SAND CREEK MASSACRE

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sand Creek Massacre
National Historic Site

Cheyenne camp circa 1860's – William S. Soule Photograph

The Sand Creek Massacre

Its victims numbered in the hundreds. Cheyenne and Arapaho survivors were displaced, relocated to Indian Territory. Its aftermath included congressional investigations, bitter critics, and staunch defenders, – reprisal, revenge, the mustering out of a Colonel and the resignation of a Governor.

Sand Creek also gave rise to a new generation of federal Indian policies, new treaties at the Little Arkansas and Medicine Lodge – and the next generation of fighters and fights: Beecher Island, Washita, Summit Springs, Palo Duro Canyon, Sappa Creek, and the Little Big Horn.

Sand Creek is among our nation's most profound historic places. The event remains a powerful, and to some, sacred symbol of sacrifice and struggle.

Seeds of Conflict

As Colorado Territory grew, so to did the tension and fear between settlers and native tribes. The settlers' desire for land and prosperity was confronted by nations who lived, hunted, and traveled across the same areas. Negotiations between leaders – governors, agents and officers on one-side, chiefs and headmen on the other, failed. A reservation established in 1861 was insufficient for the nomadic Cheyenne and Arapaho. The area was but a fraction of what had been promised ten years earlier. The seeds of conflict began in 1864 with the murder of Cheyenne Chief Lean Bear. In addition, the burning of several Cheyenne camps by Colorado cavalrymen near the South Platte, and claims that troops had initiated conflict near a place called Fremont's Orchard foreshadowed war. By June, the murders of the Hungate family near Denver and lingering fears of Indian attacks like those at New Ulm, Minnesota which had claimed hundreds of lives, increased tension among pioneers and Colorado officials. Assurances of amnesty for "friendly" tribesmen were tempered by a proclamation to "kill and destroy" hostiles. By summer, war would erupt across the plains of Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado. A September sojourn by Chiefs to meet with Colorado Governor Evans and Colonel Chivington accomplished little. Soon, the recruitment of additional volunteers began – farmers, printers, miners, clerks, politicians, gamblers, and even an actor heeded the call.

The Indian Expedition

George L. Shoup. A native of Pennsylvania, Shoup commanded the 3rd Colorado Regiment at Sand Creek.

Photo courtesy Colorado Historical Society, F3465

On November 24, 1864, a force of some 600 troops under the command of Colonel John Chivington, mostly volunteers who had been chided as the "Bloodless Third" Regiment, began a ride from Camp Fillmore towards Fort Lyon, some 120 miles down the Arkansas River. At Lyon, the expedition was joined by an additional battalion.

"Boots and Saddles" was sounded on the evening of November 28. An all-night ride brought the volunteers to Sand Creek. Here, at dawn, the troops got their first sight of the camps of Black Kettle, White Antelope, Left Hand, and other leaders. Within moments, a barrage of arms fire and howitzer bombardment was leveled against the Cheyenne and Arapaho. The tribes used driftwood and underbrush as defense while others crawled into pits dug along the banks of Sand Creek. Big Head, Howling Wolf, Spotted Horse, and other small groups of warriors fought the troops in several desperate struggles near the creek.

Later, groups of volunteers continued to pursue Cheyenne and Arapaho for several miles up Sand Creek. By afternoon, about 160 of the tribes lay dead, the majority women and children. Before departing the "Bloody Third" ransacked and burned the village.

Dozens of wounded troopers and their dead comrades were taken to Fort Lyon for care and burial. Here, protestations against the attack were lodged by some officers and civilians – sparking bitter indignation that would continue for years.

The Aftermath

Captain Silas Soule, Company D First Colorado Cavalry.

Photo courtesy Denver Public Library X-22202

Questions about the attack and claims of atrocities led to Congressional investigations and military inquiry. These took testimony from dozens of eyewitnesses and accepted depositions from others. Controversy arose as some veterans, like Lieutenant Joseph Cramer and Captain Silas Soule, bitterly condemned the attack, citing its ghastly scene and brutalities. On December 14th, Soule wrote, "*I refused to fire and swore that none but a coward would, for by this time hundreds of women and children were coming towards us and getting on their knees for mercy…My company was the only one that kept their formation, and we did not fire a shot*." Soule was later murdered on the streets of Denver.

Others, including Colonel Chivington, Major Jacob Downing and Lieutenant "Handsome" Harry Richmond, stoutly defended the attack. Volunteers anxious to restore honor and reputation, referred to themselves as the "Vindicators." One, Sergeant Stephen Decatur, penned, "*We are not violators of flags of truce! We are not the cowards who would massacre disarmed prisoners of war! nor the vain braggarts to bring home trophies of a battle with defenseless and already subjugated enemies…We are men who proved our manhood by going out in defense of all we hold dear. We are Americans, who love the flag of freedom, and we believe that we honored and did not disgrace that flag at the battle of Sand Creek"*

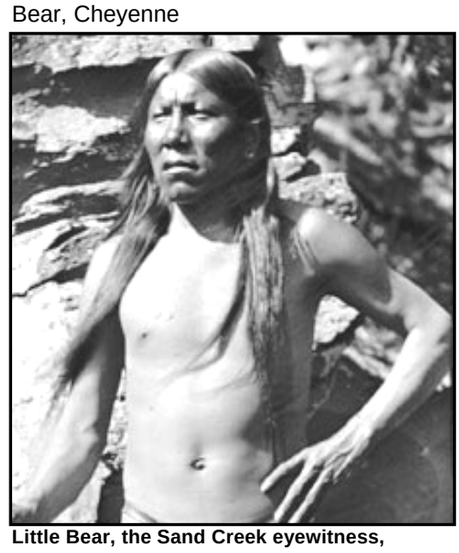
The Legacy

Lonewolf or Stacy Riggs. Cheyenne eyewitness to Sand Creek, Washita, the Dull Knife Fight, and the Little Big Horn.

Photo: Soul of the Red Man, 1937

White Antelope and Yellow Wolf, venerated Cheyenne Chiefs, were two of many leaders to perish at Sand Creek. Others included Lone Bear, Warbonnet, Standing Water, Heap of Crows, Black Wolf, and Bear Robe. A list of 112 Sand Creek Heads of Families was translated and compiled by the United States in 1865. The list includes killed, wounded, uninjured, and estimated values of property lost. The names of additional victims, particularly babies, children and women, are harder to ascertain – and the difficult task of identification continues.

"*As I ran by Black Kettle's lodge he had flag tied to lodge pole and was holding it…bullets were hitting all around me and bullets were hitting the lodges like hard storm…Indians were running north of the camp. Soldiers came due south of the village…It was about 2 miles where men, women, and children throwed up breastworks on bed of the Sand Creek. On way up, the feathers of my war bonnet were shot away and my shield was shot several times, but I did not get hit. As I was running by I seen lots of women and children that had been killed…*" Little Bear, Cheyenne



Little Bear, the Sand Creek eyewitness, photo circa 1875. Little Bear passed away in 1917.

Photo: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institute

For More Information

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