

HENRY FORD AND MR. GOODNIGHT

by
Alan Boye

Author's note: In September, 1878 about 300 Northern Cheyenne men, women and children fled Indian Territory in Oklahoma. They had been taken to Oklahoma against their will and were told they could not leave. The following April, after numerous battles and the deaths of over 80 people, less than half of the now starving and wounded Cheyenne reached Montana. Eventually they were granted a reservation there.

In the summer of 1995 I hiked the 1,000 mile route of this handful of desperate Indians who fled Oklahoma in quest of their homeland. For a good deal of the trip I was joined by two Northern Cheyennes, Andrew Sooktis and Samuel Spotted Elk, Junior. Both men are descendants of Dull Knife one of the leaders during the 1878 escape. The following essay is excerpted from the forthcoming book about my walk, *Holding Stone Hands - On the Trail of the Cheyenne Exodus of 1878* (University of Nebraska Press).

A little after 8 a.m. one spring morning, the bandit Jesse James noticed a picture on his wall needed straightening. He propped a chair up against the wall and, with his back to the room, climbed onto the cushioned seat without removing his boots. At nearly point-blank range, Robert Ford withdrew his pistol and shot poor Jesse in the back, ending the outlaw's long career as a robber of trains and banks. It was April 3, 1882.

One hundred and a dozen or more years later Henry A. Ford sits in the cab of his pick-up truck staring out at the miles of open Kansas range. It is land his grandfather settled the year before a band of fugitive Northern Cheyenne under

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the leadership of Dull Knife and Little Wolf passed through. It is land his father patrolled as cowboy and later as sheriff. "Oh yeah, I'm related to Bob Ford, the man that done shot Jesse James." His voice is a western drawl, each word strolls out unrushed and relaxed, every syllable taking its own good time forming around his tongue and teeth. "My Grandfather came from Missouri. My grandmother knew the James family quite well." Ford's hands are resting on the steering wheel. They are gigantic hands, thick and meaty and strong despite his seventy-three years of tough living on the Kansas prairies. "I have to put a stone in my shoe to remind me how old I am. My poor memory was caused by too much drinkin' or fightin' or lovin' when I was younger, but now I can't remember which it was that done it." He lifts one of the big hands and points to a darker green splotch in the emerald fields near the truck. "Buffalo wallow," he says. "You can still find them all over the place."

Ford leans forward, his round, weathered face looms over the steering wheel. "Damn. Now he swore this gate would be unlocked. I talked to the owner just this morning." Ford has brought me and my two Cheyenne companions as well as his friend, Don Goodnight, twenty miles out from town and across three miles of roadless country to the location of the largest of several Indian battle sites thirty-five miles south of Dodge City. Bouncing and jolting the five of us like so much cattle feed, he has driven over open fields, plowed across muddy swales, and slammed over grass-covered boulders to find the place where the Cheyenne Indians fought the cowboys in Clark County, only to come across this locked gate.

"You can see those white bluffs over yonder," he says pointing to low chalk hills two miles in the distance. "Well, it was right about there in that canyon down toward Spring Creek where they fought."

Despite the folklore, there were actually very few battles in the Old West between cowboys and Indians. Most of the fighting with Indians was between different tribes or involved the United States Army. Bloodshed for whites in the Old West was mostly a result of gangs of disgruntled Rebel soldiers like Jesse James, or—especially in Kansas—groups of men who drove great herds of cattle to railyards in towns like Dodge City. There were few times when the two lifestyles came into direct conflict. But in 1878 a band of three hundred Northern Cheyenne who were in the early weeks of a four month long running battle with the U.S. Army, fought with cowboys at this place in "the new southwest" as southern Kansas was then known. A week earlier the Northern Cheyenne had killed a couple of cowboys in northern Oklahoma. Now local cowboys, panicked at reports of marauding Indians, formed posses to ride out in search

of the Cheyenne.

The cowboys were nervous because just three years earlier there had been wide-spread rumors of Indians storming isolated homesteads and killing dozens of pioneers. The rumors were false, started by ranchers trying to scare away the plowmen pioneers, but the stories had spread so quickly and convincingly that groups of settlers banded together to build stone breastworks and fortifications around high points of land.

This time around it was more than hearsay for on Tuesday, September 17, 1878, cowboys from Driseoll's ranch stampeded up Front Street in Dodge City shouting out how the Cheyenne were swarming over the cattle land forty miles to the south. Fed by news reports of the Cheyenne escape from Indian Territory, and nurtured by the story from the Driscoll ranch, the town of Dodge instantly grew numb with fear.

After a successful battle against Army troops a few days earlier, already known as the Battle at Turkey Springs, the Cheyenne divided into several smaller bands and moved northwest up the various creek-beds which parallel one another in this dry country. As they moved through the once open land, speckled now with ranches, they had at first tried to purchase horses in order to replenish their beleaguered stock. Local ranchers, already aware of the escape from Indian Territory, responded with raised weapons. No one will ever know for certain exactly how few people were killed during this part of their trek, but it seems likely that between September 17 and 22, the Cheyenne were responsible for a handful of deaths including the death of a black cook for the Chapman and Tuttle spread twenty miles south of Dodge, had stolen about twenty horses, and killed a hundred sheep. By Thursday evening every rancher and pioneer within thirty miles of Dodge had come into the city seeking protection. The *Nebraska State Journal* reported that dozens of men and women had been killed in raids. Even the *New York Times* reported there was "panic and all kinds of fighting" just outside Dodge City. The paper said that a house was burning just two miles to the south of town where a farmer had seen the Indians coming and fled. The *Russell, Kansas Reformer* reported that a Swedish farmer "hearing of the impending danger, bundled his wife and two children into the old prairie schooner, mounted one of the ponies and struck off across country, leaving his family in the barnyard; he had forgotten to hook up the traces."

Fortified with ammunition and supported by 107 cavalry and 40 infantrymen under the command of Captain Joseph Rendlebrock, about 50 cowboys and ranch owners headed out of Dodge City on Saturday morning.

Soon they had made contact with one group of Cheyenne but Rendlebroek's ability to lead faltered. According to his court martial records, "when one company of his command was fighting the enemy and the firing distinctly heard by him [Rendlebroek] failed to support said company or make any disposition whatever to fight the enemy with the rest of his command." As a result the cowboys and soldiers retreated away from the Cheyenne as night fell.

The next morning they found a trail in this white-rimmed canyon that runs into Spring Creek just beyond the front of Henry Ford's truck. The soldiers circled around to the west, trying to surround the group of Cheyenne. A cowboy who was there said the Cheyenne "had dug holes around the top of the canyon large enough to hold two to six men in each hole, and we advanced to within 300 to 400 yards of them and fired around them all day. Everybody was anxious to charge into them and endeavor to capture them, except the ranking captain."

Although Rendlebroek was in command of three companies of cavalry and one infantry, he used only a portion of his command to skirmish with the hostiles while he remained with the rest of his command near-by.

The cowboy claimed that later that evening the leading men in his bunch tried to persuade Rendlebroek to put guards around the Indians and hold them in their position in order to send for reinforcements and heavier artillery. Instead Rendlebroek, who was "under the curse of Custer," according to the cowboy, withdrew all of his forces a mile away where they camped for the night.

At Rendlebroek's court martial he was found guilty of neglecting to send a messenger to the Commanding Officer at Ft. Dodge to notify him of the engagement and of the position of Indians, and the probable direction they would travel. Even more serious was the charge that he actually "withheld information necessary for intelligence co-operation of other troops in the attempt to capture or destroy these Indians." When he returned to camp, "under the pretence of procuring supplies," the Cheyenne escaped "thus allowing Indians to gain a march of 36 hours on his command." The cowboy who testified at the court martial said, "the next morning the Indians were gone again, having taken a northerly direction and crossed the Arkansas River up where the Deer Trail was located at the time." The Cheyenne had with them the bodies of their wounded and about two hundred head of horses.

Disgusted with the Army, the ranchers fired off telegrams to the governor. Soon the newspapers picked up the story and three days later the Secretary of War issued orders to General George Crook commander of the Department of the Platte telling him to "spare no means to kill or capture these Indians for if

they are successful in reaching the north, it will endanger the whole northwest and affect for a while the whole Indian reservation system."

Within a week charges were brought against Rendlebrock for his conduct in Kansas and at the Turkey Springs Battle.

My traveling companions have spread out across the landscape overlooking the distant battle field, sharing the same view that Rendlebrock had of the fortress of white cliffs where Dull Knife and Little Wolf were entrenched. Andy and Sam have climbed the locked fence and are about a mile distant, on the very edge of the canyon, stooping over to inspect plants and rocks as they walk.

Henry Ford leans against the hood of his truck. "My father worked out this way riding for the Goodnight-Craven's crew," he says. Earlier in the day he had given me a copy of the book his father wrote during the 1930s. Henry Ford's father led an adventuresome life, eventually becoming the sheriff of Clark County. His father's third grade education didn't stop him from writing his story down, picking out the words a single letter at a time on the old typewriter which sat on the roll-top desk in the Clark County Sheriff's office. Henry and the other children, when they got within hearing distance, would spell words for him. "The Kid" as his father was known during the 1890s when he began to ride for the area's cattle companies, not only knew every square inch of land for a hundred miles in any direction, but also knew more about horses than anyone else who lived in that expanse. On an 1898 trip into Nebraska to obtain horses, the Kid earned his keep by bringing along a short, mean bronco and betting on its ability to throw any cowboy along the way who thought he could ride it. The Kid had just about every kind of job a man could have in those days in the west: breaking horses, ranch hand, longshoreman, merchant marine, bartender and logger. He enlisted in the army during the Spanish American War and survived a month of sea-sickness for a tour of duty in the Philippines. He rode horses and roped steers in dozens of traveling shows which were riding the coattails of Buffalo Bill's popularity. But his greatest adventure might have been escaping from jail after being falsely accused of horse stealing. The Kid hid out in these canyons and camped on the high mesas; he rode the rails and worked wherever he could. Finally turning himself in after more than a year on the lam. He served a year in prison for his jailbreak and came out a changed man, determined to stay on the right side of the law.

"He went to work for your grandfather about then," Henry Ford calls out to Don Goodnight. Mr. Goodnight stops snapping photographs and comes back to where we are standing.

"That would have been about right," Mr. Goodnight says. "Henry's father was foreman of my grandfather's spread on the old Ben Johnson Ranch, north of Englewood." In sharp contrast to Henry Ford's blue jeans and ball-cap, Mr. Goodnight wears a brown, western style corduroy jacket, pearl-button dress shirt and a felt, grey, western hat with a small, tightly-rolled rim. After sixty-seven years his inquisitive blue eyes and friendly smile seem a pretty natural part of his face. With the ease and love of men who have spent a lifetime coming to know one place in the world, both men lean on the truck and talk of the history of the land. "My Grandfather Frank hired Henry's father," Mr. Goodnight says.

His grandfather, Frank Goodnight, was the cousin of Charles Goodnight, the first white man to settle this part of the United States. Colonel Charles Goodnight served in the Confederate Army and when that dream failed, blazed a trail west where, in 1876, he established the first ranch in the Texas panhandle. The J.A. Ranch was jointly owned by Goodnight and John Adair, an Irish nobleman and financier. The J. A. Ranch at one time totaled more than one million acres.

"I grew up on the Ranch at Englewood," Mr. Goodnight says, pointing off to the south across fifty miles of yellow valley land.

"Right there?" I say, joking.

"Well, yes, most of the land you see there. My maternal grandfather, Charlie McKinney came here in 1884 and had control of 30,000 acres. Frank Goodnight had that much or more. . ."

"Your son has nearly that now, don't he?" Henry Ford cuts in.

"Yes," Mr. Goodnight says, "Nearly so."

"I guess you could say we come from a long line of cow men," Henry Ford says.

Although Charles Goodnight was a visionary man—he invented the chuck wagon, a portable kitchen and pantry which traveled with a camp cook and experimented with cross-breeding buffalo and cattle to produce catalos—his ranches remained chiefly great reservoirs for cattle. For over twenty years following the Civil War millions of cattle were sent up the trails from his and similar ranches to railheads in the new towns of Nebraska and Kansas. It was during these years that Dodge City found its fame as the toughest cowtown in the west. Dodge was a busy place but soon, in search of fresh grass and new markets, the cattlemen made other trails northward. Goodnight himself figured he could find a market for his cattle to the west in the goldfields beyond New Mexico's Pecos River and so he and a partner named Oliver Loving set out up

the Pecos one spring with a herd of fat steers. To their great surprise they were able to sell the entire herd at Ft. Sumner. They hurried back to the ranch for another herd. Soon the busy Goodnight-Loving Trail extended up to the northern border of New Mexico, to Colorado and Wyoming.

"There's trails all over this land," Mr. Goodnight says. "Why you can still see the Tuttle Cattle Trail right there." He points to a ridge where a strip of lower, greener grass winds north and south across the face of the earth to the horizon.

"You headed up to Wichita today, Don?" Henry Ford asks.

"Yes. Going to pick up a couple of fellers and fly them to Kansas City." Mr. Goodnight checks the clear blue sky as he answers. "I've been flying since I got out of the service in 1948," he explains. He has made a living all of his adult life as a flying instructor, teaching ranchers and business executives and others how to fly the small planes that have replaced the horse ponies and chuck wagons of his grandfather's day. He flies JJ Cubs, these days, and loves the way his home land looks from the air.

He gazes out across the open, treeless land, past where my Cheyenne companions are walking, spread out like distant tumbleweeds; beyond the white rimrock of the canyon where the ancestors of these cowboys and Indians battled so long ago; far across the vast green and yellow buffalo rangeland turned cattle empire and empty. "I've been all over the world," he says after a pause, "and this is a pretty good ole place to live."