

The term “Indian Wars” usually refers to battles and skirmishes that occurred between the United States army and various Native American tribes in the second half of the 19th century. But long before Europeans arrived in the Americas, Indians had been engaging in savage inter-tribal warfare. It is no exaggeration to say that tribal warfare was an integral part of Indian culture. There is no way to know when the first large battle between Indian tribes occurred in North America, but the last great battle was fought in southwest Nebraska between the Sioux and the Pawnees. It happened on August 5, 1873, and was actually more of a massacre than a battle. The two most riveting sources on the Massacre Canyon Battle are found below: one is by a *Chicago Tribune* reporter writing out of Omaha, and the other is a 1922 account by John W. Williamson, the white trail agent for the Pawnees, who witnessed and participated in the battle.

The Massacre Canyon Battle

From *The Chicago Daily Tribune*; August 30, 1873; page 2; written by reporter Aaron About and sent from Omaha, Nebraska, on August 25.

On the 8th of August, Conductor Norton, who came down on the western passenger train of the Union Pacific Road, announced that a “great battle” had been fought between the Sioux and Pawnee Indian tribes, on the Republican, 150 miles south of Elm Creek. Mr. Norton said several Indians had come into his train at Grand Island, and told a pitiful story of the battle. Little attention was paid to the report, people believing the Pawnees...had overrated the fight, and that the whole affair would in a few days settle down into a small skirmish. When, however, it was announced that the Pawnees had reached the railroad, and that their wounded filled four cars, everybody woke up and realized that a great Indian battle had really been fought on our border.

The story told by the Pawnee was that 250 of them were hunting on the Republican, when the Sioux, 1,000 strong, came down upon them, defeated them, and killed over 100, including many women and children...

On the 10th of August, confirmatory reports of the battle began to arrive, and, for a wonder, differed little from the first reports received. On this day about fifty Pawnees came into Kearney Junction, 191 miles west of Omaha, and brought with them 250 horses. They were a hard-looking set, much worn out, had evidently had a hard fight, and were greatly demoralized. In the evening, the eastern-bound freight train on the Union Pacific Railroad brought down 100 more Pawnees and a boxcar of wounded. They said the battle took place not more than 40 miles south of Plum Creek, on the “Divide;” and that they had lost everything—buffalo-meat, robes, horses, saddles, furs, and even a great number of their squaws and papooses. One old Indian, relating his experience, said: “The Sioux were too many for us. They attacked us suddenly, and were better armed than we were. The Sioux came down first upon the defenseless camp, and slaughtered our women and children. Then they sought us out. We gave them battle, and were defeated. We have lost everything, and are very poor.” One Pawnee woman said: “The Sioux were very cruel; their warriors outraged our wounded and dying women, and then took the children by the heels and beat their brains out on the ground.”

...Nick Janis, who was in charge of the Oglala Sioux, who attacked the Pawnees, gives us an account of the battle from the Sioux side. He says: [Two days before the attack] “six Oglala Sioux Indians came in from a scout, and reported the Pawnees in camp on Ree Fork of the Republican. The news created the greatest excitement in our camp, and the Sioux decided to go and attack the Pawnees before they had time to come and attack our camp. Little Wound, the Sioux Chief, came up and asked me if I had any orders to keep him from going to fight the Pawnees; and I told him I had not. He said he had orders not to go to the Pawnee reservation, or among the whites, to fight them, but had no orders in regard to this part of the country. I told him I would go with him and see the Pawnees; but he said it would be of no use, as the young men had determined to fight, and no one could stop them. They said I had prevented them from going to fight the Utes last year, and the Utes came and stole their horses and killed one of their warriors. They believed the same thing would happen again if they did not strike the Pawnees first. They started out and were joined by the Brules from Mr. Estes’ camp, when the whole body proceeded to the Pawnee camp [and attacked it the following morning]... [The Oglala and Brules were two different bands of the Lakota Sioux; these two bands lived and hunted separately but joined forces in this case to attack the Pawnees.]

John H. Williamson, the white man in charge of the Pawnee hunting party, has made a lengthy report of the contest on the 5th of August, from which I glean the following. He says: “The Pawnee party consisted of 250 men, 100 women, and 50 children, or about 400 in all. We started from the Pawnee reservation on the 3rd of July, and proceeded up the Platte Valley to Plum Creek, and then southward to Turkey Creek, where we killed 55 buffalo. Next we went to Elk Creek, down to the Arapahoe village on the Republican, and then south to Beaver Creek, where we hunted and killed 400 buffalo. From there we went up on the Beaver a few miles into Kansas, and expected to go farther, but heard rumors of the Sioux; and to avoid being caught, went southwest to Sappy Creek, where we caught a few buffalo. Here we remained some days; then returned to the Beaver and moved northward to the Republican, near the mouth of Frenchman’s Fork, where we killed 200 buffalo. Again we heard rumors of Sioux, but the Pawnees did not believe there was danger.

“We were returning home, and traveling northward toward Frenchman’s Fork, when, on the 5th of August, the Sioux came toward us over a bluff. The Pawnees at once got their women, children, and packhorses into a ravine; and Mr. Platt and myself galloped up toward the Sioux, to see if we could not prevent the coming conflict. When within about 40 rods of the Sioux, they opened fire on us, and we were compelled to move back. The Pawnees then came up, offered battle, and the contest began. The firing lasted about an hour, and but few were killed on either side. The advance-line of the Sioux numbered only about 100 warriors, but reinforcements soon came up, and enveloped the Pawnees on three sides. The Sioux warriors probably numbered 700 to 1,000, when the Pawnees broke and fled.

“The greatest panic ensued. The Pawnees threw off their robes and meat, mounted their women and children on the packhorses, and sought to escape down the ravine toward the

Republican. The Sioux rapidly pursued and most of the Pawnee women and children were overtaken, captured, and shot or scalped. Sky Chief, the leader of the Pawnees, was killed while skinning a buffalo and scalped. Some of the slain were dragged together, their bodies burned, and savage tortures brutally perpetrated..."

D.F. Powel, Assistant Surgeon, U.S. Army, gives the following additional particulars of the Sioux-Pawnee battle: "...We marched nearly 20 miles before reaching the battlefield. It was a horrible sight. Dead warriors lay grim in death, with bows still grasped in their stiffened fingers. Sucking infants were pinned with arrows to their mothers' breasts. Some lay on the ground, their bowels protruding from ghastly wounds made by knives. Others presented to us their skinless heads, the red blood glazed upon the skull where the scalp had been torn off. In a canyon, as we rode up, the first object that attracted our attention was a dead squaw; and, as we advanced along the ravine, we counted 50 other dead bodies. They were in every possible position; having fallen where shot, and apparently expired in great agony. Many of the squaws had evidently been outraged and then shot. One, with her papoose, was found in the weeds badly wounded, but still alive. We made her as comfortable as possible, and proceeded up the ravine, but when we returned, the baby was dead, and had on its head marks of fresh violence. The mother had killed it to save it from further pain!"

Adapted from John W. Williamson, *The Battle of Massacre Canyon: The Unfortunate Ending of the Last Buffalo Hunt of the Pawnees, 1922.*

I have been asked many times to write my personal recollections and experiences with the Pawnees on their last buffalo hunt, which ended in a battle with their old enemy, the Sioux. So many stories have been written, all claiming to be authentic, that I have hesitated to pen for publication a true account of the battle that ended so disastrously for the Pawnees, knowing that it will differ, in many respects, from accounts previously published.

In the spring of 1873, the Pawnees at the Genoa agency [Pawnee Indian reservation in Nebraska] numbered 2,460. Of this number, 600 were fighting men, or warriors. I had come to the agency three years before and was working for the government at the time the Pawnees left on their last buffalo hunt. At this time buffaloes were feeding in the valleys of the Platte, Loup, Niobrara, and Republican rivers and their tributaries.

To prevent clashes between rival tribes as well as to keep Indians from molesting homesteaders, a trail agent would accompany a tribe going off the reservation on a hunt. Major Burgess, a Quaker, was head Indian agent at Genoa, and through him the Indians made a request in May 1873 for permission to hunt and for the appointment of a trail agent to accompany them. I did not apply for the position and was surprised when one of the Pawnee chiefs informed me that they had requested the government to appoint me as their trail agent, which was granted.

Several days before starting out a young man by the name of Platt, who was visiting his uncle, an Indian trader near Genoa, asked to go along on the buffalo hunt. I had no objection, especially since he would provide me with companionship along the trail. He

was about my age [23 years old] and a fine fellow, though not accustomed to western life and what we called a "tenderfoot."

On July 2, 1873, the Pawnees, numbering 700, left Genoa for the hunting grounds. Of this number 350 were men, and the rest were women and children. Most of the men were armed with bows and arrows, old-fashioned muzzle-loading rifles, a few had seven shot Spencer carbines, and some carried Colt powder-and-ball revolvers. All were mounted, and in addition took with them 800 extra ponies to carry home the meats and hides.

In the town of Lowell, we had our first excitement. I went into town to get a square meal and some of the Indians went along. At the time a bunch of cowboys were in town for what they called a "good time," drinking and shooting. I was standing in front of the hotel watching the excitement when I saw a cowboy ride out in the street and grab the rope from an Indian who was leading his pony. He jerked it away from the Indian and started across the prairie with the pony. I got on my horse and went after him. When I overtook him, I rode between him and the pony, cut the rope, and brought the pony back to its Indian owner. I then told the Indian to go to our camp and tell the chiefs to send some of their men to town, for I could see there would be problems with these cowboys riding up and down and raising hell in the streets. At one point they scared a four-horse immigrant team so that the wagon turned over and the women and children spilled out. It was not long before 150 Pawnee warriors came riding into Lowell and soon after every last cowboy in town decided it was best to disappear.

The first buffalo we saw and killed was a few miles from Plum Creek Station. It was a Sunday afternoon and the scouts located a lone bull that had evidently been driven out of a herd by younger bulls. He was in a small canyon; the Indians lined up on each side and shot their arrows into him until he looked like a porcupine. Finally he was out of his misery, having died from loss of blood. After opening him up, the men cut out a piece of liver, sopped it in the blood, and ate it raw, which was considered a brave act. They dared me to do the same. I did not intend to be outdone or looked upon as a coward, so I did likewise. They were surely a happy people after having killed their first buffalo on the hunt.

The country was not settled between Plum Creek Station and Arapahoe. A sod house was the only habitation in the vicinity. As soon as the Indians saw it, some of the young men made for it. The first thing I knew the young devils were riding around the sod house as fast as their ponies could carry them. I started for the place and found a young woman standing at the door, almost scared to death. Some of the Indians were grinding their knives on a stone and others were still riding around the house. I made them stop, and they went away. The woman was alone; her husband had gone somewhere. She told me the Indians begged for something to eat and on being refused grew angry and began to terrorize her in that way. I assured her they would not bother her any more. I have often wondered what would have occurred had I not been there to keep them from molesting her.

That same day, our Indian scouts reported finding a herd of three or four hundred buffaloes. At the command of the chief presiding that day, the hunters formed in the shape

of the letter V. At the point rode one of the scouts with a spear decorated with colored feathers. There was no noise or disorder as the procession slowly advanced toward the herd. The eye of every hunter was on the feathers at the end of the scout's spear. Suddenly the feathers disappeared. It was the signal for the hunt to begin. With military precision the V-shaped formation straightened out, and 350 Indians and one white man swept down the valley into the buffalo herd. Each hunter selected a buffalo as his prey, chased it away from the herd, and while riding alongside the fleeing animal shot it down. Jumping from his pony, the hunter would complete the kill by plunging his knife into the buffalo's heart. In a short time the animal would be skinned, the meat cut from around the bones, rolled into strips, and bound together with thongs made from the hide. The meat was then packed on the pony, brought into camp, and turned over to the squaws, who cured the meat and tanned the hides. The Pawnees were such experts at killing buffaloes that not a single animal escaped out of the several herds we attacked during the summer hunt.

In giving chase one day to a herd of buffaloes, a young man disobeyed a rule of the hunt by dashing into the herd. That night, while in camp, they brought this young man to me, wanting me to punish him. I refused to do so telling them that it wasn't any affair of mine, and they would have to punish him as they saw fit. This they did as follows: About forty Indians formed a double row of twenty on a side, each having in his hand a whip consisting of a piece of braided rawhide attached to a wooden handle. The culprit was stripped of all his clothes except his breech and was ordered to pass between the lines of Indians. This he did as fast as he could and doubled up in such a manner as to expose as little of his body as possible; all of those lined up in the double row attempted to lay on a lash as he rushed by. He made this run in less time than it takes to tell it, but still he bore the marks of his punishment and blood ran from the cuts given him.

While hunting on the divide between Beaver and Prairie Dog creeks, I saw some of the Indian men riding around in a peculiar manner. I rode up to where they were and found that they had a white hunter corralled at the head of a canyon. The poor fellow was almost frightened to death and was standing up in his wagon swinging his arms and yelling at the top of his voice. I talked to the Indians and succeeded in getting them to quit. I think that fellow got out of that part of the country as quick as he could. I don't think the Indians would have hurt him as long as he didn't show fight. They might have robbed him and probably would have taken his horses had they not been made to quit.

On August 4 we reached the north bank of the Republican River and made camp. At 9 o'clock that evening three white men came into camp and reported to me that a large band of Sioux warriors were camped 25 miles to the northwest, waiting for an opportunity to attack the Pawnees, anticipating that we would move up the river where buffaloes were feeding. Previous to this other white men visited us and warned us to be on our guard against Sioux attacks, and I was a trifle skeptical as to the truth of their story. But one of the men now present, a young fellow about my age at the time, appeared to be so sincere in his efforts to impress upon me that the warning should be heeded, that I took him to Sky Chief, who was in command that day. Sky Chief said the men were liars; that they wanted to scare the Pawnees away from the hunting grounds so that white men could kill buffaloes

for hides. He told me I was a squaw and a coward. I took exception to his remarks, and retorted: "I will go as far as you dare go. Don't forget that."

Now I will take a moment to refer to the young man, Platt, who accompanied us on this hunt. When it was discovered the next day, August 5, that the Sioux were in fact going to attack us, he rode up to me and asked what I was going to do. I told him I was going to stay and see it through. He said he was going to leave us, which he did, and I did not blame him. I think I would have done the same thing had I been in his place, as he had only come along for the adventure. But it was different with me; I could not think of leaving them, being branded a coward, and being taken to task by the Indian office for shirking my duty.

On the morning of August 5 we broke camp and started north, up the divide between the Republican and Frenchman rivers. Soon after leaving camp, Sky Chief rode up to me, extended his hand, and said, "Shake, brother." He recalled our little unpleasantness from the night before and said he did not believe there was cause for alarm. He was so certain of this that he had not taken the precaution to send out scouts to look for the Sioux. A few minutes later a buffalo scout signaled that buffaloes had been sighted in the distance, and Sky Chief rode off to engage in the hunt. I never saw him again. He had killed a buffalo and was skinning it when the advance guard of the Sioux shot and wounded him. Sky Chief attempted to reach his horse, but before he was able to mount, several of the enemy surrounded him. He died fighting. A Pawnee, who had been skinning a buffalo nearby, but managed to escape, told me how Sky Chief died.

It was reported that the Sioux were coming, and orders were shouted down the line for squaws, children, and pack ponies to take refuge in the canyon. The Sioux then appeared in the distance. Down the canyon arose a chant. It was the war song of the Pawnee nation, sung by squaws standing side-by-side and rocking back and forth. The song grew louder and louder as the enemy approached. I had loaded my revolvers and made up my mind to do my share of the fighting. As the Sioux warriors came over the hill, it became apparent that their numbers were several times more than the fighting men of the Pawnees.

I afterwards learned that the Sioux warriors numbered between 1,200 and 1,500 [versus 350 Pawnees]. The Sioux were still about a mile-and-a-half away when the Pawnees noted they were greatly outnumbered and suggested to me to go out and parley with them. I rode out about 300 yards accompanied by Ralph Weeks, a half-breed interpreter. Waving a handkerchief as a token of peace I attempted to stop the Sioux, but on they came—the whole bunch of them. Suddenly the war whoop of the Sioux sounded, and several puffs of smoke from as many guns, and the whistle of bullets warned me that it was time to beat a retreat. The battle cry of the Sioux was answered with a cry of defiance from the Pawnee warriors, which denoted that a warm reception awaited the enemy. All the Indians were mounted, and as I reached the canyon the 350 Pawnees hurled themselves at the enemy. At the edge of the canyon my horse, which had been struck by one or more bullets, stumbled and fell. It took less than a minute to strip off the saddle and bridle and place them on my buffalo pony, held for me by a squaw. Mounting my other horse, I rode up from the canyon. The Pawnees were putting up a splendid fight, but the odds were against them. I blazed away with my revolvers and had fired several shots at the Sioux when the

Pawnee chiefs noticed the enemy was surrounding the head of the canyon and gave orders to retreat. I did not understand the command, but when I noticed the squaws cutting the thongs that bound the packs of meat on the ponies and mounting with the children, I concluded it was about time to make a dash myself.

A moment before the retreat commenced, I saw Fighting Bear, a Pawnee chief, engaged in a duel with a Sioux chief—I presumed he was a chief because of the war bonnet he wore. Both chiefs were fighting with tomahawks. Taking deliberate aim, at close range, I fired at the Sioux. The bullet struck the mark and evidently wounded the chief, which gave Fighting Bear the opportunity to finish him. Jumping from his horse, the Pawnee chief scalped his enemy, remounted, and, grabbing the dead Sioux's horse by the bridle, joined in the retreat down the canyon.

One thing, I remember, passed through my mind as we were fleeing down the canyon. An old lady friend of mine had often asked me why I wore my hair so long, and had told me it would be a very attractive scalp if I ever got mixed up in an Indian battle. When I saw the Sioux coming I thought of what the old lady had said, and I did not lose any time in twisting my hair up and tucking it under my hat so it would not be so noticeable.

I often have thought of a little Indian girl, who evidently had fallen from her mother's back, in our retreat down the canyon. She was sitting on the ground with her little arms raised as if pleading for someone to pick her up. As I passed I tried to pick her up but only succeeded in touching one of her hands. I couldn't return, so she was left behind to suffer a horrible death by the bloodthirsty Sioux. Just imagine, dear reader, six or seven hundred Indians, men, women, and children, and as many ponies, all huddled together and going for dear life down this canyon, with over a thousand bloodthirsty savages shooting down on them. In some places the canyon was quite narrow, causing them almost to stop, which was when most of the lives were lost. It was in the retreat down the canyon that the greatest loss of life occurred among the squaws and children, the Sioux riding down each side and firing down on them.

As the Pawnees reached the river and crossed to the opposite bank, the Sioux succeeded in cutting off 700 ponies, and had started down the stream to cross at another point to pursue the Pawnees when the sound of a bugle stopped them. Looking across the river, I noticed a company of U.S. cavalry emerge from the timber. When the Sioux saw the soldiers approaching, they beat a hasty retreat. In company with Fighting Bear and two other chiefs I crossed the river and conferred with the officer in command, who suggested that the Pawnees return and gather up the meat left behind and bury the dead. But the Pawnees could not be induced to comply with the suggestion. They were firm in the belief that the meat had already been poisoned and the wounded put to death.

We camped that night on the banks of Red Willow Creek. There was nothing to eat. All our supplies had been left behind on the battlefield. I had always thought that an Indian was devoid of emotion, but that night I was convinced that at times an Indian gives vent to his feelings the same as a white man. Seated on the ground and rocking back and forth, the

warriors pulled hair from their heads while the tears rolled down their cheeks. The squaws kept up an incessant wail for the dead. We were demoralized.

During the night, I got on my pony and rode a mile or so from the camp to get away from the overwhelming grief and horrible moaning and crying. Waking the next morning, I thought of my eastern friend, Mr. Platt. I returned to the camp and told the Pawnees to stay where they were until I came back from searching for Mr. Platt. I had ridden about ten miles when I discovered horseshoe tracks on a buffalo trail leading down a canyon and, looking around, I saw his white horse feeding with the bridle and saddle on. I took the horse by the reins and had not gone far before I saw Mr. Platt sitting on the side of a washout with his face buried in his hands. He looked up in a dazed condition, recognized me, and exclaimed, "For God's sake, John, is that you? I had given up all hopes of getting out of here alive." I then returned with him to the Pawnee camp.

That day we all started down the valley for home to the Genoa agency. At Plum Creek Station a company of soldiers were stationed, and an army surgeon dressed the wounds of the injured. I wired [telegraphed] to headquarters in Omaha what had occurred, and arrangements were made with the Union Pacific Railroad to provide boxcars for bringing the Pawnees to Silver Creek. From Silver Creek the Pawnees walked across to Genoa, a sorrowful return from the last buffalo hunt in a region that had been their home for so many years.

In the battle the Pawnees lost 156 people, including men, women, and children. According to the Sioux's trail agent, Nick Janis, the Sioux lost 50 warriors. The battle also cost the Sioux \$10,000, because the government took that amount out of the Sioux's annuity fund and turned it over to the Pawnees to compensate them for their lost meat and ponies.

During the fall I was sent by the government to the battlefield to bury the dead. To assist me with the task I hired one man at Plum Creek Station and four more at Arapahoe. We arrived at the battlefield early one evening, commenced the gruesome work, finishing before dawn and hurrying back to Arapahoe, as the Sioux were reported to be on the warpath. At one place on the battlefield we discovered the charred remains of several children, who had evidently escaped injury and been left behind in the retreat only to meet a horrible death by torture at the hands of the Sioux.

This story would not be complete without saying something about my trip to the Republican Valley in October 1921. I had not been there since the fall of 1873, when I had been sent to bury the Pawnee dead. Instead of seeing buffaloes, deer, antelope, and elk, I saw large herds of fine cattle, horses roaming in pastures, and contentment all around. Instead of Indian trails and buffalo wallows, I found railroads and improved highways. Instead of Indian tepees and the rough camps of buffalo hunters, I found beautiful homes, cultivated farms, and prosperous villages. Indeed I was very much surprised and pleased to see the new order of things in the once "Wild West" as I had known it. The power and dread of Indians is no longer felt and feared by white people. The Pawnees are now but orphans, driven from the land they loved so well to reservations that are distasteful to their wild and free nature.