A postscript to Geronimo

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Much, perhaps too much, has been written about Geronimo's exploits on the warpath. A good deal of this information was second-hand, but there is one source of knowledge about the old Apache warrior that is based on statements from his own lips.

A few years before Geronimo died “in captivity” at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, S. M. Barrett, superintendent of education for the Lawton schools, visited Geronimo often. Through interpreters, and through his and Geronimo's knowledge of Spanish, Barrett was able to write Geronimo's Story of His Life, published by Duffield & Co. in 1907. This little-known book, dedicated to President Theodore Roosevelt, tells many illuminating things about Geronimo and the folklore and philosophy of the Apaches.

Those who have always considered Geronimo to be a Chiricahua may be surprised to learn from his own words that he belonged to another one of the six subtribes of Apaches. “To one of these, the Bedonkohe, I belong,” he said. Our tribe inhabited that region of mountainous country which lies west from the east line of Arizona, and south from the headwaters of the Gila River.”

The other five subtribes were the Chihene (Ojo Caliente or Hot Springs) Apaches under Victorio, to the east; the White Mountain Apaches to the north; the Chieahen Apaches to the west; the Cho-konen (Chiricahua) Apaches, under Cochise, to the south; and the Nedni Apaches under Chief Whoa, to the south and west. These tribes grew closer together when they were under attack by United States troops, and Geronimo actually became the war chief of the united Apaches, largely Chiricahuas, in later years.

Geronimo was born in Nodoyohn Canyon, Arizona, in June 1829. This canyon, he said, lies around the headwaters of the Gila River, and so speculation has arisen that Geronimo may have been born in New Mexico. Of course, as this territory belonged to Mexico until 1848, Geronimo was actually a Mexican subject at birth.

Gokhlayeh*—as he was called in Apache—was the fourth in a

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* Meaning “one who thinks before he acts,” not “one who yawns,” as has been reported previously. The Spanish name Geronimo or Jeronimo (Jerome), was applied to him by Mexican troops who fought against him.
family of eight children—four boys and four girls. (A brother and sister were with him at Ft. Sill during the last years of his life.) As a boy, Geronimo's father often told him of the brave deeds of Apache warriors, the pleasures of the chase, and the glories of the warpath. He hunted buffalo, deer, turkeys, bears, rabbits, and mountain lions.

"There were many fish in the streams but as we did not eat them, we did not try to catch or kill them. . . . Usen (the God of the Apaches) did not intend snakes, frogs, or fishes to be eaten. I have never eaten them. . . .

"During my minority we had never seen a missionary or a priest. We had never seen a white man. Thus quietly lived the Bedonkohe Apaches."

When Geronimo was a small boy, his father died, and it fell upon the son to care for his mother. In 1846, when he was seventeen years old, Geronimo was admitted to the council of warriors under the chief of the Bedonkohe Apaches, Mangas Coloradas. Soon he married the fair Alope, daughter of Noposo. "Three children came to us—children that played, loitered, and worked as I had done."

In the summer of 1858, the Bedonkohe Apaches went south into Old Mexico to trade. They went through Sonora and camped outside the town called Kaskiyeh by the Indians. One day when they returned from town, they found that Mexican troops had attacked their camp and had killed the warriors of the guard and many of the women and children. Geronimo's aged mother, his young wife, and their three small children were among the slain. That night the Apaches and Geronimo swore revenge, although they left in silence for their home in Arizona.

Geronimo burned all the belongings of his family. Whenever he would visit his father's grave, or saw anything to remind him of former happy days, "My heart would ache for revenge upon Mexico," he said. So, because of the massacre at Kaskiyeh, the seeds were sown that later grew into hatred for all who crossed his warpath.

The Bedonkohe, Chiricahua, and Nedni Apaches united in taking to the warpath against Mexico. Geronimo, then thirty years old, helped to incite the tribes to revenge. "I will fight in front of the battle. I only ask you to follow me to avenge this wrong done by these Mexicans. Will you come?"

In this campaign Geronimo was allowed to direct the attack, once the Mexican force had been discovered. The Indians fought with fury and, although many Indians were killed in the two-hour battle, the
Apaches were victorious and destroyed two companies of cavalry and two of infantry. After this battle, Geronimo was made war chief of all the Apaches. The Apaches had avenged the massacre at Kaskiyeh.

Even this great victory failed to appease Geronimo, and, for the rest of his active life, he led forays into Mexico, burning and slaying as he went. He was wounded many times, and his body bore many bullet scars to his grave.

Even after they had become wards of the United States government in later years, Geronimo and his followers would break loose from the San Carlos Reservation from time to time and go on raids in the mountains of Mexico. At this time they were continually pursued by Mexican and American troops.

At the close of his life, he said, "It has been a long time since then, but still I have no love for the Mexicans. With me they were always treacherous and malicious. I am old now and shall never go on the warpath again, but if I were young and followed the warpath, it would lead into Old Mexico."

During the years of pursuit, 5,000 soldiers tried to track down about 250 Apaches, who knew the terrain and the water holes and thus were able to elude the pursuers. Sometimes the Apaches would be captured and returned to the reservation, only to break loose again. Finally, Geronimo surrendered to General Miles in 1886 and told him that the Apaches wished to return peacefully to the United States. Following their surrender, the Apaches were shipped by train,
under guard, to Ft. Marion, Florida. Then in 1894, when Geronimo was sixty-five years old, the Apaches were taken to the Ft. Sill Military Reservation near Lawton, Oklahoma. Later Geronimo was permitted to attend the expositions in Omaha in 1898, in Buffalo in 1901, and in St. Louis in 1904. In March 1905, he traveled to Washington to ride in the inaugural parade of Theodore Roosevelt.

According to Geronimo, Miles said they would be brothers to each other and would make a treaty whereby the government would provide the Apaches with houses, land, livestock, and clothing. Geronimo claimed that General Miles never kept his promises. Ft. Sill was not exactly the promised land, and the Apaches looked in vain for the houses, stock, and implements that General Miles had promised, so Geronimo said.

The climate at Ft. Sill did not agree with the Apaches from Arizona, and Geronimo even consented to let one of his wives go to the Mescalero Reservation in New Mexico. This wife was the mother of Robert Geronimo* (his legal surname), who still lives on the Mescalero Reservation. Actually, Geronimo had eight wives. Four of them were full-blooded Bedonkohe Apaches, and the other four were part Bedonkohe and part other Apache blood.

The cell where Geronimo was confined during his early days at Ft. Sill may still be seen today. In his later years Geronimo was allowed to leave the reservation and was a familiar figure on the streets of Lawton, five miles away. There he often cadged drinks from residents and tourists in exchange for some interesting bits of conversation about his past.

Geronimo died at the age of eighty at Ft. Sill on February 17, 1909. His death from pneumonia was reportedly caused by exposure while lying drunk by the roadside one stormy night. Up to the time of his death, he was still hoping that the remnant of his tribe might be allowed the privilege of returning to Arizona and New Mexico. His wish was finally granted, but after his death. Today, many descendants of these Apaches are living on the San Carlos and Ft. Apache Indian reservations in the White Mountains of Arizona and the Mescalero reservation in southern New Mexico.

* Born in 1889.