

The Death of Cheyenne and Arapaho Culture

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Abstract

This paper attempts to establish that the Pikes Peak gold rush was the impetus that drastically altered the culture and lifestyle of the Plains Indians, particularly the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. Special attention is given to the introduction of agriculture, the increasing dependence on government annuities, and the demise of warrior culture. These three changes characterized life on a reservation. Due to the erosion of their traditional way of life, living conditions on the Cheyenne and Arapaho reservation were very poor. This paper will also attempt to establish that the reservation life imposed on the natives prompted many of them to adopt the educational, vocational, and social habits of whites. Some accomplished this by attending white schools and learning English, while others simply moved off the reservation and assimilated into European-American society.

Introduction

The Cheyenne and Arapaho would not go quietly into the night. As is well documented, various battles and diseases throughout the 19th century ravaged the Indigenous American population, bringing low once great civilizations. But the plains tribes lost more than kin – they also lost their culture. When I was a kid, movies and TV shows imbedded the image of an Indigenous American warrior in my mind: wearing a headdress, holding a bow, riding a horse. Although Hollywood has not painted an entirely accurate image, the culture that this image represents has long since disappeared. The Cheyenne resisted these changes to the end, but fenced into their Oklahoma reservation, they did not have much choice. Rarely has an entire culture metamorphosized in such a short time. Although Indigenous American life was almost rendered unrecognizable in a matter of decades, names like Sand Creek and Wounded Knee often eclipse the history of these cultural shifts. In this essay, I argue that the Pikes Peak gold rush was the catalyst that erased an entire way of life.

For a young Cheyenne man living prior to the white migration, life consisted mainly of hunting buffalo and fighting enemies. A dead buffalo would provide the tribe with food, clothing, and shelter. A dead Comanche or Kiowa would provide the young man with the admiration and respect of others. However, as more and more prospectors flooded into the Pikes Peak region, these pastimes became increasingly untenable. Instead of evicting the prospectors, the government evicted the Cheyenne and Arapaho, relegating them to out-of-the-way reservations. Finding buffalo within reservation boundaries was hard enough, and to make matters worse, the newcomers either killed or scared off the buffalo that remained. The Cheyenne and Arapaho addressed this food shortage in two ways: they took up farming and ranching, and they became increasingly dependent on the white man's goods. As reservation life became the new normal, warrior culture began to diminish, too. The U.S. government had little tolerance for war with the natives or between the tribes, doling out swift vengeance to those who took up the warpath. A position was created within the government that authorized appointed individuals, known as Indian agents, to interact with Indigenous tribes on behalf of the U.S. government. Decades of costly battles with the U.S. government spelled the end for the warrior societies that had dominated life on the plains. The Pikes Peak gold rush planted the seeds that led to these massive cultural changes. The introduction of agriculture and ranching, dependence on annuities, and the demise of warrior culture would all characterize reservation life.

Eventually, the Cheyenne and Arapaho realized that the only way to flourish on a reservation was to adopt the customs of white society.

The Gold Rush and Indian Reservations

The Pikes Peak gold rush was not the first time the Plains tribes witnessed hordes of settlers stream across the prairie in search of gold and it would not be the last. Nevertheless, this rush was different from the ones that preceded it. These settlers were not simply passing through as they did in 1849 – they were in Colorado to stay, at least until they failed to strike gold and went home. In 1858 stories of gold in the Pikes Peak region began to reach eastern ears. In one year, the city of Denver went from being non-existent to possessing hotels, gunsmiths, barbers, and all the other amenities of an established city (Temple 152). When Indigenous Americans found hordes of settlers on the land promised to them in the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty, conflicts inevitably arose. For example, when a settler's cow was killed in 1858 by the Sioux, U.S. soldiers sent to the Sioux camp to rectify the situation ended up killing a chief, whose relatives, in turn, retaliated by launching more raids on settlers (Fowler 369). In a bid to limit contact between whites and the Indigenous population, the U.S. government drew up a new treaty—the 1861 treaty of Fort Wise— that relegated the Cheyenne and Arapaho to a much smaller tract of land. Chiefs Little Raven and Black Kettle later claimed that they had not known what the treaty meant (Fowler 374). Because of this, and because not all the chiefs had sanctioned the treaty, it was largely ignored. Relationships between whites and Indigenous Americans continued to deteriorate. The unprovoked murder of a Cheyenne chief at Ash Creek ignited the tempers of many of the Cheyenne warriors, who then went on a killing spree across the western United States. Colorado governor John Evans raised a regiment to strike back at the natives; this regiment would be responsible for the massacre at Sand Creek. Predictably, the tempers of the warrior societies were once again ignited, and once again the Cheyenne commenced a campaign of terror. After years of war the government concluded that a new treaty was needed. In 1867, the Cheyenne and Arapaho signed the Treaty of Medicine Lodge, which relocated their reservation to Oklahoma. Although this would not be the last time the Indigenous Americans were moved, it would be on this reservation that the Cheyenne and Arapaho would see much of their culture fade away.

The Introduction of Agriculture

The U.S. government encouraged the Plains tribes to farm on their reservations, and initially, some chiefs showed a willingness to take up the plow. Southern Cheyenne chief Black Kettle expressed hope that the president “would listen to [the Cheyenne] and give them a home where they might be protected against the encroachments of their white brothers until at least, like them, they had been taught to cultivate the soil and other arts of civilized life” (qtd. in Hatch 67). Black Kettle and his tribe were given a home, but it was not what he was expecting. Unbeknownst to Black Kettle, the land designated for Indigenous Americans in the 1861 Fort Wise Treaty was barren farmland that would have proven a challenge for even the best farmers. Furthermore, the Cheyenne people did not have the technology or skills necessary for farming – nor did they have the desire to obtain them. Becoming a farmer was seen as a denial of one's culture. To be a true Cheyenne one must hunt buffalo, even if it made finding sustenance more difficult. The transition to farming and ranching was very slow, and the Cheyenne continued to hunt outside of their reservations for decades. To get the signatures of the Northern Cheyenne chiefs on the 1867 Treaty of Medicine Lodge, the government was forced to cede and allow them to hunt outside of Indigenous territory (Halaas & Masich 239). This proved to be a shallow victory. The U.S. government could not force the change to farming; however, the disappearance of the buffalo could.

Around the same time as immigration into the Pikes Peak region picked up, the already dwindling buffalo population began to plummet. The winter of 1863 – 64 was known as the “year of hunger” amongst the Cheyenne. Due to the quickly disappearing buffalo, Cheyenne depredations picked up, as Indian agent Samuel Colley noted: “most of the depredations committed by them are from starvation. It is hard to make them understand that they have no right to take from them that have, when in a starving condition” (qtd. in Hatch 106). Often, Indigenous peoples were found begging settlers for food (Fowler 373). There were multiple factors that contributed to this buffalo genocide, but the primary factor was the influx of settlers. The newcomers killed off masses of buffaloes, and the herds that survived left the territory. One prominent Arapaho chief named Medicine Man noted that “We see the white men everywhere. Their rifles kill some of the game, and the smoke of their campfires scares the rest away, and we are no longer able to find any game ... Our old people and little children are hungry for many days, and some die, for our hunters can get no meat” (qtd. in Fowler 372). The Cheyenne could not go on conducting buffalo hunts forever; for the survival of the tribe, something needed to change.

This change took the form of increased farming and cattle ranching on the reservations. Due to Cheyenne reluctance to abandon the way of life that they were traditionally taught, farming and ranching were accepted as the new normal albeit very slowly. Many recognized that these methods were the only way to become self-sufficient, and by the early 1880s the Cheyenne had begun to plant fields and accumulate cattle (Halaas & Masich 309). During and immediately following the Pikes Peak gold rush, however, these practices had not yet taken hold. During this time starvation was imminent, and sufficient quantities of buffalo were nowhere to be found. To meet their needs, the Cheyenne turned to their perennial enemy: the settlers and their government.

Dependence on Annuities and Settlers’ Goods

Guns, metal pots, and other wares from the east were not new to the Plains tribes. For many years prior to the gold rush, these goods were commonplace amongst the Cheyenne. Sometimes, the Cheyenne would even locate their villages directly outside a trading post for the economic benefits (Halaas & Masich 26). With the demise of the buffalo, however, the demand for food and other supplies skyrocketed. Many of the Cheyenne and Arapaho sought employment from whites in increasing numbers so they could pay for the food and goods they needed (Fowler 372). While much of this dependence on the settlers was driven by the need for necessities, the Plains tribes also developed an affinity for more pernicious substances. Many settlers took advantage of the high demand for alcohol by selling liquor at extremely high prices. Indian agent Albert Boone, who oversaw the Cheyenne and Arapaho reservation, said the Indigenous people were “great lovers of whisky ... often offering a good Pony or mule for one Bottle” (qtd. in Hatch 94). In addition to the settlers, the Cheyenne turned to another source of supply: the U.S. government.

Every major treaty from Fort Laramie to Medicine Lodge involved the payment of annuity goods to the Cheyenne. These annuities included a plethora of goods, but the food items provided were valued most highly by the Plains tribes. Indian agents often found that they did not have enough beef to meet the demand (Halaas & Masich 278). Due to the influx of settlers, the Cheyenne and Arapaho became increasingly dependent on these annuities; an Arapaho chief called Neva said “I know the value of the presents which we receive from Washington; we cannot live without them. That is why I try so hard to keep peace with the whites.” (qtd. in Fowler 384). The government knew this, sometimes recommending that Indian agents withhold annuities to blackmail the tribes they were assigned to help (Halaas & Masich, 278). Before the gold rush, most of the Cheyenne’s needs were met by the buffalo. After the gold rush these needs were met by white settlers and annuity payments.

The Diminishing Influence of Warrior Culture

Prowess in battle was valued very highly amongst the Cheyenne. To prove their manhood, young men would often join one of six warrior societies. Before white encroachment, these societies would test their mettle by launching horse stealing raids against the Kiowas and Comanches (Hyde 41). When the Cheyenne or Arapaho were wronged, these warrior societies saw it as their duty to exact revenge. With the influx of settlers, however, extracting revenge became increasingly costly. When Dog Soldiers (one of the Cheyenne warrior societies) attacked immigrants in Nebraska territory, Colorado governor John Evans called up the 3rd Colorado volunteer calvary, which then massacred Black Kettle's band at Sand Creek. Attacks against whites had dramatic consequences, and eventually, these consequences would spell the end for the Cheyenne warrior societies.

Even going to war against traditional Native American enemies proved increasingly dangerous. Governor Evans did not like inter-tribal conflicts and attempted to discourage such conflict (Fowler 375). Sometimes the government would even promise protection against other tribes, which made waging war on those tribes less appealing. However, out of all the Cheyenne's enemies, other Indigenous Americans proved the least threatening. One adversary loomed over all others, and eventually, this foe would subdue even the bravest warrior societies.

In 1869, the Dog Soldiers once again went on the warpath, and once again the U.S. military counter attacked. The military finally found the Cheyenne at Summit Springs, where 52 Cheyenne men were killed in battle (Halaas & Masich, 265). With so many of their warriors dead, the Dog Soldiers faded from their prominent role in Cheyenne life – war had become untenable. Eventually, the more militant Northern Cheyenne were forced to join their Southern brethren on the Oklahoma reservation. However, the fighting spirit of the Cheyenne was not yet quelled; in 1879 a band of Cheyenne left the Oklahoma reservation to return to their homeland in Montana. After much fighting with U.S. soldiers, they arrived in Montana and were allowed to stay. By this time, even the more militant members of the Cheyenne were ready to accept reservation life; the official who oversaw the new Montana reservation reported that these Cheyenne had obtained “a good herd of domestic cattle, and by their own industry they have cultivated an extensive field, and will this season raise an abundance of vegetables, sufficient to last them during the winter and until next summer” (qtd. in Allison 95). It had taken decades, but battle by battle, the warrior culture of the Plains tribes gradually disappeared.

A New Indian Policy

The Cheyenne and Arapaho were not the only ones who found this rapidly changing lifestyle inconvenient. The United States government incurred high costs in their efforts to get the Cheyenne and Arapaho out of the way of settlers. Maintaining a reservation was expensive, and the government soon found they were the ones left holding the bill. As specified in the Medicine Lodge treaty, the government was required to provide annuities, including food, to the tribes; these rations soon became the primary source of sustenance for the Indigenous Americans. The quality of life on reservations was much lower than it was during days of nomadic buffalo hunting. With nothing to hunt and no one to fight, Indigenous men often found themselves listless, as opportunities for employment were very limited. However, the woes of the Cheyenne and Arapaho did not escape the sight of reform-minded individuals back east. These people decided the best way to deal with what was termed the “Indian problem” was to assimilate the tribes into white culture.

To achieve this goal, the Dawes Act was born. For centuries, the Cheyenne had lived in communal camps, but under this act, land would be allotted to individual Indigenous people. It was thought that private ownership would motivate the Indigenous Americans to cultivate land and adopt the customs of white men. As commissioner of Indian Affairs Hiram Price stated, land

allotment would “domesticate and civilize wild Indians” (qtd. in Stremlau 266). Private ownership was thought to be the key to assimilating the Cheyenne and Arapaho.

The Dawes Act was not the only tool the government used to assimilate the Native Americans. Indian agents often put pressure on the Cheyenne and Arapaho to send their children to white run boarding schools, either on or off the reservation. Threats of cutting rations, or alternatively the reward of bonus rations, were frequently used to convince the Indigenous population to send their children to these schools where they would be instructed in the ways of the white man (Berthrong 226). The government wanted the Cheyenne and Arapaho to blend in seamlessly with their white neighbors; the complete demolition of their remaining culture was thought to be the only way to accomplish this goal.

Assimilation

The Indian agents who were attempting to force the Cheyenne and Arapaho into conformity were persistent and they continued to put pressure on the tribes for decades. It took time, but eventually many of the Cheyenne and Arapaho came to this inescapable conclusion: the only way to thrive in a post-gold rush world would be to completely assimilate into white society. Some chiefs reached this verdict earlier than others. Chief Little Raven, considered one of the more “progressive” Arapaho chiefs, began to adopt white customs as early as 1859. He often visited Denver, where he was described as a “sensible and friendly disposed man” who “handles a knife and fork and smokes cigars like a white man” (qtd. in Hatch 76). Many chiefs, especially those from the Arapaho, followed his example in attempting to placate the government by adopting the customs of their white neighbors. In the 1880s, however, most of the Cheyenne and Arapaho still resisted assimilation. The government decided the best way to achieve their goal was not to convince the older Cheyenne and Arapaho of the benefits of assimilation, but rather to inculcate the youth, which they attempted to do via white-run boarding schools.

The problem was not creating the schools – there were plenty of reformers who were willing to teach Indigenous Americans – but rather convincing the parents to send their children to the schools. As would be expected, Indigenous parents were loath to send their children away; they feared (rightly so) that the instructors would attempt to separate their children from their cultural heritage. However, many of these parents came to the realization that these schools offered their children opportunities for upward mobility that were not present at home. In 1879, the Cheyenne and Arapaho got permission to send their children to the new off-reservation Carlisle Indian School. Although there were limited spots available at the boarding school, so many parents wanted their children to attend that their Indian agent agreed to exceed the limit (Berthrong 83). Upon their return to the reservation, these students often found employment either at the Indian Agency or in the outside world (Berthrong 85). The acceptance of white habits was very slow, but eventually the chiefs, who had great influence amongst the tribesmen, began to support the efforts of the government. By 1897, only one Arapaho chief still refused to advise his people to farm and send their children to school (Berthrong 213). The Cheyenne were more intransigent than the Arapaho, but eventually they began to step in line with the Indian agents as well. Slowly, the tribes adopted the educational, vocational, and social habits of whites.

Many of the Cheyenne and Arapaho who were ready to assimilate simply moved off the Oklahoma reservation altogether. Although such an action would be breaking with tradition, the depressing conditions on the reservation convinced many that moving into the white world was for the best. By 1947, at least nineteen percent of the tribal members lived outside of the reservation (Stewart 125). As mentioned above, many of these tribe members were employed by whites. This was a better alternative to living on the Oklahoma reservation where food was scarce and employment opportunities were few and far between. Whether through attending white schools or

moving off the reservation, the Cheyenne and Arapaho slowly integrated themselves into the surrounding society.

Conclusion

Many of the Pikes Peak prospectors had no intention of permanently altering Native American life, but they did. As soon as settlers began moving into the Pikes Peak region, conflict with the natives was bound to happen. The U.S. government concluded that the only way to keep the peace was to separate the two races; thus began a long string of treaties with the Cheyenne that continually shuffled them around to wherever the whites were not. To keep the peace with the settlers, the Cheyenne were asked to give up their way of life. On the Oklahoma reservation buffalo were few and far between; annuities, imported food, farming, and ranching would replace the buffalo. Reservation life did not allow for the raiding parties that played such a large role in Cheyenne culture— if the Dog Soldiers attacked either whites or other Indigenous Americans, the retribution would be quick and painful. On the reservation the Cheyenne and Arapaho consistently faced pressure from the government to conform. This pressure, coupled with the lack of opportunities on the reservation, convinced many Indigenous peoples that assimilation into white society was the most pragmatic option available. Not all were immediately onboard with this agenda— many Native Americans fought tooth and nail to preserve the traditional ways. However, by the late 1800s, most of the chiefs began to sing to the tune provided by the Indian agents; not long after, the rank-and-file tribal members began to follow the advice of their leaders. Cheyenne culture began to look increasingly like that of the white man in the 1880s and 90s. The Plains tribes still existed— but much of their culture was lost forever.

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