

A MILITARY BURIAL AT LAKE ALTUS

*By James B. Shaeffer**

During the 1957 spring meeting of the Oklahoma Anthropological Society at Norman, Mr. Elmer Craft of Eldorado, Oklahoma mentioned a burial which he had recently found while surveying for Indian sites along the shores of Lake Altus, near Lugert. He added that he was not certain whether the remains were Indian or white but that he believed the excellent preservation of the bones warranted investigation by the salvage project. Accordingly arrangements were made and in April excavation was begun.

Lake Altus is located in Southwest Oklahoma in the southeastern section of Greer County. The lake has been formed by a dam across the Red River along the Greer-Kiowa county line about seventeen miles due north of Altus. The lake extends northward from this point for a distance of approximately fifteen miles and varies from less than a quarter of a mile to more than a half a mile in width. The west side of the lake lies against the base of the treeless Quartz Mountains which rise abruptly back of the shoreline. The shore itself drops off gradually to form a sandy strand at low water level.

On the gentle slopes of this sandy shore Indian artifacts often appear as they are washed out of the surrounding hillside by the action of the waves. It was north of the present tourist lodge that Mr. Craft had located the burial. A controlled lowering of the dam level and the subsequent wave action had uncovered some human toe bones which Mr. Craft was observant enough to note. Though the evidence was slight he was aware of its possible significance and for that reason had not only avoided disturbing the area further but had marked the location and covered up the remains.

Excavation was begun at the feet because they had been exposed due to the slight slope on which the body had been buried. The damp sand made the digging quite easy and it was not long before the first evidence, a leather fragment around the bones of the right foot, suggested that the burial was historic rather than prehistoric. Shortly thereafter several pieces of metal which later proved to be boot nails were uncovered.

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As the digging proceeded it was to become evident that this individual had literally "died with his boots on."

In order to expedite the excavation at this point Mr. Craft continued to work at the feet while the writer shifted his attention to the region of the head hoping to locate the position of the skull. Careful probing indicated that it lay about six inches beneath the surface. Once the skull was located digging was begun several feet away with the idea that something might have been placed around the head, a practice often followed in the case of Indian burials. The general procedure was to outline the skeleton within a shallow rectangular pit the depth of the body. Working slowly toward the cranium, the writer, perplexed by not having reached the top of the skull as expected, was finding another kind of bone. It was thought that these might be the remains of some animal but further cleaning showed a pile of human ribs. It now appeared that the burial might possibly have been disturbed and reinterred. From the placement and arrangement of the bones at the same level as the skull the disturbance hardly seemed the work of rodents but whether the bones had been so placed at time of burial could never be determined.

Meanwhile Mr. Craft, working up from the feet, came upon some small roundish objects which upon cleaning seemed to be made of metal. Later examination indicated that they were legging hooks or hooks from the boots.

Presently there was another problem to be solved at the upper portion of the body. A long slender slightly polished bone was found on the chest. The bone was not human. It looked rather like a segment of bird bone. The immediate reaction was that this finding might substantiate the burial as that of an Indian scout, the bone segment representing part of an amulet or necklace worn around the neck. The fact of the matter was that this bone was identified as the stem of a wooden or corn cob pipe which had evidently been kept in the breast pocket.

Shortly thereafter Mr. Craft came up with another round piece of very corroded metal having the form of a button. After a little more spit and polish it was possible to make out an eagle. It was the first indication that this was possibly a military burial. The question now was whether this was a renegade dressed in an army uniform, an Indian Scout, a white soldier or officer?

Presently in working carefully around the pelvic area a hard lump of brown stained material was found near the left hip. cursory cleaning showed it to be a small round metal box about three inches in diameter and an inch or two thick. The lid was corroded shut. The box itself was quite heavy for its

size and seemed to be filled with something solid which did not rattle when shaken. The purpose of this item remained an enigma until it was opened in the laboratory and found to contain percussion caps corroded into a near formless mass by water. Several more buttons were found presently making a total of six which, together with the legging fasteners, leather fragments, pipe stem and a hook of some sort, possibly for a cap, completed the inventory of associated grave goods.¹ A final piece of evidence which indicated a white burial rather than that of an Indian, hostile or scout, was the position of the skeleton for it lay on its back with the arms folded across the chest, this being a white rather than an Indian burial position. Some additional exploratory digging was done beneath the burial and in the vicinity but no other evidence of interments or associated material was found.

When it became evident that we were dealing with a military burial, a hole in the left temple of the skull became even more significant. This aperture about three inches in diameter was circular in shape and at a slight upward angle. When the skull was lifted, there was also a jagged opening at the back of the head. Most of the bone from both holes was missing. It seemed clear that the soldier had met his death by a large calibre weapon or by a smaller calibre one fired at close range.

Laboratory examination of the skeletal remains by Dr. Alice Brues, Associate Professor of Anatomy at the University of Oklahoma Medical Center in Oklahoma City revealed more concrete evidence as to age and race. At first, due to the rather poor condition of some of the teeth it was surmised that the skeleton might be that of an officer until Dr. Brues established the age at death to have been between 18 and 20 years. It was added that, except for some slight dental deficiencies, he had been in good health. The skeleton was definitely that of a white male and lacked any evidence of Indian admixture. The probability was that the burial was of an enlisted man from one of the nearby military posts at Ft. Sill, Ft. Cobb, Ft. Reno, or perhaps from one of the Texas posts, who had been killed in an action against the Indians. The question which remained was what action and when.

On the latter point our first lead was supplied by Lieut. Col. L. D. McCurry, U. S. Marine Corps, Associate Professor of Naval Science at the University of Oklahoma, who provided the information that percussion caps went out of Army issue about 1870 although the possibility existed that they might have survived longer as regulation issue on the western fron-

¹This material is now stored in the History Division of the Stovall Museum at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma.

tier. This gave the first estimated date for the burial. It suggested however that a search would have to be made of military records around or prior to 1880 in order to get more definite information. Since it thus appeared that further research would be historical it was decided to turn the evidence over to more competent hands in this field. Accordingly the material was submitted to the U. S. Army Artillery and Guided Missile Museum at Ft. Sill.

Subsequently a letter was received from Mr. Gillett Griswold, Curator of the museum, stating that Mr. James Marler, the Assistant Curator, had done the research on the uniform buttons and the percussion caps with the following significant results:

Buttons identical to your specimens, including the inscription *SCOVILLS CO EXTRA*, appear on one of our Union Army uniforms here at the museum. The same button, with a different manufacturer's imprint, is on one of our Army forage caps issued in 1893. None of these buttons appear on our artifacts after this date. Corroborative data is contained in Volume II of the *Atlas of the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, which specify this type of button worn by enlisted men of the Union Army for the period 1861-65. It is certain, therefore; that the buttons were an item of Army issue from the Civil War to the 1890's. The design of subsequent regulation buttons included a constellation of stars above the eagle's head.

Percussion caps were in use by the Army on the western frontier until the 1870's. Cartridge weapons were not issued to the military in this area until 1874.

On this evidence it would appear that burial was that of an enlisted man and that the date was within the period 1861-1874.

This, then, is the present status of information concerning this particular burial. One further lead, again provided by Mr. Marler, suggests the circumstances of the action which led to the soldier's death. There is Mooney's report of an encounter in 1874 between a band of marauding Indians and a group of soldiers who surprised them at rest. This action occurred in the general area of the burial. During the brief engagement a Kiowa by the name of Gi-edal who was mortally wounded in the first fire propped himself against a rock and succeeded in killing one soldier and wounding another before he died and the troops were repulsed.² Whether this is the action

²James Mooney, *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians*, 17th Annual Report, Amer. Bur. Ethnol. (Washington, 1898), Pt. I, p. 339. The Kiowa Calendar reference here covers an event in the winter of 1874-75, and is worthy of special notice for possible history back of the military burial described in this article. The country in the region at the junction of the Elm Fork with the North Fork of Red River, near the southern end of Lake Altus (southwest of Lugert) was an old Kiowa camping area, the tribal sun dance held here in the summer of 1874 having celebrated the release of the Kiowa leader, Set'-ainte (Satanta or "White Bear"), from the Huntsville, Texas, prison. The fight that took place with a detachment of soldiers at a

responsible for the death of the soldier whose remains were uncovered nearly one hundred years later by archaeologists is not certain at present. Perhaps further search of the military journals and reports of this period can narrow this possibility to a concrete probability. Mr. Marler has had considerable correspondence on this matter with the National Archives and Record Service and with the Office of the Adjutant General of the United States Army. While the identity of several soldiers wounded in other nearby engagements has been established, it has not been possible to identify the individuals killed and wounded in the action recorded in Mooney's report.³



The sequel to this excavation is contained in a letter from Mr. Craft who revisited the area several months later. He found that the burial site was completely under water. Undoubtedly, had salvage operations not taken place when they did, even this fragment of Oklahoma's past would have been lost beyond recall.

Winter, 1874-5, *Gi-edal* killed; Kiowa imprisoned. — Pictograph from the Kiowa Calendar.

Kiowa camp some months later in the winter of 1874-75 was of such importance that it was indicated on the tribal calendar as "*Gi-edal Ehotal-de Sai*, 'Winter that Big-Meat was killed.'" The Kiowa pictograph shows *Gi-edal* ("Big-Meat") distinguished by buffalo horns on his war-bonnet, with blood gushing from his mouth and a wound in his side. It was at the close of this period in the history of Kiowa warfare that a number of warriors were selected and sent as prisoners to Fort Marion, Florida. The evidence unearthed in the military burial at the edge of the water in Lake Altus points to this as a site that should have further consideration and note in the history of old Greer County and Southwestern Oklahoma.—Ed.

³ Since Dr. Shaeffer's article on "A Military Burial" went to press for this winter number of *The Chronicles*, a note has been received in the Editorial Department which seems to point the grave as that of a young soldier killed by accident in 1869. The identity of the young man and the tragedy of his death will be told in an article now in preparation for the Spring number of *The Chronicles*, the incident told in an original Diary kept by one of Custer's troopers on an expedition out of Fort Sill in the spring after the establishment of that post. It may be added here that the discovery of this data and Mooney's account as given in the Kiowa Calendar history on the battle with the Kiowa that brought the death of *Gi-edal* make the site of this military burial on the shore of Lake Altus and the site of the later Kiowa battle in the same region, a place of historical significance that should be specially marked in the history of Southwest Oklahoma.—Ed.