

CAPROCK CHRONICLES

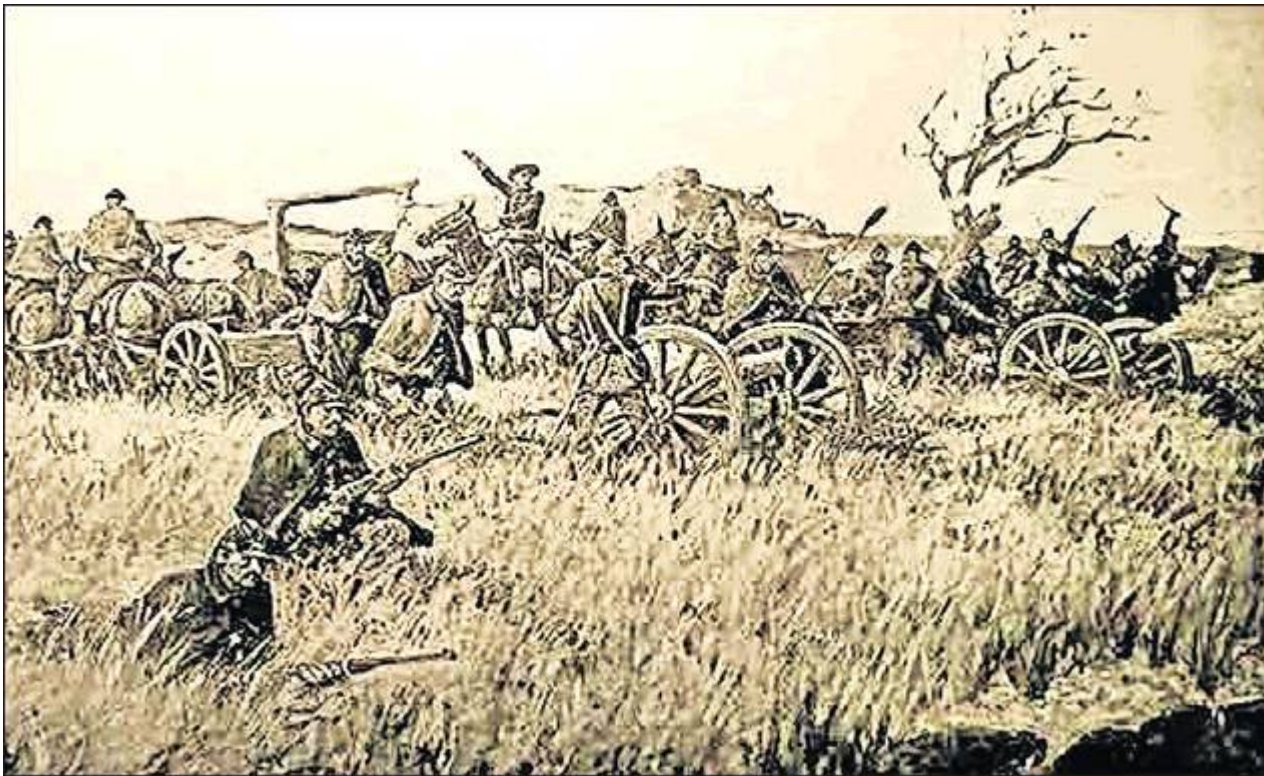
The first battle of Adobe Walls

Kit Carson, the Comanche and the Kiowa on the Caprock

BY CHUCK LANEHART

This edition of Caprock Chronicles is written by Chuck Lanehart. It is the first of three articles, written by him, on the history of Adobe Walls. The series is edited by Jack Becker a librarian at Texas Tech University.

Kit Carson, a frontiersman who ventured throughout the American West, became famous in his lifetime as a gallant army officer, mountain man, guide and explorer. He was well known as an intrepid Indian fighter, but when he appeared on the Texas Caprock to battle Native Americans, he met his match.



The Battle of Adobe Walls. [PROVIDED BY CHUCK LANEHART]

By the 1860's, fearsome nomadic Plains Indian tribes had dominated the Llano Estacado for centuries. When wagon trains appeared on the Santa Fe Trail north of the Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle, Comanches with their northern Kiowa allies wreaked havoc on the Anglo travelers, who hunted buffalo and other game the Indians relied upon to survive.

The Comanches boasted they would “kill every white man that came on the road.” And in 1863, there was “not a week that whole season, but that some outrage was committed by them,” wrote an observer.

The attacks alarmed U.S. Army General James Henry Carlton, stationed at Fort Bascom in New Mexico. In his command was Colonel Kit Carson, the perfect man to remedy the unrest. The general sent Carson into the heart of Comanche territory on the Texas plains to neutralize the natives and make the area safe for Anglos.

Carlton’s orders were simple. No women or children were to be killed, at least not “willfully and wantonly,” but otherwise, Carson was free to sanction the Indians as he saw fit. “You know where to find the Indians, you know what atrocities they have committed, you know how to punish them. They must be made to fear us, or we can have no lasting peace.”

Carson’s battalion of some 400 cavalry, infantry and Indian scouts departed Nov. 10, 1864 with plenty of supplies and two mountain howitzers, hoping to surprise the Indians as they wintered along the Canadian River.

After scouts spotted a large encampment of Indians along the river’s banks, Carson told his officers, “We will have no difficulty finding all the Indians that we desire.”

On Nov. 25, Carson’s cavalry attacked and burned a Kiowa village. Several elderly Kiowas found cowering in their teepees were killed. Others fled, scattering to forewarn multiple Comanche encampments nearby.

As Indians planned a counterattack, Carson left 75 infantrymen to protect his supply train and proceeded with about 330 cavalry and scouts to Adobe Walls, an abandoned trading post northeast of present-day Stinnett. The Army forces dug in amongst the ruins and prepared for battle.

Soon, a force estimated at 1,200-1,400 Comanche and Kiowa warriors attacked the makeshift fort. One of Carson’s lieutenants described fighters “mounted and covered with paint and feathers . . . charging backwards and forwards . . . their bodies thrown over the sides of their horses, at a full run, and shooting occasionally under their horses.”

An odd moment of comedy arose during the heat of battle. Months earlier, a Kiowa brave acquired and learned to play an Army bugle. Each time Carson's bugler sounded "advance," the brave—undetected on the dusty battlefield—sounded "retreat," causing great confusion until Carson's men figured out the clever ruse.

For hours, waves of warriors attacked Adobe Walls. Carson's men fell further back to the safety of the ruins, defending their position with furious rifle fire and a determined shelling from the howitzers.

But the Indians kept coming, Carson later wrote, "repeatedly charging my command from different points, but invariably with great loss." They "acted with more daring and bravery than I have ever before witnessed."

Despite the use of the howitzers a larger force of Indians soon gathered, estimated to be 3,000-making it one of the greatest engagements of Native American warriors ever assembled.

His troops defended their position for several hours, but Carson had clearly bitten off more than he could chew. He chose his only option: retreat.

Withdrawal was dangerous, as warriors relentlessly attacked Carson's flanks. Comanches started a grass fire and used its smoke as a screen. The soldiers repeatedly used the howitzers to repel the Indian attacks and stumbled into Fort Bascom before the end of November.



Col. Kit Carson's Howitzers. [PROVIDED BY CHUCK LANEHART]



Adobe walls. [PROVIDED BY CHUCK LANEHART]

It was Carson's last battle. He later wrote, "The Indians whipped me in this fight." The Comanche-Kiowa alliance had resoundingly driven the great Indian fighter from the field. But it was an encounter that could have ended in a massacre, a disaster that would have dwarfed Custer's last stand 12 years later.

Three soldiers died, and another 21 were wounded. More than 100 warriors were killed, with perhaps 200 wounded, and the Kiowa village was decimated.

Kit Carson soon retired and died in 1868, at age 58, of natural causes. With the victory at Adobe Walls the Comanche-Kiowa kept control of the Llano Estacado for another eight years.