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# Cheyenne Dog Soldiers

## A Ledgerbook History of Coups and Combat

Jean Afton, David Fridtjof Halaas, Andrew E. Masich  
with Richard N. Ellis

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*Dedicated to the Cheyenne People*

## Foreword

The drawings in the Dog Soldier Ledgerbook depict the history of our people the Cheyennes during the troubled times following the massacre of Black Kettle's village at Sand Creek, Colorado, November 29, 1864.

These drawings represent *real* people and *real* events. The warrior-artists who drew these images intended them to be a record of the coups and combats that characterized this period of unprecedented warfare against traditional enemies as well as the white newcomers who now invaded our homeland.

The Sand Creek Massacre was a watershed in the history of our people. Many of the drawings depict retaliatory raids against white soldiers and civilians the beginning of our struggle to exist as a free people. We invite you to share our story.

LAIRD AND COLLEEN COMETSEVAH  
CLINTON, OKLAHOMA  
JUNE 30, 1996

*Laird Cometsevah is a chief of the Council of Forty-Four and president of the Southern Cheyennes' Sand Creek Descendants. His great-grandfather was in the village at Sand Creek when U.S. volunteer troops attacked Black Kettle's village. Colleen Cometsevah is a descendant of Chief Black Kettle and Black Tail Eagle also known as Big Jake or Old Little Wolf another Cheyenne chief who survived Sand Creek. She is one of the genealogists of the Sand Creek Descendants.*



Cometsevah's pipe, recovered from his lodge at Sand Creek, following the massacre. Courtesy Laird Cometsevah.



Cometsevah, Southern Cheyenne and great-grandfather of Laird Cometsevah; and Long Face, Laird's grandmother. Both were at Sand Creek when it was attacked by the 3rd Regiment of Colorado Volunteers, November 29, 1864. Courtesy Laird Cometsevah.



Gathering at Old Fort Lyon, Colorado, 1995. Left to right: Joe Big Medicine (Longdale Cometsevah (Clinton, Oklahoma), George Night Owl (Clinton, Oklahoma), Jean Afto (Denver), Arleigh Rhoads (Clinton, Oklahoma), Richard Ellis (Durango, Colorado),  
Courtesy Hal Gould, Camera Obscura, I

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## Introduction

Dawn broke cold and clear on November 29, 1864, revealing an American flag fluttering from a lodgepole before Black Kettle's tipi; below it was a white flag. Camped in a big bend of the Big Sandy or Sand Creek were Cheyennes under council chiefs Black Kettle, White Antelope, War Bonnet, and Sand Hill and perhaps some Arapahos. In the village were George, Charley, and Julia Bent, children of prominent fur trader and former Indian agent William Bent, as well as government interpreter John Smith and a soldier. The Cheyennes believed that they were under military protection, as such had been the policy of Maj. Edward W. Wynkoop, commander of Fort Lyon, and his successor, Maj. Scott Anthony, and they had been told at the recent Camp Weld conference that they would be safe if they would "submit to military authority" at Fort Lyon.

Approaching the village was a command consisting largely of the Colorado Third Cavalry, derisively called the "bloodless Third" of "hundred daysers," whose enlistments were shortly to expire. They were under the command of Col. John M. Chivington, Methodist-Episcopal elder and would-be politician, who had instructed the Cheyennes to submit to the military at Fort Lyon. Chivington, who had chosen not to inform his superiors of his plans, stopped mail and stage traffic, placed citizens under arrest, and cordoned off Fort Lyon after he arrived there so that no one could leave the post. He disregarded protests from officers at Fort Lyon that the Cheyennes at Sand Creek were peaceful and had surrendered to the army. On the morning of November 29, his command attacked the unsuspecting village.

The Sand Creek Massacre marks a pivotal point in Cheyenne-United States relations and had important ramifications to the history of Cheyenne people. Some believe that this is the most important single event in Colorado history, while others identify it as the most important event in the history of Indian-white relations in the United States because of the symbolism that has become attached to it.

The Cheyenne world had changed greatly by 1864. The Cheyennes had met Europeans at least as early as 1680, but it was in the nineteenth century that contact with whites, mainly Americans, increased dramatically. Government explorers and fur trappers signaled American penetration of the Great Plains

and mountain West, and the opening of the Santa Fe trade in 1821 marked the beginning of regular travel through the southern edge of Cheyenne territory. In 1825 a group of fifteen Cheyenne leaders agreed to a treaty of friendship with the United States, represented by Gen. Henry Atkinson.

In the 1840s travel increased in the northern part of Cheyenne territory with the inception of migration to the Oregon country and the Mexican California. Military units passed through Cheyenne country, but the military presence and the volume of civilian traffic on the Santa Fe Trail sharply increased with the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846. Growing contact between people of very different cultures brought incidents such as the killing of Tobacco, who was shot when he rode into the camp of a government wagon train to warn of an impending Comanche attack.

More serious was the California gold rush, which brought thousands upon thousands of gold prospectors across the plains and a cholera epidemic that devastated the Cheyenne population. Mixed blood George Bent, who lived his adult-life as a Cheyenne and who became a major source of information for ethnohistorians George Bird Grinnell and George Hyde, saw the impact of cholera firsthand and commented that it led to the destruction of the old Cheyenne clans. Measles and whooping cough had also made an impact, and Cheyennes and other observers noted a decrease in buffalo



William Bent (second from left) with Arapaho chief Little Raven (left) and the chief's son (right). The chief's sons are traditionally clad and wear silver pectorals with *najas*, eardrops, and moccasins. However, the warrior at second from left wears an 1857 pattern infantry frock coat and moccasins.

herds as well as changing migration patterns caused by heavy travel across the plains. In 1846 Yellow Wolf, a council chief, complained of declining buffalo herds and acknowledged that his people were hungry. Complaints about the destruction of game were repeated in subsequent years, and in 1853 a Cheyenne agent, Thomas Fitzpatrick, reported that they were "actually in a *starving state*." William Bent also noted the scarcity of game in 1859.

In 1851, concerned with the safety of the flood of Americans traveling to California, Oregon, and Utah, the government called northern and central Plains tribes to a grand gathering at Fort Laramie. The 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty, signed by Cheyennes and other tribes, provided for the safety of travelers and allowed the construction of military posts on routes of travel. The document also defined the territories of participating tribes. Boundaries for Cheyenne and Arapaho territory were from the Arkansas River to the North Platte and from the Rocky Mountains to the Smoky Hill country in western Kansas. This was simply a definition of territory and did not involve a land purchase or the abandonment of claims to other land.

The Cheyennes and Arapahos were thus acknowledged as owners of most of eastern Colorado in 1858 and 1859 when gold seekers invaded their territory. According to the Fort Laramie Treaty and the 1834 Indian Trade and Intercourse Act, the Fifty-niners were trespassers, a fact that was not lost on Indian agent William Bent and other officials.

As a result, Commissioner of Indian Affairs A. B. Greenwood journeyed west to meet with Arapahos and a few Cheyennes near Fort Wise in 1860, proposing a reservation that would isolate the two tribes from the Colorado gold regions. In the Treaty of Fort Wise, which ultimately was signed and ratified in 1861, a group of Cheyenne chiefs led by Black Kettle and White Antelope accepted a small reservation bounded roughly by the Arkansas and Sand Creek.

The treaty, if binding on all members of the two tribes, amounted to the sale of millions of acres of land. However, the Cheyenne signatories explicitly stated that they signed only for themselves and that it was not binding on the majority, who were not party to the talks. It also is doubtful that they fully understood the terms of the treaty, which provided for land allotment and which in the original document provided for the sale of reservation land to townsite developers.

The Treaty of Fort Wise was a worthless piece of paper. The Cheyenne signatories spoke for only a small minority. Most of the warrior societies, including the powerful Dog Soldiers, a major group in Cheyenne society, rejected the treaty, and government officials had every reason to be cognizant of the significance of that rejection. The Indian office had been in business long enough to know something about tribal political structures, to understand the absence of centralized tribal governments, and to realize that chiefs could speak only for their own particular group. Of course, that knowledge did not stand in the way of United States objectives when the government wanted something usually a land cession from a tribe. The Indian office had been willing and able to manipulate tribal political divisions to its own end, often by making a treaty with a few tribal leaders and then declaring it binding on the whole tribe. Perhaps the most glaring example was the Cherokee removal treaty, in which the United States ignored the constitutional government of the Cherokee nation and made a treaty with a minority faction. Clearly Indian officials were aware that Black Kettle could not make commitments for all Cheyennes. His words were explicit, and the subsequent actions of white officials made it plain that they understood this fact.

Coloradans were aware of the deficiencies of the Treaty of Fort Wise, for the *Rocky Mountain News* in 1863 acknowledged that the mining districts were still unceded Indian country. No one was more aware of the situation than territorial governor John Evans. His goal was to obtain approval of the treaty by the remainder of the tribe, and he warned the Indian office, "If this is not done the mining country of the Territory and in fact all the settled portion of Colorado are subject to Indian title. . . . Our laws are null and we are in anarchy." That point was underscored when the surveyor general refused to accept land claims until title to Indian land was extinguished.



Pvt. Joseph W. Aldrich, Company F, 1st Colorado Volunteers, age twenty-four, killed at Sand Creek on November 29, 1864. Aldrich stood 5 feet 5 inches tall and had light hair and hazel eyes. He is uniformed like most of the troops serving in the West 1858 forage cap, 1854 cavalry uniform jacket, and reinforced 1861 pattern kersey trousers. His arms include an 1853 Sharps carbine, Colt's .44-cal. New Model Army revolver, and model 1860 light cavalry saber. The carbine is suspended on the broad carbine sling of buff leather, and the saber is hooked to the model 1855 saber belt with its 1851 pattern belt plate. He wears nonregulation gauntlets. Colorado Historical Society.



Participants at Camp Weld Conference, Denver, September 28, 1864.  
Kneeling (left to right) are Maj. Edward W. Wynkoop and Capt. Silas S. Soule. Seated (left to right) are White Antelope (Cheyenne), Neva (Arapaho), Black Kettle (Cheyenne), Bull Bear (Cheyenne), Na-ta-nee (Arapaho). Standing (left to right) are unidentified (but possibly Dexter Colley, son of agent Samuel Colley), U.S. interpreter John S. Smith, Heap-of-Buffalo (Cheyenne), Bosse (Arapaho), unidentified (but possibly Samuel Elbert, secretary of Colorado Territory), and an unidentified man. Colorado Historical Society.

Evans's failure to obtain the signatures of the increasingly powerful Dog Soldiers and others undoubtedly set the stage for the more aggressive military posture of Colorado troops under Colonel Chivington and for the development of a sense of panic about the "Indian danger," a panic that was fueled in part by pronouncements of the governor and by stories in the *Rocky Mountain News*. Repeated reports of Indian danger led to authorization in the summer of 1864 to raise the Third Colorado Cavalry for one hundred days and set the stage for the attack at Sand Creek just before the enlistment period expired.

Historian Donald Berthrong concludes: "His treaty plans frustrated, Governor Evans moved systematically to prove that the Plains Indians were hostile. His motivation was simply to force a situation which would enable him to clear Indians from all settled regions of Colorado territory." If Colorado officials had become more militant by 1863, so, too, had the Dog Soldiers, who refused to accept the treaty and who refused to live on a reservation. They had stayed away from the Arkansas Valley, claiming as their own country the headwaters of the Republican and the Smoky Hill Rivers.

The Dog Men or Dog Soldiers were one of the four Cheyenne military societies created by Sweet Medicine, culture hero and giver of the Sacred Arrows. Other soldier societies were the Kit Foxes, Red Shields, and Bone Scrapers or Crooked Lances. Later additions were the Bow Strings and Crazy Dogs, the latter existing only among Northern Cheyennes.

The history of the Dog Men in the middle of the nineteenth century indicates major changes in Cheyenne society. The written record describes the growth in numbers and in power of the Dog Soldiers, but more important is the testimony of George Bent, the mixed-blood son of William Bent and Owl Woman, and other Cheyenne sources. Bent writes: "In early days the Dog Men were purely a soldier society, but in later years they came to be looked on as band or division of the tribe. To understand this change clearly it should be remembered that the soldier society was an organization of warriors, while the band or clan was an organization of families." He goes on to note that about 1837 the Dog Soldier society, led by Porcupine Bear, "changed itself from a society of warriors to a camp or separate division." One of the old divisions joined the Dog Soldiers, as did warriors from other societies and tribes.

Bent typically called the Dog Soldiers tribal "renegades" and "outlaws,"