

The Battle of Arickaree

by
Winfield Freeman*

In the summer of 1868, a body of Indians called renegades, composed of parts of several tribes, made a raid on settlers who occupied the Saline and Solomon valleys, killed several people, drove away horses and made captive two young white women.

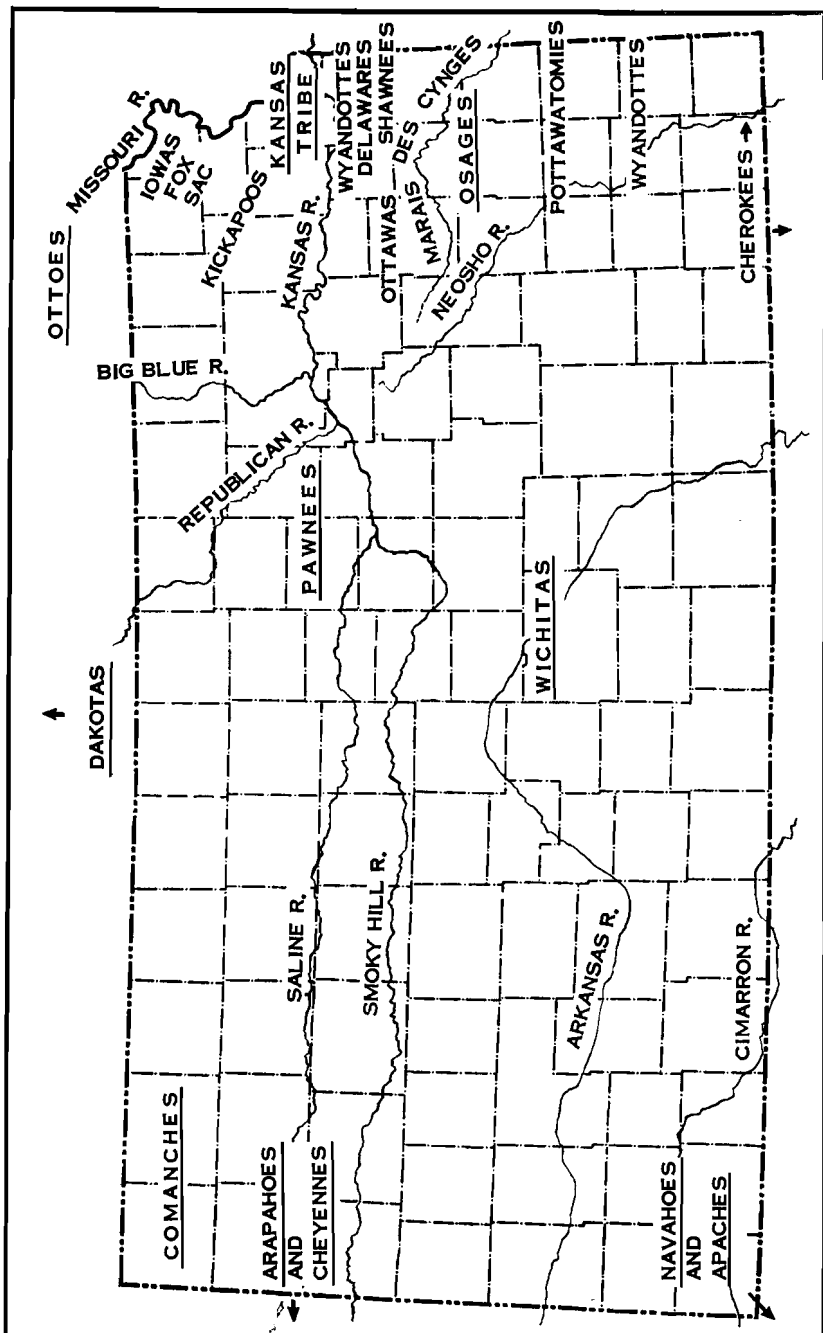
Many of the settlers along the Solomon and Saline rivers were formerly soldiers, only three years out of the Union army. They quickly formed a mounted company and gave pursuit, but could not overtake the fleeing Indians.

About this time scouts reported to General Sheridan, in command of that department, that a small band of Indians, not to exceed two hundred and fifty, was camped on the western frontier of Kansas. He decided to form a company of experienced ex-soldiers, buffalo hunters and other frontiersmen, to pursue the enemy. Col. George A. Forsythe, of General Sheridan's staff, received orders to form the company. Word was soon passed up the Saline and Solomon valleys that such a troop was to be formed at Fort Harker, in Ellsworth county. In a few days, ex-soldiers, buffalo hunters, frontiersmen and scouts had assembled there, all anxious to enlist. Lieut. Fred Beecher, of the regular army was detailed to select a group of fifty men. Personally acquainted with many of them because of his capacity as chief of scouts, he was able to select men of mettle and daring. Among those selected were Capt. H. H. Tucker, an Ottawa county lawyer; Judge Howard Morton, of Ottawa county; S. E. Stillwell, at that time only eighteen years of age. At twelve this youth was able to speak Spanish, and handle a gun like a frontiersman; at eighteen he went on the plains as a scout. He was the youngest man in the command.

The company made a forced march to Fort Hays and from there up the Smoky Hill river to Fort Wallace, a distance of two hundred miles. They remained at Fort Wallace a day and two nights while supplies of ammunition, rations, pack mules and a few horses were gotten ready. On either the eighth or tenth of September the troop of forty-nine men left Fort Wallace, with Colonel Forsythe in command. Lieutenant Beecher was second in command. Dr. Moore, Fort Wallace, a citizen surgeon, went along. This body of men expected to encounter a band of 250 or 300 Indians, then reported to be in the north within a range of eighty miles.

While the command was at Fort Wallace a band of Indians attacked a wagon train near Sheridan, then the western terminus of the Kansas Pacific railroad, about fifteen miles east of Fort Wallace. The wagon train lost four men and considerable stock was run away, this incident hastening

(Continued on page 18)



Indebtedness to several sources is acknowledged for the map on the facing page. The primary ones are these: Bliss Isely and W. M. Richards, *Four Centuries In Kansas* (rev. ed.; Wichita, Kansas: The McCormick-Mathers Publishing Co., 1944, for The State of Kansas); Frederic Logan Paxson, *The Last American Frontier* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913); and the centennial issue of *To The Stars* (April-May, 1954), the Kansas Industrial Development Commission publication. Acknowledgement also is made to J. Brinkman, Department of Art, Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia, Kansas, who produced the final map.

There is the obvious possibility that errors have been introduced by the editor. Furthermore, no pretense of completeness is intended. But it is hoped that the reproduction will serve the purpose of orienting the reader, at least in a general way, for a more particular study of "Indian geography." The map is based on one in Isely and Richards, p. 17, which shows the approximate location (tribal names underlined) of the major aboriginal groups in the general Kansas area of 1541. Evidence provided by Paxson, *passim*, and by a Kansas territorial map in the number of *To The Stars* cited is the basis for the other indications appearing on the map.

The major problem encountered in mapping the locales in Kansas occupied by the various Indians is that often their first settlement within the boundaries was only one of several. (In subsequent issues, *Heritage of Kansas* proposes to offer detailed studies of the several tribes.) The removal policy of the United States government, begun about 1824, presumably was originated to make way for the continuing and growing demand by the white settler for more land. This policy resulted in what Isely and Richards term the "Emigrant Indian." At least for almost twenty years, the red men were on the move west, and many of them were established on reservations in Kansas. The following table, reprinted from Isely and Richards, p. 34, gives the names of the tribes classified as emigrant, indicates the year in which each began its migration, and shows further the area from which they migrated:

Shawnee	1825	Missouri, Ohio, Indiana
Miami	1827	Ohio, Indiana, Illinois
Delaware	1828	Ohio, Indiana
Peoria, Kaskaskia, Wea, and Piankeshaw	1832	Illinois
Kickapoo	1832	Missouri, Illinois, Indiana
Ottawa	1833	Illinois, Wisconsin
Cherokee	1835	Georgia
Iowa	1836	Iowa
Chippewa	1836	Michigan
Pottawatomie	1836	Indiana
Sac and Fox	1837	Iowa and Wisconsin
Wyandotte	1843	Ohio and Michigan

the departure from Fort Wallace and the line of march was made toward Sheridan at which place the trail of the Indians was picked up and followed north until they reached the Republican river below the forks. They then marched north along the banks of Spring Creek, where the scouts discovered a trail which led to a place where a temporary Indian village had been located. Investigations showed the village had been composed of about six hundred lodges and the Indians had departed only a few days before. The opinion that a larger body of Indians than reported at the fort was confirmed.

The trail led westward toward the Arickaree and that evening camp was formed on the north bank of the creek in a narrow valley, opposite a sandy island. All around was peace and quietness, and the stillness of life impressed the experienced scouts that the presence of the troop was known to the red men, yet the Indians' presence was unknown to the troop.

Sharp Grover, an experienced scout from Fort Wallace, stated to Colonel Forsythe that indications convinced him that a large body of Indians was in the vicinity so guards were placed in every direction and a strict watch kept during the night to prevent a surprise attack or the stampede of the stock. Early in the evening Grover and Stillwell went to the sandy island in the creek to see if it would offer a place in which to retreat should an attack be made during the night or if it would be a place to make a stand, if the troop was surrounded by the Indians. The island was about one hundred and twenty-five yards long and fifty yards wide, situated in the middle of Arickaree creek, about one hundred yards from either bank. Composed entirely of sand, it was about two and one-half feet higher than the dry bed of the creek.

Just as day was breaking the morning of September 17, all were aroused by an alarm of "Indians, Indians!" yelled by the sentinels. Confusion reigned as the Indians galloped over the hills, driving the pack mules of the troops up the valley at breakneck speed. The Indians, yelling at the top of their voices and swinging their blankets, retreated rapidly up the valley beyond rifle shot. Under the cover of darkness they had succeeded in creeping down a ravine near where the herd was held under guard and at a signal stampeded the mules and some of the horses.

Scouts were sent out and immediately every man was mounted, except those whose horses had been lost. In a few moments the Indians returned, galloping toward the troop with the unearthly yells and war whoops of the savage. The valley was alive with mounted warriors, stripped naked and painted for battle. With the chiefs, decorated with barbaric war bonnets in the lead, they rode recklessly toward the troop—Arapahoes, Cheyennes and Sioux—singing their battle songs.

Sharp Grover, who was near Colonel Forsythe, pointed out the advantages of the island as a place of refuge. "No time must be lost," he

urged and the command was given—"Reach the island and unhitch the horses." Pell-mell, every man for himself, they went over the bank with a grand rush, over the embankment, across the creek bottom and onto the island. This sudden and unforeseen movement of the troops surprised and disconcerted the Indians.

Colonel Forsythe ordered Jack Stillwell to take some men to the east end of the island and hold that point if possible. He took Trudell, known as French Pete, and four other men, and quickly reached the point, digging shelter in the sand as rapidly as possible. Not a shot was to be fired until the enemy came within close range.

The savages charged the island in wild disorder, riding at top speed, yelling and shooting recklessly. The order to "fire" rang along the line and in an instant the roar of muskets rose above the yells of the Indians. Painted warriors reeled and fell as volley upon volley was poured into the charging foe. Horses freed from their riders, frenzied with fear or smarting from bullet wounds, rushed over the pits, trampling on the dead and dying. Soon warriors and horses were mingled in confusion; several great chiefs lay dying; many reached the island to rise no more; then as if by magic the enemy deflected right and left and hastily retreated; but stopping long enough to gather up many of their dead and wounded. A constant fire was kept up from the island as long as there was an Indian within rifle range.

Rallying in the protection of the hills, the savages started a new mode of attack. While more Indians appeared on the hills, yelling and shooting guns and arrows, many were discovered crawling in the grass toward the island. During the interval the soldiers had dug into the sand and banked it in front of them for greater protection, and at the same time keeping up a desultory firing at the Indians crawling in the grass, which was tall enough to hide them from view. Some of the Indians succeeded in reaching the island, but as soon as a body appeared in view it was pierced by a bullet from the scouts.

During the first hour of the battle all of the horses and mules were killed, including some of the Indian horses which had taken refuge among the horses on the island. Firing on both sides continued until 10 o'clock in the forenoon.

A lack of organization among the Indians was quickly noticed by the scouts, giving them hope the enemy would withdraw from the battle. Presently, however, the celebrated Indian chief, Roman Nose, hero of many battles, appeared on the hillside. Up to this time he had taken no part in the battle. Stillwell, who knew the chief, and his men watched Roman Nose's movements. The Indians appeared to survey the valley, and soon were around their chief in earnest consultation. Firing had ceased and the stillness became oppressive.

In this short armistice the scouts prepared as best they could for the ordeal of a further charge of the savage foe. Anxious eyes rested on Roman Nose. Every musket was loaded, including those of the dead and wounded which were laid ready for rapid firing. Death in the sandpits was a foregone conclusion, for how could a few almost famished men withstand the repeated charge of hundreds of savages prepared for battle?

Movements of the Indians around Roman Nose indicated that order was about to be restored in the Red Man's ranks and that an intelligent hand was to direct a new charge. Roman Nose, after earnestly addressing the assembled warriors, mounted his horse armed with a lance, his favorite weapon. The chief claimed a charmed life, believing no bullet ever was made to kill him. His faith in special Providence that guarded his person caused him to be unmindful of personal danger.

The five scouts who had occupied the east end of the island had all escaped injury.

When Roman Nose assumed command about 10:30 o'clock, firing was resumed from the hillsides as well as by the Indians who lay in ambush. With Roman Nose in the lead, with wild and exultant yells, onward they came toward the island. The dust for a moment concealed the advancing horde, but soon they could be seen making directly for the east end. Stillwell ordered his men to make sure of Roman Nose at all hazards. It seemed only a moment until the Indians were on the island, riding with unchecked speed, firing and yelling like devils in wild pandemonium. Simultaneously, the scouts delivered their fire in the band about 10 o'clock, firing was dropped back under the shelter of the pits. The Indians were taken by surprise not knowing the east end was occupied, but they kept wildly on making for the west end where the main body of the troop was.

Roman Nose's spear fell from his hand and he clutched his horse's mane. His braves gathered around him and held him on his mount, and thus carried away their chief. He was mortally wounded. The Indians quickly gathered up many dead and wounded and retreated to the hills.

After the fall of Roman Nose, the Indians made several futile attempts to reach the island. At 2 o'clock firing ceased and a deadly stillness settled upon the hills and valley, broken only by the moaning of the wounded and dying.

Presently what appeared to be a new band of Indians came into view. The hearts of the soldiers almost failed them as they knew a new order of battle soon would be formed. Through field glasses was seen an old war-horse named Dull Knife, one of the Sioux tribe. Colonel Forsythe, lying in a pit, gave orders that no man should fire until the Indians came in close range. In a few minutes the warrior band swept down the hillside across the narrow valley and into the creek bottom, shouting their terrible war cries. It seemed now that the end had surely come. Each with determination acquired only in the ordeal of death, nerved himself for the

last encounter. Several scouts concentrated their fire on the new chief. He fell dead from his horse within one hundred feet of the island. His mount turned in full gallop from the island, followed by the Indians, the scouts pouring lead at the retreating horde.

Now for the first time the troop had time to help the wounded and count the dead. The sand bar was red with blood; dead men and horses were strewn about. Half the little band was killed or wounded.

Heretofore, the enemy had advanced on horseback, but now they returned to regain the body of their dead chief, marching down the valley in a solid column. Each brave sang a doleful death song. The spectacle was appalling; a drama in human life never to be repeated. The hills were occupied by the wives, mothers and daughters, urging sons, husbands and brothers to conflict. The marchers came on hastily, ending the battle as soon as they recovered the body of their dead chief.

The wounded received medical attention. Dr. Moore, the citizen surgeon, received a wound on his head in the early part of the fight. Nearly crazed by the wound, he would jump up frequently and had to be pulled back into the pit. He died during the day.

Colonel Forsythe, wounded by a ball passing through his thigh, commanded the battle from a hastily dug hole. Lieutenant Beecher was also wounded and before his death at nine o'clock that night, implored his comrades to shoot him. Captain Morton was shot in the back early in the morning. John Harrington, who was struck on the forehead by an arrow, recovered. Captain Culver, a trooper from Solomon, was shot in the head and died instantly. Culver station, in Ottawa county, on the Saline river, is named in his honor.

Under cover of night, Stillwell and his four men, who had occupied the east end of the island, rejoined the remainder of the command. On their way they heard a voice "Have I no friends to help me?" They recognized the voice as that of Scout Farley. Directed by his cries, they found him on the north bank of the Arickaree, where he had occupied a favorable position for sharp-shooting during the day. In the last charge he was mortally wounded. He was taken to the sand pits and died on the island a few days later. His home was on the Saline river.

The troop was without water the entire day and the creek afforded none at that time of the year. To keep from perishing of thirst they dug into the sand and six feet down they found enough muddy water to fill their canteens.

After a conference Jack Stillwell and Pete Trudell volunteered to attempt to pass through the Indian lines and reach Fort Wallace. It was decided they should start their perilous journey at midnight. Capture by the Indians meant certain death. They were provided with horse meat to eat and wore moccasins made of boot tops, to imitate the footprints of the Indians should their tracks be discovered. Each was armed with a

repeating rifle and a knife. Wearing blankets, like Indians, they crawled from the island in a southerly direction, keeping close together and avoiding hollows and ravines. As they reached the hillside, several of the enemy passed by. As day began to break they had reached a point three miles from the Arickaree. They took shelter in a hollow bank. During the night in soft and sandy soil they had walked backwards and had taken other precautions so that their tracks would mislead the Indians. During the long wait that day the discharge of firearms could be plainly heard.

At nightfall they started east and south, soon discovering Indians coming from their village toward the battle ground. Hearing the sound of voices and the clatter of horses the scouts hid away from the traveled path. At dawn they reached the south fork of the Republican river and to their dismay found themselves within half a mile of the Indian village. There they hid in a swamp during the day and at nightfall waded the river and started hastily in the direction of Fort Wallace. The night passed without incident; and concluding they had passed the Indians, the pair decided to journey during the day. But to their dismay about seven o'clock that morning they discovered the advance guard of the Cheyenne village moving south to join the southern Cheyennes. The men had now reached Goose creek and there they found the carcass of a buffalo which had been killed the winter before. The bleaching ribs were covered by hide enough for shelter and it was an easy matter to crawl into the shell which provided a lodging place more acceptable than elegant. From this unique cover they saw the village pass southward.

Trudell became weak and sick from drinking water out of a buffalo hole. Morning came with a light rain and snow which prevented them from seeing far, but they continued their travel and about noon reached a wagon road, which they recognized as being fifteen miles from Fort Wallace. They soon met two colored soldiers carrying dispatches to Colonel Carpenter, commander of H Troop, Tenth U.S. Cavalry, encamped at Lake station, seventy miles from the Arickaree.

The scouts reached Fort Wallace at sundown on September 20 and reported to Colonel Bankhead, the officer in command, who wired General Sheridan at Fort Hays. General Sheridan replied to proceed with all available troops to Colonel Forsythe's relief. The command left Fort Wallace at midnight with wagons, ammunition and supplies.

Meanwhile at the island there was further fighting. On the morning of the eighteenth, before daylight, a body of Indians came down the Arickaree on horseback. The scouts opened fire and the Indians retreated at great speed. These Indians were on a journey, and knew nothing of the previous battles.

No men on the island were killed after the first day, but the wounded suffered greatly from the want of food and care. The food supply was horse meat. On the third night, no relief having come, it was concluded the two

scouts had been killed and two more should be sent out. Jack Donovan and Capt. A. J. Riley volunteered this time and they were instructed to return if they did not find relief. These scouts were fortunate in intercepting Colonel Carpenter, who was seeking the island, having no information as to its exact location.

Donovan at once was mounted on a mule and led the relief command to the island, while Captain Riley continued on to Fort Wallace.

On the morning of the ninth day after the battle, the lookouts raised the cry of "Indians, Indians!" The men, exhausted by the fighting and lack of food, felt the end had surely come. Over the hills could be seen a dark line of mounted men riding at high speed. Each soldier grasped his rifle for the final struggle.

Realization that the advancing horsemen were the relief troop came when the rising sun reflected from the saber and carbine, and cheer upon cheer rose from the island. The brave men who had crawled away at midnight had succeeded. Men who had not faltered in battle, now wept like children.

Thus with the return to Fort Wallace ended the battle that in tradition of the Red Man was one of the most tragic in frontier warfare.