

Colony Oklahoma
Nov 27th 1914

George E Hyde
My Dear Friend

I received your letter
day before Thanksgiving. I was school
closed 22 Turkey for Thanksgiving. Received
My Wife and Myself took dinner with
School children of course. Government took
all bills for this first year. Indian Chief
was also invited at this Thanksgiving. Received
Every body had all they could eat. The
doctor that visited the Drees. told Northern
Physicians that Drees had lots of good horses
I understand. White Elk Northrup Physician will
go with him to go with Sioux. to visit
Drees. they are going Drees back. it will be
several months before they return. When I hear
from them. I will write to you all about
it. I received letter from Butler same time
I got your letter.

your friend
George Bent

In 1904 George Hyde, an independent scholar on the Old West, wrote to George Bent, a mixed-blood Cheyenne Indian who had been educated in white schools and was then in his early sixties, beginning a correspondence that lasted until Bent's death in 1918. From his home in Colony, Oklahoma, on the Cheyenne reservation, Bent wrote close to four hundred letters to Hyde, outlining the history of his people. One such letter, written November 27, 1914, and pictured here, begins "My Dear Friend." Letter courtesy of the Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

GATHERING WAR CLOUDS: GEORGE BENT'S MEMORIES OF 1864

by Steven C. Haack

The popular image of the period of westward expansion tends to exaggerate the hostilities between European emigrants and Native Americans. In truth, cooperation and mutually beneficial interaction generally typified the contacts between the two cultures.¹ To the emigrant facing the journey ahead or the settler working to build a new life, weather and disease surely posed a greater threat than did armed American Indian resistance. Agreements to allow emigrants passage through the hunting grounds of the Great Plains stood intact for many years, finally wearing thin beneath the sheer volume of the emigration and its impact upon the area's game and other resources.

A total of about three hundred and fifty thousand emigrants crossed the American plains between 1841 and 1866. The annual numbers varied enormously, peaking at fifty-five thousand migrants the year after the discovery of gold in California. By the mid-1860s, about twenty thousand emigrants a year traveled the trails west.² Their livestock in particular had a strong impact on the land. The number of oxen and horses brought along by westward emigrants may seem unimpressive when compared to the millions of bison supported by the plains ecosystem, but, being constrained to the areas near the trails, their impact was quite concentrated. As each season progressed, the trails left broad scars on the land, having been cleared of grass, game, and firewood. To the emigrants, this was a matter of little concern as long as they found sufficient resources to support their migration. To the Native Americans, it was a serious imposition. So impressive, in fact, was the yearly spectacle that Brule Chief Spotted Tail would eventually conclude that it was all an elaborate hoax designed to intimidate the Indian. Wagon trains, according to Spotted Tail, were moving west over the Oregon Trail and then dropping south to return east via the Smoky Hill Road and start all over; thousands of wagons were constantly moving in a huge circle to strike fear into the Native American and undermine his will to fight for his land.³

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1. Michael L. Tate, *Indians and Emigrants: Encounters on the Overland Trails* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).

2. Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road: The Covered Wagon Mainline via Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 22–23.

3. Eugene F. Ware, *The Indian War of 1864* (Topeka, Kans.: Crane and Co., 1911), 160–61.



George Bent (1843–1918), a son of the famous trader William Bent and a Southern Cheyenne named Owl Woman, spent the first decade of his life at Bent’s Fort, his father’s trading post on the Arkansas River, but his childhood was strongly influenced by his mother’s culture. That changed dramatically when Bent’s father enrolled him in an academy at the age of ten; Bent spent the next eight years in the white man’s world, attending schools in Westport and St. Louis. After completing his formal education and fighting for the Confederacy during the American Civil War, Bent in 1866 married Magpie, the niece of Black Kettle, a Southern Cheyenne chief. Photograph of the couple courtesy of History Colorado, Denver.

Even as relations deteriorated, the outbreak of war was not inevitable. Many Indian leaders were well aware that any such confrontation would be a disaster for their people. However, with an increasing scarcity of game and a growing resentment toward white intrusion, young Indian men were turning to the theft of livestock and sometimes attacked travelers and settlers. Such raiding proved a source of frustration to a military presence stretched thin by civil war in the East, making it less able to control the enormous tracts of territory for which it was held responsible. Furthermore, the government’s Indian policy tended to be incoherent and was often poorly communicated down the line of command.

The year 1864 represents a sad turning point in the interactions between Native Americans and emigrants moving across the plains. A number of minor incidents in the spring of that year would cast a long shadow and destabilize relations to the point that a single tragic act would irrevocably shatter the peace. Behind these incidents was an ever-present aspect of asymmetrical warfare. Among the American Indians warfare was practiced by small, autonomous groups of warriors with little or no guidance from the tribe’s higher governmental structure. The United States government, of course, found it difficult to track and engage these small, mobile groups of warriors in the field. Organized to conduct war on the European model of two armies meeting on a field of battle, the U.S. Army assumed that warriors were in some manner representing the interests or fighting on behalf of the greater band or tribe to which they belonged. As such, that band or tribe was itself responsible for its actions and could reasonably be attacked in retaliation for the small-scale raiding committed by any of its members. Extending this logic, any Indian village could stand as an example of the retaliation that such raiding could provoke. In short, if they could not find the Indians they wanted to fight, they would fight the Indians they could find. General William Tecumseh Sherman expressed the philosophy several years later when he wrote, “The Indians are poor and proud. They are tempted beyond the power of resistance to steal the herds and flocks they see grazing so peacefully in this valley. To steal they sometimes kill. We in turn cannot discriminate—all look alike and to get the rascals, we are forced to include all.”⁴

It is hard enough to construct a clear, unambiguous picture of this complicated matter from records kept by whites. It is almost impossible to obtain such a view from the Indian perspective. It is our great fortune that one man, reared in the Native American tradition and educated in white schools, witnessed many of the important events of 1864 and took pains later in his life to commit his memories to paper.

George Bent was a son of the famous trader William Bent and a Southern Cheyenne named Owl Woman. He spent the first decade of his life at Bent’s Fort, his father’s trading post on the Arkansas River. The adobe structure stood at the heart of commerce on the Colorado plains with dozens of employees trading for buffalo robes from the Plains Indians and pelts from mountain trappers.

4. Sherman quoted in Donald J. Berthong, *The Southern Cheyennes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 284.

They also provided goods and services to the wagons traveling along the mountain branch of the Santa Fe Trail that passed by the fort. Wagon trains from Bent's Fort crossed the Kansas plains each year, the oxen pulling carts heavily laden with buffalo hides destined for the eastern market. Each hide typically cost the company twenty-five cents worth of trade goods and would be sold for five dollars.⁵ Such a business prospered only if peace could be maintained in the region and William Bent worked tirelessly to bring his diplomatic skills to bear upon the problems that constantly threatened to shatter the fragile relationships between whites and Cheyennes.

George's childhood was strongly influenced by his mother's culture, so it is hard to imagine how much his world changed when, at the age of ten, his father took him to Westport, at present-day Kansas City, and enrolled him in an academy. He spent the next eight years in the white man's world, attending schools in Westport and St. Louis. These were academies attended by children of the upper crust of white society. William Bent could well afford it. The curricula of these academies included classical language and ancient history, providing the kind of education designed to send their young graduates into society well prepared to continue the family legacy.

Like many of his classmates, George was expected to continue in the family business in some capacity. However, as school adjourned in June of 1861, he was swept up in the wartime political maelstrom gripping Missouri and he joined the Confederate Army. After seeing action in Missouri, Arkansas, and Mississippi, he was taken prisoner and sent back to St. Louis. It was his great fortune that a friend of the Bent family recognized him as the prisoners were paraded through the streets of St. Louis. With the pulling of political strings, George was soon paroled to the custody of his brother and returned to his father's ranch on the Purgatoire River to the west of Bent's Fort.⁶

George Bent would eventually settle into life interpreting and working on behalf of various interests. His life was not altogether happy. He was never truly comfortable in a skin made patchwork from two discordant cultures. He was often exploited by whites for the access he could provide to Indians and, in turn, mistrusted by Indians themselves. He struggled with an

addiction to alcohol. However, he was also sustained by a dream. George Bent was dedicated to the creation of a book filled with all he could remember or glean from others about the Cheyenne people. It would include everything from their origins in the Great Lakes region to the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn and their adaptation to reservation life. It would also include descriptions of the many manual skills his forefathers used to survive the rigors of the High Plains; how they preserved meat and made the shields used in warfare and the rawhide rattles used in religious rites.⁷

He never wrote about his motivation for creating such a book. In fact, Bent rarely discussed his personal emotions at all, despite the fact that many of them must have been quite strong. Even when he wrote about the events he witnessed at the massacre at Sand Creek and the pitiful night the survivors spent freezing on the prairie, he remained unemotional and matter of fact. He may have seen himself as among the few people capable of recording the history of a rapidly vanishing era. We can plausibly speculate that his experience at the academies had left him deeply impressed with the durability of the written word and, by stark contrast, the fragile nature of oral tradition, but none of his letters overtly state this.

The creation of such a book was an ambitious dream that would require the cooperation of someone who was, in his own way, a misfit and a dreamer. At fifteen, a serious case of rheumatic fever left George Hyde deaf and close to blind, ending his formal education. However, a visit to the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in 1898 in his native city of Omaha, Nebraska, left Hyde with an insatiable curiosity about the Old West, and he pursued the subject as an independent scholar for the rest of his life. In 1904 Hyde wrote to George Bent, then in his early sixties, and began a correspondence that lasted until Bent's death in 1918. From his home in Colony, Oklahoma, on the Cheyenne reservation, Bent wrote close to four hundred letters to Hyde.⁸ In a round, legible hand, still showing the flourished capitals he learned at the academy, Bent wrote long, stream-of-consciousness letters, skipping from one topic to another with little regard for the rules of punctuation. It appears that the subject of coauthoring a book was broached early on in their correspondence. Hyde must have discarded some of the early correspondence, because the first mention

5. For a description of Bent's Fort, see David Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 145–47, 171–72.

6. David F. Halaas and Andrew E. Masich, *Halfbreed: The Remarkable True Story of George Bent* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2004).

7. *Ibid.*, 287–326.

8. Lincoln B. Faller, "Making Medicine Against 'White Man's Side of Story': George Bent's Letters to George Hyde," *American Indian Quarterly* 24 (Winter 2000): 64–90.

of the book we find in existing letters implies that an agreement had already been reached. In December 1905 Bent wrote, "I will let you name our book as you are better posted than I am of this kind [of] work. Any name you wish to give this book will suit me."⁹

In 1916 Hyde completed the manuscript. It was a splendid account written in the first person. The book then began its own long journey. Hyde could not find a publisher. America in the 1920s was speeding forward towards a bright future as an industrial powerhouse and a world leader. Nobody, it seems, was interested in Indian stories. The manuscript lay fallow, Hyde finally selling it, along with a stack of Bent's letters, to the Denver Public Library for a few hundred dollars in 1930. The bulk of the letters, some 240 in number, were sold to a Chicago book dealer who then sold them to William Robertson Coe. These are now in the Coe Collection at Yale University. Others, tragically, were destroyed after Bent's death when a depressed Hyde determined that they were of little value since he had extracted most of their contents. He later expressed a deep regret for burning them.¹⁰

Hyde, pressed into seclusion by his disabilities, went on to establish a reputation as a scholar of the American Indian and to publish a number of volumes that have stood well the test of time, but he would never see the book based on Bent's letters through to publication. In 1966, Hyde informed Savoie Lottinville, director of the University of Oklahoma Press, of the existence of the manuscript in the archives of the Denver Public Library and also sent to him a longer working manuscript of the book that he had kept in his Omaha attic. The book, *The Life of George Bent as Written from His Letters*, finally saw publication in 1968, a few months after George Hyde's death.¹¹

Maps sometimes accompanied Bent's letters to clarify his writings. Most of these were prepared by Hyde and mailed to Bent with the request that the locations of particular events be indicated. In a few cases, Bent would draw a map on his own, typically quite roughly, to help in the

explication of the accompanying letter. In the process of writing the book it appears that Hyde separated the maps from the letters and, in most cases, they were never reunited. Fourteen of the maps were sold in the late 1920s to John Van Male, a Denver bookseller, who then sold them to the archives at the University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries, where they reside today.

Of particular interest is a map (figure 1) sent by Hyde to Bent that was returned with a letter dated April 14, 1913.¹² On this map, covering much of western Kansas and part of eastern Colorado, Bent marked the location of a number of events that took place during the spring and summer of 1864. The map and the relevant letters provide an opportunity to examine this important time in the history of the Great Plains through the eyes of one Native American participant. Using the map as a focus, we can extract a cohesive narrative of the time from George Bent's letters.

The map itself is a strange construction. It consists of six different pieces of thin tracing paper pasted together. The individual pieces have a number of rivers placed upon them apparently by careful tracing. It is not known why Hyde created the map this way. His eyesight was so poor that reading was a laborious effort requiring a strong magnifying glass. One can imagine that the process of tracing the course of a river would have been quite challenging. It may have been easier for Hyde to approach the task in a piecemeal manner. The Arkansas and Smoky Hill rivers, as well as Walnut Creek, Sand Creek, and Pawnee Fork, appear to have been drawn by carefully tracing their courses. However, the northern tier of creeks and rivers such as the Republican and Solomon rivers and Beaver, Sappa, and Prairie Dog creeks are roughly sketched in. The approximate area the map covers is illustrated in figure 2.

Among the notations in Bent's hand are the Cheyenne names for a number of creeks and rivers. Both branches of the Solomon River are labeled Turkey Creek, the north fork of the Smoky Hill River is labeled Black Butte Creek, and along Ladder Creek Bent wrote "Running Creek or Rush Creek." In addition, White Woman Creek is labeled Dry Creek and a tributary to the Republican River is labeled Cherry Creek.

The letter that accompanied this map is quite short, by Bent's standards, and reads:

9. George Bent to George Hyde, December 18, 1905, Coe Collection, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut (hereafter cited as "Coe Collection").

10. George Hyde to John Van Male, October 24, 1929, Box 1, Folder 98, George Bent Papers, WH1704, Western History Collection, Denver Public Library, Colorado.

11. George E. Hyde, *Life of George Bent: Written from His Letters*, ed. Savoie Lottinville (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968).

12. George Bent to George Hyde, April 14, 1913, Box 1, Folder 4, Bent-Hyde Papers, Archives Department, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries.



George Bent, pictured at left around 1901, translating for the group of Indians and their white visitors as they discuss the Ghost Dance, worked as an interpreter on behalf of various interests, but it was not an altogether happy life. He was never truly comfortable in a skin made patchwork from two discordant cultures, and he struggled with an addiction to alcohol; but he was also sustained by a dream. Bent was dedicated to the creation of a book filled with all he could remember or glean from others about the Cheyenne people. It would include everything from their origins in the Great Lakes region to the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn and their adaptation to reservation life. Photograph courtesy of the Research Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

My Dear Friend, On the map you sent me I have given the Indians names for these streams. Solomon Creeks are Turkey Creeks in Indian. At the forks I marked where Cheyennes and Sioux were camped together in 1864 when they brought in lot of plunder, silks, bonnets, shoes and lots of other fancy stuff. I also marked it on map in Smokey Hill where Cheyennes were camped the time Lean Bear was killed on Hackberry Creek. Bitter Lake was great place for wild horses. I think they went there for grass that grew around the lake. I think they liked the water also. The Cheyennes moved back from Kiowas same trail in 1864. After Blunt's fight Cheyennes and Arapahoes moved onto mouth of Running or Rush Creek, south bank of it. In this camp is where Black Kettle and his party came from Denver. When one war party got to this camp Cheyennes and Arapahoes had lots of stuff

they got at Fort Lyon that the agent has issued to them. From this camp Cheyennes moved to Solomon Creeks or Turkey Creeks. Black kettle band moved from these streams towards Fort Lyon as agent Colley and Wyncoop [*sic*] told Black Kettle to move there and no harm would be done to them and this is why they moved. Arapahoes had already moved there under Little Raven and when they heard soldiers were going to disarm them some had already given up some old bows and guns. One night they all left and crossed the Arkansas River to join the Kiowas on Medicine Lodge Creek. Your friend, George Bent.¹³

This letter typifies Bent's writing style. Terse and choppy, the meaning is sometimes unclear and, in a few cases, could have been clarified with the application of punctuation.

13. *Ibid.*

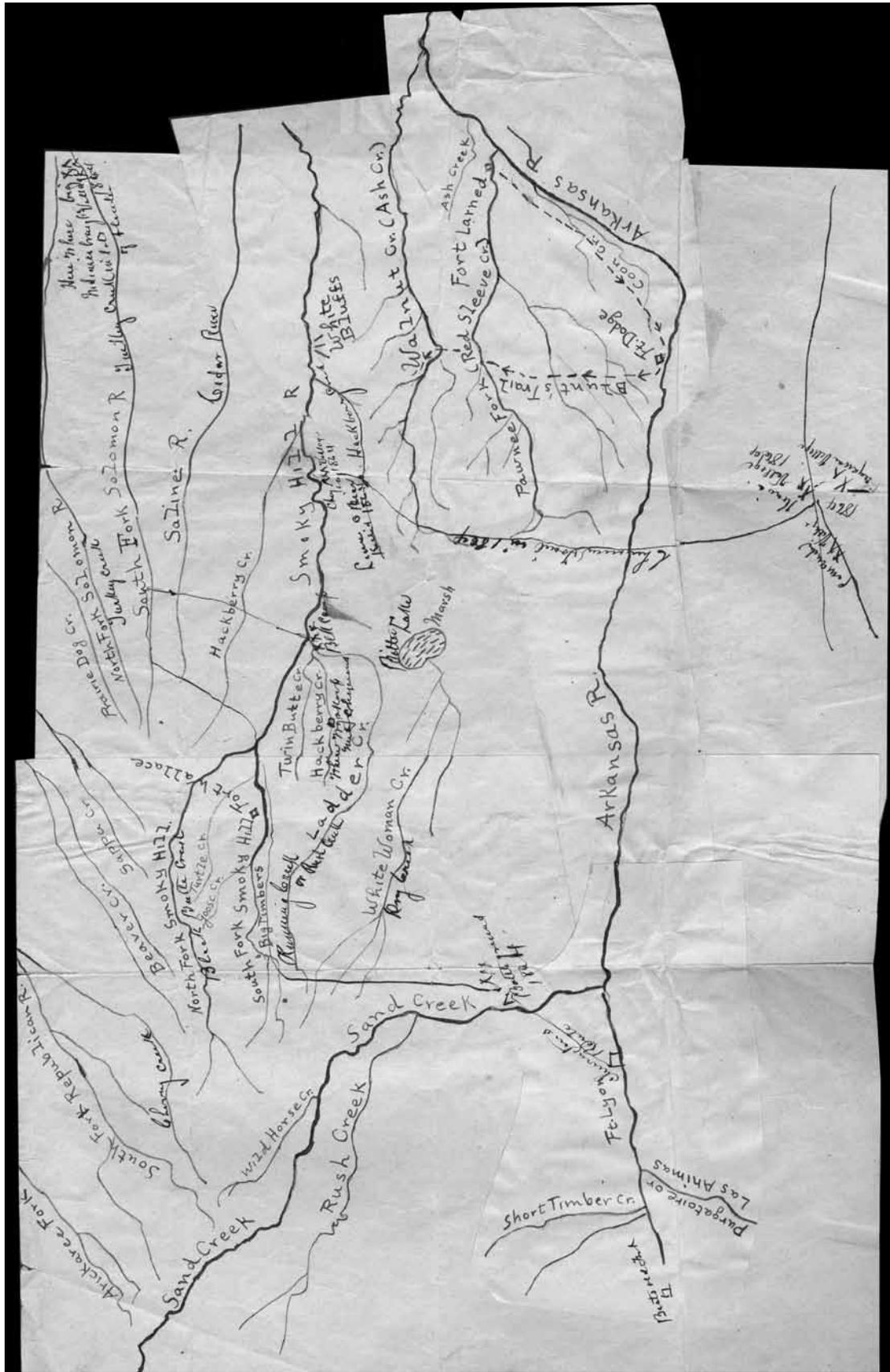
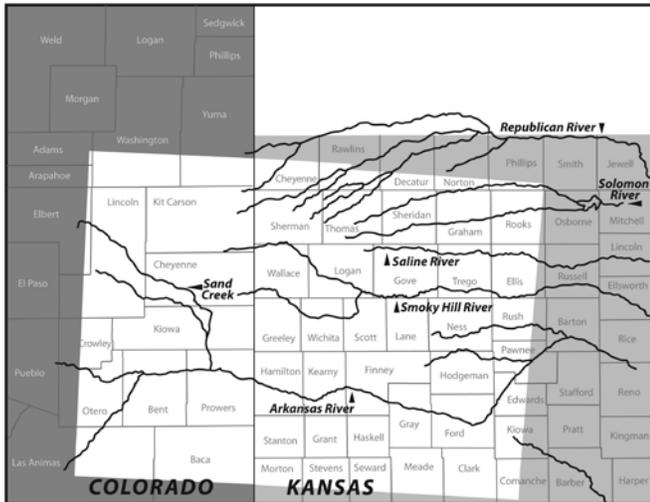


Figure 1



George Hyde prepared a map of western Kansas and eastern Colorado — figure 1, opposite — and sent it to George Bent, who returned it with a letter dated April 14, 1913, and a number of notations illustrating the events of 1864. Of special interest is the path Black Kettle took from the “Big Village” camp to Fort Lyon. It is generally noted that Black Kettle’s band simply reported to Fort Lyon in late October, but Bent showed the circuitous route the Indians took to arrive there. The map shows that they first headed north to the south fork of the Solomon River, then west along that river and south to the south fork of the Smoky Hill River. Reaching its headwaters, they headed straight south to Fort Lyon and camped on Sand Creek. Bent also drew a line, labeled “Chivington’s route,” running north from Fort Lyon to the Indian camp. At the other end of the line is the notation “Battleground 1864.” Map courtesy of the Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries, Bent-Hyde Papers. Figure 2, above, shows the region covered by Hyde’s map, indicated in white.

The earliest event on the map is indicated by the note just northeast of the center, which reads “Lean Bear killed 1864.” This sad event, like so many others, was the outcome of the U.S. Army’s policy of responding to a particular criminal act by attacking any random village. On April 5 a party of Cheyennes stole 175 head of cattle from government contractors on the headwaters of Sand Creek, in east-central Colorado. Three days later Lieutenant George Eayre left Denver with fifty-four men and two howitzers to recover the cattle. Picking up a trail, they traveled northeast for several days to a Cheyenne encampment of seventy-five lodges led by Crow Chief. The Cheyennes, warned of his approach, had fled by the time Eayre reached the camp. He destroyed the abandoned camp and pressed on. Three days later, he came upon a much larger village, also deserted by the time the soldiers arrived. Again, everything was put to

the torch.¹⁴ Nineteen cattle were recovered here, though it is by no means clear if the raiders belonged to this band or the villagers had simply brought in strays, a very common practice. Unsatisfied by so paltry a showing for his efforts, Eayre returned to Denver to reprovision and left again in late April looking for more Cheyennes. Taking a more southerly route this time, he headed down the Smoky Hill River, finding little for two weeks.

On May 16 Eayre’s command, strung out for several miles, approached a Cheyenne encampment of two hundred and fifty lodges on a small tributary of the Smoky Hill River known to the Cheyennes as Hackberry Creek. This location most likely lies in southern Gove County. George Bent did not witness what followed. He was camped to the west on the Smoky Hill River at a village where Crow Chief’s people sought refuge after the destruction of their village. In fact, Bent was with a small group of warriors who set out to track Eayre’s movements and concluded that he was returning to Denver. He later heard of the events of May 16 from Little Chief and related his description:

In the morning Cheyenne hunters came in from chasing buffalo. Village cryer went through the camp asking chiefs to get on their horses and go out and meet the soldiers, as the hunters had seen them near the village. The cryer said the hunters told him there were good many soldiers and they had cannons with them. It was custom when Indian sees anything first thing he does is to find village cryer and tell him what he has seen so everybody can hear. Black Kettle and Lean Bear were head chiefs of this village. Lean Bear was leading lot of us to go and meet the soldiers. Just as we rode on hill, we seen 4 companies of cavalry and cannons also. Soon as they seen us they formed line. We were not looking for battle as we were camped near Fort Larned all winter and trading with traders both at Pawnee Creek and Walnut Creek. Lean Bear told us all to stay back, that he would ride up and show the officer his Washington papers to show him that they were at peace with whites. Lean Bear had on his breast Lincoln medal that was given him in Washington 1863. When

14. George Bird Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 138–39.

he rode to within 20 or 30 feet to the officer who was in front of the soldiers, hallowed out. When the soldiers fired at Lean bear and also at the Indians, I was to one side with some young men. One company was near us and they were shooting the other way so we had good chance to shoot into them with bows and arrows and pistols as we had bought good many pistols and guns from traders during winter. We were so close to them, we shot several of soldiers. 2 soldiers fell off backwards off their horses. We captured 15 head of their horses, saddles, bridles and saddle bags. Lean Bear and Star were both shot off their horses in front of soldiers. The soldiers rode up to them and shot them again while laying on ground. They killed 3 of us and we killed 4 or 5 soldiers. The soldiers shot cannon at us. The bullets hit the ground all around us (grape shot). Black Kettle rode up and stopped the fight saying not to make war with the whites.¹⁵

Black Kettle, long convinced of the futility of a war with the whites, managed to keep the incident from erupting into a battle as the soldiers, facing overwhelming odds, retired from the field. Despite the esteem in which he was held, Black Kettle could not stop the retaliatory raiding throughout the area that followed the murder of Lean Bear. Within days, he moved the Cheyenne encampment to Medicine Lodge River, south of the Arkansas River, and, hopefully, away from the violence he feared was coming. The map shows the trails Black Kettle took to the south. Hyde had not included Medicine Lodge River on the map and Bent drew it in roughly. He put it farther west than it runs; the camp was actually about fifty miles south of Fort Larned, in Kiowa County.

William Bent was en route to Missouri with a wagon train of goods when he was apprised of the calamity gripping central Kansas. Sending the caravan ahead under the guidance of George's older brother, Robert, he flew into the nineteenth-century version of "shuttle diplomacy." He headed for the camp on Medicine Lodge River, where he arrived around June 5, finding that the Cheyenne had joined already existing encampments of Kiowa and Comanche. There, he met with the chiefs and exacted a pledge from them to remain at peace while he traveled up to Fort Larned to speak with the authorities

there. He was expecting to find there Colonel John M. Chivington, commander of the Colorado Military District, but upon arrival learned that he had gone to Fort Lyon. William and George traveled west to the ranch where George stayed while William went to Fort Lyon. Colonel Chivington met him, but gave little grounds for optimism. A former Methodist preacher with high political ambitions, Chivington had little respect for a white man who would marry outside his race. He made no secret that he was "on the warpath," and when it was pointed out that a war would be very hard on white settlers and travelers he was uninterested, saying simply that they would have to find a way to protect themselves as best they could.¹⁶

A depressed William Bent returned to his ranch. A few days later, around the first of July, he was contacted by Indian Agent Samuel Colley. Colley was as corrupt an agent as could be found. He did a brisk business stealing the annuity goods he was supposed to deliver to the Indians. He instead passed them on to his son, Dexter, who then took them to the Indian camps as trade goods. Thus, the Indians paid for goods that already belonged to them by treaty. Colley showed the Bents a proclamation issued by Colorado Governor John Evans, which demanded that all friendly Indian bands report to designated forts in the area. The plan was designed to give the military authorities a way to distinguish between peaceful and hostile bands. If the peaceful bands could be quarantined near the forts, the military would be free to put pressure on other bands, which could be assumed to be hostile. As the hostile bands eventually capitulated, they would join the peaceful bands. The plan would have tragic consequences. Colley requested that Bent help spread word of the proclamation through the Indian population. Bent, seeing it as a plan with good potential, agreed.¹⁷

So the Bents again hit the road, heading back to Medicine Lodge River to talk to Black Kettle and the other chiefs there. Around the second week of July, William convinced the chiefs that Governor Evans's plan held some promise and took a number of them north to Fort Larned to speak to the commander there, Captain James W. Parmetar. Things promptly fell apart. Parmetar had a bad reputation, which one visitor to the fort recorded thusly: "Captain Parmetar, of the Twelfth Kansas Infantry, in command here, is reported by every

15. George Bent to George Hyde, March 26, 1906, Coe Collection.

16. Halaas and Masich, *Halfbreed*, 119–21.

17. *Ibid.*, 124.



The hundreds of thousands of emigrants that crossed the American plains between 1841 and 1866 caused a serious imposition to the native peoples living there. As game became scarce and their resentment of white intrusion grew, Indian men turned to the theft of livestock and sometimes attacked travelers. Such raiding frustrated the U.S. military, already stretched thin by civil war in the East. Even still, war between Indians and whites was not yet inevitable, and they worked at peace in meetings such as the one pictured here between the Southern Plains delegation and Indian Agent Samuel Colley (back row, second from left) in the White House Conservatory on March 27, 1863. Peace came slowly, however, and at a high price. By the end of 1864 the four men seated in the front row were dead: from left to right, Yellow Wolf died of pneumonia, War Bonnet and Standing in the Water died in the Sand Creek Massacre, and Lean Bear was killed by U.S. troops in an incident discussed by George Bent in his correspondence with George Hyde. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

officer and man that I have heard speak of him as a confirmed drunkard.”¹⁸ He felt nothing but antipathy for the Indians. In George Bent’s words, “My Father told me this officer did not talk very well to the Indians in this council.”¹⁹ With no progress made, the chiefs returned south while William and George Bent returned to the ranch.

18. T. I. McKenny to C. S. Charlot, June 15, 1864, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, ser. 1, vol. 34, pt. 4 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1896), 403.

19. George Bent to George Hyde, April 30, 1906, Coe Collection; see also, Leo E. Oliva, *Fort Larned: Guardian of the Santa Fe Trail* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1997), 19, 100; *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, 1861–65* (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Company, 1896), 437. The latter report lists Captain James W. “Parmeter” and reports that he was “dismissed” from service on July 7, 1864.

George stayed with his father for a few weeks and then, some of his horses in tow, went back to the Kansas plains. Picking up a wide trail near Fort Dodge, he followed it to the fork of the Solomon River. The trail he followed was that of Black Kettle’s band moving back north. Sioux runners had come to the camp on Medicine Lodge River with word that war had broken out along the Platte River. Having neither hope for peace, after the meeting at Fort Larned, nor any means of controlling the young warriors in his camp, Black Kettle had moved back north. At the end of this trail, George Bent rode into the largest camp he had ever seen. It was now early August and war had begun in earnest. In a letter dated February 28, 1906, Bent wrote:

I was in one of the largest villages on Solomon River of Cheyennes, Siouxs and

Arapahos in summer of 1864. I had just returned from my father's ranch on Purgatoire River that summer. As I rode by each village I seen scalp dances in center of these villages. War parties came in from all directions bringing in lots of plunder. Cheyenne's and Sioux's made raids on South Platte down to Little Blue River. I saw all kinds of stuff. They brought fine silks, cloaks, bonnets, in fact everything in line of fine dry goods they took from trains that they plundered. Old Indians wore ladies fine bonnets for hats. I saw fine cloaks worn also by old men. Silks were made into squaw dresses and shirts for young men. I had 1/2 dozen made of same silks. There were no particular leaders in these war parties. Those white women that Maj. Wynkoop came out after on Smoky Hill were captured in these raids that summer.²⁰

The location of this camp is indicated in the upper right corner of the map where Bent wrote "Here where Indians brought in lots of plunder" and "Big Village 1864." The confluence of the two forks of the Solomon River is not covered by the map. The camp may have been to the east of the point shown, in modern day Osborne County.

The "white women" Bent referred to as captives had been taken during raids on the Little Blue River in south central Nebraska in August. A dreadful series of attacks had been committed along the Little Blue and Platte Rivers on August 7, 8, and 9, leaving almost fifty white settlers and travelers dead. In addition, seven women and children were taken prisoner, most of whom were taken to the camp at the fork of the Solomon River.²¹

Many of the Cheyennes looked upon all whites with undiluted hatred, but George Bent was unable to do this. He had lived among them for years and appreciated both the similarities and differences of the two cultures. He understood that whites were, like his Cheyenne friends, simply flawed human beings swept up in the events surrounding them, over which they had precious little control. He went to visit the captives. One of them, Nancy Morton, later recalled Bent as very polite as he assured her that he felt she would be released soon. She had been injured during her ordeal and Bent brought in a

Cheyenne doctor to treat her wounds. He then arranged a reunion with Laura Roper and Lucinda Eubank, two of the other captives. Though joyful, the meeting was cut short by the Sioux. He visited again the next day and, years later, Morton recalled, "How delighted I was to see him as he was so very kind to me." Though unable to fit fully into either culture, George Bent could sympathize with both.²²

The warriors were exalting in the heady days of victory at their camp, which was unassailable by simple virtue of its size. The whites in Kansas had raised over a dozen regiments of fighting men, but they were all off fighting other whites in the Civil War. The remaining military presence was barely adequate to man a handful of forts and escort the odd wagon train. Nonetheless, the chiefs knew the celebration would be short-lived. They knew a terrible price would eventually be exacted for the August raids. William Bent, still laboring to cobble together a peace plan, had managed to get a letter to them urging them to pursue a peaceful settlement. The chiefs sat in council and decided it was time to sue for peace. They called upon George Bent to write two copies of a letter, one to be delivered to Agent Colley and the other to Fort Lyon. Written on August 29, it reads:

We received a letter from Bent wishing us to make peace. We held a counsel in regard to it & all came to the conclusion to make peace with you providing you make peace with Kiowas, Comanches, Arrapahoes, Apaches and Siouxs. We are going to send a messenger to the Kiowas and to the other nations about our going to make [peace] with you. We heard that you [have] some prisoners in Denver. We have seven prisoners of you which we are willing to give up providing you give up

22. Russ Czapski, *Captive of the Cheyenne* (Lexington, Nebr.: Dawson County Historical Society, 1993), 2:20–22. Laura Roper left the Indian camp with Wynkoop. Nancy Morton's ordeal was worse. Traded from chief to chief, she ended up in the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming in the dead of winter. Several attempts to ransom her proved unsuccessful until, late in January of 1865, traders from Fort Laramie managed to purchase her freedom. Fearing the chief might change his mind, there ensued a desperate flight through terrible winter weather to Fort Laramie and freedom. Lucinda Eubank's odyssey was the longest. Also traded among the Indians, she was terribly mistreated until a former "owner" took pity on her and helped her steal away in the dead of night with her son. She was turned over to authorities at Fort Laramie on May 18, 1865. Descriptions of these women's experiences can be found in Becher, *Massacre Along the Medicine Road*, 369–78.

20. George Bent to George Hyde, February 28, 1906, Coe Collection.

21. Ronald Becher, *Massacre Along the Medicine Road: A Social History of the Indian War of 1864 in Nebraska Territory* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 1999), 132–272.

yours. There are three war parties out yet and two of Arrapahoes. They have been out some time and expect now soon. When we held this counsel there were few Arrapahoes and Siouxs present; we want true news from you in return, that is a letter.

Black Kettle & other Chievs²³

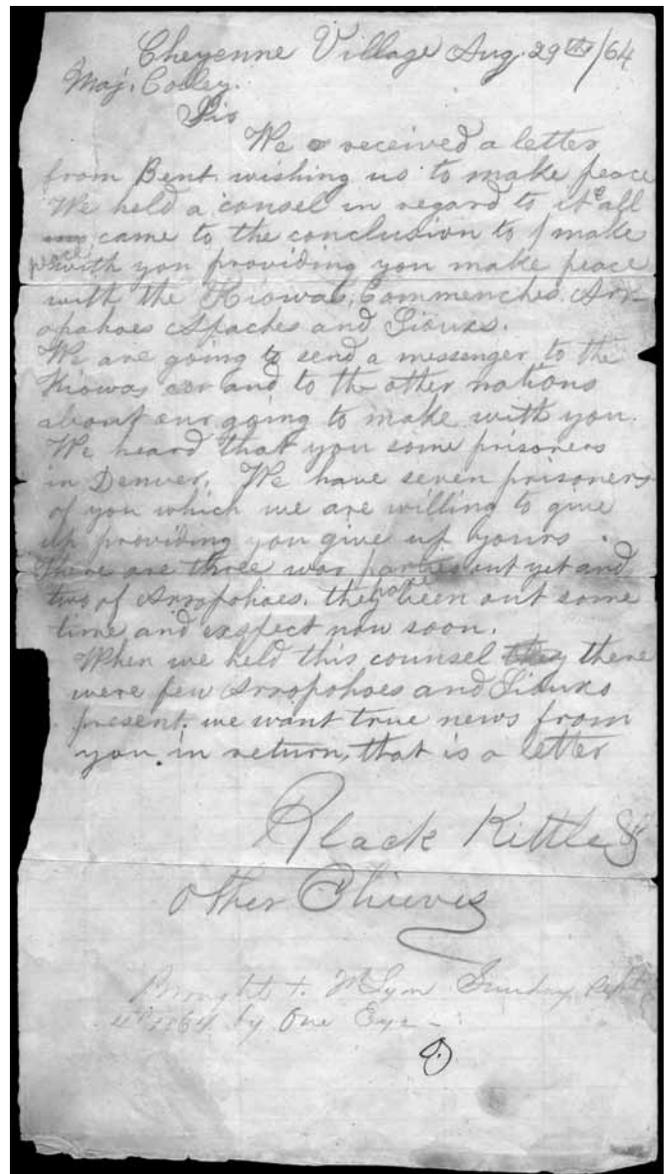
Eagle Head and the aging warrior Lone Bear were given the dangerous task of delivering the letters. On the morning of September 4, Lone Bear's party approached Fort Lyon. Despite directions to shoot all Indians on sight, Lieutenant George Hawkins held his fire when he saw them approaching with their hands up and carrying papers. The commander at Fort Lyon, Edward W. Wynkoop, was initially furious to learn that the "shoot on sight" directive had been disobeyed, but when he read the paper Lone Bear carried, he relented. Later he softened considerably when he learned that Lone Bear had approached the fort knowing that he would probably be killed, but also knowing that they would find the letter on his body and he would thus have accomplished his task.²⁴

Normally such a proposal would have required the engagement of the chain of command and Wynkoop would have needed to communicate with his superiors at Fort Riley and wait for a response. Realizing, however, that the lives of white captives might be at stake, he wrote a quick memo to Chivington, gathered 127 men and two howitzers, and headed for a rendezvous in central Kansas.

In the meantime, assuming a prisoner exchange would take place, Black Kettle moved his camp west to the mouth of Ladder Creek. This camp is shown on figure 1 just above the body in the middle of the map that Hyde labeled "marsh" and Bent labeled "Bitter Lake." The present location is in the southeast corner of Logan County. As Wynkoop approached the camp on September 9, seven hundred warriors in battle array met him. There would be no repetition of the Lone Bear affair. The warriors crowded about the soldiers, taking pleasure in the fact that they were intimidated. As the tense parlay commenced, the chiefs pushed George Bent forward to interpret. For the first time, but not the last, two sides on the verge of battle would depend upon George Bent's skill in two languages.

23. George Bent *et al.*, to Samuel Colley, August 29, 1864, Sand Creek Papers, microfilm 0018, Colorado College Special Collections, Colorado Springs.

24. Halaas and Masich, *Halfbreed*, 134.



Black Kettle, long convinced of the futility of a war with the whites, was encamped with his Southern Cheyenne peoples on the Solomon River at "Big Village," probably in modern day Osborne County, during the hostile summer of 1864. William Bent, still laboring to cobble together a peace plan, managed to get a letter to them urging a peaceful settlement. The chiefs sat in council and decided it was time to sue for peace. They called upon George Bent to write two copies of the letter pictured here, dated August 29, 1864, one to be delivered to Indian Agent Samuel Colley and the other to Fort Lyon. Letter courtesy of Colorado College Special Collections, Colorado Springs.

On September 12 four captives were delivered to Wynkoop's camp. Three others had already been taken away by the Sioux; their ordeal would stretch into the winter before their releases were arranged. An eighth captive, a Mrs. Snyder, who was taken captive near Fort Lyon, was dead. She had woven a rope from strips of cloth and hung herself from a lodge pole.²⁵

Wynkoop saw that he had a unique opportunity on his hands. He had just managed to peacefully engage four chiefs who, among them, held sway over thousands of Plains Indians. He invited them to accompany him to Denver and meet with Governor John Evans, Agent Colley, and Colonel Chivington. The chiefs agreed, but George Bent demurred. Other interpreters would be available there and, as a former Confederate soldier, his presence may actually have served to undermine the Indians' stance.

While the chiefs were in Denver, Bent joined other Cheyenne warriors in an attempt to find and engage their traditional enemies, the Pawnees. Finding none, they returned to the camp at the mouth of Ladder Creek just before the chiefs returned from Denver. Black Kettle was happy and optimistic. The white men in Denver had assured the chiefs that the proclamation Governor Evans had issued was a solid, reliable offer for peace. If they would just move to Fort Lyon, they could live free from the threat of attack. They would be protected, respected, and fed. With the High Plains winter approaching, Black Kettle told his people it was time. In late October, they broke camp.²⁶

George Bent illustrates the path Black Kettle took from the camp to Fort Lyon. Here we find an interesting detail available from no other source. While it is generally noted that Black Kettle's band simply reported to Fort Lyon in late October, Bent shows the circuitous route the Indians took to arrive there. Figure 1 shows that they first headed north to the south fork of the Solomon River, then west along that river and south to the south fork of the Smoky Hill River. Reaching its headwaters, they headed straight south to Fort Lyon. Bent does not explain the purpose of this strange route. The band may have been taking advantage of a final opportunity to hunt bison and lay in a supply of meat for the impending winter. Regardless, it is an interesting detail and, as is often the case, one made available to us only through the memory of George Bent.

By the time Black Kettle reached Fort Lyon, things had changed. Wynkoop was no longer the commander and his replacement, Major Scott Anthony, had little sympathy with Indians. He certainly did not want to feed them. He ordered them to move to Sand Creek where there was plenty of game as well as grass and water for their horses. Whether he explicitly stated that the Cheyennes would remain under the protection of the government is not clear. Certainly Black Kettle, having met all the demands made of him, assumed his people would be safe from attack.²⁷

George Bent had returned to his father's ranch. Hearing that Black Kettle was camped at Sand Creek, he went over to visit on November 26. A couple days later, Chivington stopped all traffic along the Arkansas River. The Indians would not be warned of his approach. The stage was set. Bent illustrated it on his map with a line running from Fort Lyon to the camp at Sand Creek labeled "Chivington's route." At the other end of the line is the notation "Battleground 1864."

The massacre at Sand Creek occurred on the morning of November 29, 1864.²⁸ George Bent would write descriptions of the events of that day and collect the memories of others. He would describe Black Kettle standing in front of his lodge, waving a large American flag on a pole, convinced the attack was a terrible mistake. If the soldiers could only see that they were "friendlies," the killing would stop. Of course, it would not. Chivington knew exactly whom he was attacking. Around two hundred Cheyennes and Arapahoes, mostly women, children, and the elderly, would be killed at Sand Creek, but the human toll would run much higher. Even as the survivors made their way to winter camps on the Smoky Hill River, runners carrying the war pipe spread news of the event to camps throughout the region. In his succinct style Bent wrote, "All the Indians that were not killed walked to Smoky River to that camp. I was with the party after this fight. Cheyennes and Sioux send war parties in all directions to kill all white men they ran across."²⁹ Through December and January the band of Cheyennes, Sioux, and Arapahoes moved north, gathering power like a growing hurricane as more warriors joined them in raiding.

Sand Creek shattered any vestige of trust that remained among the natives of the plains. The lesson of the massacre was clear to the Native Americans. The

25. Becher, *Massacre Along the Medicine Road*, 321.

26. Halaas and Masich, *Halfbreed*, 136–37.

27. *Ibid.*, 139.

28. John M. Carroll, ed., *The Sand Creek Massacre: A Documentary History* (New York: Sol Lewis, 1973).

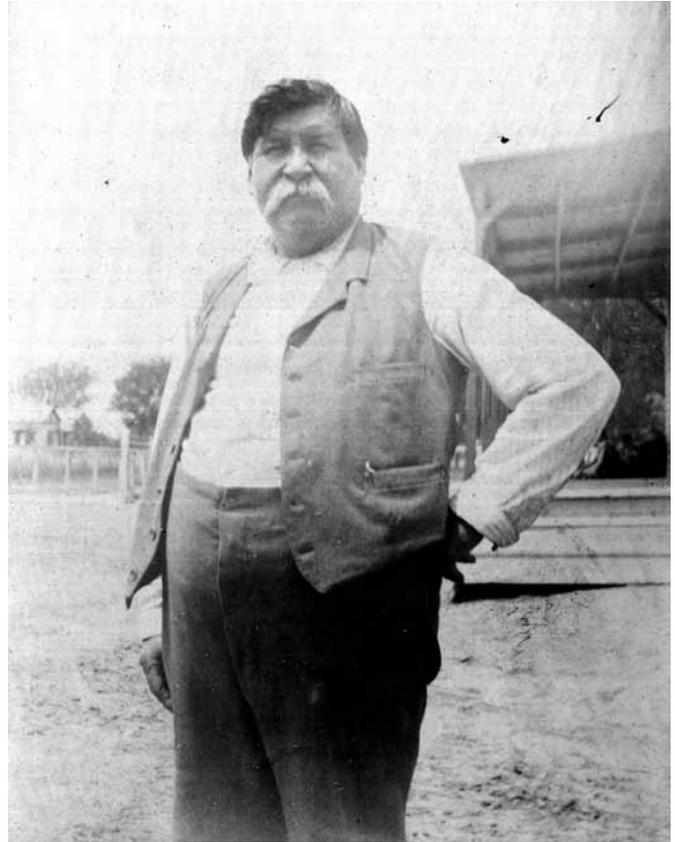
29. George Bent to George Hyde, March 15, 1905, Coe Collection.

warriors who had chosen the path of armed resistance had been fully justified. The treachery of the white man was without bounds. Their leaders would actually promise the Indians peace and protection as a means to catch them with their guard down and slaughter their women and children. The war had begun.

George Bent would spend the next year in open warfare with the whites. Traveling up through Colorado and across the Nebraska panhandle, the group of warriors, collected from the plains of Kansas, Colorado, and Nebraska, would eventually join the enormous winter encampment of the Northern Cheyennes, Sioux, and Northern Arapahoes on the Powder River in Wyoming. Bent referred to his brethren to the north as “the wild Indians” and would fight at their side through the spring and summer of 1865.³⁰

Bent never fought against Kansas troops when he was in Kansas, but he would eventually face them on the battlefield. Ironically, both he and the Kansans would have to travel into central Wyoming before this happened. At the Battle of Platte Bridge, Bent would be among the several thousand warriors who, on July 26, 1865, beset a station on the North Platte River manned by one hundred members of the Eleventh Kansas Cavalry. Later on the same day they would attack and annihilate a small military wagon train as it approached the fort. Twenty of the Kansas soldiers would remain there, interred in a burial pit as yet undiscovered, just west of the city of Casper. Bent would write a detailed account of this battle and send Hyde two maps detailing the action.³¹

The autumn of 1865 would find George Bent traveling south, crossing the plains of western Kansas once again. It had been an eventful year since he had walked through the enormous camp on the Solomon, marveling at the plunder and visiting the captives. While George was fighting up north, his father had continued his efforts to bring peace to the plains, with some success. “When I came back with Southern Cheyennes in December



After the Sand Creek Massacre of November 1864, Bent spent the next year in open warfare with whites, traveling up through Colorado and across the Nebraska panhandle toward Wyoming. “When I came back [to the plains of western Kansas] with the Southern Cheyenne in December 1865,” he remembered in a 1906 letter to George Hyde, “these people were all at peace with the whites.” Photograph of Bent in 1905 courtesy of the Research Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

1865, these people were all at peace with whites.”³² As Bent reflected on 1865 in its waning days, he probably wondered how history would have unfolded had the earlier efforts toward reconciliation been successful. It had been a tragic, magnificent few years that he would remember for the rest of his life and, fortunately, write many letters about. [KH]

30. Halaas and Masich, *Halfbreed*, 161.

31. Steven C. Haack, “The Lost Men of the 11th Kansas Cavalry,” *On Point* 15 (Summer 2009): 34–41; Haack, “‘This Must Have Been a Grand Sight’: George Bent and the Battle of Platte Bridge,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 30 (Winter 2010): 3–20.

32. George Bent to George Hyde, January 12, 1906, Coe Collection.