed; the last three were shot when, armed with wornout knives, they charged the well equipped soldiers. Dull Knife and a few not killed or captured joined Little Wolf and were not bothered by the authorities.

The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, E. A. Hayt, did not think the Indians had left the reservation for any just reason. The Commissioner’s contention was:

It should also be considered that the government ration consisting of 3 pounds of beef (gross), ¼ pound of flour, ¼ pound of corn, and for every 100 rations 4 pounds of coffee, 8 pounds of sugar, and 3 pounds of beans, for every man, woman and child, is more than sufficient for the ample sustenance of any community in the United States.

A Senate committee of the 46th Congress of the United States investigated the causes of the Dull Knife raid and much of their findings have been used in this paper. The members concluded, among other points, that: the instruction in farming given to the Indians was of no value; Miles had been compelled to conform to the will and pleasure of the head of the Indian Bureau, and to gloss

33 Ibid., 403.
34 Senate Report No. 708, 289.
over his mistakes or delinquencies with a show of approbation; and finally, "we are not living up to our obligations with the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians, and we should give them clearly to know by our future dealings with them that we will do them full and liberal justice."35

Miles reported that some of the Northern Cheyennes were heard to say when they rode north, "We are sickly and dying here, and no one will speak our names when we are gone. We will go north at all hazards, and if we die in battle our names will be remembered and cherished by all our people."36

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35 Ibid., XXV.
36 Ibid., 278.