

QUANAH'S PEOPLE

Baldwin Parker Jr. says he was in Palo Duro Canyon only once before. He was just a boy then, five or six years old. "I didn't have no good sense," he says. "I didn't know where I was at."

He's eighty-three now. He and Marguerite, his wife of sixty-two years, are resting in the shade of a grove of cottonwood and juniper on the canyon floor. The day is sunny and hot, but a nice breeze is moving through the cottonwood leaves. Its sound is like a rushing river.

Children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews surround Mr. and Mrs. Parker. There are more than fifty in all. They're gathered in the canyon for a purpose.

"We're here to make Palo Duro a sacred place again," Mr. Parker says. "This was a place of refuge and safety for our people. And today I've got it back. Somewhere here, I've crossed my grandfather's tracks."

The adults are sitting in circles of chairs near three canvas teepees, talking quietly. The children are running, laughing. They're all waiting for a drum and four singers to arrive from Oklahoma. Then the ceremony can begin. There will be drumming and singing and dancing and flute music and speeches and prayer.

The Parkers say they mean to return the spirit of their people to beautiful Palo Duro, where it hasn't been for 127 years.

The Parker family is Comanche. Baldwin Parker's grandfather was the most famous Comanche of all and a major figure in Texas history. He was Quanah, half white, half Indian, last war leader of the Quahadi band of Comanches in their desperate fight to drive white settlers and buffalo hunters from the Great Plains.

When their cause failed, it also was Quanah who led his people to peace and a reservation in Oklahoma and "the white man's way."

His mother was Cynthia Ann Parker, who as a young girl was taken captive during a raid on Parker's Fort in 1836. She grew up in the Comanche way and married Peta Nacona, a noted war leader of the Nocone band. Quanah, her eldest child, was born sometime between 1845 and 1852.

In 1860, Sul Ross led a company of Texas Rangers against the Nocone encampment on the Pease River in the Texas Panhandle. They killed Peta Nacona, captured Cynthia Ann and her little daughter Topasannah (Prairie Flower) and almost wiped out the Nocone band. The orphaned Quanah (Fragrance) took refuge with the Quahadi band on the Llano Estacado.

The Rangers' "rescue" of Cynthia Ann and her daughter proved disastrous for them. Cynthia Ann was unwilling or unable to adjust to life among her unfamiliar white relatives. She grieved for her absent son and tried several times to

escape back to the Comanche life. Topasannah died still a child, and her mother quickly followed.

Although half white and gray-eyed, Quanah developed into a superb horseman and respected war leader among the Quahadi, the most independent and warlike of the Comanche bands. The Quahadi were the only band to refuse to enter into the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867, which assigned the Comanches—along with Kiowas, Apaches, Cheyennes, and Arapahos—to reservations in Oklahoma.

The U.S. government failed to honor its treaty. The food and supplies it had promised the Indians too often never arrived. Outlaws who stole Indian livestock from the reservation weren't pursued or punished. The Army refused to enforce treaty provisions that forbade white encroachment on reservation lands. Organized bands of hunters were entering tribal lands to slaughter thousands of buffalo, leaving their carcasses to rot on the prairie.

“The hunters were killing the buffalo needlessly, all for the hides,” Baldwin Parker says. “They were doing away with our source of food. And my grandfather, in the Wichita Mountains, he knew about this. So he and his tribesmen rode into the Panhandle.”

In June 1874, Quanah Parker and a Comanche shaman named Isa-tai urged the reservation Indians to join them on a raid through Texas. They recruited a band

of 700 warriors and attacked a party of buffalo hunters camped at the ruins of an old trading post called Adobe Walls in the Texas Panhandle.

Baldwin Parker, telling the story, picks up a small drum and beats out a rhythm. “On their way up to Adobe Walls, this is the song they sung,” he says. And he sings a song in the Comanche language and ends it with a small cry. “This is Quanah’s medicine song,” he says. “It makes you strong. It makes you feel mean.”

Although hugely outnumbered, the Adobe Walls defenders—twenty-eight men and a woman—were strongly fortified and, with their powerful buffalo rifles and superb marksmanship, held off the attackers for five days.

Only one hunter was killed. About fifteen Indians were killed or wounded. When 100 reinforcements arrived to aid the white hunters, the Indians rode away.

After the disappointment of Adobe Walls, many of the reservation Indians returned to Oklahoma. But the battle touched off a two-year series of raids and battles that historians call the Red River War. Quanah and his warriors rode on bloody raids in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, while the Army and Texas Rangers rode in pursuit, determined either to destroy the Indians or force them to accept the reservation.

Whenever the government forces came near striking distance of their prey, however, the Comanches would disappear into Blanco, Tule, Palo Duro, or some other of the canyons along the rugged Caprock at the edge of the Llano Estacado.

Palo Duro had been a hideout and wintering ground for the nomadic plains tribes for many generations. “It’s nice down here, and you can’t see the canyon from a long way off,” says Jacquetta Parker-McClung, one of Baldwin and Marguerite’s eleven children. “Our people could roam, and then they could come here to their home and rest. They could feel safe here.”

A Kiowa shaman named Maman-ti assured Quanah’s hungry and weary followers that they would be safe from the soldiers in Palo Duro. But it was within that canyon’s steep walls that Colonel Ranald Mackenzie and the Fourth U.S. Cavalry would break the back of Quanah’s resistance.

In late September 1874, hundreds of Comanche, Kiowa, Arapaho, and Southern Cheyenne men, women, and children were camped in Palo Duro, their teepees strung out along its floor, a thousand feet below the surface of the flat, treeless plains.

At dawn on September 28, Colonel Mackenzie led his men down the steep, narrow trail into the canyon and rode through the encampment.

“As we galloped along, we passed village after village of Indian lodges both on the right and left, totally abandoned,” Captain R.G. Carter wrote years later.

“The ground was strewn with buffalo robes, blankets, and every imaginable thing, in fact, that the Indians had in the way of property. . . .”

By scrambling up the steep canyon walls on foot, most of the Indians escaped. Only three, and one white man, were killed in the battle. But the soldiers burned the teepees and destroyed the Indians’ food and belongings.

In an even more devastating blow, they also captured the Indians’ herd of more than 1,500 horses. Colonel Mackenzie presented about 300 of them to the Tonkawa Indian scouts who had led him to Palo Duro, then ordered his soldiers to drive the rest out of the canyon and shoot them.

It took the soldiers a whole day to pile up their dead bodies. The great mound of horse bones amazed passersby for many years, Captain Carter wrote.

Most historians believe Quanah was not in Palo Duro on the day disaster struck. But without the teepees, supplies, and horses destroyed there, he couldn’t long hold out against the Army and the Rangers.

“When our people were attacked here in Palo Duro, they were at the end of their rope,” says Dr. Parker-McClung. “It was the end of a beautiful way of life.”

Within a year of the Battle of Palo Duro, Quanah and his hungry warriors surrendered to Colonel Mackenzie and moved to the Kiowa-Comanche reservation near Fort Sill in southwestern Oklahoma.

There, for a quarter of a century, he performed perhaps his greatest service as a leader: teaching his people how to survive in the white man's world. He promoted the construction of schools for Indian children and encouraged the Comanches to go into farming and ranching and get along with the whites.

He numbered among his friends President Theodore Roosevelt and Charles Goodnight, who within two years after Quanah's surrender had established his famous JA Ranch in Palo Duro Canyon.

The ceremony to make Palo Duro sacred again is supposed to begin at one P.M. The drum doesn't arrive from Apache, Oklahoma, until three. "We were late two hours, but we were on time, Indian time," says Kenny Looking Glass, the drummers' leader.

Indian time continues. The dancing doesn't begin until five, after everybody has eaten.

Then, the drummers begin their beat and raise their voices in Comanche song. Baldwin Parker rises from his chair. A son places a red-and-black shawl about his shoulders. Mr. Parker takes his rattle and joins a dozen of his kin—a group ranging in age from his eighty-three to Jessica Waltrip's six—in the Gourd Dance.

After the dance, Brittany Parker, a young girl, says the Lord's Prayer in the Comanche sign language. Then Baldwin's son Ron Parker, whose idea it was to have this ceremony, rises to speak.

"I've lived out west in Arizona and New Mexico for the last fifteen years. So I've come across this country in all seasons and all times from sunup to sundown. I've seen all kinds of weather. I've dodged tumbleweeds as high as my hood."

His voice begins to break. "Every time I come across this country, I see coyotes and I see rabbits and I see deer. But I don't see the buffalo. I don't see my people.

"I just wanted to come back to where my people sheltered. Some of them died in here. They're probably buried in here."

Ron's brother Don sings a song used in the peyote ceremony of the Native American Church. Quanah was one of the founders of the peyote religion on the reservation, and Don still practices it.

"The American Indian is caught in a conflict between the demands of modern society and his traditional culture," he says. "For some of us, that's hard. I have to put on a tie and a suit. I have to use proper English. And, you know, in the evening time, I want to go to a peyote meeting. I want to be me.

"It's a duality. But life is like that. Quanah understood that. His mother was white. His father was a leader of the Comanches. He had to know both ways."

As the sun is setting, Don sings the ceremony's final song. It's about death and grief and recovery. While he's singing, six deer—five does and a buck—suddenly appear at the top of a peak along the canyon's edge. The buck cocks his head. He stands for minutes, listening.

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