

Alternative Perspectives on the Battle of Wolf Creek of 1838

By Mary Jane Warde

Abstract

The Battle of Wolf Creek in northwestern Oklahoma in 1838 was highly significant to the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche, and Plains Apache tribes, but little known beyond their mutual frontier. Their oral accounts of the battle allow us to examine these Plains Indians' view of their history and compare it to the non-Indian's ways of memorializing events.

In the spring of 1837 a group of Cheyenne men began planning a horse raid against the Kiowas. That raid led a year later to the largest and last major conflict among the Southern Plains tribes in the nineteenth century, the Battle of Wolf Creek in western Oklahoma. Researching the event illustrates two points: first, the challenge of collecting information about an event that happened on the edge of written documentation; second, the alternate perspectives Indian people may have on their history and its preservation.

The Battle of Wolf Creek on June 23, 1838 (not to be confused with a battle in 1868 in the same general location at the head of the North Canadian River) occurred during a period of flux and adjustment on the Southern Plains. The first four decades of the nineteenth century saw Osages, Pawnees, Creeks, Delawares, Piankashaws, Wichitas, Caddos, Cheyennes, Arapahos, Kiowas, Comanches, and Plains Apaches (Katakas) in the region west of the Cross Timbers. The five tribes directly involved in the 1838 conflict were all relative

newcomers to the region and had yet to establish firm claims and boundaries. The Comanches arrived first, by the early 1700s, according to contemporary French reports. Mounted on horses acquired from the Spanish settlements, they migrated into the region to hunt buffalo and other game. They also created a strong trade relationship with the Wichitas, who farmed the river valleys of present Oklahoma. Late in the 1700s the Kiowas also moved onto the Southern Plains, along with the Plains Apaches. About 1790 Gui-kate (or Wolf Lying Down), second in authority in the tribe, negotiated a peace with the Comanches, ending the sporadic friction that had existed between the two tribes since they both lived in the vicinity of the Black Hills of South Dakota. Thereafter, the three tribes shared hunting territory and occasionally camped together.¹

Within a generation, however, the Kiowas, Comanches, and Apaches faced new competition on the Southern Plains. The Arapahos and Cheyennes, pressured out of the Black Hills region by the Crows—old friends of the Kiowas—migrated toward the headwaters of the Arkansas River in the early 1800s. At first relations among the five tribes were friendly, and Anglo-Americans observers Stephen Long and Jacob Fowler described large multi-tribe encampments in 1820 and 1821, respectively. By 1826, however, the Cheyennes and Arapahos, who lived north of the Arkansas River, routinely raided the horse herds of the Kiowas and Comanches, based generally between the North Fork of the Red River and the Canadian River. Sometimes they took as many as one thousand horses at a time. It has been said that the Pawnees stole horses from the Cheyennes and Arapahos, who had stolen them from the Kiowas and Comanches, who stole them in the first place from the Spanish settlements in Mexico and New Mexico. At any rate, horse raiding among the Plains tribes was an important means by which a man acquired status and distributable wealth while he made his reputation as a leader. So in the spring of 1837 it was not unusual for groups of young men to plan a raid on their neighbors' horse herds.²

This year, though, the planning stage of the raid by members of the Bow String warrior society coincided with a serious incident that affected the whole Cheyenne community. The murder of a Cheyenne by another member of the tribe required a Renewal of the Medicine Arrows to make things right. Until that was done, there was little hope that the planned raid would be successful. Impatient to be on their way, though, the Bow String warriors demanded that White Thunder, the Keeper of the Arrows, conduct the Renewal ceremony immediately. White Thunder refused because the time was not right. He agreed to hold the ceremony only when the Bow Strings beat him severely with their quirts in spite of his seventy years and high status among the Cheyenne people. Even then, the Keeper warned the Bow Strings that their venture would fail. Their Arapaho neighbors reinforced this prediction. They were holding their Sun Dance nearby about the same time, and the man who had "put up" the Sun Dance, along with another participant, had visions they interpreted as warnings of disaster. Much of what we know about this time and what followed has come to us through George Bent, the son of trader William Bent and Owl Woman, the

daughter of White Thunder, Keeper of the Medicine Arrows.³

In spite of the warnings, the Cheyenne raiders slipped out of the camps and set off south on foot, their party consisting of thirty-eight Bow Strings and four Contraries. But as White Thunder had predicted, they had bad luck from the beginning. Game was scarce, and they soon used up their food supplies. Hunting game exhausted their ammunition, so that by the time they located the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache camps in today's Texas Panhandle or western Oklahoma, they had few arrows left. While the main party waited, two scouts went ahead to watch the camps from a nearby bluff. Again misfortune struck. A young Kiowa, who had gone out to straighten arrows, saw them and, thinking they were returning hunters, approached them. They fired at him, and he escaped to warn the camps.⁴

Soon Kiowas, with Setangia (Satank) leading one band, were scouring the prairie for the intruders. Comanches and Apaches joined the pursuit, following the fleeing Cheyennes along a trail beside the creek. Perhaps realizing they had little chance of escaping, as they were short of ammunition and on foot, the Bow String raiders revealed their position in a ravine they had fortified with piled up rocks and challenged the Kiowas to attack them. When the Kiowas asked who they were, the Cheyennes, it is said, sang and danced to identify themselves, the origin, according to one version, of the Kiowa Gourd Dance. The Cheyennes resisted as long as possible, but, once their arrows were exhausted, the Kiowas overran them with only six men lost. Along with a fine medicine lance in its feathered case and a Dog Soldier staff, the Kiowas took the scalps of all forty-two Cheyennes.⁵

According to one Kiowa account, years later when Stumbling Bear visited the site of the battle, the skeletons still lay in a row where the Kiowas left them. Thereafter the Kiowas called the place *Sakota Aotonde Pa*, "the creek where the Cheyennes were massacred." They called this the time of the "wailing Sun Dance summer" because they mourned their six dead while holding their ceremony. The Comanches named the fight *Utah Hookne*, the "Robe Entrenchments," because the Bow Strings draped hides over their impromptu defenses.⁶

Not until months had passed did the Cheyenne people learn what had happened to the forty-two missing men. Arapahos who had accompanied traders to the Kiowa camps hurried back to report that the Kiowas had recently celebrated a victory. These witnesses recognized two of the forty-two scalps displayed by the hair and ornamentation as belonging to missing Bow String warriors, Red Tracks and Coyote Ear. Word quickly spread through the Cheyenne bands that all forty-two warriors were dead. Grief rolled from camp after camp, and the relatives of the slain men pleaded with the other warrior societies for revenge. Porcupine Bear, chief of the Dog Soldier society, moved from camp to camp late in 1837, calling for a unified Cheyenne assault on the Kiowas. But while visiting a camp on the South Platte River, Porcupine Bear became drunk and was involved in the killing of Little Creek, another Cheyenne. For this murder he was outlawed, exiled with a small band of family and followers to a

precarious existence outside the protection of the Cheyenne bands. The Dog Soldier society he had led shared a degree of his disgrace. Yellow Wolf, second chief of the Dog Soldiers, took up his mission, at the same time working to regenerate the Bow String warrior society. Yellow Wolf then passed the responsibility for organizing the revenge expedition to them and their new chief, Little Wolf.⁷

Some thirty years before, the Cheyennes as a nation had moved the Medicine Arrows against an enemy, but preparing to do so in the winter of 1837-1838 created severe problems. Getting word to all ten bands took time, and as the first arrivals waited for the rest, they soon exhausted nearby resources of game and grazing. Starvation threatened people and horses, when during the winter snow lay so deep on the ground it was difficult to break a trail. To survive, the Cheyennes scattered again to wait for spring, but the mourning continued. When the last band arrived from the north, the process of unifying the people for the campaign against the Kiowas intensified. Bereaved relatives wailed, gashed themselves to show their grief, pleaded for relief, and offered gifts to anyone who would avenge the dead warriors. The chiefs hesitated so long that the Red Shield society took the lead in organizing the expedition. Then that spring the entire Cheyenne nation began to move south, taking the Medicine Arrows and the Medicine Hat with them. At Bent's Fort they traded for firearms and ammunition for the upcoming campaign.⁸

On the Arkansas River, they paused to camp near the Arapahos. The Cheyenne chiefs held a feast for them, at which Yellow Wolf persuaded them to join the campaign against the Kiowas. Because of the Cheyennes' deep anger, all agreed they would take no prisoners in the coming fight. Flat War Club, a young Arapaho man with unusual medicine, made a place for himself in Cheyenne history by declaring that he would not return from the fight. Because he was giving up his body for their cause, he said, he wanted the privilege of "talking to" any woman who took his fancy, including the married women. The Cheyennes granted this brash request because of his special medicine and his commitment to their fight. Apparently some elderly Cheyenne ladies still sighed over his memory as late as 1908.⁹

With the decision made to proceed and the Arapahos secured as allies, the Cheyenne chiefs sent the "wolves" ahead to locate the Kiowas. While the two nations were moving south from the Arkansas River across western Kansas, scouts, Pushing Ahead and Crooked Neck, first spotted Kiowas near Wolf Creek in present Ellis County, Oklahoma. They hurried back to report. By the time they rejoined the two advancing nations, they were camped at the junction of Crooked Creek and the Cimarron River in present northeast Beaver County, Oklahoma. Scouts Wolf Road, Gentle Horse, and others then returned on foot to the Wolf Creek watershed.¹⁰

As expected, Kiowas were hunting on the divide between Wolf Creek and Beaver Creek, an area known as late as 1874 for an abundance of buffalo, deer, antelope, turkey, quail, and prairie chickens. At one point, the Cheyenne scouts

took cover in a ravine while a Kiowa on a fine bay mule shot, skinned, and butchered a buffalo only a few feet away. When he rode away with his meat, they turned back, running approximately twenty miles through the night to deliver their news. Once in sight of the Cheyenne and Arapaho camps on Beaver Creek, Wolf Road signaled their success by waving a wolf skin. As the scouts entered the camp, they howled and turned their heads from side to side, imitating hunting wolves. It was a familiar signal, and the Cheyennes began preparing for the imminent fight as the camp crier circulated with the affirmation that they would march that night.¹¹

Meanwhile, the Kiowas, in those days under the general leadership of Dohausen, or Little Bluff, an old enemy of the Cheyennes, were on their guard. They suspected that the annihilation of the Bow String warriors would eventually bring Cheyenne retaliation. That June they had gathered on Wolf Creek, which they called *Gui Pa*, for mutual protection and to prepare for their Sun Dance. The Apache lodges stood just upstream (southwest) with the Comanches located downstream (northeast) in a series of camps that stretched along the north bank for miles. Kiowas frequently ventured out to hunt and collect useful plants in the low, sandy, sage-brush covered hills and ragged ravines on either side of the creek. The same afternoon the Cheyenne scouts spotted them, Kiowas on the divide, it was told later, sighted something unusual in the distance along Beaver Creek. Although this was probably the Cheyenne tepees eight or nine miles away, the Kiowas dismissed them as sand hills gleaming white in the sun.¹²

In preparation for the night march, the Cheyenne women rolled up the sides of their lodges to keep wolves and coyotes from gnawing them and stowed their belongings up on scaffolds. While they worked, their men painted themselves and their horses, sang their war songs, and readied their weapons. Everyone fell in when the march began—men, women, children, babies, horse herds, and dogs—with the chiefs leading and a screen of scouts out ahead. The march toward the Kiowa camps was highly organized, and the warrior societies policed it strictly. Through the night, they sang their war songs softly and circled the column constantly to prevent impetuous young men from breaking away and alerting the Kiowas too soon. As the Cheyenne column advanced southeast, the Arapahos paralleled them further east. To the west the outlaw, Porcupine Bear, and his small band of exiles, marched due south.¹³

In spite of the care the Cheyennes took in approaching the Kiowa camps, the foggy dawn found them and the Arapahos too far east, well downstream from the point at which Wolf Creek, flowing northeast, and Beaver Creek, flowing southeast, join to form the North Canadian River. Recognizing their mistake, the columns swung back to approach the Kiowa, Apache, and Comanche camps from the southeast. By that time, Porcupine Bear's outlaw band had encountered a party of Kiowa men and women hunting and digging roots north of Wolf Creek. Porcupine Bear attracted their attention from a bluff and, keeping his back to them, signaled that he had spotted buffalo. His little band of seven men

waited out of sight, hidden by the sloping ground. The unsuspecting Kiowas rode into his ambush, and Porcupine Bear's men killed all thirty before they could ready their weapons. But because of his outlaw status, Porcupine Bear could not under Cheyenne law claim first coup. That honor went to Walking Coyote, who killed a Kiowa couple he met on the prairie several hours later.¹⁴

It was about mid-morning when the main columns of Cheyennes and Arapahos finally came within striking distance of the Kiowa camps in the cottonwoods along the north bank of Wolf Creek. About three or four miles out, the non-combatant Cheyennes and Arapahos separated from the fighting men and stationed themselves on bluffs out of harm's way. Approaching from the southeast along a stream, the warriors came across a party of Kiowa women digging roots on the south side of Wolf Creek and killed twelve before charging on toward the Kiowa camp. As they broke onto the bank of Wolf Creek, they discovered they were directly across from the camp, but the water was deep and the far bank was too steep and slick for their horses to climb. Little Wolf and Medicine Water, leading the charge, were forced to pause. Meanwhile, a Kiowa wearing a yellow war shirt appeared on foot on top of the bank. He held the Cheyennes off until more Kiowas, Comanches, and Apaches arrived to support him. The man was Sleeping Wolf, but the Cheyennes afterwards referred to him as "Yellow Shirt." They counted coup on him at least three times, but he fought on until he was unhorsed with a broken thigh. Even then he continued to use his bow while seated on the ground. The Cheyennes counted coup on him three more times before they killed him.¹⁵

While the fight continued in the creek at the downstream end of the Kiowa camp, another party of Cheyennes found an easier, undefended crossing upstream and poured across. In the timber they discovered and quickly killed courting couples and women who had been collecting sap from the trees. Then they charged on toward the Kiowa camp, which was now in confusion. Some of the Kiowa and Apache women were trying to load their belongings onto horses in hope of escaping to an outlying Comanche camp several miles south on the Canadian River. Others were desperately digging holes and piling fallen timber to form circular barricades. Some of the Cheyenne women and boys came forward to guard Kiowa horses driven off by their men, and their appearance on a hillside nearby frightened the Kiowa and Apache women even more.¹⁶

By now small groups of Comanches were arriving from downstream to help defend the Kiowa camp, and soon the fight spread in among the lodges and timber barricades. One Comanche chief charged into the camp, had his horse killed under him, ran back for another mount, and returned to the fight. A little later, Crooked Neck led a Cheyenne feint that lured some of the Comanches, including that chief, into a trap. Too late, the Comanche chief recognized the danger, tried to escape, and died with an arrow in his back.¹⁷

Even though the Cheyennes and Arapahos were inflicting much damage on their enemies in the Kiowa camp, they were also losing good men. White Thunder, the Arrow Keeper, was killed early in the fight, stating as he died that if the

Cheyennes thought he was such a fool, they could now name a wiser man as his replacement. One by one, Gray Hair, Dead Man, Rising Sun, Big Breast, and Porcupine fell. Flat War Club—fighting on foot armed with only his unique weapon—died as he had predicted he would months ago. As the day stretched on, Cheyenne women and those skilled at healing tended to their wounded some distance away. At the same time, the Kiowas were suffering losses, including Gui-kate and several other chiefs. Late in the day some Kiowas and Apaches parleyed with a group of Arapahos about a ceasefire, but the Arapahos refused as long as their Cheyenne allies continued fighting. Even so, a stalemate gradually developed, with the Cheyennes and Arapahos unable to force their horses over the Kiowas' cottonwood log barricades. Exhaustion began to affect both sides while the casualties increased. As the sun began to set, the Cheyennes and Arapahos broke off the fight. Reunited with their non-combatants, they withdrew toward their camp on Beaver Creek. As they went, the Kiowas formed a line along the ridge to watch them out of sight.¹⁸

Three days later Lieutenant Lucius B. Northrop led a detachment of twelve United States Dragoons, eight Comanches, and thirty Osages into the devastated Kiowa camp. Auguste Pierre Chouteau, serving as agent to the western Indian Territory tribes but confined by an injury to Camp Holmes, had sent the dragoons along with his nephew, E. L. Chouteau, to try to prevent conflict between the Southern Plains tribes. The Comanches had informed him in late spring that they intended to attack the Cheyennes. He had persuaded them to keep the peace, but they insisted on an escort home to the Comanche camps on Wolf Creek. Now as they surveyed the Kiowa camp, they found forty-three men dead in addition to women and children slain. The bodies of about one hundred horses littered the site, and thirteen enemy dead—twelve Cheyennes and one Arapaho—still lay unburied. Chouteau and Northrop visited the graves of the Comanche dead and listened to their accounts of the attack. The Kiowas told the visitors that without the ammunition Agent Chouteau had given them on their last visit to Camp Holmes, they would have been at an even greater disadvantage. The Osages, who were also enemies of the Cheyennes, offered to join the Kiowas in a retaliatory raid, but the Kiowas, citing the loss of life, leadership, and horses, declined to strike back.¹⁹

The Battle of Wolf Creek might have been one event in an escalating war for supremacy on the Southern Plains. Instead, it was the last major conflict among these five tribes. The two alliances had tested each other at full strength and reached a stalemate. Then the following year, the smallpox epidemic that had entered the Northern Plains in the summer of 1837 reached the Southern Plains. It ravaged the Plains peoples, causing great distress and terrible loss of life. At the same time, more and more white people and Indian peoples removed from the East were migrating onto the Plains. Perhaps the survivors of the Battle of Wolf Creek reasoned that there were other enemies coming who were more dangerous and powerful than the ones they knew.²⁰

So in the summer of 1840 Arapaho Chief Little Raven set up peace negotia-

tions through the Apaches, with whom some Arapahos were intermarried. The Arapahos also approached the Cheyennes, and the Kiowas cautiously offered to return to the scalps of the Bow String warriors. The Cheyennes considered this offer gravely before leaving the final decision to White Antelope and Little Old Man, chiefs of the Dog Soldiers. They agreed to end hostilities, but at their initial meeting, High Backed Wolf spoke for the Cheyennes as he refused to accept the scalps the Kiowas brought wrapped in a blanket. To look at them, he said, would only create distress and recall bad feelings best forgotten. Afterward, all five tribes gathered on the Arkansas River three miles downstream from Bent's Fort, with the allied camps facing each other across the water. On the occasion they called "Giving Presents to One Another Across the River," they exchanged mounds of trade goods and herds of horses. The peace they sealed that day has never been broken. Through the next four decades, the five tribes that fought so bitterly at Wolf Creek accepted each other's presence on the Southern Plains and stood from time to time against common enemies encroaching from the east.²¹

As with so many incidents in Indian history before the coming of the Anglo-Europeans, the Battle of Wolf Creek in 1838, as important as it was in Southern Plains Indian history, can frustrate the historian. In time the pioneers swept in to claim, divide, and rename the land, and the battle was almost unknown outside the five tribes that participated in it. Lieutenant Northrop and E. L. Chouteau described the battle to Auguste Pierre Chouteau, who reported it to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. But if Northrop reported it to his superiors, the documentation has not been located. At the turn of the twentieth century, George Bird Grinnell and George E. Hyde collected information about the event while studying Cheyenne culture. Their primary informant was George Bent, who grew up among Cheyenne family and elders who had participated in the campaign against the Kiowas. He heard Gentle Horse tell about scouting along Wolf Creek for the Kiowa camp and Little Raven tell how he rejected the Kiowa offer of a cease-fire. Similarly, W. S. Nye collected Kiowa and Comanche accounts, as did James Mooney in his investigations for the Bureau of American Ethnology. Mooney noted that Tebodol, who participated in the fight, was still living in 1896 and was presumably one of his informants.²²

Among Cheyennes, Kiowas, and Comanches, at least, oral accounts persist. Within the last three years' fieldwork, one Cheyenne volunteered the story of the Bow String warriors, while another connected their death with the birth of the Kiowa gourd dance. Most recently, a Cheyenne husband and wife, highly respected for their knowledge of tribal genealogy, told me that their great-grandfathers fought there. A Comanche elder told me that his ancestor helped defend the Kiowa camp. Wistfully he remarked that he has always wanted to go to that place.

But *place*—or at least exact *place*—is missing from most Indian accounts, contributing to the historian's frustration. Chouteau reported that the fight was about one hundred seventy-five miles northwest of Camp Holmes. George Bent

stated that the location was nineteen miles above Fort Supply in a letter to Hyde and twenty miles above Fort Supply in a questionnaire for historian Joseph Thoburn. Ben Clark, a scout who married into the Cheyenne tribe and wrote ethnographic materials about them at the turn of the twentieth century, also placed the battle about twenty miles upstream from Fort Supply. Grinnell even produced a sketch map, based on Bent's accounts. As promising as that sounds, changes in river channels, landscape, vegetation, and land use complicate the search by obscuring and erasing physical remains. Yet another account by a Kiowa places the site just south of Fort Supply in a spot now inundated by the Fort Supply Reservoir. None of the five participating tribes was allowed to remain in the vicinity of the battle after assignment to reservations in 1867. No elder was able to take researchers to the site and say, "It happened here." Probably, as a local history of Shattuck, Oklahoma suggests, the camps stretched for several miles from Willow and Rock creeks near Shattuck, past Twenty-five Mile Creek north of Gage, as far as Sixteen Mile Creek north of Fargo, Oklahoma. A more accurate summary is at best an educated guess.²³

Locating the site of the killing of the Bow String warriors is even more difficult. Purported sites lie on the Washita River in the Texas Panhandle (Kiowa), close to the location of the 1868 Washita Massacre near Cheyenne, Oklahoma (Kiowa and Arapaho), and at a rocky mound near Hobart, Oklahoma much farther downstream (Cheyenne).²⁴ The most specific location is that provided by James Mooney in his commentary on the Kiowa Settan calendar history: "a small tributary of Scott Creek...an upper branch of the North Fork of the Red River," south of Fort Elliott in the Texas Panhandle. Presumably his information came from Tebodol, a Kiowa survivor of the fight. But Mooney is also the reference cited for the location near Cheyenne, Oklahoma.²⁵

Accurate placement is important for a number of reasons. Locating this event speaks to an aspect of local, state, and regional history that should not be forgotten. In this case, it pushes the threshold of history back more than five decades before non-Indian settlement of the region and offers a non-Anglo-American perspective. The Battle of Wolf Creek was an important part of several tribes' histories. Knowledge of it adds to our understanding of the roles of participants such as Little Raven, Setangia, and White Antelope in subsequent interaction among these tribes and with Anglo-Americans. Unfortunately, knowledge of Indian landmarks is fast disappearing with the passing of tribal elders. In practical terms, current land use and construction projects may intrude into a historic site such as this one, and the accidental exhumation of human remains then becomes an issue under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

A case in point was the 1971 discovery of the "Sand Man," the skeletal remains of a Cheyenne buried in the probable vicinity of the Battle of Wolf Creek. He had been interred with great care. His face was painted red, his elaborate hair pipe and concho earrings were in place, his blanket was heavily beaded, and his parasol and weapons lay at his side. While his cause and date of death

were not apparent, these items were compatible with trade goods available at Bent's Fort for the period of the Wolf Creek battle. Cheyenne men on hunting or raiding expeditions traveled light and would not have carried these important but cumbersome belongings with them. It is tempting to imagine that he was a casualty of the battle, buried by his relatives afterwards.²⁶

Moreover, as Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation forensic artist Harvey Pratt worked with the Sand Man's skull to reconstruct his appearance, supernatural occurrences convinced him that this man died with his spiritual powers in full force. Pratt, a nationally recognized leader in his field as well as a traditional Cheyenne chief and descendant of the Arrow Keeper White Thunder, recalled that a warrior prepared his "medicine" before battle just as he readied his bow, lance, and shield. Pratt was unable to begin the exacting process of reconstruction until a Cheyenne ceremonial person performed the proper ceremonies. Pratt's work on the forensic reconstruction of the Sand Man illustrates an intriguing juxtaposition of scientific procedure based on Anglo-American values functioning in accord with traditional ways. It is a reminder that the Indian tribal ways still have as much validity for some Indian people as our ways have for non-Indian people.²⁷

Re-interred at Fort Supply in 2000, the Sand Man remains an intriguing mystery and reminder of Cheyenne presence in the area at the time of the Battle of Wolf Creek, but he provides no additional information about its location. Lacking documentation from written sources or Indian oral history, perhaps the only remaining method of locating the site is that suggested by a Cheyenne friend and earnest researcher into his tribe's history: One should take offerings of food and tobacco to the general location and listen for the echoes in the quiet of the night. While professional historians may scoff at this method of locating the sites of historic events, some Cheyennes are equally skeptical of professional historians, whom they see as sometimes unduly influenced by federal bureaucracy and by the ambitions and enthusiasms of local landowners and officials. If specific *place* is missing from Indian oral accounts of the Battle of Wolf Creek, what is strikingly present is detail about *what people did*. Through George Bent, who probably sat listening to the elders while they smoked and reminisced, we know White Thunder's dying words; that the outlaw Porcupine Bear counted twenty coups that day and how he won them; that Medicine Bear took an arrow in the face while retreating across Wolf Creek; that Rising Sun was wounded crossing the creek, fell from his horse, rose, waded on across, and fell dead on the other side; and that Gentle Horse, wearing his hair in a top knot on his forehead with an eagle feather stuck through it, rode through the Kiowa camp rounding up horses which he triumphantly drove away into the hills. We know there was great courage on both sides, and men who fought there appreciated that courage in friend and enemy alike.

Perhaps what is said and what is not said in these Indian accounts of this event suggest something important about Indian perspectives on Indian history.

Lack of specificity about place may have occurred because everyone involved knew where the trails, fords, sheltered camp sites, good water, and fine grazing were located in those days. Where the battle took place on Wolf Creek went without saying. Certainly the Cheyenne scouts knew within a few miles where to look for the Kiowa camps at that time of year. But perhaps place was not nearly so important to the tellers as *what people did*, hence the wealth of admiring detail in the oral accounts of the great battle recalled by George Bent. For us history is not quite complete without the ability to stand on the spot, take a photograph, and erect a monument. For the Cheyenne, Kiowa, Comanche, Arapaho, and Apache participants and their descendants, commemoration lies in describing feats of skill and courage, singing the songs that recall victory and loss, and naming the new generation for the heroes of another time.

Notes

1. A. P. Chouteau to Commissioner of Indian Affairs C. A. Harris, June 28, 1838, M234, Letters Received, Office of Indian Affairs, microfilm, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; James Mooney, "Calendar History of the Kiowa," *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1895-1896*, volume 17, part 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898), 162-165; Mildred P. Mayhall, *The Kiowas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1962), 12-13; George Bent to George Hyde, January 23, February 17, 1905, typescript, courtesy of Bob Rae, Fort Supply Historic Site, Fort Supply, Oklahoma.
2. Donald Berthrong, *The Southern Cheyennes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1963), 17-23; Virginia Cole Trenholm, *The Arapahoes, Our People* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1970), 107-108.
3. K. N. Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Cheyenne Way: Conflict and Case Law in Primitive Jurisprudence* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), 146-147; George Bird Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1956), 45; George E. Hyde, *A Life of George Bent Written from His Letters* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 72; George Bent questionnaire, 86.01.969.4, Joseph Thoburn Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City; Trenholm, *The Arapahoes*, 103-104.
4. Hyde, *George Bent*, 72; Mooney, "Calendar History," 271-272.
5. Wilbur Sturtevant Nye, *Bad Medicine and Good* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1962), x-xi; Mooney, "Calendar History," 272; oral tradition repeated by Lawrence Hart, Oklahoma Historical Annual Meeting, April 20, 2001.
6. Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes*, 46-48; Bent to Hyde, February 17, 1905; Mooney, "Calendar History," 272; Thomas W. Kavanagh, *The Comanches: A History, 1706-1875* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1996), 243-244.
7. Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 48; Hyde, *George Bent*, 73-75; Trenholm, *The Arapahoes*, 104.
8. Llewellyn and Hoebel, *The Cheyenne Way*, 148; Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 49-51.
9. Bent to Hyde, February 17, 1905; Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 51-52; Trenholm, *The Arapahoes*, 104-105.
10. Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 53.
11. *Ibid*; interview of Sam Manning, 108:57-58, *Indian-Pioneer History*, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
12. Candace S. Greene, "Exploring the Three 'Little Bluffs' of the Kiowa," *Plains Anthropologist* 41(1996):221-224; Nye, *Bad Medicine and Good*, x-xi; Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 55.

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13. Hyde, *George Bent*, 78-79.
14. Nye, *Bad Medicine and Good*; Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 56-57; Hyde, *George Bent*, 79.
15. Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 58-59; Hyde, *George Bent*, 79-80.
16. Bent to Hyde, February 17, 1905; Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 58-61; Hyde, *George Bent*, 80-81.
17. Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 58-61; Hyde, *George Bent*, 80-81.
18. Bent to Hyde, February 17, 1905; Nye, *Bad Medicine and Good*, xi; Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 59-60; Hyde, *George Bent*, 80-82.
19. Camp Holmes lay at the mouth of Little River on the Canadian River in present Hughes County, Oklahoma. Chouteau to Harris, June 28, 1838; Bent to Hyde, January 23, 1905.
20. Mooney, "Calendar History," 275-276.
21. Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 63-69; Bent to Hyde, February 17, 1905; David Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1954), 186-189.
22. See Lincoln B. Faller, "Making Medicine Against 'White Man's Side of Story': George Bent's Letters to George Hyde," *American Indian Quarterly* 24 (Winter 2000):64-90; Mooney, "Calendar History," 272.
23. Chouteau to Harris, June 28, 1838; Bent to Hyde, January 23, 1905; Bent questionnaire, 86.01.969.4, Thoburn Collection; Ben Clark, "Cheyenne History, The Present Location of the Cheyennes," 3449-a, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; *A Pioneer History of Shattuck* (Shattuck, OK.: Interested Citizens of Shattuck, Oklahoma, 1970), 8; Mooney, "Calendar History," 271-272.
24. Nye, *Bad Medicine and Good*, x-xi; Trenholm, *The Arapahoes*, 104.
25. Mooney, "Calendar History," 271-272; see Trenholm, *The Arapahoes*, 104.
26. Harvey Pratt, "The Reconstruction of the Sand Man," presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Oklahoma Historical Society, April 20, 2000, Tulsa, Oklahoma.
27. *Ibid.*