

Major Indian battle fought in Phillips County, Kansas

by Kirby Ross
Review Staff Writer

In 1878 the editor of the *Phillipsburg Herald* claimed to have found human bones on “the old battle field” in the north part of the county, and then chastised an individual from Kirwin for turning those remains over to the authorities. While his rant is a bit amusing to read, the underlying subject matter was quite serious, involving a bloody three-day battle that had occurred just eleven years earlier, before white settlers had moved into the area.

During the summer of 1867 the Indian Wars in western Kansas exploded with a vengeance, particularly along the Smoky Hill, Saline, and Solomon Rivers. With veteran Sioux warriors and elite Cheyenne Dog Soldiers under Roman Nose descending from the north and

Kiowas under noted Chief Satanta moving up from the south, railroad construction crews were attacked, as were stagecoach stations, wagon trains, and frontier homesteaders. Not having enough soldiers to deal with the situation, on July 15 four companies of six-month volunteers were enlisted, forming the 18th Kansas Cavalry Battalion.

On August 1 a gang of unarmed railroad workers was massacred just east of Hays, resulting in a 40-man detachment of the 10th U.S. Cavalry—the famed African American Buffalo Soldiers—taking up the chase under the command of Major George Armes. Making contact with 75 Cheyennes on the Saline River twelve miles north of Hays, an eight hour skirmish ensued but resulted in relatively few casualties on either

side.

Returning to Fort Hays, Armes immediately requested permission to have a large punitive expedition mounted and sent back to the Saline and on up to the Solomon River in search of the camps of the Indians. In response, he was given command of two companies of the 18th Kansas Cavalry along with a company of Buffalo Soldiers, and on August 13 his 135 troopers proceeded to the North Solomon where he was supposed to coordinate with another 125 soldiers from the 18th Kansas under a more senior officer.

Disregarding his orders, Armes moved away from the rendezvous point, traveling to the southwest where he came upon the trail of Native Americans and followed it back to the North Solomon in what is now Phillips County, arriving here on August 20. That night a large fire was seen in the direction of present-day Kirwin to the east, causing Armes to send a three-man patrol under the command of Captain George Jenness to investigate. Failing to await the return of this scout, Armes resumed his northerly movement, leaving Jenness unsupported and having to fend for himself.

Entering the Prairie Dog breaks two miles northeast of present-day Long Island the next day, a party of Indians was spotted, causing Major Armes to divide his command and push on ahead toward the creek with half his men, leaving his supply train trailing behind with the other half. Afterward taking light fire from Indian skirmishers



BATTLE AT PRAIRIE DOG CREEK -- This print depicts the 1867 battle between the Kansas 18th Volunteer Cavalry (with a small group from the 10th) and over 400 Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Sioux. The battle was in reality more of an organized retreat over many miles for the cavalry soldiers, who found themselves greatly outnumbered, to prevent a massacre similar to that of Custer, years later, at Little Big Horn.

later that morning, the cavalrymen continued their march until they were just north of the state line. Finally, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, they were attacked by a large number of Indians including Chief Satanta and Roman Nose. Outnumbered by 5 to 1, the U.S. troops dismounted and found refuge in a ravine, where they were subjected to a dozen assaults during the course of the remainder of the day, but managed to hold off the Indians due to the superior firepower of their Spencer repeating rifles.

As this was unfolding, Jenness, who had been left behind, was trying fruitlessly to catch up to the main force of soldiers. During the course of its trek, Jenness' three-man force was swelled, fortunately for him as it turned out, as he took in another little reconnaissance party Armes had sent out. In addition, a squad of Buffalo Soldiers from Fort Hays stumbled upon Jenness, carrying orders from the senior U.S. command that ironically directed Armes to cease all offensive operations and to return to the post. Pushing on to join their comrades and arriving at the state line, this contingent under Jenness spotted yet another small body of cavalrymen, and, almost simultaneously, discovered that 300 to 500 Indians were moving toward them at full gallop.

Successfully racing to combine forces with the nearby troopers, thus bringing the total number of bluecoats to just over two dozen men,

they dismounted and formed a defensive square seconds before the screaming mass of hostiles were upon them. Once again, the repeating rifles helped to break the attack.

Knowing that he must find Armes, Jenness began inching forward on foot, maintaining a strong defensive perimeter by moving troops back and forth to reinforce any side that was under immediate threat. In this manner, with horses and wounded men in the center, the little contingent moved another half-mile towards Armes. At this point an even larger number of Indians was spotted on the surrounding hills.

Armes, with his seventy-man force, heard the shooting of Jenness' smaller group three miles to his south, but felt it imprudent to attempt to move out of his defensive position to help. Jenness, with one of his men killed and half of them now wounded, decided he would be doomed if he continued north or remained where he was. Reversing course and moving back into Phillips County, Captain Jenness was now seeking to reach Prairie Dog Creek for a final stand. Soon he came upon a ravine, where he and his men remained until dark. That evening they continued their retreat, coming upon a deep, jagged gully, and traveling quietly down it as hundreds of Indians moved about above them. Reaching the creek before daylight, after crossing it the troopers

climbed to the high bluffs on the opposite side and established a defensive position as their chief scout, Allison Pliley, continued on in search of help from the supply train and its accompanying soldiers.

As Jenness was marching, so too was Armes. Running low on ammunition, the major felt his survival also depended upon reaching the supply train. Fighting his way to the creek and spending the night there, at daylight he was able to discern the location of the wagons and quickly moved toward them.

Not far away, at this same time Jenness' beleaguered, smaller force of cavalrymen saw that the Indians had discovered their new position and were massed on the opposite bank of Prairie Dog Creek. Repelling several attacks and also running low on ammunition, the situation was looking grim for Jenness and his immediate command.

At around this same time, Pliley found the wagon train, which was located two miles west of present-day Woodruff. Galloping through a cordon of Indians surrounding it, he entered the camp shortly before Major Armes fought his way in. With Armes' arrival, it appeared a total massacre might yet be averted.

With some of the junior officers volunteering to lead a relief column to Jenness' position, Armes, not wishing to deplete his own strength, denied them permission. Unwilling to abandon their comrades to certain death, a number of the men nonetheless proceeded to disobey orders and left the relative safety of their reinforced position. As they reached Captain Jenness, they found most of his men to be wounded. Forming yet another hollow square in the middle of



SPENCER REPEATER -- This photo depicts an old Spencer Repeating Rifle, as used by the cavalry troops. The rifles held seven rounds and were reloaded through a removable tubular magazine which fed through the stock.

which the rescued soldiers were placed, they fought their way back to the main body and thus were able to reunite the entire command.

With the Indians continuing to harass them for the rest of the day the soldiers moved back toward the Solomon that night. At daybreak on August 23 the men saw that their efforts to break free were to no avail as they continued to be surrounded by eight hundred warriors. After engaging in a third day of fighting, probably near present-day Speed (details on this day's events are lacking), Major Armes once again began

pushing southward at nightfall. As he moved closer to Fort Hays, the Indians finally withdrew, allowing him to continue the rest of the way without incident.

While having very narrowly averted an outcome that might have resulted in Phillips County being mentioned in history books in the same paragraph as the Little Bighorn, in the end Armes reported losing just three men killed in all of the fighting, and having thirty-five wounded (over one-fourth of his command, most of whom had been out with Jenness). Perhaps emboldened by their

defeat of the U.S. troops here, the Indian raids in Kansas continued unabated for another two years before finally being suppressed in the course of a full-scale military campaign during 1868-69 (making it safe for settlers to begin flooding into Phillips County and the surrounding area immediately afterward).

[Originally published in the October 14, 2004, issue of the Phillips County Review. Print of 1867 Battle at Prairie Dog Creek used by permission of the Kansas National Guard.]