

Chapter 2.

PEOPLES OF THE SOUTHERN GREAT PLAINS

Part I. SUSTENANCE AND SURVIVAL

Pre-Columbian Conditions. In some ways, the life patterns of human inhabitants of the American Great Plains 10,000 years ago do not seem to have been greatly different from that of their descendants living there when the Europeans first arrived.¹ From the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers westward to about the hundredth meridian, where the soil was thick and rich and precipitation predictable and relatively plentiful, the eastern Plains people were farmers. They lived in established villages of round huts or semi-subterranean dwellings, and stayed put, tending their crops.

But from about the hundredth meridian westward to the mountains, in the steadily drier climate where only the tough prairie grass grew and the precipitation was extreme, erratic and unpredictable, the people were predominantly hunters and gatherers. In particular, they followed and lived off the most predictably migratory and richest food and materials resource: the American Bison (now also commonly referred to as the buffalo, since that was all the first Europeans had to compare it to).

Along the corridor where the Great Plains meets the great mountain ranges of the Sangre de Cristos and the Rockies, the history of the relationship between indigenous peoples and the American Bison goes back a very long time indeed. Archeological discoveries near the present-day Colorado towns of Morrison, Littleton, Ft. Collins and elsewhere along the “Front Range”, show that Paleolithic hunting and gathering communities were making a living off the bison herds and other game more

than 10,000 years ago, just as their descendants were when they encountered Spanish explorers in the 1540's.²

The ancient native hunting tribes (and the ones the Spaniards encountered) followed the migrating herds of bison on foot, hauling their belongings on sleds pulled by their dogs. Hunters approached the bison herds on foot, sometimes disguised in the hide of a familiar animal, and then either shot their prey with a bow and arrow or speared them. The danger to the hunter was considerable, but the rewards to the tribe were great.

Buffalo meat was (and is) an excellent and complete source of lean animal protein. The buffalo's internal organs could be fashioned into useful cooking and food storage vessels and utensils. Its sinews were used for sewing, and its hides provided both clothing and shelter (coverings for tipis). Little wonder then that the buffalo was a sacred and highly revered animal among all the Plains tribes, with ceremonies celebrating its well-being and reminding tribal members of the need to treat it with respect. This, even though as late as the end of the 18th century CE, some Plains tribes also hunted them by means of the buffalo jump, in which hunters herded them over a low cliff, breaking their legs, so tribal members waiting below could finish them off and butcher them. Meriwether Lewis described this practice in his 1805 journal.³

Contact and Conquest (I): Encroachment and Treaty. European entry into the North American continent began to transform cultures of the southwestern Great Plains long before continuous contact with the Europeans would occur. Though there was minimal contact with the Spanish *conquistadores* who came and quickly went when no gold was to be found, the lasting and transformative legacy of their brief visit was

the arrival of the horse. Although the Spanish sought to prevent Indian contact with or access to their herds, enough of these animals either escaped into the wilderness or were stolen by the indigenes that they soon became as dependent on the horse to help them hunt the buffalo as they were on the buffalo itself.

Following the migrating buffalo herds was a risky way to make a living, for the entire tribe as well as its individual hunters. If a herd was spooked by weather into stampeding or simply left en masse in the middle of the night, tribal bands could be left stranded on the prairie with their sole means of sustenance having vanished. But with the horse, scouts could go further afield in search of the herds, and the entire band could travel farther and faster on their horses, each of which could drag about four times more provisions and belongings than their dogs. The tribes who first acquired horses gained a distinct advantage in the hunt, against competing tribes who were not mounted.⁴

The other transformative influences came not from the south but from the northeast. In the 1600's, British and French fur trading companies started distributing firearms to northeastern tribes to foster the commercial hunting of fur-bearing animals.⁵ This gave a powerful military advantage to these tribes, who began to drive neighboring tribes further west, even as increasing European colonization along the Atlantic seaboard was beginning to drive the eastern tribes westward as well.

So during the 17th and 18th centuries, indigenous culture groups of the western Great Plains experienced the combined impacts of European technology and demographic dislocation by new native culture groups now moving onto the Plains. Now the tribes that would come to dominate the western Plains were those who had

mastered the arts of both horsemanship and the use of European weaponry. They were the most effective hunters, and they were the most feared warriors.

Archeologists and ethnographers trace the migrations of what would become the historic Plains tribes by the languages they spoke and the artifacts they crafted. The Utes' claim to have been the direct descendants of the Ancient Ones and the host tribe of the Rocky Mountains and western Great Plains seems fairly well grounded in current scientific knowledge: there are enough linkages in terms of the evolution of artifacts and co-existence with the buffalo to relate them back to the region's Paleolithic hunters of 10,000 years ago.⁶

What we now refer to as the southern Plains tribes entered the region from about the 1300's onward, which is when the Ancestral Puebloans also migrated from the Colorado Plateau to the Rio Grande Valley (see chapter 4). The newly arrived Plains tribes forced the Utes back up into the mountains, where they had less access to the buffalo and had to start relying on a wider diversity of native to the high country.

Athabascan speaking tribes such as the Navajo and Apache entered mostly from the north (as did the Kiowas, who had formerly been in the Yellowstone area); while the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Comanches entered from the northeast and east. Though the British, Spanish, and (later) the American governments all officially sought to keep firearms out of Indian hands, they were the most valuable and highly prized manufactured goods traded on the western Plains. The trading companies chartered by all of these governments did a brisk business arming the tribes for the conflicts that were soon to come.

The first conflicts were among the Plains tribes themselves. Never before had they had the technology to inflict such serious casualties on each other, or to kill buffalo

in numbers that far exceeded their own immediate needs. And never before had they faced serious competition from any other than neighboring tribes for access to the buffalo and other fur-bearing game.

But by the early 19th century, the high mountain valleys and streams flowing through them onto the Plains were increasingly populated by French and American (including African-American) fur trappers, supported by trading companies to supply them. While Britain's Hudson Bay Company dominated the fur trade in the north and northeast, independent traders and trading firms had more opportunity to flourish in the southern Plains.

In 1833, brothers Charles and William Bent, along with their partner Ceran St. Vrain, built a fort on the Arkansas River near the present-day town of La Junta, Colorado, to trade buffalo hides the Indians brought them for manufactured goods Indian families wanted. Prized trading goods for the tribes were items such as rifles and ammunition for the hunters/warriors, canvas tenting to cover their tipis (much lighter and easier to transport than buffalo hides), cotton fabric for clothing, and kettles, knives, and other utensils to make migratory home life on the Plains less of a struggle.⁷

The tribes who traded with the Bents and others quickly increased their wealth and influence relative to those who did not. For them, the more trade the better. But what this began to result in was an incremental conversion from subsistence hunting to commercial hunting. The competitive advantage of tribes heavily engaged in the buffalo trade could only continue if they kept their level of hunting at or above that of their rivals. And this was all occurring at a time when the supply of buffalo seemed limitless; their estimated total herd size still ranged into the millions.

Mounting competition among the tribes finally led to a bloody war among them, culminating in the Battle of Wolf Creek in western Oklahoma in 1837. The mounted, armed tribes killed each other's warriors in unprecedented numbers; and by the time it was over, they realized that in essence, they had all lost. What then emerged was advancement in the practice of another set of survival skills: the arts of tribal inter-tribal governance. The Cheyenne Dog Soldiers (a warrior society) organized an inter-tribal peace council at a campsite on the Arkansas River near Bent's Fort in 1840, in which the theretofore warring tribes came together to agree that never again would they try to wipe each other out in their competition for the buffalo and the lucrative trade with the Whites.

It is interesting that it was the Dog Soldiers who initiated this process. Like some other Plains tribes, both the Southern and Northern Cheyennes had two principal institutions of governance: the military societies and the councils of tribal chiefs.⁸ The warrior societies organized the buffalo hunts and disciplined errant hunters who did not adhere to their plans. They also organized war parties against other tribes (and later, the U.S. Army and some white settlements), and were responsible for the defense of the tribe. Important warrior societies among the Southern Cheyenne included the Dog Soldiers and the Bowstring Society.

The other primary institution of governance was the council of tribal chiefs. Just as the warrior societies were responsible for the effective and judicious use of military force, the tribal chiefs (sometimes also referred to as "peace chiefs") were responsible for seeking to ensure that force was not needed. A chief of a warrior society (a "war chief") could be elevated by the tribe to the position of chief of the tribe. On that occasion, though, the newly chosen tribal chief was forced to relinquish

his position as war chief (hence, the appellation “peace chief”, although the situation was not always quite so binary).

American military and civilian government leaders preferred to think of the relationship between the peace chiefs and the warrior societies as being hierarchical, (like the American governance model of the military being subordinate to civilian leadership). When Americans entered into treaties signed by the tribal chiefs, they expected the chiefs to compel the warrior societies to abide by them.

But within Cheyenne society, the situation was considerably more nuanced, and the relationship between their two institutions of governance is best seen as being more lateral than hierarchical. Most warrior society members were relatively young men recently come of age; and the way to gain status within the tribe was to make a name for oneself in the hunt and on the field of battle. By contrast, peace chiefs tended to be tribal elders, who may have been former warrior society members and leaders.⁹

In making major decisions affecting the future status their tribes and bands, both the warrior societies and the peace chiefs advocated their points of view, which were sometimes in harmony and sometimes not. At the culmination of the process, the council of tribal chiefs would make a ruling that the warrior societies then might or might not abide by. To openly disregard a peace chief council pronouncement could foster destructive disunity within a tribe or band, but warrior society members might comply with widely varying degrees of support. Sometimes the divergence of views was so strong that a warrior society might break away from the band, and at least temporarily go its own way—which was to happen often in the 1860's.¹⁰

Understanding the nature of Plains tribal governance is necessary to fully appreciate the dramatically different strategies for tribal survival that the peace chiefs

and the warrior societies adopted during the mid-19th century. Even as the southern Plains tribes were making peace among themselves in the early 1840's, their region was beginning to experience the first of successive waves of American commercial, political, and military activity that would forever transform their environment and their way of life.

In addition to increasing numbers of fur trappers and commercial buffalo hunters – engaged in the wholesale killing of bison for their hides alone – miners headed for western gold fields and settlers headed for lands of their own to the West were slicing ever-deeper wedges into the tribes' traditional homelands. Their violent responses to the incursions resulted in the U.S. government's designation of its first Indian agent, Thomas Fitzpatrick, to bring peace to the Plains through treaties with the tribes.

In 1851, in the historic Treaty of Fort Laramie, the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and some other Plains tribes agreed to restrict their hunting and gathering activities to an area bounded by the Platte River on the north, the Arkansas River on the south, the Great Divide on the west, and a border on the eastern Plains about 300 miles east of the Divide. In return, the tribes would be annually be given \$50,000 worth of provisions to replace those they would otherwise obtain by unlimited free-range hunting of the buffalo and trading.¹¹

Unfortunately, the federal government had neither the capability nor ultimately perhaps the inclination to enforce the Treaty of Fort Laramie (which had ceded to the Indians most of the Colorado prairie). Unauthorized hunting and white settling continued unabated. Then the 1858 discovery of gold in Colorado led to an

uncontrolled invasion of miners and immigrants that destroyed what was left of the treaty's standing.

Contact and Conquest (II): Toward a 'Final Solution'. Pressed by territorial authorities, the federal government initiated a new treating making process in 1860, culminating in an 1861 concluded in southeastern Colorado Fort Wise (as the U.S. Army had renamed a trading post acquired from the Bents downstream from their original one). However, by this time, the Cheyenne and Arapaho warrior societies had become enraged and disgusted by the federal government's failure to enforce the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie. They had begun to raid wagon trains and occasionally massacre white settlers on unauthorized homesteads, and they refused to attend the Fort Wise treaty process.

In warrior societies' view, their only possible survival strategy was to drive the white settlers, ranchers, hunters, and others off the Great Plains, so they could resume their buffalo-dependent way of life unmolested. However, the survival strategy of the peace chiefs assembled at Fort Wise in 1861 was just the opposite.

Cheyenne Chiefs Black Kettle and White Antelope and Arapaho Chiefs Little Raven and Left Hand viewed the American engulfment of the Great Plains as inevitable; and they also saw the military resistance advocated by the warrior societies as suicidal. To them, their tribes' only hope of survival was to accept the Fort Wise treaty's terms of a reservation in southeastern Colorado less than one tenth the size of the range promised them in the 1851 Fort Laramie treaty, along with provisions and implements to help the tribes adapt to a farming and ranching way of life.¹²

These two radically different strategies for assuring continued sustenance and survival could not ultimately be contained within a single tribal structure. Some Cheyennes and Arapahos cast their lot with the warrior societies, and others with the peace chiefs. Unfortunately, the paths both were to follow would ultimately lead to the near-extinction of the tribes.

The Fort Wise Treaty was signed the same year the Civil War began. Most U.S. Army forces were concentrated in fighting the war in the East, and remnants of the army remaining in Colorado were a motley crew. There were regularly commissioned officers and some career soldiers; but they were augmented in times of crisis by temporary volunteers who had neither the experience nor the discipline to consistently comport themselves well in the field. Additionally, there was a divergence of views within the Army itself as to how best to relate to the Plains tribes.

The year after the war began, President Lincoln appointed John Evans the territorial governor of Colorado, who in turn appointed his friend (and ordained Methodist minister) John Chivington as a colonel in the Colorado Volunteers. That same year, Chivington would distinguish himself and his volunteers staving off a Confederate Army (ie., Texas volunteers) advance at Glorieta Pass, New Mexico.¹³

As it turned out, the territorial government and the U.S. Army in Colorado had its rough equivalents of “war chiefs” and “peace chiefs”, although the belligerents held the upper hand. By 1864, Chivington had become commander of the Colorado military district, and had ordered his men to shoot on sight any Plains Indian who had not obeyed Governor Evan’s July, 1864 proclamation that any Plains tribal member who did not report immediately to a designated military fort would be considered an enemy of the state.¹⁴

Basically, the governor had declared war against all Indians on the Plains except followers of the peace chiefs who obeyed his edicts. Peace Chief Black Kettle sent an emissary to the Army at Fort Lyon, Colorado (on the Arkansas River southeast of La Junta, Colorado), with a letter he had dictated, requesting less draconian terms for negotiating a lasting peace – terms that would allow the tribes to continue to hunt buffalo and live in their traditional ways. The Fort Lyon commander, Maj. Edward Wyncoop, saw a possibility for averting war, and arranged safe passage for Black Kettle and other peace chiefs to Denver to make their case directly to Governor Evans.¹⁵

There the governor reiterated his promise that all Plains tribal groups reporting to Fort Lyon would be under the protection of the U.S. Army, and that no harm would come to them. To conclude the agreement, Major Wyncoop arranged for the exchange of provisions for weapons with the tribal leaders.

Relying on this assurance, Cheyenne peace Chiefs Black Kettle White Antelope, and Arapaho peace Chief Left Hand (Niwot) gathered their followers, and reported to Fort Lyon as instructed. But upon their arrival, they learned that the peace-making Major Wyncoop had been reassigned, and the new commander refused to allow them entry or grant them protection. He ordered them instead to camp a few miles downstream, at Sand Creek. There Black Kettle planted a six by twelve-foot American flag he had been given by the Army outside his lodge, to show that their encampment was protected by the good faith of the Colorado governor and the volunteer forces commanded by Colonel Chivington.

But the predations of the Dog Soldiers and other Cheyenne warrior societies on wagon trains, stage coaches, and settler homesteads had continued after the agreement

in Denver, and pressure mounted on Governor Evans and Colonel Chivington to settle the “Indian problem” once and for all. Chivington was unabashedly ambitious, and saw a future for himself as the next governor of Colorado or its first congressional representative after statehood. But his continuing failure to control the Indians was beginning to tarnish his credentials as great white defender of the Plains, and thus his future political plans. His religious zealotry was less that of a compassionate Jesus than of a vengeful Old Testament Jehovah. And he was about to prove it.

In the early fall of 1864 Evans and Chivington issued a call for more Colorado volunteers for a limited term appointment of 100 days. These temporary militia members were hardly Colorado’s finest: busted miners, Denver saloon denizens, and others driven simply by a desire to inflict revenge on the Plains tribes for the atrocities their warrior societies had committed against white settlers. And in some ways they were suitable for the task at hand, since men of greater moral sensibility may not have done what they were about to do.

Early on the morning of November 29, 1864, Colonel Chivington ordered his men to attack Black Kettle’s unarmed encampment on Sand Creek. There they slew nearly 150 Cheyennes – 109 of them women and children and most of the rest unarmed, disabled, and elderly. They grievously wounded scores more.¹⁶

Black Kettle ran from his tipi waving the white flag of peace and surrender, pointing to the huge American flag, and was partially scalped for his efforts. Black Kettle survived the attack, but many of his people, who had trusted his judgment and his leadership, did not. White Antelope also approached the mounted soldiers, arms outstretched, gesturing peaceful intent. The Colorado Volunteers dismounted and

opened fire. White Antelope folded his arms and sang his death song just before he was slain: “Nothing lives forever, only the Earth and the Mountains”.¹⁷

Chivington and his men returned to Denver, brandishing body parts they had carved off their victims as trophies of their accomplishment. Chivington falsely claimed his troupe had slain between 400 and 500 Indians in heroic combat.¹⁸ Governor Evans decorated Colonel Chivington and his men for their valor; and Chivington bragged to the Denver press that “Posterity will speak of me as the great Indian fighter . . . I have eclipsed Kit Carson.”¹⁹

But other more credible sources would soon tell a different story. Captain Silas Soule, an officer serving under Major Wyncoop from Fort Lyon, who had been ordered to Sand Creek with a contingent of troops, refused to order them to participate in the massacre. Soon the word began to spread in Denver and elsewhere of what one historian has referred to as “what would become the worst atrocity in all the Indian wars”.²⁰

Two military commissions and a congressional inquiry, at which both Captain Soule and Major Wyncoop would testify, substantiated the details of the massacre at Sand Creek. Members of the Congress Chivington one day hoped to join instead concluded that he had “he deliberately planned and executed a foul and dastardly massacre”, and found him unworthy of the uniform he wore.²¹

Chivington resigned his Army commission to avoid court-martial; and President Andrew Johnson later asked John Evans to resign as governor of Colorado for trying to cover up evidence of the Sand Creek Massacre. Within a few weeks of rendering the testimony that helped end the public careers of these two erstwhile

Colorado political luminaries, Silas Soule was assassinated near his home in Denver by one of Chivington's men, who was never brought to justice.²²

The Sand Creek massacre precipitated the open warfare between the Plains tribes and the U.S. Government that the governor and the colonel may have been trying to either avoid or to hasten. The peace chiefs' survival strategy had failed in the face of the treachery visited upon them. The war chiefs then exacted vengeance for Sand Creek on all unprotected whites found on the Colorado prairies (especially white settlers who had been invited to farm and ranch on the buffalo range by invitation of Congress in the 1862 Homestead Act).

This reign of terror was beyond the capacity of local military authorities to contain. So after the Civil War ended, military forces were enhanced on the prairie to counter the growing Indian menace. A sincere effort at peace by congressional leaders and the peace chiefs was made in 1867. In the Medicine Lodge Treaty, several Cheyenne, Comanche, Arapaho, Kiowa, and other Southern Plains tribe bands agreed to confine themselves to reservations in western Kansas and Oklahoma in return for protection and provisions. But some of the warrior societies would remain unrepentant and uninvolved in this process; for them, the memory of Sand Creek was a wound that would not heal.

Since he was one of the few American government leaders – civilian or military – that the Cheyennes and Arapaho still trusted, Edward Wynkoop was appointed Indian agent to the Colorado territory, with the near-impossible task of trying to convince the federal government to honor its promises of provisions to the peaceful tribal bands, while also trying to cease hostilities with the warrior societies. And

among the Cheyenne chiefs with whom Wyncoop worked – still seeking his people’s survival through negotiation – was Black Kettle.

Overall command of the U.S. Army’s war against hostile bands of Plains tribes had now been assigned to the uncompromising Civil War veteran cavalry commander Philip Sheridan. Obeying his charter to subdue the Plains tribes by any means necessary, Sheridan declared total war on every American Indian on the Great Plains not on a reservation. In announcing his view that “the only good Indian is a dead Indian”,²³ he was essentially inviting those under his command (including the zealous George Armstrong Custer) to commit genocide against the free-roaming indigenous peoples of the Great Plains, even as Wyncoop was still trying to protect them.

Colonel Custer learned through Osage scouts of a string of Cheyenne encampments along the Washita River in western Oklahoma in November of 1868, among which was Black Kettle’s (who had been unsuccessful in obtaining protection for his band at Fort Cobb, Oklahoma). The old peace chief was now a pariah among the Cheyenne warrior societies, and the only members of his band were the elderly, the disabled, and the widows and orphans of Army raids on Indian villages. He had no choice now but to camp near the Cheyenne war society lodges, since they afforded the only reliable protection. But the war chiefs forced him to camp separately instead of among them, in retribution for his failed attempts to save his people through peace-making.

At dawn on the morning of November 2, 1868, almost four years to the day from Colonel Chivington’s attack on Black Kettle’s unarmed camp at Sand Creek, Custer attacked the old chief’s defenseless encampment on the Washita. And again,

the soldiers (this time U.S. Army regulars) indiscriminately slaughtered men, women, children, and the elderly.

By now, the military assault on all Plains Indians had become a war against their very existence. Custer's soldiers completely destroyed all provisions and everything else in the village, and shot or stabbed to death over 800 Cheyenne ponies, before the warriors camped downstream could come to Black Kettle's aid. However, the Southern Cheyenne's last great champion of peace would not survive a second massacre: Custer's men slew him and his wife as they fled for their lives.²⁴

Custer would continue his practice of surprise attacks on Plains Indian villages for another eight years, until Sitting Bull and a coalition of Plains warrior societies returned the favor at a bend in Montana's Little Big Horn River in 1876. But by that time the federal government had concluded that the most effective means of systematically defeating all the Plains tribes was to systematically destroy their source of sustenance: the buffalo. In testimony before Congress in 1874, the Interior Department advocated just that; and by the end of the 19th century, the American Bison was nearly extinct.²⁵

Contemporary Conditions (I): The Southern Plains Tribes. Confined to the Kansas and Oklahoma reservations, Southern Plains tribes' populations declined dramatically in the 1870's, as they succumbed to diseases for which they had no immunity, and to starvation occasioned by insufficient funding of the reservations, and corrupt Indian agents who sold off their provisions to others instead of feeding reservation residents. Judging the reservation system to be a failure, in 1887 Congress experimented with dividing up reservation lands into individual homestead-sized

allotments, giving some to each Indian family, and selling the rest off to white farmers and ranchers.

The concept was to complete the conversion of Plains culture from that of communal hunters and gathers to individual, Euro-American style yeoman farmers. This approach was furthered by well-meaning missionaries and government agents removing Indian children from their families and home cultures, and placing them in residential boarding schools to complete their enculturation into mainstream white society.

But such was not to be the case. Tribal members quickly lost most of their allotted lands to real estate swindles, usurious loans, and unpaid taxes; and many of their children felt they had fallen into a dark inter-cultural chasm that made it difficult to relate either to the old traditional ways or the new ones of the dominant culture.

Given these grave challenges to their cultural as well as physical survival in the late 19th century, it is in some ways remarkable that Southern Plains tribal cultures have survived as well as they have. More culturally supportive federal government policies adopted in the last third of the 20th century were certainly helpful. But there is also something about the power of lineage and cultural identity that is at the core of their survivability, as expressed in the traditional teachings conveyed by Southern Cheyenne women Eunice Petramala and Minoma Little Hawk-Nixon in the concluding section of this chapter.

Contemporary Conditions (II): Contested Lands and Conflicted Memories.

The brief sketch of the 19th century history of the relationship between the Southern Plains tribes and Euro-American society is a history of contest and conquest. How this

period of conflict was and is commemorated depends greatly on who's doing the commemorating, and when.

In fighting for control of the Southern Great Plains, the tribal warrior societies and the U.S. Army were fighting over more than land and land use; they were fighting for the survival of their respective cultures. White farming and ranching communities and the cities that supported them were profoundly grateful to ruthlessly aggressive American warriors such as Philip Sheridan and George Armstrong Custer. So towns, cities, and counties established throughout the Great Plains in the late 19th century bear their names.

Less well remembered are the peace makers – those who risked their reputations and sometimes their lives trying to bring out the best in their respective cultures. A street in old town Denver is named after Army major and later Indian agent, Edward Wyncoop, who devoted his public service career to facilitating peaceful co-existence with a culture not his own. Another lane nearby bears the name of the Arapaho peace chief Little Raven, who sought to do the same; and a campground in the hills west of Denver goes by his Arapaho name, Chief Hosa. A little town near Boulder, Colorado (where he used to camp) is named after Arapaho peace Chief Niwot, as is a canyon north of Boulder (Left Hand).

No familiar Colorado landmark bears the name of Captain Silas Soule, an honorable man who lost his life in the cause of cleansing American society of the dishonor brought upon it by the Sand Creek Massacre. But the dominant Rocky Mountain peak on Denver's western horizon is named after Governor Evans, and there is still a little town on the Colorado prairie near Sand Creek named Chivington.

The Parklands Connection. To travel eastward from Pueblo, Colorado, along the Arkansas River and to visit national historic sites along the way is in some ways to trace the mid-19th century history of the Southern Plains tribes and their relationship with Euro-American society. First is **Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site**, on the Arkansas River near the agricultural community of La Junta. This site is where Bent brothers Charles and William built the most successful and best-known of their trading forts on the Colorado prairie.

The Fort was in operation from 1833 until 1846, when the Army commandeered it to fight the U.S.-Mexican War, and William Bent moved his operation to a more advantageous site a few miles downstream on the Arkansas. This period was the relative heyday of relations between the southern Plains tribes and the whites. Everybody was making money in the fur trade, the buffalo, trade, and (especially for merchants/traders such as the Bents) the wagon-born freight shipping along the Santa Fe, Colorado, and Oregon trails.

Although some of the Plains tribes may have been at each other's throats, and Indian raids on wagon train raids were not unknown during this period, Bent's Fort was something of an international demilitarized zone and trading center; until the war between them in 1846-48, the Arkansas River at Bent's Old Fort was the border between the U.S. and Mexico).

The international language was commerce, and the peace was kept by a common desire for mutually profitable exchange. William Bent was himself a living example of the intercultural mediation that happened at his Fort. His two Cheyenne wives (per Cheyenne custom, he married his first wife's sister when she died) bore him

several children who were well-educated in the ways of American culture, but later spent much of their lives living on the prairie as Cheyenne warriors and translators.

The Fort was a staging area for U.S. Army incursions into Mexico during the war, at which time Bent abandoned it for a more favorable location downstream on the Arkansas. After the war, insulted at the price the U.S. Army offered him for the Fort, William Bent dynamited it instead.

Fortunately, an Army draftsman convalescing from a prolonged illness at the Fort had made precise and detailed drawings of every aspect of the compound during his stay. It was these renderings the National Park Service used to construct an equally detailed full-size, historically accurate replica of the Fort in 1976. Since this is a national historic park, the interpretive staff dress as 1840's denizens of the Fort, and convey a sense of what life was actually like their during this period (see Eunice Petramala's presentation in the following section).

Leaving the Arkansas River and traveling northeastward from the Fort deeper into Colorado prairie land, one arrives at the **Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site**. This site commemorates a later phase in history – the departure point (1864) of descent into a murderous, mutually genocidal race war on the Plains.

Wars of this nature can bring out both the best and the worst in those caught up in them, and the stories of these places convey both. Interpretive staffs here and at Washita Battleground know that there is no one unified historical narrative on such profoundly painful events. There are multiple stories from multiple cultural and historical perspectives. It is their role to present these multiple, evidence-based stories (whether that evidence is obtained via the written word or the oral tradition) as a woven tapestry from which the visitor is invited to discern their own meaning.

Traveling southeastward from Sand Creek into western Oklahoma, one comes to **Washita Battleground National Historic Site** near the town of Cheyenne. The very name of this memorial site reminds us that histories in the present day can be just as contested as the lands were in the mid-19th century. The official name of the place is “Battleground”. But many Cheyenne and others are of the view that it should properly be named a massacre site, like Sand Creek.

What seems to have happened at Washita was not actually one encounter between Army soldiers and the Cheyenne, but two. The first is the one recounted above: Custer’s dawn attack on Black Kettle’s unarmed camp, and the massacre of its inhabitants.²⁶ And there are two versions of this first encounter as well.

One holds that Custer thought he was attacking the warrior society camps further downstream on the Washita. When he realized his men were massacring defenseless non-combatants, he ordered them to stop. He then had his men round up the women and children, and march them to the safety of Army forts in Colorado.

The less flattering version is that Custer attacked the least-well defended camp first. Then, realizing that his men were slaying noncombatants, he rounded up and marched his captives away from the warrior society camps using them as human shields, so the avenging warriors would not attack during their retreat.²⁷

In either case, the facts do show that Custer’s men broke into two contingents during the massacre phase, and were never reunited. Custer left the field with his contingent and his prisoners, leaving the others behind. And it was at this point that the second encounter occurred. Alerted to Custer’s attack on Black Kettle’s camp, Arapaho warriors from the downstream camp nearest Black Kettle’s now attacked the separated contingent of soldiers left behind, and killed them all.²⁸

So, as at Gettysburg – a Civil War battleground where fallen soldiers of both the North and South now lie together beneath the site of tragic conflict – so too do Cheyenne people and Army soldiers alike lie together beneath the rolling hills of the Oklahoma prairie on the banks of the Washita.

The teachings shared by Eunice and Minoma in the following sections of this chapter focus on the many meanings of survival and sustenance: the physical survival of the historic Plains tribes through the 19th century, as their fortunes rose and fell with the buffalo; and the struggle for cultural survival that continues to this day.

These teaching are at once both painful and hopeful. They recount a time when a sacred relationship with the buffalo was a core organizing principle of Cheyenne life and culture; a time when competitive commercial hunting began to erode that relationship; a time when genocidal warfare nearly destroyed it; and a time when we are all now seeking to learn what lessons we can from this intercultural history.

We remember these stories and tell them to each other for the same reasons we remember the Holocaust. These were times of tragedy and triumph, of the best and worst in human nature manifesting itself. And it seems that in any time and at any place, everyone's physical and cultural survival may depend on our ability to focus on emulating and replicating the best, while never forgetting the circumstances that gave rise to the worst.

¹ Alvin M. Josephy, *The Indian Heritage of America*. NY: Knopf, 1968; at 109-122.

² Sally Crum, *People of the Red Earth*. Santa Fe, NM: 1996.

³ *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, Vol. 4. May 29, 1805.

⁴ Josephy, at 117.

⁵ Jack Weatherford, *Indian Givers – How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World*. NY: Random House, 1988.

⁶ J. Donald Hughes, *American Indians in Colorado*. Denver, CO: Univ. of Denver Dept. of History, 1977, at 26.

⁷ Crum, at 101.

⁸ See generally Karl Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Cheyenne Way*. Norman, OK: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1941.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ See generally David Fridtjof and Andrew Masich, *Halfbreed – The Remarkable True Story of George Bent*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004.

¹¹ Crum, at 117.

¹² Fridtjof at 102-103.

¹³ Hampton Sides, *Blood and Thunder*. NY: Random House, 2006; at 367-370.

¹⁴ Fridtjof at 123-125.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 136.

¹⁶ Crum at 114.

¹⁷ This accounting of the Sand Creek Massacre was provided by George Bent, the son of trader William Bent and his first Cheyenne wife. He witnessed the entire event, was wounded by the soldiers, and escaped with other survivors. Fridtjof at 138-150.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Sides at 470. Carson would later refer to Chivington's actions as "treacherous, brutal, and cowardly butchery". *Id.* at 471.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ 38th U.S. Congress, 1st Sess. *Report of the Joint committee on the conduct of the war (1865)*. University of Michigan Digital Library Production Service., 2005.
<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text->

[idx?c=moa;idno=ABY3709.0003.001;rgn=full%20text;view=toc;cc=moa](#). Retrieved Sept. 6, 2009.

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²³ Fridtjof at 258.

²⁴ Id. at 268-270.

²⁵ Lloyd Burton, *Worship and Wilderness*. Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2002; at 173-175.

²⁶ Crum, at 117.

²⁷ Personal communication from unnamed lineal descendants of the Dog Soldier and Bowstring Societies, Washita Battleground National Historic Site, Cheyenne, Oklahoma, May 20, 2009.

²⁸ *Destiny at Dawn – Loss and Victory on the Washita* [DVD]. Tucson, AZ: Western National Parks Association, 2007.