Adobe Walls & Booming Borger

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Adobe Walls

Nestled in the prairies and plains of the Texas Panhandle is Adobe Walls, the site of two notable conflicts between the native Plains Indians and the white men. The existence of the Comanches and the Kiowas gives Adobe Walls its historical significance.

It was theirs before it was ours. The transition of its stewardship is filled with harrowing tales of thundering buffalo, broken treaties and desperate fighting.

The first battle involved Christopher (Kit) Carson, who led United States troops to the protection of the ruins of Fort Adobe when a band of Kiowa and Comanche Indians met them, ready to fight. More than 60 warriors were killed in what was called "Kit Carson's last fight."

Settlers were seeking safe passage through the Plains as they traveled west along the Santa Fe Trail and other treacherous routes. Many were seeking refuge from the ravages of the ongoing Civil War.

Because of the war, the Army was spread thin along the Texas-New Mexico frontier. A fear had spread among the whites that the Southern Plains Indians - the Comanche, Kiowa, Arapaho and Cheyenne — might be forming an alliance with the mountain tribes consisting of the Utes and Jicarilla Apache. There was little the Army could do and a pre-emptive attack by the military was planned.

Carson was ordered to enlist the Utes and Jicarilla Apaches in a campaign across the Plains with a strategy that if the tribes were pitted against each other, they could never form a significance alliance. Carson left Fort Bascom on the Canadian River and began his 200 mile journey. He had with him, 14 officers, 321 enlisted men and 75 Ute and Jicarilla Apache Indians. In return for their service the Indian scouts were given a blanket, a shirt, a worn rifle and limited ammunition. More importantly, they were given the promise that they could claim whatever booty they recovered from the Comanche and Kiowa camps.

Nearly three weeks later, after an exhausting trek through winter storms and muddy terrain, Carson's forces engaged the enemy near Adobe Walls, an old trading post first established in the 1840s.

In the day long battle that followed, Carson's men destroyed more than 170 Kiowa lodges. Carson estimated the Indian losses at more than 60 dead, but later reports swelled past 100.

On the Army's side, two soldiers were killed, 21 were wounded. Among the Utes, one was killed, four wounded. It was a remarkable outcome. Carson was virtually surrounded by a massive force of more than 3,000 Comanche and Kiowa warriors. But by using the old adobe buildings as shelter and the howitzer as unequaled firepower, Carson was able to hold his ground until dark. Then, he wisely retreated.

The buffalo robes and winter provisions of the Comanches and Kiowas were destroyed. The Utes and the Comanches were cast against each other and any hope of a union was destroyed. It was the largest Indian battle in Texas history.

By 1867, the government had reached an agreement with the roving Comanches. The Medicine Lodge treaty caused the tribe to give up its rights to hunt above the Arkansas River, and in return the treaty claimed that the area south of the river would be theirs to roam, hunt and develop without intrusion from the whites. The area included what is now the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles.

In 1874, everything changed. The war was over and hundreds of veterans, many of whom had lost everything to the battle between the states, moved westward in search of a new life. The railroads had pushed into Kansas, but then stopped, dumping hundreds more unemployed workers. The quick solution for many was to get a rifle and a horse and set out to kill the buffalo.

The Arkansas herd of buffalo reached all the way down to the Cimarron, where it provided a storehouse for the Plains Indians. There the herd crossed the paths of the Texas herd that reached down into the Concho and Pecos regions in the winter and during the spring moved up along the Arkansas River into Colorado.

At one time, the buffaloes were considered an endless resource. Even the Indians doubted, at first, that these huge, thundering animals could ever be vanished. In 1867, the buffalo count was to be estimated nearly 50 million.

There had always been a reasonable business in buffalo hides. But by the mid-1860s, tanneries all over the world discovered the wonders of buffalo leather. Orders for hides skyrocketed, and the Plains became crowded with every kind of hard case that came along with a rifle. By the early 1870s, the Plains area was jammed with trading companies seeking to buy robes from the hundreds of buffalo hunters who had joined with skinners and teamsters to create a giant assembly line of death.

For the most part, these men never considered they were robbing the Indians of their livelihood, nor did they find any reason to fret about the natural restocking of this valuable resource. They had come to make their fortune with shot and powder. They killed for the hides and left the meat to rot in the sun.

It was a deprecation the Indians could never understand. For them, the buffalo was a walking storehouse. It provided everything from clothing to fuel for the campfire.

In just a few short years, the buffalo disappeared in astounding numbers. The hunters kept coming. So did the young newcomers, Billy Dixon and Bat Masterson. They all congregated in Dodge City, Kansas. The Indians protested the slaughter of the buffalo, especially the illegal hunting that was going on in the supposedly protected region below the Arkansas River.

In March of 1874, with dozens of wagons loaded with
thousands of dollars’ worth of building supplies, a caravan of hunters, skinners, traders and teamsters left Dodge City, crossed the Arkansas and moved into the forbidden land of the Medicine Lodge treaty.

This migration did not put the Comanches and Kiowas in good humor. They tried to get help from the government. The attempt was in vain. In June, they turned inward for the solution. There was a young warrior, a medicine man, among the Comanches who was looking to extend his power among the tribes. His name was Isatai, and he promised he could belch forth wagon loads of ammunition from his stomach. He had the power, he said, to protect the warriors against the powerful smoking guns of the buffalo hunters. Their bullets, he said, would pass right through the warriors without damage.

His staunchest ally was Quanah Parker, the half-breed son of a Comanche chief and his captive wife, Cynthia Ann Parker. Isatai and Quanah called together the Kiowas, Southern Cheyenne and Comanches. They made plans to attack the hunters of Adobe Walls, to drive them off the prairie and forever protect the buffalo herds that sustained the Indians of the Southern Plains.

"There never was a more splendidly barbaric sight," Dixon later said in his biography. "In after-years I was glad that I had seen it. Hundreds of warriors, the flower of the fighting men of the southwestern Plains tribes, mounted upon their finest horses, armed with guns and lances and carrying heavy shields of thick buffalo hide, were coming like the wind."

If that early morning attack on June 27, 1874 had gone as Quanah planned, Dixon would have had nothing to marvel at; nothing to make his scalp itch in fear. He would have been asleep when the warriors arrived and so, too, would the 27 others.

But they weren't. Several hours earlier, a ridge pole that supported the roof at Jim Hanrahans saloon had cracked like a rifle shot in the night. Everyone was up to help repair the roof. When the attacking force arrived, it had lost its element of surprise.

In a day long battle, the hunters divided themselves among the few low-ceiling buildings that existed on the site. There was Hanrahans Saloon, the small Myers & Leonard's store and the Rath & Wright trading post. With the mud walls as a barricade, the hunters were able to use their booming Sharps rifles against the Indians who were already demoralized by their loss of surprise and the sudden knowledge that Isatai's medicine was far less than promised. In the early fighting, more than a dozen warriors and three defenders were killed.

For the next couple of days, Quanah kept his force close to the Walls but never ventured another frontal attack. On the third day, a group of chiefs rode up onto a nearby hilltop to look down on the besieged hamlet. Dixon, being the best of the marksmen, was coaxed into trying a "long shot".

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He threw his Sharps 50 across a stack of feed and took aim and fired. The distance was later measured at 1,538 yards, a remarkable shot that Dixon himself described as a "scratch shot", meaning he could probably never duplicate it again. Across the prairie and on top of the hill, lay a wounded warrior who had been knocked from his mount by the bullet.

In the end, the Indians' losses were estimated between 30 and 40. The entire force of the attackers has been reckoned from as few as 250 to as many as 1,500. Dixon seemed comfortable with 700.

Everyone agreed that the cracking ridge pole saved the lives of the hunters, but not everyone agrees that the pole really cracked. Some say that Hanrahan had been warned of the impending attack several days earlier when Amos Chapman, a government scout, came to the Walls with a small number of soldiers.

Knowing the attack was coming, Hanrahan took out his pistol in the pre-dawn hours of June 27 and fired a shot in the air. When the hunters came running he told them the ridge pole had cracked.

Whatever the reason, the alarm had sounded. Quanah, himself injured, withdrew his forces. The end had begun. In July, the government gave the troops authority to attack the Indians inside their own territory and subdue them in any way necessary. There was no more talk of peace, only total surrender and complete submission.

By September, Col. Ranald MacKenzie and his 4th US Cavalry looked down upon hundreds of tepees scattered for miles along the bottom of the Palo Duro Canyon. The Comanches and Kiowas were trapped. The end had come.

Adobe Walls had been the hub of the giant wheel that rolled over the Plains Indians. The town fell back to seed following the last battle and the prairie grass covered the site. There was a 50 year celebration in 1924 and in 1941 a monument honoring the Indians who died there was erected.

Excerpts from Art Chapman's article on The Battle of Adobe Walls, Houston Chronicle Magazine, August 2, 1992

Billy Dixon (lower left) and Buffalo Hunters at Fort Elliot, 1876.
Photo Courtesy Hutchinson County Museum, Borger, Texas
During the fall and winter of 1874 - 1875, Southern Plains tribes and the U.S. Army engaged in numerous battles and skirmishes in the Panhandle region of Texas. These conflicts, collectively known as the Red River War, mark the end of almost 200 years of Comanche domination of the Southern Plains. Their Plains Indian allies included Kiowas, Kiowa-Apaches, Southern Cheyennes, and Arapahos. With their dispersal to reservations, the region was opened to settlement by Anglo-Americans, and a nomadic life that had endured for centuries was ended forever.

Many actual battle sites of the Red River War are located on private land and are not accessible to the public. Fortunately, there are museums, historical markers, and other locales where visitors can learn more about this important chapter of our nation's history.

**Buffalo Wallow Battle Ground Monument:** This pink granite monument was erected by the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society in 1925 to mark the area of the dramatic fight that took place on September 12, 1874. In this vicinity, two civilian scouts and four soldiers were attacked and encircled by some of the same Kiowa and Comanche warriors who had kept the Lyman wagon train under siege from September 9 - 12, 1874. All but one of the men who took refuge in the buffalo wallow survived. **Location:** south from Canadian on U.S. 60/83 about 15.5 miles, turn east onto SH 277 and continue for about 7 miles to a dirt road; take a right turn and continue south for about 1 mile to the monument.

Billy Dixon was awarded the Medal of Honor for his valiant efforts at Adobe Walls. However, it was rescinded in 1914 because he was a government Scout which they said, at that time, made him ineligible. In 1989, the Medal was reinstated. In 1990 Dixon, Buffalo Bill and others were posthumously awarded the Army Medal of honor and a grave marker was set during an official full dress military honor guard ceremony from Ft. Sill Oklahoma and included a mounted historical Calvary unit, a 21 gun and saber salute, and the firing of a mountain howitzer. Over 400 people were in attendance. A duplicate of the Medal and citation are on display at the Hutchinson County Museum.

**Directions to Adobe Walls:** Starting at the County Museum in Borger, travel north to the County Court House in Stinnett, Texas on Highway 207 for exactly 26 miles. At this point there is a green “AdobeWalls” sign on the east side of the road. Turn onto the blacktop road and go east as far as you can go. The road turns south, and the blacktop ends where a gravel road begins. It will zig zag east and south, then enter the Turkey Track Ranch. Stay on this road and do not turn off any side roads. You will enter a wide, flat valley and will soon come to the Adobe Walls monuments. From the time you leave Highway 207, you will travel 15.6 miles, a total mileage of 27.6 miles from Stinnett.
ADOBE WALLS, JUNE 27
LYMAN'S WAGON TRAIN, SEPT. 9-12
BUFFALO WALLOW FIGHT, SEPT. 12
BATTLE OF SWEETWATER CREEK, SEPT. 12
FARNSWORTH'S ENGAGEMENT, NOV. 6
BATTLE OF McCLELLAN CREEK, NOV. 8
PALO DURO CANYON, SEPT. 28
BATTLE OF RED RIVER, AUG. 30

MAJOR BATTLE SITES OF THE RED RIVER WAR, 1874
Booming Borger

From Lawless Beginnings To Progressive Panhandle City

As late as 1925 there were fewer than 100 registered voters in Hutchinson County where some oil well drilling activity was developing. Then on January 11, 1926 the Smith #1 blew in at 10,000 barrels per day and pandemonium broke out. Within days, millions of dollars were spent on leases; within weeks, men by the thousands poured into the area, and by the end of the year, over 800 wells had been drilled. It was in the frenzied atmosphere that well known town builder, A.P. "Ace" Borger, acquired 240 acres and established his namesake.

Borger, Texas burst into being on the raw windy day of March 8, 1926. That morning it was nothing more than a few stakes driven into the ground and an idea in the mind of burly, cigar chewing A.P. "Ace" Borger. By sunset, Borger was a reality and Ace was $100,000 richer. The town grew dramatically, both in size and in reputation. By the end of the year it contained 10,000 or 20,000 or 30,000 people. Nobody knows for sure because the rowdy, lawless, crowded boom town changed complexion from day to day.

The new town, flooded with workers earning big money, quickly attracted a large criminal element. That group gained control of the town before it had a chance to grow. They even made convicted Oklahoma murderer, "Two Gun Dick" Herwig, the city's chief law enforcement officer. During that period of national prohibition, beer joints and whiskey sales flourished in Borger. Dance halls, gambling establishments, and houses of prostitution abounded in the wide open town. Popular tradition has it that there was a murder per day during its heyday. Although a murder per day is a considerable overstatement of the situation, the town saw more than its share of violent death.

Local law enforcement either would not or could not bring order to the chaos that reigned supreme during the boom. Conditions deteriorated to the point that state officials were forced to take a hand. At about the time of Borger's first birthday celebration, the governor sent the Texas Rangers to clean up the town. They stayed for a short time and about the middle of June declared Borger to be free of crime and corruption. Those who witnessed the event claimed that there was a line of "ladies of the evening" over a mile long trudging down the road from Borger to Amarillo after the Rangers gave them until sundown to get out of town.

The Ranger interlude proved to be only a lull in the activity, for as soon as they left the criminal activity returned to Borger. The lawless element was a little more circumspect in its activity this time and managed to operate a few more years.

Then on September 13, 1929, an unknown assailant shot and killed district attorney Johnny Holmes in Borger. Texas Governor Dan Moody declared martial law in Borger and sent both the Rangers and the National Guard to maintain order. From September 29 to October 29 of 1929, the town remained under state control. This time when the outside law enforcement authorities left, the hold of the criminal element was broken once and for all.

Thus, a stable community, centered around oil and gas production and distribution, grew out of the boom-era chaos. Carbon black plants, refineries, natural gas plants, and a complex pipeline system processed and transported Borger's numerous petroleum products to the waiting world. By the end of the 1930s, the Borger area including Phillips, Sanford and Fritch, was a major American petroleum supplier and an important part of the overall national oil industry.

Reprinted from A Salute To The Don D. Harrington Petroleum commemorative booklet published by Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, Canyon, Texas

Oil field scene near Borger, 1926, during the boom.
Photo Courtesy Hutchinson County Museum, Borger, Texas

Museum Dedicated in 1977

On a cold, blustery Sunday, November 20, 1977, Congressman Jack Hightower dedicated the Hutchinson County Museum. The museum highlights the history of the county from an introduction at the entry, cases on Coronado and the Indians; Historic Indians, Adobe Walls, Early Adventurers, Ranching, County Pioneers, Farming and Early Industry. There is also the Boom Town exhibit including a Thomas Hart Benton painting of his famous picture of Borger, "Boom Town".

From the iron gates at the museum designed and made by George Parkhurst, much local talent is displayed. This includes Wiley Price's miniature homes and models of Adobe Walls, W.C. Maddox' miniature working oil well and Richard Hogue's 8-foot portrait of Chief Quanah Parker in the foyer of the second floor gallery.

From the Hutchinson County History Book