

Philip Henry Sheridan

The Memoirs of
General P. H. Sheridan,
Volume II., Part 6



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Part 6

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CHAPTER XII.

AT FORT LEAVENWORTH—THE TREATY OF MEDICINE LODGE—GOING TO FORT DODGE—DISCONTENTED INDIANS—INDIAN OUTRAGES—A DELEGATION OF CHIEFS—TERRIBLE INDIAN RAID—DEATH OF COMSTOCK—VAST HERDS OF BUFFALO—PREPARING FOR A WINTER CAMPAIGN—MEETING "BUFFALO BILL"—HE UNDERTAKES A DANGEROUS TASK—FORSYTH'S GALLANT FIGHT—RESCUED.

The headquarters of the military department to which I was assigned when relieved from duty at New Orleans was at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and on the 5th of September I started for that post. In due time I reached St. Louis, and stopped there a day to accept an ovation tendered in approval of the course I had pursued in the Fifth Military District—a public demonstration apparently of the most sincere and hearty character.

From St. Louis to Leavenworth took but one night, and the next day I technically complied with my orders far enough to permit General Hancock to leave the department, so that he might go immediately to New Orleans if he so desired, but on account of the yellow fever epidemic then prevailing, he did not reach the city till late in November.

My new command was one of the four military departments that composed the geographical division then commanded by Lieutenant-General Sherman. This division had been formed in 1866, with a view to controlling the Indians west of the Missouri River, they having become very restless and troublesome because of the building of the Pacific railroads through their hunting-grounds, and the encroachments of pioneers, who began settling in middle and western Kansas and eastern Colorado immediately after the war.

My department embraced the States of Missouri and Kansas, the Indian Territory, and New Mexico. Part of this section of country—western Kansas particularly—had been frequently disturbed and harassed during two or three years past, the savages every now and then massacring an isolated family, boldly attacking the surveying and construction parties of the Kansas-Pacific railroad, sweeping down on emigrant trains, plundering and burning stage-stations and the like along the Smoky Hill route to Denver and the Arkansas route to New Mexico.

However, when I relieved Hancock, the department was comparatively quiet. Though some military operations had been conducted against the hostile tribes in the early part of the previous summer, all active work was now suspended in the attempt to conclude a permanent peace with the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas, and Comanches, in compliance with the act of Congress creating what was known as the Indian Peace Commission of 1867.

Under these circumstances there was little necessity for my remaining at Leavenworth, and as I was much run down in health from the Louisiana climate, in which I had been obliged to live continuously for three summers (one of which brought epidemic cholera, and another a scourge of yellow fever), I took a leave of absence for a few months, leaving Colonel A. J. Smith, of the Seventh Cavalry, temporarily in charge of my command.

On this account I did not actually go on duty in the department of the Missouri till March, 1868. On getting back I learned that the negotiations of the Peace Commissioners held at Medicine Lodge, about seventy miles south of Fort Larned had resulted in a treaty with the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas, and Comanches, by which agreement it was supposed all troubles had been settled. The compact, as concluded, contained numerous provisions, the most important to us being one which practically relinquished the country between the Arkansas and Platte rivers for white settlement; another permitted the peaceable construction of the Pacific railroads through the same region; and a third requiring the tribes signing the treaty to retire to reservations allotted them in the Indian Territory. Although the chiefs and head-men were well-nigh unanimous in ratifying these concessions, it was discovered in the spring of 1868 that many of the young men were bitterly opposed to what had been done, and claimed that most of the signatures had been obtained by misrepresentation and through proffers of certain annuities, and promises of arms and ammunition to be issued in the spring of 1868. This grumbling was very general in extent, and during the winter found outlet in occasional marauding, so, fearing a renewal of the pillaging and plundering at an early day, to prepare myself for the work evidently ahead the first thing I did on assuming permanent command was to make a trip to Fort Larned and Fort Dodge, near which places the bulk of the Indians had congregated on Pawnee and Walnut creeks. I wanted to get near enough to the camps to find out for myself the actual state of feeling among the savages, and also to familiarize myself with the characteristics of the Plains Indians, for my previous experience had been

mainly with mountain tribes on the Pacific coast. Fort Larned I found too near the camps for my purpose, its proximity too readily inviting unnecessary "talks," so I remained here but a day or two, and then went on to Dodge, which, though considerably farther away from the camps, was yet close enough to enable us to obtain easily information of all that was going on.

It took but a few days at Dodge to discover that great discontent existed about the Medicine Lodge concessions, to see that the young men were chafing and turbulent, and that it would require much tact and good management on the part of the Indian Bureau to persuade the four tribes to go quietly to their reservations, under an agreement which, when entered into, many of them protested had not been fully understood.

A few hours after my arrival a delegation of prominent chiefs called on me and proposed a council, where they might discuss their grievances, and thus bring to the notice of the Government the alleged wrongs done them; but this I refused, because Congress had delegated to the Peace Commission the whole matter of treating with them, and a council might lead only to additional complications. My refusal left them without hope of securing better terms, or of even delaying matters longer; so henceforth they were more than ever reckless and defiant. Denunciations of the treaty became outspoken, and as the young braves grew more and more insolent every day, it amounted to conviction that, unless by some means the irritation was allayed, hostilities would surely be upon us when the buffalo returned to their summer feeding-grounds between the Arkansas and the Platte.

The principal sufferers in this event would be the settlers in middle and western Kansas, who, entirely ignorant of the dangers hanging over them, were laboring to build up homes in a new country. Hence the maintenance of peace was much to be desired, if it could be secured without too great concessions, and although I would not meet the different tribes in a formal council, yet, to ward off from settlers as much as possible the horrors of savage warfare, I showed, by resorting to persuasive methods, my willingness to temporize a good deal. An abundant supply of rations is usually effective to keep matters quiet in such cases, so I fed them pretty freely, and also endeavored to control them through certain men who, I found, because of former associations, had their confidence. These men, employed as scouts, or interpreters, were Mr. William Comstock, Mr. Abner S. Grover, and Mr. Richard Parr. They had lived on the Plains for many years with different tribes of Indians, had trapped and hunted with them, and knew all the principal chiefs and headmen. Through such influences, I thought I saw good chances of preserving peace, and of inducing the discontented to go quietly to their reservations in the Indian Territory as soon as General Hazen, the representative of the Peace Commissioners, was ready to conduct them there from Fort Larned.

Before returning to Leavenworth I put my mediators (as I may call them) under charge of an officer of the army, Lieutenant F. W. Beecher, a very intelligent man, and directed him to send them out to visit among the different tribes, in order to explain what was intended by the treaty of Medicine Lodge, and to make every effort possible to avert hostilities. Under these instructions Comstock and Grover made it their business to go about among the Cheyennes—the most warlike tribe of all—then camping about the headwaters of Pawnee and Walnut creeks, and also to the north and west of Fort Wallace, while Parr spent his time principally with the Kiowas and Comanches.

From the different posts—Wallace, Dodge, and Larned Lieutenant Beecher kept up communication with all three scouts, and through him I heard from them at least once a week. Every now and then some trouble along the railroad or stage routes would be satisfactorily adjusted and quiet restored, and matters seemed to be going on very well, the warm weather bringing the grass and buffalo in plenty, and still no outbreak, nor any act of downright hostility. So I began to hope that we should succeed in averting trouble till the favorite war season of the Indians was over, but the early days of August rudely ended our fancied tranquility.

In July the encampments about Fort Dodge began to break up, each band or tribe moving off to some new location north of the Arkansas, instead of toward its proper reservation to the south of that river. Then I learned presently that a party of Cheyennes had made a raid on the Kaws—a band of friendly Indians living near Council Grove—and stolen their horses, and also robbed the houses of several white people near Council Grove. This raid was the beginning of the Indian war of 1868. Immediately following it, the Comanches and Kiowas came to Fort Larned to receive their annuities, expecting to get also the arms and ammunition promised them at Medicine Lodge, but the raid to Council Grove having been reported to the Indian Department, the issue of arms was suspended till reparation was made. This action of the Department greatly incensed the savages, and the agent's offer of the annuities without guns and pistols was insolently refused, the Indians sulking back to their camps, the young men giving themselves up to war-dances, and to powwows with "medicine-men," till all hope of control was gone.

Brevet Brigadier-General Alfred Sully, an officer of long experience in Indian matters, who at this time was in command of the District of the Arkansas, which embraced Forts Larned and Dodge, having notified me of these occurrences at Larned, and expressed the opinion that the Indians were bent on mischief, I directed him there immediately to act against them. After he reached Larned, the chances for peace appeared more favorable. The Indians came to see him, and protested that it was only a few bad young men who had been depredating, and that all would be well and the young men held in check if the agent would but issue the arms and ammunition. Believing their promises, Sully thought that the delivery of the arms would solve all the difficulties, so on his advice the agent turned them over along with the annuities, the Indians this time condescendingly accepting.

This issue of arms and ammunition was a fatal mistake; Indian diplomacy had overreached Sully's experience, and even while the delivery was in progress a party of warriors had already begun a raid of murder and rapine, which for acts of devilish cruelty perhaps has no parallel in savage warfare. The party consisted of about two hundred Cheyennes and a few Arapahoes, with twenty Sioux who had been visiting their friends, the Cheyennes. As near as could be ascertained, they organized and left their camps along Pawnee Creek about the 3d of August. Traveling northeast, they skirted around Fort Harker, and made their first appearance among the settlers in the Saline Valley, about thirty miles north of that post. Professing friendship and asking food at the farm-houses, they saw the unsuspecting occupants comply by giving all they could spare from their scanty stores. Knowing the Indian's inordinate fondness

for coffee, particularly when well sweetened, they even served him this luxury freely. With this the demons began their devilish work. Pretending to be indignant because it was served them in tin cups, they threw the hot contents into the women's faces, and then, first making prisoners of the men, they, one after another, ravished the women till the victims became insensible. For some inexplicable reason the two farmers were neither killed nor carried off, so after the red fiends had gone, the unfortunate women were brought in to Fort Harker, their arrival being the first intimation to the military that hostilities had actually begun.

Leaving the Saline, this war-party crossed over to the valley of the Solomon, a more thickly settled region, and where the people were in better circumstances, their farms having been started two or three years before. Unaware of the hostile character of the raiders, the people here received them in the friendliest way, providing food, and even giving them ammunition, little dreaming of what was impending. These kindnesses were requited with murder and pillage, and worse, for all the women who fell into their hands were subjected to horrors indescribable by words. Here also the first murders were committed, thirteen men and two women being killed. Then, after burning five houses and stealing all the horses they could find, they turned back toward the Saline, carrying away as prisoners two little girls named Bell, who have never been heard of since.

It was probably the intention to finish, as they marched back to the south, the devilish work begun on the Saline, but before they reached that valley on the return, the victims left there originally had fled to Fort Harker, as already explained, and Captain Benteen was now nearing the little settlement with a troop of cavalry, which he had hurriedly marched from Fort Zarah. The savages were attacking the house of a Mr. Schermerhorn, where a few of the settlers had collected for defense, when Benteen approached. Hearing the firing, the troopers rode toward the sound at a gallop, but when they appeared in view, coming over the hills, the Indians fled in all directions, escaping punishment through their usual tactics of scattering over the Plains, so as to leave no distinctive trail.

When this frightful raid was taking place, Lieutenant Beecher, with his three scouts—Comstock, Grover, and Parr—was on Walnut Creek. Indefinite rumors about troubles on the Saline and Solomon reaching him, he immediately sent Comstock and Grover over to the headwaters of the Solomon, to the camp of a band of Cheyennes, whose chief was called "Turkey Leg," to see if any of the raiders belonged there; to learn the facts, and make explanations, if it was found that the white people had been at fault. For years this chief had been a special friend of Comstock and Grover. They had trapped, hunted, and lived with his band, and from this intimacy they felt confident of being able to get "Turkey Leg" to quiet his people, if any of them were engaged in the raid; and, at all events, they expected, through him and his band, to influence the rest of the Cheyennes. From the moment they arrived in the Indian village, however, the two scouts met with a very cold reception. Neither friendly pipe nor food was offered them, and before they could recover from their chilling reception, they were peremptorily ordered out of the village, with the intimation that when the Cheyennes were on the war-path the presence of whites was intolerable. The scouts were prompt to leave, of course, and for a few miles were accompanied by an escort of seven young men, who said they were sent with them to protect the two from harm. As the party rode along over the prairie, such a depth of attachment was professed for Comstock and Grover that, notwithstanding all the experience of their past lives, they were thoroughly deceived, and in the midst of a friendly conversation some of the young warriors fell suddenly to the rear and treacherously fired on them.

At the volley Comstock fell from his horse instantly killed. Grover, badly wounded in the shoulder, also fell to the ground near Comstock. Seeing his comrade was dead, Grover made use of his friend's body to protect himself, lying close behind it. Then took place a remarkable contest, Grover, alone and severely wounded, obstinately fighting the seven Indians, and holding them at bay for the rest of the day. Being an expert shot, and having a long-range repeating rifle, he "stood off" the savages till dark. Then cautiously crawling away on his belly to a deep ravine, he lay close, suffering terribly from his wound, till the following night, when, setting out for Fort Wallace, he arrived there the succeeding day, almost crazed from pain and exhaustion.

Simultaneously with the fiendish atrocities committed on the Saline and Solomon rivers and the attack on Comstock and Grover, the pillaging and murdering began on the Smoky Hill stage-route, along the upper Arkansas River and on the headwaters of the Cimarron. That along the Smoky Hill and north of it was the exclusive work of, the Cheyennes, a part of the Arapahoes, and the few Sioux allies heretofore mentioned, while the raiding on the Arkansas and Cimarron was done principally by the Kiowas under their chief, Satanta, aided by some of the Comanches. The young men of these tribes set out on their bloody work just after the annuities and guns were issued at Larned, and as soon as they were well on the road the rest of the Comanches and Kiowas escaped from the post and fled south of the Arkansas. They were at once pursued by General Sully with a small force, but by the time he reached the Cimarron the war-party had finished its raid on the upper Arkansas, and so many Indians combined against Sully that he was compelled to withdraw to Fort Dodge, which he reached not without considerable difficulty, and after three severe fights.

These, and many minor raids which followed, made it plain that a general outbreak was upon us. The only remedy, therefore, was to subjugate the savages immediately engaged in the forays by forcing the several tribes to settle down on the reservations set apart by the treaty of Medicine Lodge. The principal mischief-makers were the Cheyennes. Next in devilry were the Kiowas, and then the Arapahoes and Comanches. Some few of these last two tribes continued friendly, or at least took no active part in the raiding, but nearly all the young men of both were the constant allies of the Cheyennes and Kiowas. All four tribes together could put on the war-path a formidable force of about 6,000 warriors. The subjugation of this number of savages would be no easy task, so to give the matter my undivided attention I transferred my headquarters from Leavenworth to Fort Hays, a military post near which the prosperous town of Hays City now stands.

Fort Hays was just beyond the line of the most advanced settlements, and was then the terminus of the Kansas-Pacific railroad. For this reason it could be made a depot of supplies, and was a good point from which to supervise matters in the section of country to be operated in, which district is a part of the Great American Plains, extending south from the Platte River in Nebraska to the Red River in the Indian Territory, and westward from the line of frontier settlements to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, a vast region embracing an area of about 150,000 square miles. With the exception of a half-dozen military posts and a few stations on the two

overland emigrant routes—the Smoky Hill to Denver, and the Arkansas to New Mexico—this country was an unsettled waste known only to the Indians and a few trappers. There were neither roads nor well-marked trails, and the only timber to be found—which generally grew only along the streams—was so scraggy and worthless as hardly to deserve the name. Nor was water by any means plentiful, even though the section is traversed by important streams, the Republican, the Smoky Hill, the Arkansas, the Cimarron, and the Canadian all flowing eastwardly, as do also their tributaries in the main. These feeders are sometimes long and crooked, but as a general thing the volume of water is insignificant except after rain-falls. Then, because of unimpeded drainage, the little streams fill up rapidly with torrents of water, which quickly flows off or sinks into the sand, leaving only an occasional pool without visible inlet or outlet.