

SOME REMINISCENCES OF THE BATTLE OF THE WASHITA

*By Theodore A. Ediger and Vinnie Hoffman**

MOVING BEHIND'S STORY OF THE BATTLE OF THE WASHITA

Moving Behind was about fourteen years old at the time of the Battle of the Washita. She lived in Chief Black Kettle's camp. That was the Cheyenne village which was attacked by Custer's troops.

Shortly before her death in 1937, Moving Behind (Mrs. Black Hawk), whom the writer had known since he was a small child, related an eyewitness account of the historic battle of November 27, 1868. She said she was "over eighty years old, blind and helpless, but still able to remember accurately what happened." Though wrinkled and gray, she was still beautiful to me in her stately Cheyenne way.

Praying as she talked, Moving Behind said:

"I have lived all these years, and before this no one has ever asked me to tell the story about how the soldiers approached the Black Kettle camp one morning at daybreak. You should have asked me long ago, before I went blind. Then I could have gone with you to that place and shown you where we camped and hid—if that place is still the same. From what I hear, the place and the river are different now.¹

"I was there, and know what happened to us that morning, about dawn. That was where Black Kettle was killed, as well as many other Cheyennes.

"I was an orphan since I was a child, and my close relatives reared me. I was a young girl, and began to know a little about love at that time. I lived with my aunt, Corn Stalk, and her family.

* These reminiscent stories by eyewitnesses of the noted Battle of the Washita were told to Theodore A. Ediger when he lived in Western Oklahoma some years ago. Mrs. Vinnie Hoffman was present with Mr. Ediger when Moving-Behind told her story. Mrs. Hoffman is a granddaughter of Chief Heap-of-Birds, one of the last of the Southern "Fighting Cheyennes" to surrender in 1875. She lives near Hammon, Oklahoma. Mr. Ediger is widely traveled as a correspondent for the Associated Press, and now resides at 44 James Street, New Hyde Park, Long Island, New York.—Ed.

¹ The course of the Washita now is about 600 yards north of the place where Black Kettle and his wife were shot from their horse into its waters. The site is about one and one-fourth miles northwest of Cheyenne, Roger Mills County, Oklahoma.

As I remember, my aunt and her husband, Roll Down, were well acquainted with Black Kettle and his family, and used to camp near him whenever they pitched camp.

"Now, I will mention the names of some families who also camped near Black Kettle: Clown, Bear Tongue, Scabby Man, Half Leg, and some others I do not recall. These families all used to camp together. One Kiowa man named High Bank also camped there. The rest of the Cheyennes camped east and west along the Washita River.

"Bear Tongue and Statue were the bravest men, and fought valiantly until they were shot and killed.

"Black Kettle and some of the other Cheyennes had gone off somewhere during that time, and had just returned to the camp the day before the attack was made.² With them they brought plenty of sugar, coffee, and other stuff.

"Someone in the camp said that a warning had been issued for us to move at once. They planned to have the camp move. But somehow they refused to move away at once. If they only could have listened and done what they were told to do! They did not feel sure about the warning. Not a soul knew about the secret plans that were being laid.

"I felt rather strange late that evening.

"Black Kettle's wife became very angry, and stood outside for a long time because they were unable to move that evening. She was disappointed. Sometimes your own feelings tell you things ahead; perhaps this was what that woman felt. She talked excitedly, and said, 'I don't like this delay, we could have moved long ago. The Agent sent word for us to leave at once. It seems we are crazy and deaf, and cannot hear.'

"The next morning, just before daylight, someone must have suspected that the soldiers were near the camp, for many awoke earlier than usual.

"We heard a woman saying in a low voice: 'Wake up! Wake up! White men! White men are here! The soldiers are approaching our camp.'

"We became frightened, and did not know what to do. We arose at once. At that instant, the soldiers let out terrible yells, and there was a burst of gunfire from them.

"My aunt called me, but as I started to go out, the girl with whom I had stayed all night grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back, saying, 'Don't go out, stay inside; the white men might see you

² Black Kettle and a party had ridden to Fort Cobb to ask Gen William B. Hazen, the special Indian Agent, for protection.

outside, and shoot you.' My aunt called me again, and told me to hurry and come out. I became so frightened that I was trembling, but went outside.

"I could see the dark figures of persons running here and there in a mad rush. When a burst of gunfire was heard, my aunt would catch my hand, and say, 'Hold my hand tightly, don't turn it loose whatever may happen. We will go somewhere and hide.'

"The young men had guns, and they uttered the most terrifying war whoops when the fight began. Black Kettle and his wife were last seen when they rode off on a horse.

"The brave man, Statue, on horseback, trotted his horse back and forth at the camp, talking in a loud voice to the chiefs. He said, 'That is exactly how I always have felt toward you chiefs, that some day you would turn out to be cowards. Leaving the poor, helpless women and children behind, and letting them suffer!'

"They say that some got away before daylight, but no one saw who they were. Many Indians were killed during the fight. The air was full of smoke from gunfire, and it was almost impossible to flee, because bullets were flying everywhere. However, somehow we ran and kept running to find a hiding place. As we ran, we could see the red fire of the shots. We got near a hill, and there we saw a steep path, where an old road used to be. There was red grass along the path, and although the ponies had eaten some of it, it was still high enough for us to hide.

"In this grass we lay flat, our hearts beating fast; and we were afraid to move. It was now bright daylight. It frightened us to listen to the noise and the cries of the wounded. When the noise seemed to quiet down, and we believed the battle was about to end, we raised our heads high enough to see what was going on. We saw a dark figure lying near a hill, and later we learned it was the body of a woman with child. The woman's body had been cut open by the soldiers.

"The wounded ponies passed near our hiding place, and would moan loudly, just like human beings. We looked again, and could see the soldiers forcing a group of Indian women to accompany them, making some of the women get into wagons, and others on horses.

"The Indian ponies that were left were driven toward the bottoms. Some horses would run back, and the soldiers would chase them, and head them the other way.

"The soldiers would pass back and forth near the spot where I lay. As I turned sideways and looked, one soldier saw us, and rode toward where we lay. He stopped his horse, and stared at us. He did not say a word, and we wondered what would happen. But he left, and no one showed up after that. I suppose he pitied us, and left us alone.

"Before leaving, the soldiers shot all the Indian ponies which they had driven to the bottoms.

"It was getting late in the day, and when all was quiet my aunt raised her head and looked around.

"'Look, we are safe!' she cried. 'I can see someone walking up the hill. Let us get up now, and go there too.'

"Some more Indians were walking toward the first one on the hill. We got up, and ran to where the men were standing. Some more men and youths were coming from all directions. Some were on horseback.

"'They (the soldiers) are right across the river, and are going slowly, let's shoot them,' suggested someone.

"Others said not to shoot, for fear of hitting the Indian women who were being taken away by the soldiers. My aunt's husband happened to be there. Scabby and Afraid of Beaver were there also, with two extra ponies, one of them my aunt's slow pony. While we stood there, some young men rode up, and one of them recognized me as his girl friend. He got off, and as he shook hands with me, he asked, 'Is this you, Moving Behind?'

"I said, 'Yes.' We both cried, and hugged and kissed each other. This young man, named Crane, was my sweetheart in the good old days when I was young. As I was about to leave, he said, 'I will lend you my saddle, and you can return it sometime.' He took his saddle off his horse, and brought it to me. I took it and used it.

"We all got on our ponies, and rode down to the river to find the spot where Black Kettle and his wife were killed. There was a sharp curve in the river where an old road-crossing used to be. Indian men used to go there to water their ponies. Here we saw the bodies of Black Kettle and his wife, lying under the water.³ The horse they had ridden lay dead beside them. We observed that they had tried to escape across the river when they were shot.

"Clown, Afraid of Beaver, Scabby, and Roll Down got off their horses, and went down to get the bodies. They were too heavy to lift, so they had to drag them in the water, then bring them up. Clown got his red and blue blanket, and spread it on the ground beside a road a short distance from the river, and the bodies were laid on the blanket and covered with the same blanket. Clown got the saddle from the dead horse, and gave it to my aunt to use, saddling her pony with it.

³In 1934, WPA workers found a skeleton believed, because of jewelry with it, to be that of Black Kettle. The workers made the discovery as they were building an extension to a highway bridge over the Washita near the old battle site. They donated the bones to the newspaper, the *Cheyenne Star*, in whose window they were on display for years.

“It was getting late, and we had to go, so we left the bodies of Black Kettle and his wife. As we rode along westward, we would come across the bodies of men, women, and children, strewn about. We would stop and look at the bodies, and mention their names.

“We went farther west, up the Washita River, until we got to where Afraid of Beaver’s father, named Crooked Wrist, was camping. There were some of my relatives there, and they told me to remain, that I was welcome at their tepee. I dismounted, and went in, and I lived with this family until I married.

“A long time later, when the whites and Indians had quit fighting, George Bent⁴ asked us to go and shake hands with a soldier. We went, and he said that this was the soldier who saw us hiding, and pitied us and saved us. Of course, we shook hands with the tall soldier. I recall that he had a brown mustache and blue eyes.”

WOLF BELLY WOMAN’S STORY OF THE BATTLE OF THE WASHITA

Wolf Belly Woman, daughter of the famed Cheyenne warrior chief, old Whirlwind, and the wife of the late John Otterby, told me the following in 1939, two years before her death:

“I was about ten or eleven years old during the Battle of the Washita.

“My father’s camp was not far away from Black Kettle’s, and I could hear the battle. But let me tell you how narrowly I escaped being in the battle. Black Kettle’s camp was the farthest west on the Washita, thus it was the one that was attacked. Next to it there was an Arapaho camp, then another Cheyenne camp, then my father’s, then a Kiowa camp.

“The evening before the battle, I was visiting at Black Kettle’s camp with Carrying Quiver, a woman who was a friend of my family. At Black Kettle’s camp they wanted Carrying Quiver and me to stay overnight, but she said that she had to take me home.

“I am thankful that we did not remain.”

⁴ George Bent, well known Cheyenne interpreter, died in 1918 at Colony, Oklahoma.