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PLAINS INDIANS ON
THE NEW MEXICO-COLORADO BORDER:
THE LAST PHASE, 1870-1876

MORRIS F. TAYLOR

WHEN Colorado became a territory in 1861, the northern boundary of New Mexico Territory was dropped from the thirty-eighth to the thirty-seventh parallel. Subsequent political subdivision brought the plains and mountains (to the crest of the Sangre de Cristos) of extreme northeastern New Mexico within the confines of the immense County of Colfax (established in 1869). Most of the same type of country in southeastern Colorado was divided between the counties of Las Animas and Bent (established in 1866 and 1870, respectively). The eastward course of the Cimarron Seco, or Dry Cimarron (known simply as the Cimarron in Kansas and Oklahoma), through hills and mesas in New Mexico just south of the Colorado line showed few signs of white occupation in the early 1870's. The Hall brothers—Jim, Nathan, and William—brought in 2,500 head of cattle from Richland Springs, Texas, in the fall of 1871. Their Cross L brand soon dominated the country along the Dry Cimarron, and there were a few other scattered settlers.¹ As early as 1868 it had been rumored that Madison Emory had discovered a gold-bearing quartz lode "of marvelous richness" on the river, but the report apparently was without substance.²

In Colorado, on the Arkansas River and its southern tributary known as the Purgatoire (Americanized to Picketwire), settlement was developing slowly in the vicinity of the confluence of the two streams. In 1866 the well-known frontiersman, Tom Boggs, went

to the lower Purgatoire from New Mexico and founded the tiny community of Boggsville;³ the following year the relocated Fort Lyon was set up on the north bank of the Arkansas below the mouth of the Purgatoire.⁴

Except for a few cattle and sheep outfits, there was no resident white population between the Arkansas and Canadian Rivers, through which the Cimarron Cutoff of the Santa Fe Trail passed. But that branch of the famous thoroughfare was withering as railroads reached across Kansas. In 1870 the Santa Fe trade went to the Kansas Pacific Railroad town of Kit Carson in eastern Colorado, much of it carried via the Mountain Branch of the Trail through Trinidad and over the Raton Pass. At the same time the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, which was soon to have a prime effect, was still building across the plains of central Kansas many miles east of the Cimarron Cutoff.⁵

During the first half of the 1870's there were Indian incursions through the region between Fort Lyon and Fort Bascom, on the Canadian River,⁶ for reasons and on a scale not generally realized. Appearance of young men of the Plains tribes from their agencies east of the Antelope Hills in Indian Territory during 1872 and 1873 may be ascribed mainly to a desire for perpetuation of the old way of life. Penetration of the upper Dry Cimarron country and the valleys of the Arkansas and the Purgatoire above Fort Lyon was a continuation of their old pattern of warring on the Ute in the foothills, or even in their mountain fastnesses, while the Ute maintained their custom of buffalo-hunting and horse-stealing on the plains.⁷ Search for buffalo does not explain raids that far west by warriors of the Plains tribes. White buffalo hunters had not yet made serious inroads south of the Arkansas River,⁸ although the winter of 1872-1873 saw the heaviest shipments of buffalo hides from Dodge City, Kansas, north of the Arkansas.⁹ That same winter was a good one for the southern Cheyenne, whose buffalo hunts had been very successful.¹⁰ Most of the raids probed far beyond the location of the main buffalo herds, which on the Dry Cimarron was rarely west of the range of the later 101 Ranch astraddle the Neutral Strip-New Mexico boundary.¹¹

Ute horses were an attraction which brought small bands of Cheyenne, often on foot and carrying bridles, lariats, and extra moccasins.¹² One such party, numbering fifteen, apparently was unsuccessful in February 1872; they were observed going down the Arkansas, dismounted, and closely followed by thirty-five, well-mounted Ute armed *cap-a-pie* as the observer put it, undoubtedly without expecting to be taken literally. Some of the settlers along the way were persuaded to cook food for both groups, whether together or separately was not said.¹³ If the account drawn upon is correct, the Ute were simply escorting the Cheyenne out of their buffalo range and away from their horses—a rather unusual procedure. About June 1, 1872, a large but unspecified number of Cheyenne moved north from New Mexico, crossing the Arkansas about forty miles below Fort Lyon, on the lookout for Ute, who probably were hunting buffalo in eastern Colorado and perhaps in western Kansas.¹⁴

While the Cheyenne were worrisome to settlers along the Arkansas, a big party of Kiowa was active in the high plains and canyon country of northeastern New Mexico. An estimated three hundred Kiowa suddenly came upon a small band of hunters from the distant San Juan Pueblo on the Rio Grande west of the mountains. Altogether there were eighteen Pueblo Indian hunters and three Mexicans, who were camped near where the Cimarron Road (Cimarron Cutoff) crossed Currumpaw Creek,¹⁵ a tributary of the North Fork of the Canadian and earlier known as McNees Creek, after a man who was killed there by Indians in 1828.¹⁶ The date was May 26, 1872, and the Pueblo hunters believed that the buffalo were about a day's travel to the east.¹⁷ The Kiowa attacked, and the men from San Juan and their companions took refuge in a nearby cave, La Cueva de la Currumpaw. There they fended off Kiowa attacks all day, and when the latter withdrew at nightfall they took with them a number of dead and wounded, including two chiefs killed. Not certain that the Kiowa had left for good, the Pueblo party stayed in the cave for two days; then they headed for home, reaching the town of Mora en route on May 31.¹⁸

Identification of Kiowa leadership in this case is next to impos-

sible, but an attempt may be made to place the incident in some context. The Kiowa did not hold their Sun Dance in the summer of 1872, apparently because of factional divisions between those desiring peace with the U.S. Government and those insisting on hostilities.¹⁹ The disunity was emphasized by a big spring raid from Indian Territory into Kansas, an undertaking of sufficient scale to be recorded in the Anko calendar for that summer. The Kiowa captured a large number of mules on that venture; in one raid they ran off one hundred and twenty government animals between Camp Supply, Indian Territory, and Fort Dodge, Kansas.²⁰ Probably a part of the same pattern was an encounter on May 22 between Indians and a detachment of Troop E, Sixth Cavalry, whose casualties were one man killed and one wounded.²¹ Assuming the accuracy of the number three hundred given for the Kiowa band on the Currumpaw in May, they may have been the perpetrators of the big Kansas raid. If, however, the Pueblo party exaggerated or the published figure was in error, Kiowa presence on the Currumpaw remains nonetheless a fact.

Shortly after the fight at Currumpaw Cave, a report reached Las Vegas that a band of Kiowa and Apache (undoubtedly meaning Plains or Kiowa Apache) had raided herds to the east, not many miles from the Texas line. Luis Guadalupe's place below Fort Bascom at the juncture of the Canadian, or Red, River and Ute Creek, a northern tributary, was hit. Then the Indians went up the Canadian to the ranch of a man named Johnson, about ten miles above the abandoned military post.²² Herders Miguel and Juan Ignacio Medina were killed by a party of forty Kiowa at a place called Palo Blanco on the eastern border of San Miguel County, which then extended to the boundary of the Texas Panhandle. Either the occupants of the nearby ranch belonging to Don José Martínez, of Taos, were away, or they had hastily abandoned the place, which the Indians ransacked for arms, clothing, and provisions. Someone, either at the ranch or along the Indians' route, noted that the Kiowa had with them a large number of horses and mules.²³

With the evidence it is not possible to link indisputably those three Kiowa occurrences, but the close time sequence in the same region strongly suggests some relationship. And it may be surmised that they were of a piece with other signs of Kiowa restiveness that season. On April 20, Kiowa under Big Bow (with some Comanche under White Horse) burned a government wagon train deep in Texas on the San Antonio-El Paso road, killing seventeen teamsters. White Horse and a mixed band destroyed a white family near the site of old Camp Cooper on the Brazos River in Texas on June 9, celebrating the feat with a scalp dance when they returned to the Kiowa Reservation. A few days before that some Kiowa led by the eldest son of Chief Satank killed and scalped a cowboy near Fort Sill, Indian Territory.²⁴ The growing militancy of the Kiowa Chiefs Big Bow and Lone Wolf was the product of their hatred of the reservation system, an attitude that was aggravated by the continued imprisonment at Huntsville, Texas, of their like-minded and influential colleagues, Satanta and Big Tree. Their opposition came from the peace faction led by Kicking Bird and Stumbling Bear.²⁵ By late June it appeared that most of the Kiowa were ready for the warpath.²⁶

A similar division existed among the Cheyenne, but the resistance group was smaller and less effective. Most of the Cheyenne favored peace, rejecting, however, specific proposals that they settle into an agricultural life and send their children to white men's schools. On those points they broke with their close associates, the Arapaho, who were peaceful and generally willing to try the white man's ways. In the summer of 1872 only a very small number of Cheyenne—estimated at twenty lodges led by Medicine Arrows, Heap of Birds, and Old Whirlwind—stayed away from the reservation in alliance with the hostile Kiowa villages.²⁷

The basic desire of the Cheyenne for peace was not inconsistent with the demand of many of their young men (not just the extremists staying with the Kiowa) that they be free to roam over what was left of their old ranges, engaging in horse raids and war

on the Ute. Insistence on the old ways persisted in the face of shrinking chances that they could be maintained. For example, in the summer of 1871 the intention of young Cheyenne to use ammunition, promised by the government for buffalo hunting, in an attack on the Ute was squelched only by a threat to withhold government rations from the tribe.

Varying degrees of youthful intransigence weakened control by the older Cheyenne chiefs, some of whom probably were half-hearted about it anyway. In August of 1872, anger and alarm spread quickly when Richard Jordan and his family were killed by Cheyenne on the Pawnee Fork of the Arkansas River in Kansas. Lieutenant Colonel J. W. Davidson, commandant at Camp Supply in Indian Territory, at once blamed the Kiowa and Cheyenne. Chief Medicine Arrows vehemently denied that his people had anything to do with the killings, which apparently were in retaliation for the death of a Cheyenne at the hands of white buffalo hunters.²⁸

A band of about two hundred Cheyenne led by One-eyed Bull appeared on the Purgatoire River in Colorado in the late summer. They pointedly refrained from molesting a stagecoach, and it was said that the ranchers of the area were not worried by their presence.²⁹ Unpredictably, the opposite reaction was aroused by a small, mixed party of Cheyenne, Kiowa, and (Kiowa) Apache that showed up on the Nine Mile Bottom of the Purgatoire about the same time. The composition of the group suggests that the Cheyenne were from the dissident lodges, but there is no proof.

Rumors rushed in all directions, telling of great slaughter by the savages. When such reports were unverified, the editor of the *Daily Rocky Mountain News* called them "canards," while the *Colorado Chieftain* denounced the consternation as a "gigantic sell" and tried to calm matters by saying that the Indians had been quietly subsisting there, in part, on the fruit in Mr. Higbee's melon patch.³⁰

A few days later the Pueblo paper published a level-headed account by a Methodist circuit rider, the Rev. O. P. McMains, who rode into Higbee and Smith's ranch on September 19. Forty-

three of the Plains Indians came to the ranch on September 13, staying about twenty-four hours. They were well mounted and equipped, and they were especially interested in tools and any scrap iron for weapon points. Leaving the fertile bottom lands, the Indians rode up the Purgatoire past the ranch of a man named Felton. He followed them upstream past the ranch of a Mr. Gildey, at the mouth of Bent Canyon on the north side of the river, to a little Mexican cluster known as Red Rocks Plaza, deep in the spectacular Red Rocks Canyon of the Purgatoire. There the leading citizen, Don Juan Córdova, killed a beef for them and asked them not to molest his livestock in the canyon of the Chacuaco, a southern tributary of the Purgatoire. But once over his line, according to a settler named Whiteman (oddly enough), they raided horse herds belonging to George W. Thompson and Lonny Horn in Colorado and to Dr. Thomas E. Owen in New Mexico.³¹ The Methodist preacher's account concluded with a statement that a "vast number of horses" were stolen from the Dry Cimarron country, an assertion that sounds as if it might have been based on rumors that came up from New Mexico.³² In mid-October the Pueblo newspaper carried a vague report of Cheyenne stock stealing and "other outrages" in the same Colorado vicinity.³³

The usual winter quiet set in. The Kiowa, both militants and peacefully inclined, stayed on their Indian Territory reservation, and the Cheyenne had such a good winter that their agent withheld annuities and rations until summer, because they were able to support themselves on the plenitude of their buffalo robes.³⁴ But by mid-February 1873 word was out in southeastern Colorado that a small party of Cheyenne, on foot and carrying bridles, lariats, and extra moccasins, had left the reservation near Camp Supply, heading westward to fight the Ute and steal their horses. It was said that a raid was expected near Fort Lyon or Trinidad, Colorado—not exactly pinpointing the locale.³⁵ It is possible that the warning, despite certain discrepancies, referred to White Bird, nephew of the conciliatory Chief Little Robe, who led seventeen young Cheyenne warriors on a foray against the Ute to fulfill boastful pledges made during a whiskey spree on the reservation.

Those Cheyenne probed unsuccessfully into the mountains west of Fort Bascom, New Mexico.³⁶ On the way back to the reservation they were hit by a detachment of troops some miles east of the fort.³⁷ One Indian was killed, one left for dead in the field, and three others wounded, including White Bird.³⁸ That group probably was the small band of Cheyenne that Tom Boggs was told about in a letter; his correspondent said they went up the Canadian and might get to the upper Arkansas, and he added that the Cheyenne chiefs, Little Robe and Stone Calf, said they were unable to keep their young men from slipping away.³⁹ And there is also the possibility that three separate bands were in the field.

That many of the Plains Indians were determined to carry on in the old ways was substantiated in March 1873, if the report was factual, by a fight near the Dry Cimarron between Arapaho and (Jicarilla) Apache.⁴⁰ The course of the Dry Cimarron had long been a means of egress to the plains for buffalo and antelope hunting by the Mohuache Ute and Jicarilla Apache, who had been jointly based on the Agency at Cimarron, New Mexico, since 1861. Once again inter-tribal strife occurred when that most peaceful of the Plains tribes, the Arapaho, persisted in following the old trails west into conflict with their mountain-dwelling enemies.

But there was a surcease of that kind of activity on either side of the New Mexico-Colorado line during most of the summer of 1873. The Cheyenne gathered on the Washita River in June for a Sun Dance, or Medicine Lodge, attendance at which was compulsory for all adult male members of the tribe. After the ceremony they scattered to summer camps. The young men had not given up their militant ideas, but the big problem for their elders that summer was to cope with illicit whiskey traders, who infested the villages.⁴¹ Similarly, the Kiowa assembled for their Sun Dance on Sweetwater Creek, also in Indian Territory, and strong dissatisfactions within that tribe were obvious because Satanta and Big Tree had not been released from prison.⁴²

Intra-tribal problems combined with those that transcended tribal divisions to create a very unstable situation on the reserva-

tions in the fall of 1873. Unlawful liquor traffic has already been mentioned, but of greater importance were evidences of increasing white penetration of the lands south of the Arkansas River. More and more white buffalo hunters were wreaking their slaughter there,⁴³ and the Santa Fe Railroad was building along the north bank of the river into Colorado, providing the means for fast and large-scale immigration of white men to plains and mountains.⁴⁴

In spite of those provocations, however, the arrival of a large party of Cheyenne in southeastern Colorado that autumn was motivated mainly by the old desires to war on the Ute and to hunt, although relatively minor depredations upon the property of white settlers seems to have become almost a natural part of the process. The expedition, however, was not intended as a hostile move against the whites, nor was arrival of the Indians on the Arkansas a surprise. Major James Biddle, Sixth Cavalry, commanding at Fort Lyon, was apprised that about a hundred Cheyenne had left the reservation two weeks before they showed up.⁴⁵ The warning unquestionably was concerned with a large band under the soldier-chiefs Spotted Horse, Big Wolf, and One-eyed Bull; there was a smaller party of about thirty warriors led by White Eagle (White Bird), who intended to visit the graves of their comrades killed near Fort Bascom the previous spring.⁴⁶

On the same day (September 27) that the Pueblo *Chieftain* and the *Las Animas Leader* published accounts of 173 Cheyenne in the Fort Lyon-Las Animas-Boggsville vicinity,⁴⁷ fifty-five men of Company M, Sixth Cavalry, Second Lieutenant George S. Anderson commanding, left Fort Lyon in search of other Cheyenne, who were reported to be marauding in the Two Buttes area. The cavalrymen found signs, saw no Indians, and were back in the fort on September 30.⁴⁸ Coincidentally, the Cimarron (New Mexico) *News* told its readers, also on September 27, that about fifty Cheyenne (probably White Bird and his men) had stopped at Mr. Lacey's ranch on Vermejo Creek in the foothills. Well-armed and each leading an extra horse, the warriors insisted that they meant no harm but were looking for (Jicarilla) Apache, although the Cheyenne took what they wanted from the ranch

house.⁴⁹ The nearly simultaneous appearance of those groups of Cheyenne was quickly followed by a report that a cavalry company from Fort Union, New Mexico, would reinforce the garrison at Fort Lyon, Colorado,⁵⁰ which at that time had but one infantry company and one of cavalry.⁵¹

The *Colorado Chieftain* said that "the settlers are concentrating in their strongholds," a natural enough reaction in the presence of one hundred and seventy warriors (no women or children were in the Cheyenne party).⁵² But another newspaper at the scene of action—the *Las Animas Leader*—gives the impression that the Indians were not hostilely inclined, camping a day or two near Las Animas (a small settlement on the south side of the Arkansas across from Fort Lyon) and saying that they had come to visit friends and to have a hunt. Perhaps their explanation was a bit disingenuous, but events showed that they were not on the war-path and that the *Las Animas* paper was a truer reflection of actualities than some of those farther removed.⁵³ No attempt will be made here to explain the editorial differences.

Major Biddle tried to persuade the Cheyenne to return to their reservation at once, and according to the *Leader*, about one hundred of them started for Indian Territory.⁵⁴ The paper, however, was guilty of oversimplification. They started back all right, but they divided into smaller parties for some stock stealing and other depredations on the way.⁵⁵ From a few miles below Fort Lyon, rancher S. P. Carpenter on Rule Creek, a southern tributary of the Arkansas, reported that five Cheyenne shot one of his horses and fourteen head of cattle.⁵⁶ In response to that and incidents of stock-stealing on the Nine Mile Bottom of the Purgatoire,⁵⁷ Second Lieutenant Anderson with thirty-five men of Company M, Sixth Cavalry, scouted the area from October 1 to October 6, seeing no Indians.⁵⁸

Approximately seventy Cheyenne from the party under the soldier-chiefs Spotted Horse, Big Wolf, and One-eyed Bull⁵⁹ moved north from Las Animas to old hunting grounds around the headwaters of Big Sandy Creek on the eastern Colorado plains. In white men's terms, their goal was River Bend, a station on the

Kansas Pacific Railroad.⁶⁰ Fear spread over eastern Colorado. The settlement of Pueblo, for example, was "wild with rumors" of three hundred Cheyenne gathered on the Arkansas below the town and of five hundred Ute coming out of the mountains to fight the Cheyenne.⁶¹ Colorado Springs was in an uproar; there was much talk of "hostile savages" in "a carnival of blood."⁶² Into the midst of all this came a dispatch from Washington, where leading Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Ute chiefs had gone for a council, understating the obvious—that the Cheyenne then in Colorado and New Mexico had left the reservation without the approval of their chief (probably meaning Stone Calf) or their agent.⁶³

The peregrination of the Cheyenne band, with perhaps some young Kiowa and Arapaho attached,⁶⁴ caused a flurry of military maneuvers; troopers were in the field, but there was no close coordination of their movements, which could hardly be called a campaign. One company was sent over from Fort Garland in the San Luis Valley to join in the search,⁶⁵ and Company M, Sixth Cavalry, again rode out of Fort Lyon with Second Lieutenant Anderson in command, this time in response to a telegraphic order from Colonel James Oakes, commander of the regiment. The men of the Sixth followed the Indians north, looking particularly into what was known as the Bijou Basin in the drainage of the South Platte River.⁶⁶ The *Colorado Chieftain* published a story from Colorado Springs predicting that the Indians would swing full circle on the plains, murdering and stealing livestock under the guidance of warriors who had been part of the Purgatoire raids in 1872.⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that the *New Mexican* in Santa Fe carried an article under a Pueblo dateline belittling the emotional statements of the Colorado Springs correspondent and remarking that the Indians had killed a few chickens and stolen a few pounds of sugar from a ranch. No outrages were committed, and the story of the killing of a man below Fort Lyon was untrue.⁶⁸ The military report contained in the Fort Lyon Post Return of October 1873 made no mention of killings or depredations, stating simply that Lieutenant Anderson and his men went through the country traversed by the Indians on their way back to the reservation,

seeing no Indians during a scout of two hundred and thirty miles.

Accounts became more far-fetched the farther they traveled; at least, the *Las Animas Leader* sharply criticized a publication called the *Kansas City Cattle Trail* for saying that schools in the area were closed and several hundred cattle slaughtered. Additional comment by the *Leader* told of about seventy-five Cheyenne, on their way back to the reservation, peacefully eating their dinner at Ella, the post office at the mouth of Sand Creek, and then passing Granada, the Santa Fe Railroad town. At the latter place a volunteer force was organized to recover stolen livestock. Thirty miles east they met First Lieutenant W. M. Wallace with Company H, Sixth Cavalry, on his way from Fort Dodge to Fort Lyon. That officer persuaded the volunteers to give up the chase—he had seen the Indians fifteen miles farther on “going like lightning.”⁶⁹

The smaller party of Cheyenne that penetrated into the hill country along Vermejo Creek in Colfax County, New Mexico, had small success in quest of Jicarilla Apache, and on the way back they turned their attention to livestock in the valley of the Dry Cimarron. One report said that one hundred and fifty Jicarilla were in pursuit, but their chances of catching up were slight.⁷⁰ Perhaps the Jicarilla show of force at that stage was mainly bluff.

Opinions about the danger varied. Some people felt that places like Pueblo and Denver had overreacted and that the call at Rocky Ford for a civilian force to attack the Indians was unwarranted.⁷¹ Others were certain that the presence of both civilian volunteers and the military in the field was a real deterrent to more serious depredations. Reassurances came from Brigadier General John Pope, commanding the military Department of the Missouri with headquarters at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, that he planned a deployment of troops on the plains of eastern Colorado to prevent a repetition of the raids. And Colorado Territory's Governor Samuel H. Elbert was so satisfied about future prospects that he publicly expressed his belief that Colorado had seen its last raid.⁷²

A couple of weeks after the governor made his statement, word reached Fort Lyon that a party of Indians had left Camp Supply with the usual assertion of intent to fight the Ute. They were

headed for the Purgatoire River,⁷³ where the best chance of finding the traditional enemy was, of course, above Trinidad. Identity of the Indians was uncertain, but past experience made it easy to guess.

Evidently Major Biddle, at Fort Lyon, discounted the old excuse, figuring it was more likely that the Indians planned to raid farms and ranches along the Purgatoire, and on November 17 he sent Lieutenant W. M. Wallace with Company H, Sixth Cavalry, across the late autumn landscape to the Nine Mile Bottom. Two days later, Company M, Sixth Cavalry, commanded by First Lieutenant H. P. Perrine went out to Red Rocks Plaza. Both units returned without having seen any Indians or any substantial signs of them.⁷⁴

The Washington meetings failed to provide reservation terms acceptable to both the northern and southern Cheyenne, and the Senate failed to ratify a treaty which would have given the southern Cheyenne about the same territory that was allotted to them under the Medicine Lodge Treaties of 1867. Those negative results worked with other conditions in the winter of 1873-1874 to produce dangerous resentments in the Cheyenne villages. Recurrent factors were: (1) the growing impact of the buffalo slaughter by white hunters south of the Arkansas; (2) the spread of the liquor traffic; and (3) the militant urgings by some of the Kiowa and Comanche to resistance and revenge.⁷⁵ A fourth and newer factor was organized horse thievery by white men, ranging from Kansas to the Texas Panhandle and hitting Indian herds as well as ranchers' stock.⁷⁶

Traders saw danger signs that winter, especially in the Kiowa villages,⁷⁷ but the military apparently did not expect anything unusual in the summer of 1874. The *Las Animas Leader* in mid-May published the opinion of an unidentified officer at Camp Supply that the Indians were quiet and a few of them probably would visit Bent County, Colorado, in the summer.⁷⁸ As late as July 3 the Pueblo *Chieftain* expressed the feeling that Colorado was free of Indian troubles for the reason that the best of feelings existed between tribes and settlers.⁷⁹ That pronouncement was

made quite some time after incidents of Cheyenne hostility had happened in Kansas and Texas, and there were ominous stirrings among Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Comanche in response to the powerful medicine displayed by a rising young Comanche named Ishatai.⁸⁰

Routine patrols were out from Fort Lyon in June, and one of the two cavalry companies guarded a survey party, which was working in the area where the Colorado, New Mexico, and Indian Territory boundaries met, the troopers using the Stowe ranch on the Dry Cimarron as a base camp.⁸¹ But complacency was dispelled when word came out of the Texas Panhandle that Ishatai and a large Comanche-Kiowa-Cheyenne war party had been repulsed by a group of buffalo hunters at Adobe Walls, the ruins of William Bent's old trading post on the Canadian River. But the failure of Ishatai's medicine did not check the outward rush of war parties from Indian Territory.⁸² Much of the resulting action—the main part of the much discussed Red River War—took place on the Staked Plains of Texas. Here we will consider the neglected peripheral fighting in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico.

Settlers had come to expect an annual visitation by Indians, but they were not prepared for the killings and other violence which burst upon them in early July 1874. The first incident of record befell a young herder, who was killed and scalped on July 4 by an unidentified band of Indians about fifteen miles south of the Santa Fe Railroad town of Granada, Colorado. Later on Butte Creek they killed a man named Warwick, who was returning to his home near St. Joseph, Missouri.⁸³ These Indians may have been part of a mixed force of Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Comanche (estimated as numbering from 300 to 500) which rode into the eastern part of Colfax County, New Mexico, and then split into smaller groups.

On Sunday morning, July 5, one of the raiding parties struck deep into Colfax County on Crow Creek, close to the foothills of the main range and west of the high buttes known as Eagle Tail and Tenaja Mountains. There they killed a herder, and nearby on

Red River (Crow Creek is a tributary of the Red) they dispatched another who was working for that well-known frontier figure, "Uncle Dick" Wootton.⁸⁴ Twelve miles north of Cimarron on Vermejo Creek, another tributary of the Red (or Canadian), the Indians struck a horse herd belonging to rancher Tony Meloche, killing Patrick Nicholson, nearly shooting Meloche in the head, and wounding George M. Chase,⁸⁵ brother of Manley M. Chase, a prominent area cattleman. Twenty-seven horses were run off, some of them close to the ranch house. The surprise was complete. Speculation suggested that Nicholson thought the Indians were friendly Ute until too late. The operation was fast; by ten A.M. the Indians had driven a large number of captured horses into the hills east of Red River.

One reaction was an attempt to raise a force of Ute and Apache to pursue the invaders, their traditional enemies, but the Plains Indians had gone too many miles before that could be arranged. Military response was immediate as soon as word reached Fort Union, New Mexico, and Fort Lyon, Colorado. A courier rode into Fort Union late the same day, and that night the post commander, Major and Brevet Brigadier General Andrew J. Alexander, Eighth Cavalry, set out with two companies of troopers for the scenes of disturbance to the north. And at Fort Lyon, Major Biddle was ordered to Trinidad with two companies of the Sixth Cavalry to intercept Indians reported in the vicinity—perhaps expected to come through the Raton Mountains from New Mexico. Trinidad was agog with plans to send men and ammunition into New Mexico as fast as horses could be procured.⁸⁶

But neither the civilian nor military forces had any luck in making contact with the Plains Indians as they hastened eastward along the old route of the Dry Cimarron. Nor were other Indian attacks checked elsewhere in Colfax County. From the eastern part came accounts of worse violence and destruction. Benito Baca, of Las Vegas, and six others died near Capulin Vega (in the vicinity of the extinct volcano). The Indians also raided a few miles south around the isolated Sierra Grande. An indeterminate number of people were killed along the Dry Cimarron; the only

one publicly identified was Antonio María Lucero, son of Nicolás Lucero of Peña Blanca, southwest of Santa Fe. At Kiowa Spring on the old Fort Leavenworth road (between the Cimarron Cutoff and the Mountain Branch of the Trail) a wagon train was attacked and several men killed, while another train was said to have lost three killed and one wounded when Indians struck it near the Rock Ranch Crossing of Red River on the Cutoff. But the most shocking information came from the Currumpaw Creek area in the extreme east end of the county. Fourteen men were killed, including a sheepman named Conn and one James Roberts. Many of the victims were livestock herders; men so employed, either were dead or had fled, so Don José Albino Baca (presumably of Las Vegas), for example, took seventy men to the Dry Cimarron country to gather his scattered sheep. All together, about twenty-five white men were killed by Indians in Colfax County during July 1874; reported losses of horses and mules ranged from 150 to 500 head. Cattle often were destroyed on the spot.⁸⁷

The *Cimarron News* said the Indians carried the most advanced weapons available to the U.S. Government, information which caused the editor to criticize the Quaker Indian policy of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This was a reference to the pacifying efforts of agents and other officials who were chosen by President Ulysses S. Grant from a list of members of the Society of Friends.⁸⁸

Pursuit by the cavalry amounted to nothing except that the Indians, knowing they were being followed, left the region quickly and disappeared into the Neutral Strip and the north Texas plains. Major and Brevet Brigadier General Alexander with two companies of the Eighth Cavalry hurried to the Dry Cimarron country and then southeastward beyond the landmark of the Rabbit Ear. From that point he turned north into Colorado to establish a camp near the prominent Two Buttes, where a third company joined his command. On August 7 he came into Fort Lyon for supplies.⁸⁹

That post had been stripped of its cavalry companies, which had been ordered to Fort Dodge to augment part of the forces being assembled for a major strike against the Plains tribes. Units

of the Sixth Cavalry, commanded by Colonel Nelson A. Miles and based on Fort Dodge, were to be part of a three-pronged campaign in cooperation with four troops of the Eighth Cavalry from Fort Union under Major William R. Price and a third segment operating out of the Darlington Agency in Indian Territory.⁹⁰ The garrison left at Fort Lyon was made up of men of the Nineteenth Infantry, and, similarly, the men on duty at Fort Union were of the Fifteenth Infantry.⁹¹ The former commandant at Fort Union, Brevet Brigadier General Alexander, led the only cavalry units left in southeastern Colorado and northeastern New Mexico, and their job, from their camp on Two Butte Creek, was to guard against possible fresh incursions by Indians along the Purgatoire and the Dry Cimarron.⁹²

The raids during the summer of 1874 turned out to be the last real flourishes of the Plains Indians, and they quickly faded with only an echo or two. Comanche were accused of running off one hundred horses from Chisum's Pecos River ranch on July 19, and they may have been the same band (estimated at 400) alleged to have reached the Dry Cimarron a few days later.⁹³ Nothing further is known of that, nor is there more information about a telegram received at Fort Lyon in early August warning of the possible appearance of about one hundred Arapaho in Colorado.⁹⁴ As a kind of defiant challenge by white men, the *Cimarron News* stated unequivocally that citizens should be authorized to shoot any Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, or Kiowa found west of the 100th meridian—the eastern limit of the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles.⁹⁵

The Red River War was over by the spring of 1875. Its last engagement was far away in northwestern Kansas, where fleeing Cheyenne dug in and were destroyed by troopers from Fort Wallace on April 23.⁹⁶ Fears rose again about a month later when the *Colorado Chieftain* carried a story about a bloody encounter between fifty Comanche and thirty buffalo hunters led by William (Arizona Bill) Kirk, on Bear Creek about fifty miles south of Granada, Colorado, not far from the New Mexico line. The date was May 16, 1875; half the Comanche and thirteen hunters were

killed.⁹⁷ For some Plains Indians the lure of the past died more slowly. In late August small parties of Cheyenne were reported in southeastern Colorado, but they apparently were well-disposed.⁹⁸ And there is evidence that a few Indians visited the Nine Mile Bottom of the Purgatoire in 1876—an insignificant vestige of the old days.⁹⁹

NOTES

1. Albert W. Thompson, *They Were Open Range Days: Annals of a Western Frontier* (Denver, 1946), pp. 70-74.
2. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Dec. 24, 1868, p. 3.
3. Frank Hall, *History of the State of Colorado* (Chicago, 1895), vol. 4, p. 75.
4. LeRoy Boyd, *Fort Lyon, Colorado: One Hundred Years of Service* (Colorado Springs, n.d.), p. 3.
5. LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., *Colorado and Its People: A Narrative and Topical History of the Centennial State* (New York, 1948), vol. 1, pp. 327, 349.
6. Fort Bascom, established in 1863 to protect the road from Fort Smith to Santa Fe and to ward off Comanche and Kiowa raids, was abandoned in December 1870. Robert W. Frazer, *Forts of the West: Military Forts and Presidios and Posts Commonly Called Forts West of the Mississippi to 1898* (Norman, 1965), p. 95.
7. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), March 21, 1872, p. 1; Record of the Medical History of the Post of Fort Lyon, Colorado, July, 1871, p. 227, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives (NA), Record Group (RG) No. 94.
8. Donald J. Berthrong, *The Southern Cheyennes* (Norman, 1963); p. 372.
9. Francis Haines, *The Buffalo* (New York), 1970, p. 196.
10. Berthrong, pp. 372-73.
11. Thompson, p. 62.
12. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Feb. 22, 1872, p. 2, and Feb. 19, 1873, p. 3.

13. *Ibid.*, Feb. 22, 1872, p. 2.
14. The Ute sometimes hunted buffalo on the Republican River, both forks of which rise in northeastern Colorado. *Ibid.*, July 16, 1874, p. 2.
15. *Weekly New Mexican* (Santa Fe), June 18, 1872, p. 1, quoting the *Las Vegas Mail*.
16. Ralph Emerson Twitchell, *The Leading Facts of New Mexican History* (Albuquerque, 1963), vol. 2, p. 127. Frontiersman Jesse Nelson, husband of Kit Carson's niece, Susan, thought that Currumpaw [variously spelled] meant Crooked Creek. Early Far West Notebook 6, p. 8, Cragin Collection, Pioneers' Museum, Colorado Springs, Colorado.
17. That estimate of location lends support to the statement in Thompson, p. 62, which suggests that the main buffalo herd seldom was found west of the Neutral Strip.
18. *Weekly New Mexican* (Santa Fe), June 18, 1872, p. 1.
19. Mildred P. Mayhall, *The Kiowas* (Norman, 1962), p. 170.
20. *Ibid.*; *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), June 6, 1872, p. 2.
21. *Record of Engagements with Hostile Indians within the Military Division of the Missouri, from 1868 to 1882, Lieutenant-General P. H. Sheridan, Commanding* (Washington, 1882), p. 32.
22. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), June 6, 1872, p. 1.
23. *Weekly New Mexican* (Santa Fe), June 4, 1872, p. 2.
24. Mayhall, p. 237.
25. Satanta and Big Tree had been convicted and imprisoned for their part in the Warren Wagon Train Massacre in Texas in 1871. *Ibid.*, pp. 227-36.
26. Berthrong, p. 369.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 364-65, 369-70.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 363, 370.
29. *Daily Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), Sept. 18, 1872, p. 1.
30. *Ibid.*; *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Sept. 21, 1872, p. 4.
31. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Oct. 1, 1872, p. 2; Las Animas County Deed Record (Trinidad, Colorado), vol. 4, p. 186.
32. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Oct. 1, 1872, p. 2.
33. *Ibid.*, Oct. 17, 1872, p. 4.
34. Mayhall, p. 239; Berthrong, p. 373.
35. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Feb. 19, 1873, p. 3.
36. The newspaper item mentioned thirty Cheyenne, while White Bird's party was said to number seventeen. The difference is inconclusive; estimates of the size of Indian war parties often were in disagreement for a variety of reasons. The difference in destinations ascribed may also be inconclusive. A simple change of plans could account for it.

37. Although officially abandoned in 1870, Fort Bascom continued to be used occasionally by military units from other posts when they were in the area. Herbert M. Hart, *Old Forts of the Far West* (New York, 1965), p. 76.
38. Berthrong, p. 375.
39. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), April 5, 1873, p. 2.
40. *Ibid.*, March 18, 1873, p. 1, based on a *Trinidad Enterprise* item.
41. Berthrong, p. 377.
42. Mayhall, pp. 241-42.
43. Berthrong, p. 372.
44. James Marshall, *Santa Fe: The Railroad that Built an Empire* (New York, 1945), pp. 64-77.
45. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Sept. 23, 1873, p. 1.
46. Berthrong, p. 378. This source says there were 160 warriors in the larger party.
47. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Sept. 27, 1873, p. 1; *Las Animas Col., Leader*, Sept. 27, 1873, p. 2.
48. Post Return of Fort Lyon for Sept. 1873, Microcopy No. 617, Roll No. 660, National Archives Microfilm Publications.
49. *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, Oct. 4, 1873, p. 3.
50. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Sept. 23, 1873, p. 1.
51. Post Return of Fort Lyon for Sept. 1873.
52. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Sept. 27, 1873, p. 1.
53. *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, Oct. 18, 1873, p. 2.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Weekly New Mexican* (Santa Fe), Oct. 7, 1873, p. 2.
56. *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, Oct. 4, 1873, p. 3.
57. *Weekly New Mexican* (Santa Fe), Oct. 7, 1873, p. 2.
58. Post Return of Fort Lyon for Oct. 1873.
59. If these names are correct, they require some explanation. The Spotted Horse of best-known record was a Northern Cheyenne, an associate of the famous Roman Nose. Berthrong, pp. 169, 262-63. If he was on the 1873 raid, a new dimension was added; River Bend was within the range of the Northern Cheyenne. A Cheyenne chief named Big Wolf was killed by troops in 1864. *Ibid.*, p. 213. And there was Big Wolf, a Northern Cheyenne, who signed the Treaty of Fort Laramie, 1868. George E. Hyde, *Life of George Bent, Written from His Letters*, ed. by Savoie Lottinville (Norman, 1968), p. 349, n. 6. Noted warrior One-eyed Bull was killed in a skirmish with troops from Fort Lyon in September 1868. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo) Sept. 24, 1868, p. 1; Berthrong, p. 307. It is probable that the Indians mentioned here were named for the older and

well-known bearers of those names. See the material on Cheyenne names in George Bird Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians: Their History and Ways of Life* (New York, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 107-08, 123.

60. *Weekly New Mexican* (Santa Fe), Oct. 11, 1873, p. 1; *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Oct. 8, 1873, p. 1; *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, Oct. 18, 1873, p. 2; Record of Medical History, Fort Lyon, Oct. 1873, p. 141.

61. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Oct. 3, 1873, p. 4.

62. Ute were gathered in the region, and the people of Pueblo had had a bad summer worrying about an attack, particularly from the Mo-huache band under their Chief Ka-ni-ache. See Morris F. Taylor, "Ka-ni-ache," part 2, *Colorado Magazine*, vol. 44 (1967), pp. 156-59. That spring a party of 300 Ute had been observed near the confluence of the Apishapa and Arkansas Rivers. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Oct. 10, 1873, p. 2.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 2, and Jan. 9, 1874, p. 2; *Weekly New Mexican* (Santa Fe), Oct. 11, 1873, p. 1.

65. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Oct. 3, 1873, p. 4.

66. Post Return of Fort Lyon for Oct. 1873; Record of Medical History, Fort Lyon, Oct. 1873, p. 141.

67. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Oct. 10, 1873, p. 1.

68. *Weekly New Mexican* (Santa Fe), Oct. 11, 1873, p. 1.

69. *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, Oct. 18, 1873, pp. 2, 3.

70. *Ibid.*, Oct. 11, 1873, p. 2, taken from the *Cimarron News*.

71. *Ibid.*, Oct. 4, 1873, p. 3 and Oct. 18, 1873, p. 2.

72. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), Jan. 9, 1874, p. 2.

73. *Ibid.*, Nov. 4, 1873, p. 2; *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, Nov. 22, 1873, p. 3.

74. Post Return of Fort Lyon for Nov. 1873; Record of Medical History, Fort Lyon, Nov. 1873, p. 145.

75. Berthrong, pp. 378-83; Mayhall, pp. 244-45; William H. Leckie, "The Red River War, 1784 [1874]-1875," *Panhandle-Plains Historical Review*, vol. 29 (1956), pp. 78-79.

76. Leckie, pp. 78, 80; Berthrong, pp. 382-83; *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, Nov. 8, 1873, p. 3 and Dec. 12, 1873, p. 3.

77. Leckie, p. 80.

78. *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, May 15, 1874, p. 3.

79. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), July 3, 1874, p. 2.

80. Leckie, p. 80; *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, June 26, 1874, p. 3; Ernest Wallace and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Comanches, Lords of the South Plains* (Norman, 1952), pp. 319, 325.

81. Post Return of Fort Lyon for June 1874.

82. Wallace and Hoebel, pp. 325-26; Leckie, p. 82.

83. *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, July 24, 1874, p. 1, quoting a letter from Granada dated July 16.

84. One of the dead men was Charles A. Buthe, but the record does not specify which.

85. The newspaper article refers to a Mr. Chase. His given name was obtained from Mrs. Stanley M. Chase, of Cimarron, New Mexico, through the cooperation of Miss Ena Sroat, assistant librarian, Trinidad State Junior College.

86. A civilian force of thirty men, led by Casimiro Barela, hastened to the Dry Cimarron, but contemporary sources indicate that such groups were ineffective. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), July 9, 1874, p. 1.

87. This account of the Plains Indian attacks in Colfax County is based on newspapers and other contemporary sources: *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), July 8, 1874, p. 1, and July 9, 1874, p. 1; *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, July 10, 1874, p. 3, July 17, 1874, p. 1, and July 24, 1874, pp. 1, 2; *Weekly New Mexican* (Santa Fe), July 14, 1874, pp. 1, 2; Post Returns of Fort Lyon for June and July 1874.

88. Berthrong, p. 345; Mayhall, pp. 221-22; Wallace and Hoebel, pp. 313-14.

89. *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, July 31, 1874, p. 3, and Aug. 14, 1874, p. 2.

90. Leckie, p. 84.

91. Post Return of Fort Lyon for Aug. 1874; Robert M. Uitley, *Fort Union National Monument, New Mexico* (Washington, 1962), pp. 46-49, 64, 68.

92. *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, July 31, 1874, p. 3, and Aug. 14, 1874, p. 2.

93. *Weekly New Mexican* (Santa Fe), July 21, 1874, p. 2; *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, July 24, 1874, p. 2, quoting a private letter from Cimarron, New Mexico, dated July 22.

94. *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, Aug. 7, 1874, p. 2.

95. *Ibid.*, Aug. 14, 1874, p. 2.

96. Leckie, pp. 96-99.

97. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), May 28, 1875, p. 4.

98. *Las Animas, Col., Leader*, Aug. 27, 1875, p. 3.

99. Morris F. Taylor, *Pioneers of the Picketwire* (Trinidad, 1964), p. 25.