

LOCAL

CAPROCK CHRONICLES

Custer, captive girls and the Cheyenne on Sweetwater Creek: Part One



Chuck Lanehart

Editor's Note: Jack Becker is the editor of Caprock Chronicles and is a librarian at Texas Tech University Libraries. He can be reached at jack.becker@ttu.edu. Today's article about George Custer's campaign on the South Plains is the first of a two-part series by Chuck Lanehart, Lubbock attorney and historian.

George Armstrong Custer stands alone—and infamous—of American Indian fighters. He is remembered for his heroism—and lack of leadership—in the disastrous 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn. But before “Custer’s Last Stand,” he visited the plains of Texas, with much different results.

The decorated 25-year-old Union General Custer arrived in Austin in 1865 as part of occupation forces following the Civil War, commanding the 2nd Division of Cavalry of the Military Division of the Gulf. During his Texas assignment, Custer’s volunteer troops threatened mutiny, preferring to be mustered out of the Army rather than continue to stay in the Army commanded by Custer. They resented his imposition of harsh discipline and considered him nothing more than a “vain dandy.”

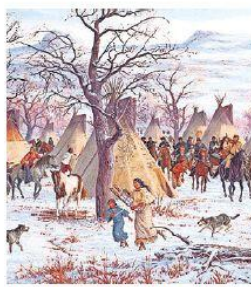
In early 1866, Custer left the Army and returned to civilian life, but soon rejoined the military at a lower rank. Custer was appointed lieutenant colonel of the newly created 7th Cavalry Regiment in July of 1866. Headquartered at Fort Riley, Kansas, the unit was tasked with forcing Plains Indian into submitting to federal authority.

Two years later, a lonely Custer abandoned his post to see his wife of four years, Libbie. He was arrested, court-martialed and sentenced to serve a year at Fort Leavenworth. General Philip Sheridan needed Custer for his winter campaign against non-compliant Cheyenne and arranged for Custer’s early reinstatement in October of 1868.

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Major General George Armstrong Custer and his wife Elizabeth “Libbie,” circa 1864. [PUBLIC DOMAIN]



Battle of the Washita River by Steven Lang. (COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE)



Custer's route to Stone Forehead's village on the Sweetwater, March 2-15, 1869. Map courtesy of Upton and Sons Publishers.

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The two led expeditions in Kansas and Indian Territory (Oklahoma) against the Southern Cheyenne, a serious threat to white settlers.

Meanwhile, pretty, auburn-haired teenager Sarah Catherine White of Kansas was taken from her family in August of 1868 by Cheyenne renegades. Her father was killed in the attack.

Anna Brewster Morgan's Kansas homestead was attacked by Sioux warriors October 3. They shot her husband James and spirited the 24-year-old away, soon trading her to the same group of Cheyenne holding Sarah White. The two girls bonded, but both were subjected to "unspeakable abuse" by their captors.

In November, Custer led his troops in an attack on a Cheyenne encampment on the banks of the Washita River, east of the Texas Panhandle border. Custer's forces killed 103 warriors and some women and children; 53 women and children were taken as prisoners.

One of the Cheyenne girls captured—Meotzi—was described as "enchantingly comely" by Custer. She became his lover, visiting his tent every night, according

to Cheyenne folklore and accounts by officers in Custer's command.

After the battle, Custer had his men shoot most of the 875 Indian ponies they captured. The Battle of Washita River was the first substantial U.S. victory in the Southern Plains War, forcing many Native Americans onto reservations, but historians describe the battle as a brutal massacre.

In early 1869, Custer scoured the Llano Estacado for Cheyenne. A three-week excursion along the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River in the eastern Texas Panhandle was unsuccessful. Next, he headed further north.

West of Indian Territory in what is now Wheeler County, Texas, Sweetwater creek was an essential waterway to millions of southern American bison in a region known as Comancheria.

The area was beautiful, with lush grass and rugged shrubs providing fodder for buffalo and the Indian's ponies. Thick outgrowths of big cottonwood trees offered fuel in winter and shade in summer. Elevations on either side of Sweetwater Creek protected those below. Plains Indians camped along the freshwater stream to seek shelter from harsh winters while Anglos continued to settle the southern plains.

On March 15, 1869, Custer's scouts located a Cheyenne village of 260

lodges near Sweetwater Creek. Custer proceeded peacefully to the village, hoping to forge a truce. He was escorted to the tepee of Stone Forehead, the Cheyenne mystic and chief, where he learned Sarah and Anna were in Rock Forehead's custody.

As Custer sat among the chiefs smoking a large ceremonial clay pipe he talked of peace. He found the Cheyenne were eager for peace, as harsh winter treks had weakened their people and their ponies.

Before Custer stood to leave, Stone Forehead sprinkled tobacco ash on the commander's boots and chanted, prophetically, "If you act treacherously toward us, some time you and your whole Army will be killed."

Custer replied, "I will never kill another Cheyenne." Satisfied, Stone Forehead directed him to a suitable spot to encamp.

With Meotzi acting as interpreter, the foes negotiated for three days about the release of the white captives and the Cheyenne's surrender to the reservation. When the Indians tried to flee, Custer took three chiefs prisoner and threatened to hang them unless the white girls were freed.

Custer dramatically hung ropes across a cottonwood limb and placed the chiefs nearby as the Cheyenne watched.

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Custer, captive girls and the Cheyenne on Sweetwater Creek Part Two



Chuck Lanehart

Editor's Note: Jack Becker is the editor of Caprock Chronicles and is a librarian at Texas Tech University Libraries. He can be reached at jack.becker@ttu.edu. Today's article about George Custer's campaign on the South Plains is the second of a two-part series by Chuck Lanehart, Lubbock attorney and historian. In Part One, Custer came across a large encampment of Cheyenne near Sweetwater Creek in what is now Wheeler County in March of 1869. Custer learned Chief Rock Forehead held two Anglo girls, and he threatened to hang three captive Cheyenne chiefs if the girls were not released.

Chief Rock Forehead relented, promising to free Sarah and Anna and report to the reservation as soon as their ponies could make the journey. Custer pledged to free the three chiefs and the women and children captured at Washita.

The Kansas girls were released, passing through a double line of jubilant soldiers. Anna's brother Daniel lunged forward, breaking into a run. Dashing through the line, he pulled his sister into a massive hug. "Oh, sister, how you must suffer!"

"The larger one appeared to be 50 years old, though she was less than 25," an officer recalled. "She was stooped, pale and haggard, looking as if she had been compelled to do more than she was able. She was quite tall, with light hair that was bleached on top until it was dirty brown from exposure. Her clothes were made of three or four kinds of material, pieces of tents and blankets, all worn out and sewed together with strings."

Soldiers threw off their great coats to comfort the girls. Custer wrote, "Men whom I have seen face



ABOVE: Sarah Catherine White of Kansas was taken by the Southern Cheyenne in 1868 and freed by Custer about four months later. BELOW: Lt. Colonel George Custer, commander of the 7th Cavalry Regiment, circa 1869. [PUBLIC DOMAIN]

death without quailing found their eyes filled with tears, unable to restrain the deep emotion produced by this joyful event."

Overwhelmed by their freedom, the girls pulled each other into a hug.

Custer reported, "Both wore their hair in two long braids, and as if to propitiate us, the Indians, before releasing them, had added to the wardrobe of the two girls' various rude

ornaments, such as are worn by squaws. About their wrists they wore coils of brass wire; on their fingers had been numerous rings, and about their necks strings of variously colored beads."

The women were escorted to an officer's tent. Custer's cook took them under her charge and dressed them in more suitable clothing, pieced together from her



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wardrobe and a selection of calico. Anna described their horrific ordeal. "The Indians subjected us to the most cruel treatment, frequently beating us in the most savage manner."

Custer refused to release his hostages until the Cheyenne made good on their promise to surrender to the reservation. But Rock Forehead's people continued their traditional nomadic lifestyle, chasing buffalo across the plains. Eventually, Rock Forehead's tribe surrendered to the reservation, but later he fled to Montana where he died peacefully in 1875, age 81.

Two of the Cheyenne chiefs captured at Sweetwater Creek were killed in a confrontation with soldiers, but the third chief and the Washita women and children were released to the reservation. Among the Cheyenne captives released was Meotzi, Custer's lover following her capture.

Sarah Morgan returned to her home in Solomon Valley, Kansas. She was warmly welcomed by her husband James, who had recovered from his wounds in the Sioux attack when Anna was abducted. In late 1869, Anna delivered a half-Cheyenne son she named Ira. Unfortunately, Ira died before age two. After having three children with James, they divorced. She

never recovered from the trauma of her capture and died at age 57 in 1902 in a Topeka mental institution.

Sarah White moved to Cloud County, Kansas, and became a schoolteacher. She married Erastus Otis Brooks, and they had seven children. In 1874, she petitioned the U.S. government for compensation for her ordeal. It was denied. She died in 1939 at age 88.

Seven years following his dramatic rescue of Sarah and Anna, Custer and his 7th Cavalry found themselves surrounded by a superior force of Lakota Sioux, Northern Cheyenne and Arapahoe near the Little Bighorn River in Montana Territory. In the resulting battle, some 275 soldiers were killed, including Custer, in the greatest US military defeat of the Indian Wars. He was 36 years old.

There are claims Meotzi was present at the Battle of Little Bighorn with her son, born of her union with Custer. Some historians argue Custer was sterile and the child's father was instead Custer's brother Thomas, who also died at Little Bighorn.

Meotzi is said to have protected Custer's body from mutilation. Another account claims Meotzi was not at the Battle of Little Bighorn, but two Southern Cheyenne women who were present recognized Custer's body as being Meotzi's husband and protected it. Following Custer's death, Meotzi cut her hair and

STOLEN WOMEN, CAPTURED HEARTS



"Stolen Women, Captured Hearts" was a 1997 movie based loosely on the abduction of Anna Brewster Morgan, captured by the Sioux in Kansas in 1869 and later traded to the Cheyenne. [PUBLIC DOMAIN]

slashed her arms and legs.

According to a 2008 book by Gail Kelly-Custer, who claims to be a direct descendant of Custer and the Cheyenne maiden, Meotzi married a white man named John Isaac, changed her name to Mary, and died in Oklahoma in 1921.

A year following the battle, Custer's remains were found at the battlefield in a shallow grave near the bodies of 40 of his men, including his brother and nephew, and dozens of dead horses. He was buried with full military honors at West Point. His widow Libbie, who had accompanied Custer in many of his expeditions, wrote several books which advanced his stature as a heroic military leader.