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The Battle of Plum Creek

Christina Smith

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Title: Delaying Action: The Battle of Plum Creek
Artist: Lee Herring

Medium: Oil on panel
Date: 1978
Dimensions: 4’x8' (panel); 4’10"x 8’10" (framed)
Description: (Historical Scene) View of a band of Penateka Comanche mounted on horses and dressed in full battle regalia; the warriors are encircling the foreground; in the distance is a tree line with the distinct view of soldiers and settlers emerging.
Credit Line: Loaned by William Adams/Cat. No. L2010.028

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The Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum in Waco, Texas, has recently received on loan a stunning painting meticulously detailing the 1840 Battle of Plum Creek, which occurred on August 12 near present Lockhart, Texas. This altercation, fought between a large number of various bands of Comanche warriors and hurriedly assembled volunteers, produced a decisive victory for the Texans. The battle was significant in that it drastically reduced the southern Comanche threat to the settlements. They never again made such a massive, organized advance into the south central region of the frontier. Rather, they participated in smaller hit-and-run raids which allowed them to quickly retreat into the relative safety of Comancheria, which was the home of the Comanche from the early 1700s until 1875. With the Comanche presence diminished, the frontier regressed and settlements expanded further east. The causes of the battle, however, and the ramifications after the event negatively affected Indian relations in Texas and ignited conflict and warfare for decades.

The Battle of Plum Creek is a direct result of the exterminationist policies of President Mirabeau Lamar. Unlike his predecessor Sam Houston, Lamar pursued a policy of aggression toward the Texas tribes. While addressing the topic of Texas Indians in his 1838 inaugural address, he bluntly stated that it was time an "exterminating war" was opened against them that would admit to "no compromise."[1]

Such was the political atmosphere in 1840 in the months before the fight at Plum Creek. This antagonistic attitude was evident when a band of Penateka Comanches petitioned Texas representatives for a peace conference. This proved politically and socially disastrous for the Comanches and triggered the historic raid that concluded with the clash at Plum Creek.

In March 1840, approximately sixty-five Penateka Comanches and their families, including twelve political leaders, arrived in San Antonio for the scheduled peace conference. The meeting was organized at the request of the Comanche leaders, who were attempting to contrive a way to harmoniously co-exist with the Texans. The southern bands were far closer to the settlements than their northern counterparts were and experienced the brunt of both Texan attacks and disease. The Penateka made an initial bid for peace in January 1840 but were instructed to return later with all of their white captives. While the Comanche emissaries returned to their villages to discuss peace terms with their chiefs, the secretary of war sent Colonel William S. Fisher, for whom the original Fort Fisher was named, with several companies to San Antonio in anticipation of a confrontation with the Comanches in the event no white captives were returned. Evidently, non-white captives were not considered important negotiating tools.

Comanche representatives returned on March 19, bringing one white captive, a teenage girl named Matilda Lockhart. She had suffered horrible abuse at the hands of her captors, and her face and body were a testament to her suffering. No other white captives accompanied the Comanche delegates, and the intended peace conference immediately disintegrated. The Comanche leaders explained that they had brought in the only captive their tribe held; they could not force or speak for other bands regarding their captives. Col. Fisher ordered the Comanche chiefs held as hostages, whereupon violence erupted inside the council house. All twelve chiefs were killed within minutes of the start of the "peace" discussions. The fight did not end inside the council house, however, as

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soldiers and the Comanches who were outside, including many children, clashed in the ensuing confusion and pandemonium. Thirty-five Comanche men, women, and children were killed, and the rest were taken as hostages. Their horses and supplies were taken as well. As for the Texans, seven officials and onlookers were killed.[2]

The deaths of the twelve Penateka Comanche leaders and their startled family members were a severe loss to the Comanches. It threw the tribal leadership into disarray and caused an atmosphere of acrimony and suspicion toward Texan officials. The Comanches felt that they had made a sincere conciliatory overture and were not only rebuffed, but also ambushed by the officials. Lamar's uncompromising political stance toward the tribes ignited a strong desire for revenge on the part of all the Comanche bands.

After what came to be called the Council House Fight, the settlers endured several tense months as they waited in anticipation for the Comanches to retaliate for the loss of their leaders. As summer progressed and nothing happened, the uneasiness began to wane and precautionary measures were eased. This complacency was a mistake. The expected payback from the Comanches did not occur in the months immediately following the Council House Fight because not only did the bands need time to mourn, but they also needed time to regroup and choose leaders to replace those lost in San Antonio. There are, however, arguments opining that in the months following the altercation, the Mexican government was attempting to entice the Comanches into an alliance with them. The purported goal of the association was the overthrow of the Republic of Texas and the reversion of the land back to Mexico. Regardless of any supplementary motives, by the beginning of August 1840, a large conglomeration of approximately six hundred Comanches, warriors, and their families had organized and begun their procession from the Hill Country to the coastal settlements, and they were ready to extract their revenge for the killings in San Antonio.[3]

With no citizen patrols in the fields, the Comanches traveled unnoticed through the sparsely populated countryside in spite of the obvious trail that a large number of Comanches, their horses, and gear would create. They initiated minor skirmishes shortly before reaching the unprepared and unsuspecting settlement of Victoria on August 6. The attack on that town greatly increased the war party's load as traders were in town with five hundred horses to sell. The Comanches acquired the herd in addition to the horses already captured from citizens.[4] After assailing the town and capturing or killing both citizens and livestock, the Comanches leisurely withdrew a short distance to camp for the night, displaying no intentions of returning to Comancheria. About fifty citizens, thinking the Comanches had followed their customary practice of quickly departing after a battle, left Victoria in search of reinforcements. In fact, however, the raid was nowhere close to its completion. After a second strike on Victoria, they moved toward the coastal settlement of Linnville, clashing with settlers along the way before reaching the port town on August 8.

Linnville was a seaport situated along Lavaca Bay and comprised of warehouses full of merchandise waiting to be transported to assorted towns and settlements. Its inhabitants were as stunned by the arrival of the Comanches as Victoria had been two days earlier. Linnville was the site of much of the physical destruction of the raid. The town was essentially demolished as the warriors burned the stores and appropriated the warehouse items. The astonished citizens fled to the bay, finding boats in which to make their escape and rowing out far enough to escape but close enough to witness the destruction.[5]

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After Linnville, the heavily laden war party began their removal back to the Hill Country. The return, however, did not go as smoothly as the initial march. The already immense procession was made even larger by the addition of so many horses. The broad trail to the coast was noticed by several people passing through the countryside, and alerts were given of the potential threat. Volunteer companies quickly began forming in nearby settlements. At the time of the Battle of Plum Creek, the men who answered the notices were not Texas Rangers, but many of them had served or would later serve as Rangers. The nature of the mobilization, for the purpose of frontier defense, is indicative of the duties of the early Ranger.

Adam Zumwalt of Lavaca and Ben McCulloch of Gonzales organized separate companies, joined forces, and picked up the trail by August 7. They soon met up with volunteers from Victoria under John Tumlinson and learned of the attack on that settlement. The combined Texan volunteers sent messengers to other settlements requesting assistance before continuing toward Victoria. Unknown to them, the town had suffered a second assault.

The men arrived on August 8, the day the Comanches had attacked the nearby town of Linnville. The Texans under Zumwalt, Tumlinson and McCulloch engaged the departing war party but did not have the means to launch a full charge. The Comanches in the rear of the departing party surrounded the Texans and engaged in a slight skirmish, allowing the rest of the warriors and their families to escape. Texan messengers were dispatched for more men. On August 9, Ben McCulloch, frustrated over a lack of action, left the volunteer force in pursuit of reinforcements in the hope of making a more calculated and intense move against the party. The rest of Tumlinson and Zumwalt's men continued to slowly pursue and harass the retreating Comanches.

Traveling in and around Gonzales, McCulloch assisted in organizing additional volunteer companies and sent messengers out in search of Mathew Caldwell and Edward Burleson, who were both well respected and experienced in Indian warfare. McCulloch requested Plum Creek to be the designated meeting point.[6] By August 10, Burleson and his volunteers, including Tonakwa warriors under Chief Placido, were on their way to Plum Creek. Chief Placido and his men, horseless, jogged beside the Burleson volunteers while the Texans rode horses.[7] Caldwell and his men also departed for Plum Creek after notification reached them while they were out on patrol.

By August 11, volunteers began arriving at the appointed rendezvous spot. Among the arrivals was Felix Huston of the Texas Militia. Despite his relative inexperience, he was chosen as the overall commander of the volunteer forces. The men lay ready as the large Comanche party began their ride through the area. No charge was ordered, however, as Huston learned that Burleson and his men would be reaching the scene soon. Once Burleson and his men arrived at Plum Creek from Bastrop on August 12, Huston was ready.

Approximately two hundred volunteers dismounted and advanced on the rear of the slow- moving Comanche party. The warriors immediately formed into a line of defense, protecting their families and others in front and allowing their livestock time to pass through. Huston did not immediately charge the warriors who stayed behind. The volunteers and warriors engaged in a firefight across a wide expanse while displaying feats of showmanship with their horses and weapons. The Texans were eager to charge as they recognized that the Comanche stall tactic was allowing the Victoria and Linnville captives and horse herd to escape. When several of the prominent leaders were killed in the exchange of fire and the Comanche's resolve seemed to falter, Huston, at the urging of more experienced frontiersman, finally ordered the volunteers to mount and charge the line. The war

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party, encumbered with a large pack train and horse herd, could not mount an adequate defense or retreat. The battle evolved into a running fight that lasted several miles. In the end, approximately eighty Comanches were killed to the Texans' one.[8]

The loss of the battle at Plum Creek was a severe setback for the Comanches. In just a few months their tribal leadership and social structure had been violently thrust into disarray. The physical size of the war party was an indication how angry the Comanches were over the treachery in San Antonio. Although they had killed twenty settlers during the revenge raid, they lost eighty or more during the Plum Creek Battle. Not only did they lose lives, they lost their enormous horse herds, captives, and goods they had taken from Linnville. The raid turned into a catastrophic loss.

Though the Comanches lost the battle, the conflicts were far from over. The lesson learned from Plum Creek was that small war parties that could move in and depart quickly should be the method used when fighting settlers. The Comanches never forgot how their peaceful overture was met with deceit. Lamar's belligerent policies during his tenure as president were felt in the decades to come as settlers, Rangers, and the military struggled against Comanche raiding parties who were tenaciously trying to hold on to their homeland. Some of the same men who were volunteers at Plum Creek participated in many more skirmishes with the Comanches while serving as Texas Rangers as remnants of Lamar's harsh policies reverberated through the next several decades.

Notes

1. Brice, Donaly E., *The Great Comanche Raid: Boldest Indian Attack of the Texas Republic* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1987) 2.
2. Ibid, 25.
3. Utley, Robert M., *Lone Star Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 27.
4. Linn, John J., *Reminiscences of Fifty Years in Texas* (New York: D&J Sadlier & Co., 1883) 339.
5. Ibid, 341
6. Moore, Stephen L., *Savage Frontier, Volume III: 1840-1841* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2007) 95.
7. Ibid, 98.
8. Brice, *Great Comanche Raid*, 48.

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Brice, Donaly E. *The Great Comanche Raid: Boldest Indian Attack of the Texas Republic*. Austin Eakin Press, 1987.

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