

Traveling Trunk: *I Heard a Coyote Howl*

by Dr. David Clapsaddle

**Preface: In the spring of 1867, Major General Winfield Scott Hancock departed Fort Riley to march out upon the plains of Kansas with a command of 1400 men: cavalry, infantry, and artillery. His mission was to make a show of force to the Southern Plains Indians. His destination was a Cheyenne/Sioux village thirty miles west of Fort Larned where he hoped to council with the Indians and persuade them to cease resisting the advance of white Americans into the region which for many years had been their hunting grounds. This little book tells the story of Box Elder, a twelve-year-old Cheyenne boy who lived at the village in April 1867 when his people had to flee from what they thought was sure to be an attack by Hancock's soldiers.*

I reached my twelfth birthday in the same moon white people call November. Our people were camped on Red Arm Creek with some Lakota who had come from the North to be with us during the cold of the year. I had already killed my first buffalo and even though it was only a calf, I was ready to become a warrior. My grandfather was to teach me all the things that a warrior must know.

Every morning, he would say, "Box Elder, come with me." Box Elder was my grandfather's name given to me when I was six years old. It is a good name for Grandfather was a good man, generous and wise. The same name was given to many men in our family from the time the stars fell from the sky. When the days were cold, Grandfather and I sat at the back of the lodge, the honored place behind the fire. It was then that mother made me a parfleche from the hide of my first buffalo. Grandfather said that every warrior must have a parfleche in which to keep his things. On the warmer days, we would sit outside the lodge to catch the sun as it shined through the bare branches of the elm trees. Many days I spent with my grandfather listening carefully as he told me how I must conduct myself as a warrior if I was to be respected by our people. I would have many other responsibilities than fighting the enemy. Grandfather helped me to understand that above all I must help my family and make sure they did not go hungry; also, that I should be generous with the poor people in the village, sharing with them

food, robes, ponies, whatever they need. Many times over, he said that I must not boast about the brave or good things I had done. Grandfather also talked to me about respect for animals: the bear, the badger, the wolf, and the coyote. All these animals are possessed with powers; but none is more powerful than the coyote. Although the coyote is not as large or strong as the wolf, he is far more intelligent. He is sly and clever. Our people came to know him as the trickster. It was then that Grandfather helped me make a medicine bag. Mother gave me a piece of soft buckskin she had made from a deer hide, and Grandfather helped me cut out the bag, careful to leave two long strips attached. With a sharp needle Grandfather had got from a trader he helped me sew up the buckskin with sinew into a little pouch. The strings were tied in a knot at the end so I could hang the medicine bag around my neck. Grandfather told me that I would need to find some things with good medicine and keep them in my bag. I already had one thing in mind, a coyote tooth I found near the river.

During the cold moons, a man named Guerrier often came to the village to trade for buffalo robes. He worked for a white man who had a trading post at Fort Larned, one day's ride to the east. We liked Guerrier. His mother was one of our people and he was married to Julia Bent whose mother was also one of our people. We also liked the things he brought to trade: coffee, sugar, lead, powder, and the pretty beads our mothers used to decorate clothing. In the moon that whites call April when the grass was beginning to turn green, Guerrier came again to the village, but not to trade. He came with a message from Wyncoop, our Indian agent. Wyncoop wanted some of our warriors to council with General Hancock who was at Fort Larned with many soldiers and big guns.

Our warriors were excited. Long into the night, they talked with the Lakota. What were the bluecoats doing? Why did they bring the big guns? Did our soldiers dare go to the fort?

Was there going to be another attack as there was at Dry River when so many of our people were killed? Finally, it was decided that about ten warriors would go to Fort Larned. I can't remember all their names, but I do recall that Tall Bull and White Horse were two who did go.

Several days later, the warriors returned to the village with news of the council at Fort Larned. During the council, General Hancock made a speech.

“You know very well if you go to war with the white man, you will lose. The Great Father has many more warriors. It is true you might kill some soldiers and surprise some small detachments, but you will lose men and you have not a great many to lose. You cannot replace warriors; we can. It is in your interest to have peace with the white man.”

Then Tall Bull made a speech: “You sent for us; we came here. We have made a treaty with our agent, Colonel Wyncoop. We never did white men any harm. We didn't intend to. We are willing to be friends with the white man.”

Guerrier who could speak the white man's language and the words of our people interpreted the speeches of the general and Tall Bull. It was then agreed that the council would resume at our village and Tall Bull's speech was intended to convince General Hancock that there was no need to hurry as our people wanted to be friends with the whites. This was the first of several tricks used to delay the soldiers' march to our village. Such a delay would allow time for our women and children to flee. Our warriors were brave; they were not afraid. But, they were also wise. Like the coyote, they were out to trick General Hancock and the soldiers.

On the morning following the council, Hancock's soldiers marched west following Red Arm Creek toward our village. The same day, our warriors tried another trick to delay the soldiers' march by setting fire to the grass. Later in the day, some of our warriors came to General Hancock saying that our village was not far away and that to prove our good intentions,

two of our warriors would be willing to stay in the soldier's camp that night. The two warriors who stayed with the soldiers were White Horse and Pawnee Killer, a Lakota warrior who had great respect among his people.

Early the next day, White Horse and Pawnee Killer left the soldiers' camp promising to return with the headmen of our village. This was another trick. When the sun was very high, one of our warriors named Bull Bear arrived at the soldiers' camp to tell General Hancock that the headmen were on their way. After waiting some time, General Hancock began to march west, and at midday, the soldiers came to a low ridge. Once on top of the ridge, they saw not far away 300 of our warriors, mounted, painted, and drawn up in a battle line prepared for war. Anyway, this is what my father told me. I had wanted to go with the warriors. After all, had I not killed my first buffalo? Was I not old enough to become a warrior? My father was firm. He said that was not the time for my first warfare. In fact, he told me that there was not going to be any battle. This was just another trick to slow Hancock's march to our village. Besides, he said that I would be needed to help my mother and sisters pack our possessions when they left the village.

Immediately, the soldiers formed a battle line, and some of the Lakotas who had no horses fled toward the village. After a short while, Wyncoop rode out between the two battle lines to ask that some of our warriors meet with General Hancock. Several of our warriors agreed to go: Tall Bull and White Horse from the Lakotas and Pawnee Killer, also a Northern Cheyenne known by our people as Bat. The whites called him Roman Nose. As the soldiers and the warriors met, General Hancock asked if the warriors wanted war or peace. Bat became angry. He answered that we did not want war, that if we did, we would not come so close to the big guns. Again, Guerrier interpreted both the words of the warriors and the white men. Finally,

both sides agreed to resume the council at our village. Our warriors turned west followed by the soldiers.

At the same time our warriors had left the village to meet the soldiers, our mothers began to load the pack horses for our trip to the North. I brought in the ponies and fixed the travois while my mother and sisters gathered the few possessions we could take. We did not take much because we needed a light load to travel quickly and not tire the ponies. But, I made sure that I did not leave my parfleche behind, and I made sure that I packed the new leggings and shirt my mother had made for me from the cloth she got from Guerrier. We left the lodges standing, another trick to make the soldiers think we were in camp; but mother cut a large piece from our lodge's skins so we could have a little shelter as we fled.

The soldiers made camp only a half mile from our village. Soon after, Bat and some other warriors went to the camp to tell General Hancock that the women and children had left the village fearing they would be attacked. Hancock ordered that warriors would be sent to return the women and children. Bat replied that our ponies were too weak to catch up with the women and children. Hancock then loaned Bat two horses, and warriors were sent to bring back the women and children. Several hours passed, and the warriors returned the borrowed horses saying the women and children refused to come back. Later that night, Guerrier reported to General Hancock that all the warriors were preparing to leave the village. Hancock then ordered Colonel Custer to take troops, surround the village, and prevent the warriors from leaving. But Custer was too late. By the time he reached the village, the warriors were gone.

Early the next morning, Hancock sent Colonel Custer and his horse soldiers in pursuit of our people and the Lakotas. The general was angry because he knew he had been tricked, not once, but many times. Several days later, Colonel Custer sent a message to Hancock that the

warriors had attacked some stage stations on the road to Denver killing several men. Hancock became angry and ordered that our village be destroyed. All our belongings were gathered into huge piles: lodges, lodge poles, robes, blankets, ropes, saddles, everything. What could be burned was set on fire. What could not be burned was broken into pieces.

As our people left the village, they separated from the Lakotas and moved north. Colonel Custer could not find us and our warriors lived to fight another day.

Last night, I thought I heard a coyote howl...