

Quanah Parker: Last Chief of the Comanches

By Peter Gorman

In October, 1867, representatives of the United States' government met with the great chiefs of the Southern Plains tribes at Medicine Lodge Creek, in Kansas, to propose a peaceful resolution to the hostilities which had raged since white settlers had begun moving west of the Mississippi nearly 30 years earlier. The government's proposal was that the Indians were to move to newly created reservations and cease all warlike activity against both the settlers and the United States Army. In exchange, the Indians would be provided with food, clothing, housing vocational training and benign supervision. The talks were often bitter but the Indians, decimated by disease and decades of warfare, had little choice but to accept the offer. After three weeks of negotiations nearly all of the chiefs of the Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Kiowa and the Comanche tribes agreed to the terms of the treaty.

Among those noticeably absent from Medicine Lodge was Chief Quanah—later known as Quanah Parker—the young, half-white leader of the fierce Quohada clan of the Comanches. Asked why he wouldn't attend the peace council, Quanah told a reporter from the East: "You tell the white chiefs that the Quohadas are warriors and we will surrender when the bluecoats come and make us surrender."

The refusal of Chief Quanah to give up the nomadic life of the Comanches and move his clan to the reservation was seen as dangerously divisive to the cause of the peace on the Southern Plains, and spurred nearly nine years of futile attempts by the US government to capture or kill him. During those years he became legendary for his daring raids on settlements throughout Oklahoma and East Texas, often riding into armed camps either alone or well ahead of his clan.

Quanah Parker was a proud warrior, a young medicine man, and the last chief of the Comanches. But he was also pragmatic and when finally the buffalo had all been slaughtered and his people were faced with starvation, he voluntarily surrendered himself and his clan to the Army at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in May, 1875. From that time until his death in 1911, he worked as hard for his people in the white man's world as he had as a plains fighter. He refused to fall prey to the depredations of reservation life that befell so many of his contemporaries, learning instead to flourish in the new world. Over the years he became a cattleman, a railroad investor and one of the influential men of his time. Among his friends he counted Indian Chiefs, cattle barons, statesmen and presidents. But he never stopped being proud to be a Comanche.

His influence continues today: during those years of acclimation to reservation life his personal power grew, both as a leader and as a medicine man. He traveled widely, performing medicine ceremonies on whites as well as Indians. His medicine was peyote, introduced to him while he was in Mexico on the late 1870s. It was his use of peyote, combined with his widespread influence, which led to the eventual formation of what is now known as the Native American Church.

Around me the rocks were close as I made my way through the crevices and up the hills, away from the camping sites and restrooms which dotted the floor of Palo Duro Canyon. Overhead the sun glared; the sky was a deep blue washed with an occasional patch of cloud. The Spring afternoon was warm but there was a bite in the wind. The night would grow bitterly cold.

I'd come to the canyon to do a private peyote meditation. In my bag was a peyote I'd made from a dozen buttons a friend had given me, and two small vials of peyote extract which had come, in a round-about manner, from the Huichol Indians in Mexico, a people who have been using peyote for thousands of years. It was good medicine which had come from the right sources. I also carried some gifts from Buster Parker, grandson of Quanah Parker. He was a 70-year-old Comanche I'd made friends with just two days earlier, when I arrived in Cache, Oklahoma, seeking information of Chief Quanah. Through luck, fate or whatever, I'd asked someone at a local restaurant whether any of Quanah Parker's relatives still lived in the area and was told about Buster. We'd met and talked. Buster was one of only three living grandchildren, and the only one who had participated in Native American Church ceremonies. Among the things he'd given me was it-say, a local medicine used to keep rattlesnakes at bay, and some cedar to toss into my fire as the night progressed.

I reached a small plateau perhaps 300 feet above the canyon floor and caught my breath beside a clump of wind-bent bushes. A bobcat suddenly stepped out from behind some rocks and stared at me, then turned and bolted. It was a good omen. I turned as well, and continued climbing for another half-hour, until the sounds of the campers were well below me.

In front of me stretched Palo Duro, an immense crevice nearly 30 miles long cut into the Texas panhandle by the headwaters of the Red River. Its walls were a brassy-colored clay and nearly sheer; trees and brush dotted the hills which rose like a miniature mountain range down the canyon's center. Huge stones carved by a hundred thousand years of wind cast eerie shadows in the afternoon light. It was Buster who'd suggested I come here and though the drive from Cache has been a long one, I was glad he had.

"If I was going to do a little meditation on my grandfather I might go to Palo Duro Canyon," he'd said over coffee. "That was the Winter camp of the Quohada. You know, sometimes I think about those days. What a life that must have been, with all the buffalo that used to live in that canyon." It had also been, he said, the place where Quanah had often gone after his raids, his trail dust simply falling off the face of the earth, leaving his pursuers mystified.

Finding out about Quanah Parker was the whole purpose of the trip to Oklahoma, so I'd asked for directions and left Cache the next morning, driving nearly 300 miles across the staked-plains territory, farmland and cattle range. Looking cold and brown before the

onset of Spring, lay unbroken as far as the horizon until, without warning, the ground gave way to Palo Duro.

Now, standing on the top of one of those small mountains which ran down the center of the Canyon, I tried to imagine what it must have been like when the rising smoke came from the tee-pees instead of campers, and the musky smell of thousands of buffalo filled the air. What it must have been to be a bluecoat or a Texas Ranger riding out against the enemy Comanches and watching them disappear in the distance, wondering if it were true that they could turn into eagles and fly away. Picturing what it must have been like for Chief Quanah on the day when Colonel MacKenzie, the man whose task it was to bring Quanah in, finally discovered this canyon and came riding in with a full complement of soldiers to attack the Kiowa and Comanche staying there. It was an attack in which the Indians escaped but at least 1,400 of their horses were slaughtered.

I picked a place for a fire beside a tall boulder and protected on two other sides by brush, then cleared the area. I marked off a circle large enough for both the fire and my things, then began to chew the it-say as Buster had said. "Chew these sticks and spit the black tar they make all around your circle. No rattlesnake will come anywhere near this." The circle marked with the medicine, I began to walk among the rocks. Overhead a hawk sailed gracefully on the wind.

Quanah was born during the late 1840s, the son of Peta Nocona, Chief of the Quohada Comanches, and Cynthia Ann Parker, a white woman who had been taken captive, along with her brother John, by the Comanches during a raid on Fort Parker, Texas, in 1836. At the time she was nine-years-old.

Raised as a Comanche woman, Cynthia Ann married Chief Nocona when she was 18 and bore him three children: two sons: Quanah and Pecos; and a daughter, Toosannah, or Prairie Flower. If she ever missed her white life there is no record of it. By all accounts she was fully accepted as a Comanche and thought of herself as one as well.

But in 1860, nearly 25 years after her capture, while she and the rest of the Comanche women, along with their children and a small group of Mexican slaves, were on the Pease River in Texas gathering berries for the winter, they were discovered by a group of Texas Rangers and Indian bounty hunters. Most of the women and children and all of the slaves were massacred. But Cynthia Ann and Prairie Flower were spared and brought to Fort Parker, where Cynthia Ann's uncle, Colonel Issac Parker, welcomed them both with open arms.

Neither Cynthia Ann nor Prairie Flower were happy with their new home, however, and made several attempts to escape and return to the Comanches. All of them failed. Prairie Flower, an Indian from birth, never adjusted to white civilization and died four years after her capture. Following her death, Cynthia Ann, broken in spirit, refused to eat and slowly starved herself to death.

"Now when they recaptured his mother, my grandfather became like a raging fire," said Buster. "Man, he hated white people and he went about in Texas, killing, burning farms, destroying things. He wanted to find out what happened to his mother, where they took her, and why."

That desire to find his mother and sister may have been—along with his desire to remain a free man—one of the reasons he had refused to participate in the Medicine Lodge Council.

Night began to fall. Across the canyon broad strokes of gold and red burned upon the canyon wall. The sky was lit with a hundred shades of violet. I made my way back to the circle I'd drawn and began to prepare things. At the head of the circle I molded a small, raised, half-moon altar from the moist canyon clay. It was perhaps four-inches high and three-inches wide, a semi-circle nearly three feet in diameter. The circle's opening faced due East, like outstretched ready to welcome the morning sun. Its head faced due West.

I finished the simple peyote altar and was starting the fire when I suddenly felt conspicuous. I pictured myself working within my circle, making my altar, just so, and knew I looked ridiculous. There I was, a white boy from New York City out in the Texas night, playing Indian. I had my medicine, my taped peyote ceremony songs, my rattlesnake it-say, my bone whistle, my hawk feather. The only thing missing were the Indians.

I almost flattened the altar. If I wanted to get stoned on peyote I ought to just get stoned, I thought. I didn't need these crazy justifications. Hell, if it had been a Catholic Mass I'd been celebrating it would have been no crazier. I wasn't a priest. I wasn't a Native American Church Roadman. I had no business making a mass.

I stopped short of destroying the altar and tried to think of my purpose instead of my ego. I wasn't there to get stoned, or to pretend to be a Roadman. I was there to meditate on what I'd read and heard about Quanah Parker, to put myself in a place he had spent time in, to feel the same wind on my back that he had felt. To eat the medicine he'd eaten. The peyote had come to me through good channels. It was meant to do me good. His grandson had even given me something of an okay to do this by suggesting the place and giving me some medicines he thought would be helpful in my search. The altar was something I'd gotten accustomed to in legitimate Native American Church ceremonies. So were the other things I had. To go out of my way to ignore the things I'd been shown, to not try to put myself in a surrounding in which I'd be comfortable would be as ridiculous as what I was doing. The best I could do was to try to do things as I'd been taught. I might not understand the reasons for everything but that didn't mean there weren't any.

I laughed out loud. The Indians were still missing from my ceremony and I still was a sight, making an altar in the canyon hills. I decided to live with that and started my fire.

The night was growing cold. The wind tore through the canyon and rushed around me. I put on a poncho I'd brought and

took out the peyote tea. I blew the bone whistle to the four directions: To the West, where it's said the Thunderbird holds back the waters so that the world won't flood; to the North, where people are said to come from; to the East, the source of light and life; and to the South, the direction of the Good Red Road, the road we're said to travel on when we die.

I put the whistle aside and took out the cedar Buster had given me. I sprinkled some of the fire. It crackled and filled the air with its sweet scent. I took the cover from the tea and took a swallow. It was extraordinarily bitter, and the pieces I'd cut were too large now that they'd been soaking for several hours. I gagged and had to fight to get and keep it down.

The bitterness of the peyote cactus, according to one story I'd heard, had only developed recently: In the old days peyote was said to be sweet so that people would want to eat it. But once they knew its properties it had made itself bitter to keep people from eating it without good reason. Buster told a different story: "My father told me that my grandfather used to say that peyote was sweet until the day Jesus died. The bitterness was to make you remember how they crucified him each time you swallowed it." It struck me that Quannah Parker might have come up with that in an effort to get the missionaries—who swarmed all over the Indians and were adamant against the use of the "pagan" peyote—to see the connection between his medicine and their beliefs.

I took out one of the small vials of peyote extract and drank the black syrup. It was even more bitter than the tea. If I hadn't fasted all day I don't think I could have kept it down.

I put the peyote away and began to listen to the tape of peyote songs I'd brought. The small water-drum beat echoed among the rocks and the sound of the singers filled the air. The words were foreign to me but that didn't matter: It was the sounds and the rhythms which held the power, and I began to lose myself to them.

I'd arrived in Cache two days earlier with a photographer, Malcolm MacKinnon, and we'd stopped at a small Indian Trading Post and restaurant. It was there that we'd asked about Quannah's family and learned about Buster. While we waited for him to arrive we'd walked into the Trading Post gift shop, a large room filled with western clothes and tee-shirts, Native American jewelry, painted steer skulls and such. A pretty young woman was tending the counter.

"Excuse me," I started. "We've heard that Quannah Parker's house is located somewhere here in Cache. Any idea where it might be?"

"Sure do," she smiled. "We have it right out back. Well, not right out back, it's down the road a bit. And it's not really we who have it, it's my uncle, Herb Woesner. He'll be along any minute if you want to wait."

Within a few minutes a thin man in his early 50s came into the store. The young woman pointed us out to him and he came over and introduced himself. He was soft-spoken with a good smile and a wry sense of humor.

"What can I do for you fellows?" he asked.

We told him what we wanted and he offered to show us the house. He drove us down a private road and on the way explained that he'd bought the house from one of Quannah's granddaughters in 1958, to include it in an Old West Fairground he had been putting together at that time. He'd built the trading post and restaurant, bought some carnival rides, then spent several years acquiring some of the oldest buildings in Oklahoma, including the first schoolhouse and church built by white settlers, and an old shack that had once belonged to Frank James. The Fairground had never really gotten off the ground, however, and Woesner now only showed the buildings to people who expressed interest.

"But how did you end up with something of such historical significance as Quannah Parker's Star House?" It was called the Star House because Quannah had had five large stars painted on the roof. Some people said he'd done it to signify that he always wanted to live beneath the stars even after he moved from a tee-pee to a frame house. Others said it was because he wanted visiting dignitaries to understand that he thought of himself as a Comanche general with as much right to stars and the white military leaders had.

"I bought the house from Mrs. Ella Cox Lutz, one of Quannah's granddaughters. She'd lived in it with her mother, Mrs. Birdsong, who was Quannah's daughter, until 1956, when the US Army decided to expand the Fort Sill Artillery Range and bought up a lot of the old Comanche land, including Quannah's. Of course, the Army Engineer Corps had been nice enough to move the house for her instead of demolishing it, and it sat right across the street from the Trading Post from the Spring of 1957 until Easter, 1958. Then, when Mrs. Birdsong died, I bought the house and moved it here."

As he finished we pulled into the Fairgrounds area, drove past the rusting carnival rides, and stopped at the gate of a tall fence which ran around the Old West buildings. Herb Woesner unlocked the gate and we walked in: It was obvious that Quannah Parker's house had been the intended star attraction. It was a large white building with wide balconies wrapped around two sides on both floors, and looked just like the old photographs I'd seen except that the stars had worn off the roof and it now overlooked a scrub plain instead of the beautiful Wichita Mountains. Tee-pee poles leaned against a tree to the right of the house and the rain-weathered remains of a peyote altar and ceremonial fire were visible directly in front of the house. I asked Herb about them.

"They sometimes have ceremonies down here. I think the last one was back in November."

He unlocked the doors to the house—a recent addition—and walked us through, pointing out which rooms had been used by which of Quannah's several wives. Through most of the time he'd lived in the house Quannah had had five wives, though in

all he'd had eight. He'd actually had six at the house for a time, an Apache woman he'd been given in gratitude for something he'd done.

 "Quanah's wives didn't take kindly to her, though," Woesner said. "They wouldn't let her stay in the house, so Quanah set a tee-pee up for her in the yard. I suppose you could say they made her life so miserable that Quanah had no choice but to send her home a short time after she got here."

 There were large, framed photographs of each wife hanging in the rooms where they'd lived. They were beautiful women, strong and independent. Three of them lived on the main floor, two upstairs with his 23 children. I later asked Buster whether there had been jealousies among the wives. "Not at all," he said. "My mother used to tell me that all the Comanche women wanted to marry him."

 "Wackeah was often said to be his first wife," Woesner continued. "But Quanah himself said they were all equal. They each had their own responsibilities, of course, but they shared the work. That's the Indian way. They work together."

 In Quanah's own room there were two photographs: One of his mother Cynthia Ann, breast feeding Prairie Flower; the other of Quanah standing next to Burke Burnett, a cattle baron, a friend and the man who built the Star House for him. It had been Quanah's commission for leasing out some unused Comanche grazing land to the cattlemen, something many people have pointed to as a sellout to the whites. In fact, the land was leased for a quarter-of-a-million dollars annually and the money was used to buy cattle and build two-room homes for all of the Comanche families on the Fort Sill reservation. "That's not a sell out," says Buster, "that's vision."

 Rumors of Quanah Parker as a sellout to the whites persist in some quarters even today, probably because he appeared to get such preferential treatment from them. While the one-wife law of the white settlers was imposed on other Indians, Quanah was permitted several. Too, while many other important Indian leaders were confined to their reservations or allowed to travel only infrequently, Quanah was permitted to go when and where he pleased. He traveled extensively to Mexico, north to Colorado and east, to Washington, DC on three occasions. There is a famous photograph of Teddy Roosevelt standing with Quanah which was taken when Roosevelt came to Oklahoma and asked Quanah to go hunting with him, an invitation Quanah tactfully turned down.

 But the special treatment he received from the white authorities, as well as the personal wealth he accrued, appears to have come from the respect his forceful personality commanded, and from his business acumen rather than from catering to those authorities. He simply learned to play the whites at their own game. According to Woesner, Quanah "understood the whites and even made good friends with some of them. But he never trusted them. Mostly he was a politician."

 Certainly in the early years of reservation life his distrust was apparent: He saw that in the new world order Indians would have to go to school, but he was adamantly opposed to sending Comanche children to missionary schools, opting instead to build the first Indian school in the Oklahoma territory. As to his house, he knew that the size of a man's home signified a great deal to the whites and so he had them build him the grand Star House, yet he appears to have spent most of his nights in a tee-pee set up behind it. Even told his people to accept the white missionaries' religion of that was what satisfied them, but he himself never stopped practicing his own spiritual beliefs.

I threw more cedar onto the fire, then finished the peyote tea and drank the second vial of extract. The songs were haunting and beautiful. The fire danced in the wind. I sat huddled against the cold night air. Overhead, stars were falling.

 I stood to stretch and stepped out of the circle: The moment I did I became aware of myself and my surroundings and felt as though my balance had been thrown off. Within the circle I was part of something and the fire gave me focus. Outside, I was on my own, my energy diffused.

 Away from the protection of the brush the wind buffeted me. It cut through my layers of clothing and burned me. Night sounds from the animals and the brush rushed past and around me. I opened my arms and thought I might take off into the night sky. This was what the Comanches had felt. This was the wind that had moved among their buffalo and carved these canyon walls. It was a fierce wind and I reveled in it. I danced in circles as it thundered around me. Bits of brush whipped by my face, disappearing instantly in the dark. Pebbles and clay and uprooted shrubs tumbled by my legs and arms. It was exhilarating. And then suddenly, after 10 or 20 or 30 minutes I was too high. I was indulging. The moment I recognized that the cold was unbearable and I missed the focus of the fire.

 I stopped my dancing and stepped back into the circle. I stared into the fire and felt its warmth. Though the tape had finished while I was with the wind, the rhythm of the drum stayed with me and focused my attention.

 The flames began to draw me. I thought of what it must have been like to be here when the buffalo roamed, and in the fire the buffalo appeared, short legged and shaggy, moving easily on green plains. Behind them, downwind, Indians on horseback, hunting those that separated from the herd. The air was clear and there were trees on the horizon.

 Suddenly dust and noise; everywhere the sound, the feel, the drumming of thousands of hoof beats, of thunderous motion. The trees were in flames and the buffalo stampeding. The fire crackled like gunshot and the buffalo began to fall, hundred, thousands of them, falling, roaring, stumbling over one another's carcasses. Trains appeared and from their windows the buffalo sport hunters fired their Sharps' Repeating and buffalo guns, leaving the animals to rot until they piled up and the air stank with the copper smell of their blood.

 It had been the buffalo hunters more than anything else which had killed the Plains Indian cultures. Three or four men could take

down hundreds of buffalo daily with their specialized weaponry, their partners skinning the animals and drying the skins on the Staked Plains for sale back East, the flesh left to rot. The greed of those hunters had been fantastic: In the three-year period from 1872-1874 alone it is estimated that nearly four-million buffalo were killed in the Southern Plains.

It was that slaughter which led to the bitter battle of Adobe Walls in the Texas panhandle, the most famous of Quanah's battles. It was a battle in which both Kiowa and Cheyenne joined up with the Quohada Comanches to oust the buffalo hunters who were slaughtering the buffalo on lands where hunting was by treaty reserved for the Indians. Under the leadership of Chief Quanah, and with the blessing of the great Comanche medicine man Isatai—who predicted that his medicine would make the Indians invincible to the hunters's bullets—several hundred warriors rode out to the Adobe Walls trading post and on June 27, 1874, launched an attack. Quanah rode first, charging with another Comanche warrior to the fortified walls of the post.

"We charged pretty fast, throwing up dust high," he later said. "I got up to the adobe house with another Comanche and poked holes through the roof to shoot."

On the first charge it seemed as though Isatai's medicine might indeed protect the warriors, but on a later charge Quanah's horse was shot out from under him and he was grazed while heading for cover. The fight lasted from sunrise until past noon, when it became apparent that the Indians's bows and arrows, lances and single-shot rifles were no match for telescoped buffalo rifles with a range of more than a mile. In the early afternoon, when the Indians withdrew, 15 of them were dead and many more were wounded. Quanah himself had to stop the warriors from beating Isatai for the failure of his medicine, though it's said he never put his trust in a medicine man again.

Following the battle, most of the Kiowa and Cheyenne who had left their reservations to join the attack returned to them. Quanah and his Quohadas however, turned south and rampaged through the Texas Panhandle for several weeks, finally returning to their winter home at Palo Duro in late summer. There, on the canyon floor, lived one of the last of the great buffalo herds, and for the remainder of the summer the Indians lived as they always had.

On September 26 of that year, however, Colonel MacKenzie's forces found the great canyon and surprised the Indians living there. They moved through the canyon, storming up the creek, burning tee-pees and destroying winter supplies, then drove 1,400 of the Indian's horses into the canyon's Tule valley and slaughtered them. Most of the Indians escaped but few had supplies and many had no horses. Through that fall and into the winter they turned themselves in at Fort Sill. In May of the following year, Chief Quanah and his Quohadas turned themselves in as well.

The end of the free life for Chief Quanah and his Clan began with the Battle of Adobe Walls. Enroute to the battle Quanah had sung a song of lament for the warriors who would not be returning with them. That song, The Battle of Adobe Walls, is still sung at peyote ceremonies, though Quanah had never used peyote until several years later, while he and his clan were living on the Fort Sill reservation.

Quanah had gone into East Texas to search for his mother and sister among her white relatives—it was at that time that he began using her last name as his own—and learned that they had both died. He was unable to discover the whereabouts of their burial sites, however, either because the Parkers refused to tell him or genuinely didn't know, and he continued south, into Mexico, to see his uncle John who was living with the Indians there, to verify the deaths.

While in Mexico Quanah either fell ill or was injured—the exact problem is unknown—and he was treated by a curandera, a medicine woman, with peyote and cured. "That experience," says Joan Denton, the adopted daughter of Buster Parker, "was so spiritual, so wonderful, that from that moment on it became Quanah's medicine. It was enlightening."

When Quanah returned to Fort Sill he brought with him the new medicine and in doing so laid the foundation of what is now known as the Peyote Road. His belief in both the spiritual and physically curative properties of peyote was immense, and word of his use of the little cactus began to spread, first among the Comanches and later among the other tribes at Fort Sill.

Quanah's new medicine was recognized by many as a powerful aid, but among the missionaries, who were driven to convert the "pagan" Indians to Christianity, and the military, whose aim was to divest the Indians of their tribal identity, it was seen as a dangerous weapon. Like many of the Indian dances, rituals and ceremonies, peyote was seen as something that would bind the Indians together and its use was forbidden by the whites. Stories were circulated about its ill effects; it was said to be debilitating, poisonous or worse, a black magic medicine which promoted all night orgies and human sacrifice. There are countless cases on record of peyote meetings which were broken up by mobs of both whites and Indians who were fearful of the pagan ceremony they imagined was taking place.

Quanah himself appears to have been left alone on this count while other Indian leaders suffered these indignities. That was partly due to his standing in both the Indian and white worlds but it was also due to the fact that he never intended to start a religion or foster a movement. For him, peyote was a medicine that cured, both physically and spiritually, and his use was apparently private. He treated both whites and Indians with it and often traveled great distances to bring it to those who needed it.

But it was precisely because he was not trying to start a cult that one formed around him: He was successful, respected and wealthy, with advantages few other Indian leaders received. It was only natural that a people who had been stripped of their traditions would gravitate toward the beliefs of such a man.

As the use of peyote spread from tribe to tribe the ceremony accompanying that use became formalized. Much of what we now see in a Native American Church ceremony is an outgrowth of the ancient Wichita Deer Dance, which used as its medicine the mescal bean, a much

