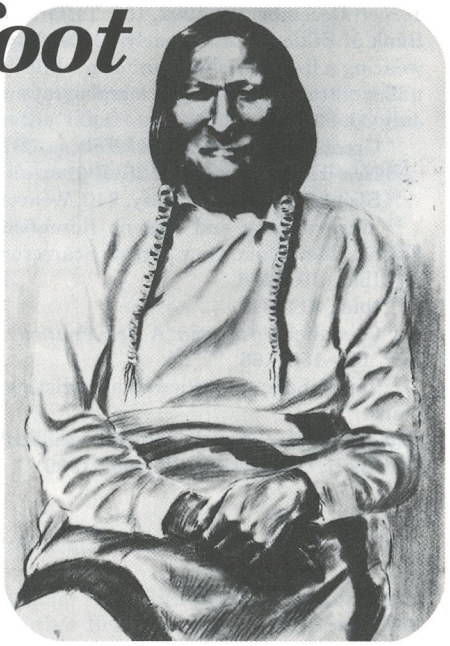
History Underfoot

The Search for Physical Evidence of the 1868 Attack on Black Kettle's Village



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On November 27, 1868, an overwhelming United States military force attacked Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle's village on the Washita River. The outcome is well known. The next day all that remained of that tragic event were its memories in the minds of those present, stories told to those who were not, and artifacts and the bodies of humans and animals left on the hallowed battleground. As time passed, direct memory faded and then dis-

appeared with the aging and death of the survivors; stories were told and retold and in the process passed along to others; accounts were written; artifacts were collected for re-use or souvenir; human bodies were removed and buried, and the bodies of animals decomposed where they fell.

With time, the Washita River valley became farm and ranch land, and eventually a few acres were purchased by the State of Oklahoma to commemorate what happened there in 1868 (Figure 1). While attracting nowhere near the attention of the historically-related Little Bighorn Battlefield, scholars studied the site using available documents, Cheyenne people remembered the place with ceremony and by re-telling stories first told in the winter of 1868, and the interested public visited the monument and pondered the events that happened so long ago. Then, in 1995, as part of a movement to have the site designated a national park,[1] archaeologists entered the picture to try to find physical remnants of the attack.[2]

A decade earlier, archaeologists working for the National Park Service (NPS) had shown that significant physical residue of the Battle of the Little Bighorn remained on the landscape.[3] They demonstrated that the study of artifact placement could, in conjunction with written and oral accounts, provide new insights into what happened. In fact, it was through the process of archaeological inquiry that written, generally non-Indian accounts and Indian participants' stories were finally accepted as complementary rather than contradictory views of the event.[4] It was hoped that similar results would be forthcoming at the Washita, which, in contrast to the Little Bighorn, is poorly known from traditional sources.

While not yielding results of the magnitude expected, archaeological and geological investigation of the site has exposed important new evidence. Geology suggests that the ground on which Black Kettle's village rested, and on which much of the fighting occurred, has probably been destroyed in the intervening years. Archaeology supports that conclusion, documents the location of a Seventh Cavalry position on a ridge overlooking the Washita valley, and provides the basis for speculation about the nature of the fighting in the area.

Historical Synopsis

On November 28, 1864, Colonel John M. Chivington led the Third Colorado Volunteer Cavalry in an attack on the Cheyennes (including Black Kettle's band) in camp on Sand Creek, Colorado

Territory. That act, which resulted in the deaths of somewhere between 100 and 500 people, was widely viewed as a massacre and shocked the nation.[5] Following the Sand Creek massacre of 1864, peace between the Plains Indians and the United States was an elusive commodity.[6] A series of treaties, including one concluded at Medicine Lodge, Kansas, in October, 1867, failed to bring peace. The Cheyennes were signatories to the Medicine Lodge Treaty, but by May of the next year they had resumed hostilities. By August, 1868, Cheyennes had attacked settlements and settlers along the Saline and Solomon rivers in western Kansas.[7] September 17 saw the Battle of Beecher's Island, Colorado Territory, between Cheyennes and a command of fifty-three United States scouts.

In March, 1868, Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan assumed command of the United States War Department's Division of the Missouri's Department of the Missouri. With only 1,200 cavalry and 1,400 infantry at his disposal, Sheridan soon proposed to conduct a winter campaign to surprise the Cheyennes in camp. Approval for the campaign was granted in October, 1868. Brig. Gen. Alfred Sully had orders to take 500 soldiers and march south of the Arkansas River and attack Cheyennes known to be assembling there. On November 18 Sully's force arrived on Wolf Creek at its confluence with the Beaver and established Camp Supply.[8]

Fig. 1. This mid-twentieth-century view of the battlefield shows the ridge over which Custer and his men rode to attack Black Kettle's village. A plowed field takes up the foreground (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society; all other maps and illustrations courtesy the authors).

Shortly thereafter, Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle took his followers into camp in a grove of cottonwood along the Washita River. Black Kettle's village consisted of some fifty-one lodges and was located upstream from numerous other villages of Apaches, Arapahos, Cheyennes, Comanches, and Kiowas.[9] On November 20 Black Kettle sought and was refused safe haven at Fort Cobb by Maj. Gen. William B. Hazen. Hazen had been ordered to provide refuge for peaceful tribes but he considered the Cheyennes at war with the United States and instructed Black Kettle to conclude a peace agreement with Sheridan. On the evening of November 26, after returning from Fort Cobb, Black Kettle met with the leaders within his village to report on his meeting with Hazen. They decided to move their village the next day to be closer to the larger villages downstream.[10]

On November 22 between 600 and 800 soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry and a supply train departed Camp Supply under the command of Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer. Armed with Spencer carbines and Remington or Colt revolvers, they headed south in search of villages. The weather was cold, and the plains were covered with snow.[11]

Early on the morning of November 27 Custer's scouts discovered Black Kettle's village. Custer took position for a surprise attack at dawn. The dawn attack involved Custer's command approaching the village from the northwest, Maj. Joel H. Elliott's command from the northeast, Capt. Edward Myers from the west, and Capt. William Thompson from the south.[12] Approximately 630 soldiers were involved in the actual attack.[13]

The troops achieved the surprise and quickly captured the village. Fighting continued all day, however, as Custer sought to capture Cheyennes who had escaped the village and to inventory and destroy the possessions found there. As itemized in Custer's report, the material included 241 saddles, 573 buffalo robes, 360 untanned robes, numerous hatchets, 35 revolvers, 47 rifles, 250 pounds of lead, 4,000 arrows and arrow heads, 75 spears, 90 bullet molds, 35 bows and quivers, 12 shields, 300 pounds of tobacco, winter provisions of dried meat and flour, and substantial clothing, 51 lodges, and between 800 and 900 horses.[14]

As the Arapahos, Cheyennes, and Kiowas from other villages downstream moved to engage Custer and his men, the Seventh assumed an increasingly defensive posture, and their dusk departure can be characterized as an escape. A detachment of soldiers under Elliott did not join in the escape. The eighteen soldiers were pur-

suing Cheyennes toward the southeast, where they encountered insurmountable opposition. Elliott and his command of seventeen were killed. When Custer withdrew from the field, he had made no attempt to account for the missing Elliott.[15] All told, an unknown number of Cheyennes and twenty-two soldiers were killed in the conflict.[16] Custer returned to Camp Supply a hero in the west, but suffered criticism within his command for his failure to search for Elliott.

Archaeological Inquiry

The goal of the archaeological inquiry at the Washita was first to determine if sufficient physical evidence of the event remained on the landscape to warrant detailed study. If the artifacts were there, the initial question was one of verification: "Is the location long thought to be the site of Black Kettle's village correctly identified? If so, the questions became, "What can the placement of artifacts on the modern landscape tell about what happened there in 1868?" and "Can that information be used to re-anchor to the modern landscape the historical actions known only through oral and written history?" Those types of questions have been asked of other battlefields in the past two decades, and the methods used in their investigation are well established.

The methods were first developed by the NPS during a mid–1980s study at the Little Bighorn Battlefield, Montana.[17] The NPS and others then used the same methods effectively at other Revolutionary War, Mexican War, Civil War, and Indian Wars battlefields.[18] The approach used at the Washita site involved several steps:

(1) Working as a team, volunteers equipped with metal detectors systematically scanned the study area for artifacts. When the metal detectors indicated the presence of a metal object buried in the ground or on the surface, that place was marked with a surveyor's pin flag.

(2) A recording crew followed behind the metal detectors, excavated artifacts, and collected those that related or possibly related to the 1868 event. In the process, they assigned a unique number to the collected artifacts.

(3) Using electronic surveying equipment, a survey crew recorded the precise location of each collected artifact, noted by its unique number.

Through that process, the team made a precise map showing the location of each event-related artifact. By using the map and accu-

rately identifying the artifacts found, it is possible to search for patterns in the location of artifacts that may relate to the event being studied.

The Study Area

The success of any battlefield study hinges on access to land where battle-related events are thought to have occurred. When plans for a possible study of the battlefield were made in 1994, the focus was on land then owned by Betty Wesner and thought by many to be the location of Black Kettle's village. That land is now the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site (NHS).

The 1995 survey focused entirely on the approximately 330 acres owned by Wesner. It was the most logical place to begin an archaeological inquiry. Only a portion of the Wesner land, however, was covered in 1995 (Figure 2). The findings of the 1995 investigations left many questions unanswered. Therefore, additional survey was con-

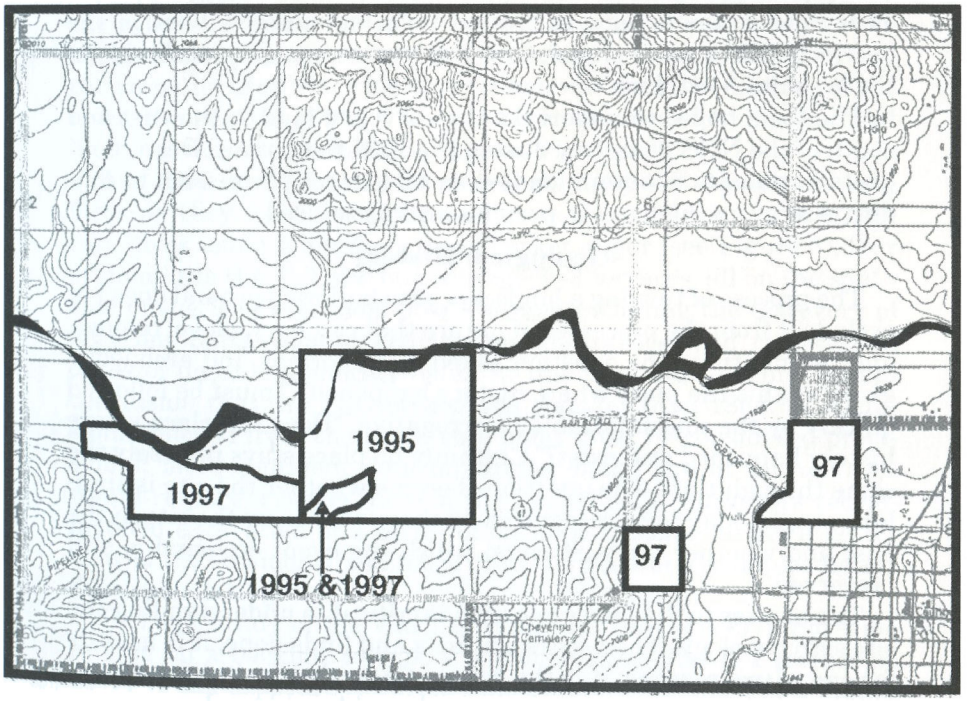

Fig. 2. Locations of the areas studied in 1995 and 1997.

ducted in 1997 to revisit the Wesner land and inventory what was present on other private land in the vicinity.

The team surveyed the western half of the land within the NHS boundary and south of the Washita River, along with a parcel of private land adjacent to the western boundary of the NHS and south of the Washita River. The new survey examined the possibility that the village site, not discovered in 1995, was actually located farther west. The survey covered both the floodplain and the uplands to the south of the floodplain.

Team members also surveyed a forty-acre parcel of land owned by the National Forest Service and used as the location of its headquarters building. The parcel is between the NHS and the town of Cheyenne and was considered a possible location of the demise of Maj. Joel H. Elliott and his detachment. Surveyors also investigated an area on the northern edge of the town of Cheyenne and along the eastern side of Sergeant Major Creek. The area included other possible sites of the defeat of Elliott's detachment. In addition, a portion of the area surveyed in 1995 was resurveyed in 1997. That land consisted of a cultivated field immediately west of the overlook. The area is situated on the terraces on the south side of the Washita floodplain.

The team hoped to undertake the survey of land to the east and south of the NHS boundary during the 1997 field study. Despite repeated attempts to obtain landowner and lessor permission to conduct survey on the parcels, permission was refused.

Geological History

The process of turning a landscape into hallowed ground does not exclude it from the processes of nature that can bury, move, remove, and reconstitute. The question asked by historians and archaeologists, "Is this the place where history happened?," must be followed quickly by the uncomfortable interrogative, "Does the place where history happened still exist?" Certainly no place stays precisely the same through time. The questions become whether the site is similar enough today to be recognized by those who knew the site in the past and whether the surface on which the event occurred is still preserved.

The answer to the latter question is critical to understanding the site's archaeology. If one seeks artifacts and finds none, it is usually for one of two reasons: it is the wrong place (that is, it did not happen there), or it is the right place but the evidence is no longer present. The lack of evidence might be because all of the artifacts have

been picked up as souvenirs, which experience shows to be unlikely, or the surface on which the artifacts fell has been lost through the process of geologic change. Investigations at the Washita conducted in 1995 and 1997 provide insight into the geologic history of the site. The findings, though of a preliminary nature, are of great interest.

Geologic study at the Washita focused on understanding the history of the terraces, or former floodplains, of the Washita River. Three terraces (T–1 through T–3) were identified above the current, active floodplain of the Washita River (Figure 3). The highest and oldest terrace (T–3) is located 6 to 7 meters above the riverbed. On the south side of the valley, the terrace is relatively close to the current channel, and its edge forms steep sides to the river valley at some places. Considerably lower is the T–2 terrace, which is found primarily on the northern side of the river. That terrace is some 3.5 meters above the river bed. On the south side of the river between the channel and the steep edge of the T–3 terrace is the T–1 terrace, which is 2.5 to 3 meters above the river bed. That apparently was the active floodplain prior to the construction of soil conservation check-dams after the turn of the twentieth century. Given that and the accounts that Black Kettle's village was on the south side of the river, the surface of the T–1 terrace was believed to be the most likely surface on which the village was located.[19]

The 1995 study began with a careful survey of the landscape surfaces as they exist today. Investigators excavated a series of five core holes using a hand-operated bucket auger (see Figure 3), four of them into the T–1 and one into the T–3 terraces, all on the south side of the Washita. Field observations (including the discovery of very few battle-related artifacts on the terrace) and radiocarbon dates of organic materials found in the cores led to a provisional conclusion that the T–1 terrace was younger than 1868.[20] Conclusions reached from the small core holes must be considered provisional; more confident determinations of the age of the terraces would require a better view of the buried soils. Surveyors recommended excavation of a series of backhoe trenches to get a better view of the sediments and more precisely recovered samples for radiocarbon dating.

Geologic study of the Washita continued during 1997, that time relying on a backhoe to expose sections across the T–1 terrace so that a broad exposure of buried soils could be examined (see Figure 3). The team opened a total of five sections, ranging in length from 5 to 26 meters and stretching north to south across the valley. They

then recovered a number of samples for radiocarbon dating from the soils exposed in the trenching. The radiocarbon dates include samples dating prior to 1868, a sample from the atomic era (substantially post-dating 1868), and samples whose dates could be either prior to or after 1868.

In considering the dates, the observations of the soils in the trenches, as well as the fact that few battle-related artifacts were found on the surface during the concurrent archaeological surveys, the survey team concluded, "T–1 could be essentially post-battle in age with the older samples redeposited and the atomic-era sample being intrusive through bioturbation."[21] Although far from conclusive, the study in essence said that the place where history happened may, in fact, no longer exist on part of the NHS. The south bank of the Washita on land now controlled by the NPS is an area sacred to the Cheyenne, but it may not be hallowed ground.

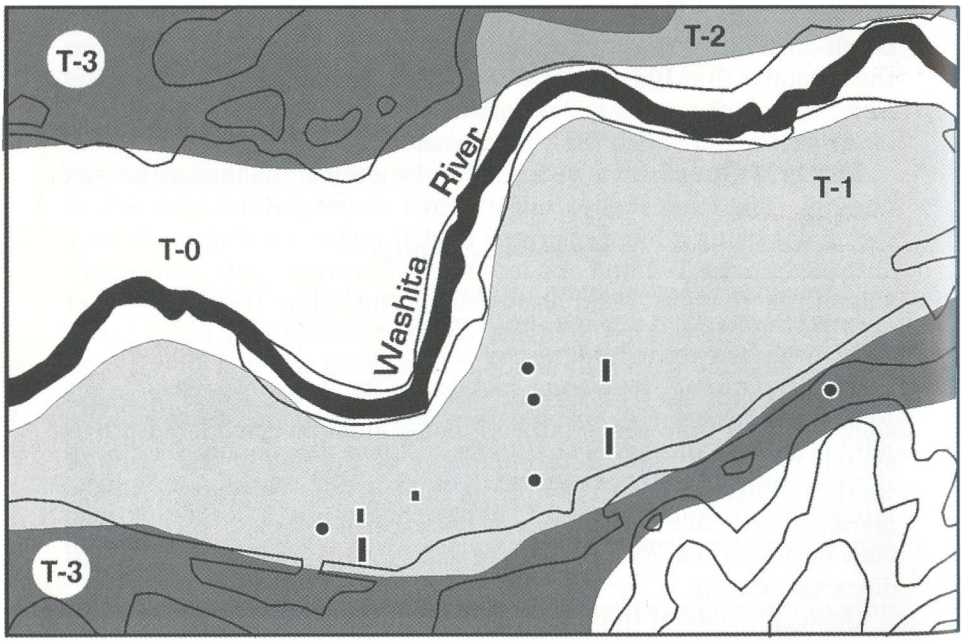

Fig. 3. Terraces of the Washita River within the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site and locations of geologic excavations. Circles represent locations of core holes. Lines represent locations of backhoe trenches.

Archaeological Findings

Archaeological interpretations of battlefields are based on two fundamental types of information: the artifacts and knowledge of their placement on the landscape. Artifacts must be identified so as to tie them as confidently as possible to the event in question, to identify their function and how they were used during the event, to identify who used them during the event, and other pertinent information. With that information in hand, study of the placement of different types of artifacts on the site can show patterns—concentrations, alignments, voids, and correlations—that result from decisions made by the participants in the event.

Once patterns are identified, it is then necessary to develop an interpretation: "Why do the artifacts cluster or align the way they do?" Interpretation is based upon an observation of the placement of artifacts on the landscape (historical fact) and upon a consideration of available written and oral history and other pertinent general knowledge. It is important to remember that interpretation is just that; it is possible to have more than one credible explanation of the observed physical remains.

It also is important to consider factors that might skew or otherwise bias the physical remains and hence the interpretations. For example, action of the Washita River may have served to remove or bury artifacts once present on the surface of the floodplain; salvage of artifacts after the event could have removed evidence; and collectors and metal detector hobbyists also could have removed evidence. Collecting has the potential to skew evidence when hobbyists concentrate on certain areas or "hot spots," eventually making them seem less of a concentration or disappear entirely.

While those factors must be kept in mind, and while it is difficult to determine to what degree they may have affected a site, many battlefield studies conducted within the past two decades have repeatedly shown that sufficient evidence remains to allow valid interpretations of the events. While some skewing of patterns has been seen, such as at the Honey Springs Civil War battlefield in Oklahoma, it does not appear to be sufficiently serious to invalidate use of the physical remains to reinterpret battles and other similar events.[22]

Patterns the survey team expected to see in the study area included a concentration of camp debris that would have resulted from the use and subsequent catastrophic destruction of Black Kettle's camp, that is, whole or fragmentary remains of metal artifacts

Table 1: Artifacts thought to relate to the attack on Black Kettle's Village, November 27, 1868, and discovered during archaeological surveys in 1995 and 1997

Description of artifacts	Probable association	Number found in 1995 survey*	Number found in 1997 survey**
Spencer cartridges (unfired)	US 7th Cavalry	11	–
Spencer cartridge cases	US 7th Cavalry	107	10
Spencer bullets	US 7th Cavalry	14	13
Henry cartridge cases	US Scout/Officer	7	–
.50/70 cartridge cases	US Scout/Officer	4	–
ca. .50 caliber spherical bullets	Native American	6	1
.36 caliber conical pistol bullets	Native American	1	–
.44 caliber spherical pistol bullets	US or Native American	3	1
.44 caliber conical pistol bullets	US or Native American	1	2
Lead shot bar	Native American	1	–
Iron harness hardware	US or Native American	3	2
Military buttons	US or Native American	2	–
Civilian	Native American	1	–
Totals		**161**	**29**

* Donated by landowner Betty Wesner to National Park Service, November 1, 1997

** Property of Oklahoma Historical Society

used in the day-to-day lives of the Cheyennes such as knives, cooking kettles, metal ornaments, bullets, and arrowheads. Some of the items might have been lost during the use of the encampment prior to Custer's attack; others would have been left there from the process of the rapid abandonment and then the systematic destruction of the camp equipment by Custer's soldiers. One also could expect that metal items left behind in the village would have been salvaged by the large number of Native Americans who remained in control of the area after Custer retreated. It is uncertain how much salvage may have gone on and how much metal might have remained in the village site.

Other patterns expected at the site consisted of positions of the soldiers and their Native American opponents. The positions would be directly betrayed by a concentration or alignment of expended cartridge cases and/or unfired bullets, and less directly by the presence of a concentration of fired bullets that had been aimed at human targets. Personal items, such as buttons from clothing, also

may be expected at a position used for any length of time. Likewise, the location where the Indian horse herd was destroyed should show a concentration of expended cartridge cases and spent bullets.

Artifacts

In the course of the 1995 and 1997 surveys, archaeologists found 190 artifacts thought to relate to the attack on Black Kettle's village (Table 1). Of those, 161 were found during the initial survey in 1995. The majority are spent firearm cartridge cases and bullets, of which most can be attributed to use by the Seventh Cavalry.

One-hundred and fifty-five recovered artifacts are .50 caliber ammunition for the Model 1865 Spencer carbine (Figure 4). That is the carbine carried by Seventh Cavalry troopers in the winter of 1868. A repeater that held seven metallic rim-fire cartridges in its magazine, the .56 caliber Spencer carbine had become extremely popular following its introduction in 1863 during the Civil War. In 1864 United States contracts with Spencer were modified to provide for use of a smaller .50 caliber cartridge. The .50 caliber weapon saw considerable service during the early Indian Wars era.[23]

The .50 caliber Spencer ammunition found at the Washita included twenty-seven unfired cartridges (Figure 4a), 117 fired cartridge cases, and eleven bullets (Figure 4b). Impressed letters, known as headstamps, on forty-four of the cases indicate manufacture by the Sage Ammunition Works (S.A.W.) (Figure 4c). Another fourteen were manufactured by the Joseph Goldmark Company

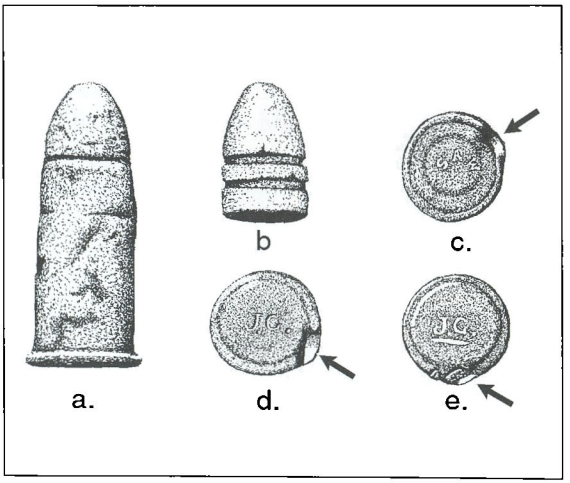

Fig. 4. Spencer rimfire ammunition: a., unfired cartridge; b., fired bullet; c., cartridge head showing mark of the Sage Ammunition Works; and d-e., cartridge heads showing two varieties of marks of Joseph Goldmark. Arrows point to firing pin strike marks.

(J.G. and J.G.) (Figure 4d-e). Due to complaints of misfiring, all Goldmark ammunition was eventually recalled and destroyed, but not until several years after the Washita. Sixty-six cases carried no headstamps, but distinctive tool marks found on those cases suggest that another sixty-one cases were manufactured by the United States government's Frankford Arsenal, one by C. D. Leet and Company, and possibly one by E. Allen and Company (not known to have manufactured Spencer ammunition, however). The cases from Washita show a mix of probably Civil War surplus rounds in the form of the Sage and Goldmark ammunition, but also a strong reliance on postwar ammunition manufactured at a United States arsenal.[24]

The conclusions reached from firearms identification analysis of the Spencer cartridges have greater pertinence to an understanding of the Washita battlefield. Firearms identification analysis involves the use of firing pin and extractor marks first to identify the *type of weapon* in which the cartridge was fired and second to identify the *individual weapon* in which a cartridge or a series of cartridges was fired. Identifying the type of weapon is possible because each has distinctive firing pins and extractors that leave distinctive impressions or marks. Identifying the individual weapon is possible because minute variations between individual firing pins and extractors exist due to variation in the manufacturing process. They are observable only through microscopic analysis. The variations mean that each individual weapon has a microscopically recognizable signature or "fingerprint" that is different from that of all other weapons of the same type. That has allowed firearms identification analysis to become a major tool in modern crime scene investigation, and it has important implications for research at the Washita as well.[25]

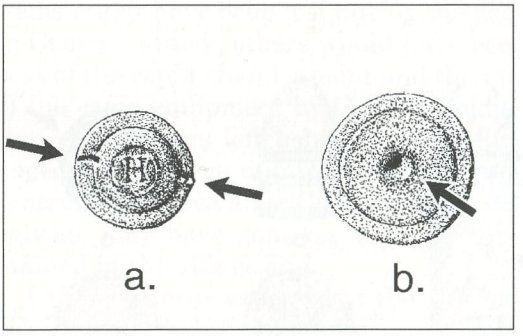

Fig. 5. Heads of metallic cartridges: a., Henry rimfire; b., .50/70 centerfire used in a Springfield Model 1866 rifle. Arrows point to firing pin strike marks.

All fired Spencer cartridge cases and two misfired rounds (having multiple firing pin impressions) were subjected to microscopic

firearms identification analysis. Ten cases were too corroded to allow study of individual characteristics. Analysis of the remaining 104 cases resulted in the identification of thirty-seven individual Spencers, that is, the 104 cartridges were fired in thirty-seven different Spencers. Put somewhat differently, all of the identifiable Spencer cartridges were fired by only thirty-seven of the approximately 630 troopers engaged at the Washita. The location of individual cartridges on the site allows archaeologists and historians to mark the location of individual, although nameless, troopers on the site. The placement of four cartridges fired from the same weapon, for example, mark four places where an individual trooper stood during the attack or its aftermath.[26]

The survey team found seven .44 caliber metallic rimfire cartridge cases for a Henry (Figure 5a). The Henry, predecessor of the legendary Winchester, also became popular during the Civil War, although it was never adopted by the United States government. Like the Spencer, the Henry was a lever-action repeater that held fourteen cartridges in its magazine. Firearms identification analysis shows that the seven Henry cases from the Washita were all fired in the same individual weapon. The weapon could have been in the possession of an officer or scout with the Seventh Cavalry or, as analysis will show to be less likely, one of the Native Americans who engaged in combat with the Seventh.[27]

Analysis also shows the four .50/70 cartridges cases found at the Washita were fired in a single weapon, which was a Springfield Model 1866 rifle (Figure 5b).[28] The metallic center-fire cases are all internally primed with a Martin Bar primer. The Martin Bar primer was developed by the army at the Frankford Arsenal and manufactured between October, 1866, and March, 1868, for use in the Model 1866 Springfield breech-loading rifle, the so-called Second Allin Conversion.[29] Like the Henry, the Model 1866 Springfield could have been in the possession of a scout or officer with the Seventh Cavalry or, less likely, with an Indian defender of Black Kettle's village.

In addition to metallic cartridge ammunition, team members also found a variety of muzzle-loading bullets for long arms and revolvers. Among them are seven approximately .50 caliber lead balls (Figure 6a). The apparently unfired bullets were probably intended for use in weapons owned by Black Kettle's Cheyennes or others coming to their defense.

Investigators also recovered a single unfired, conical .36 caliber bullet of a type identified as a U. S. Whitney pattern. It was prob-

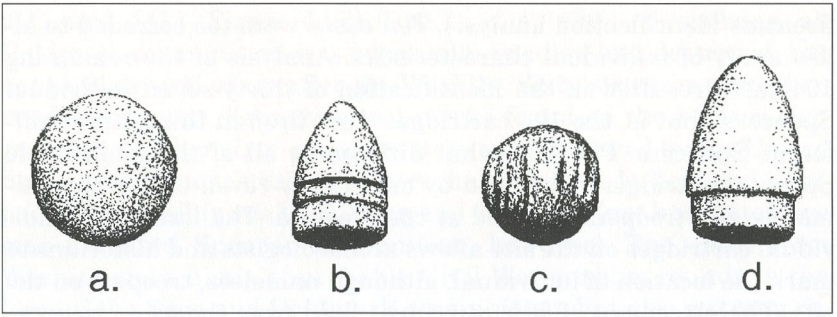

Fig. 6. Miscellaneous bullets: a., unfired .50 caliber ball; b., unfired .36 caliber U.S. Whitney pattern; c., fired .44 caliber ball showing land-and-groove marks; and d., unfired .44 caliber Colt pattern.

ably intended for use in a Navy-caliber revolver, such as a Whitney, Remington, or Colt (Figure 6b).[30] Three .44 caliber conical bullets and four .44 caliber balls were found on the site (Figure 6c-d). One of the conical bullets is unfired but the other two have land-and-groove imprints consistent with having been fired in the Model 1861 Colt army revolver. The four balls have been fired, and three of them have land-and-groove marks consistent with the Model 1861 Colt army revolver; the land-and-groove pattern on the fourth specimen is too faint to identify with certainty.[31]

The summary statements of ordnance and ordnance stores in the hands of the Seventh Cavalry in June, 1867, shows that they were equipped with Remington .44 caliber revolvers. The numbers show, however, that few troopers actually carried a revolver. The same returns for March, 1871, show the number of revolvers to approximate more closely the number of carbines. At that date most of the revolvers were Colts, but some Remingtons were still in service, most notably with units stationed in Colorado Territory and Kansas.[32]

The .44 caliber bullets fired in Colt revolvers could be attributed to the Seventh because it is uncertain when they received those weapons (but sometime between June, 1867, and March, 1871). Cap-and-ball revolvers, including Colts, also were in the hands of Plains Indians and were present in some quantity.[33] In 1867 Gen. Winfield S. Hancock reported from Fort Dodge, Kansas, "Several hundred Indians have visited this post, all of whom have revolvers in their possessions; a large majority had two revolvers, and many of them three."[34] A young Cheyenne by the name of Magpie is

known to have used a pistol against Custer's troops during the 1868 attack.[35] Thirty-five revolvers also were listed on Custer's inventory of items found in Black Kettle's village at the Washita.[36]

Based on the ordnance statements, the .36 caliber revolver bullet is unlikely to be associated with the Seventh Cavalry and therefore is likely from a revolver in the possession of an Indian defender. The .44 caliber bullets could have been fired by weapons in the possession of either the Seventh Cavalry or the Indians they were attacking.

A final firearms-related artifact was found during the inventory. That is an irregular lead bar that was probably stock for use in casting lead bullets (Figure 7). The item was most certainly an Indian possession and probably once belonged to a member of Black Kettle's band.

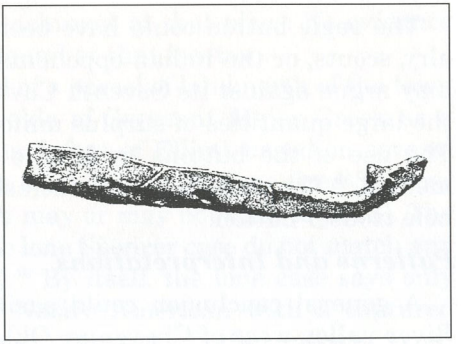

Fig. 7. Irregular lead shot bar.

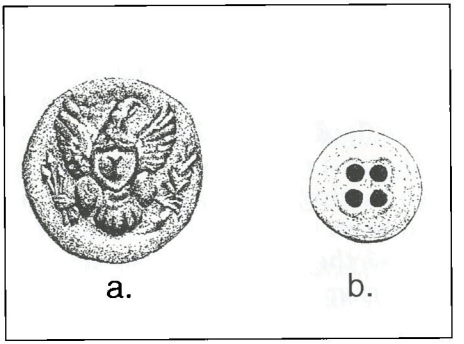

Fig. 8. Military buttons: a., coat or blouse button; b., trouser or suspender button.

Three buttons, two harness buckles, and a harness ring round out the collection. The harness hardware cannot with certainty be associated with the 1868 attack. The buttons include a non-military button with a brass front stamped with an abstract floral design. The other buttons are military. The first is a coat or blouse button embossed with an eagle, with an "I" on the shield on the eagle's breast (Figure 8a). The "I" stands for infantry. Eagle buttons indicating the line of service were worn by officers and enlisted men between 1840 and 1854 and by officers until 1902. The button dates prior to 1880, however, and probably is of pre–Civil War vintage.[37] The other military button is a four-hole, white metal trouser or suspender button (Figure 8b).

The eagle button could have been used by either Seventh Cavalry, scouts, or the Indian opponents. That it is an infantry button may argue against its Seventh Cavalry attribution were it not for the large quantities of surplus uniforms in use in the late 1860s.[38] The use of the buttons by Native Americans also is well documented.[39] The same general conclusion can be offered for the four-hole trouser button.

Patterns and Interpretations

A general conclusion could easily be made that the Washita River valley west of Cheyenne, Oklahoma, holds tightly to its secrets. As intensive as the survey was, the findings can only be characterized as meager. Therefore, it is useful to begin a consideration of patterns from the general perspective of where things were *not* found.

All except two artifacts—a Spencer case and a harness ring—were found within the boundary of the NHS. However, within that area and including the land to the west, virtually nothing was found in the floodplain of the Washita River, and nothing at all was found in the western half of the NHS or on the land farther west. Thus, except for three Spencer cases (two in the floodplain and one on the terrace on the north side of the Washita River), all the artifacts related to the 1868 event were found on the terraces in the southeastern corner of the NHS.

The lack of any real evidence in the floodplain, and in particular the lack of camp debris, is disturbing because that is where Black Kettle's village is thought to have been located. There is thus no evidence of a village within the NHS or to the west within the study area. Because Black Kettle's village was the focus of the event, that finding is troubling. The results of the geologic study, reviewed above, strongly suggest that the lack of artifacts is because the surface on which Black Kettle established his village has been washed away in the years since 1868.

The lack of artifacts on the terraces south of the Washita River in the western half of the NHS and on the adjacent property to the west argues that the village was not on that portion of the river. If the village were located in that area, one would have expected military or Indian positions on the high terraces overlooking the village. Their absence is sound evidence that the village was not in that area.

The Forest Service parcel located between the NHS and the town of Cheyenne was surveyed because one document seemed to place

the death of Elliott and his detachment at that place. No evidence related to the 1868 event was found at that location.

A final survey area consisted of a parcel of land north of the town of Cheyenne and on the east side of Sergeant Major Creek as a highly probable location for the defeat of Elliott based on several historical accounts. A thorough survey produced one fired Spencer case and a harness ring (which may or may not date to 1868). The individual characteristics of the lone Spencer case do not match any other cases found in the study.[40] By itself, the lone case says only that a trooper (or possibly a Native American with a captured Spencer) passed through the area. The lack of other cases or spent bullets in the area argues that it is not the location where Elliott was killed. It should be remembered, however, that the area is a floodplain and burial or removal of the 1868 surface is possible there as well.

The story is entirely different in the southeast quarter of the NHS where nearly all of the event-related artifacts were found. Most of the evidence there was ammunition-related, with most of it Spencer ammunition. Most of the Spencer cases were found on a northeast-to-southwest-trending ridge overlooking the Washita floodplain to the northwest. The ridge commands a good view of the uplands to the southeast.

Within the NHS, firearms identification analysis indicated a total of thirty-six individual Spencers.[41] Virtually all of them were at some point present on the ridge (Figure 9). Analysis of locations of Spencer cases on the ridge shows concentrations where individual troopers stood and fired. It was expected that the analysis would reveal a pattern that would have resulted from troopers firing in skirmish-line order. Maintenance of a formal skirmish line would result in somewhat discreet clusters of cartridges along a line. Rather, the pattern on the ridge shows evidence of a more fluid movement of troops. Troopers also appear to have either congregated on the ridge from elsewhere in the southeast quarter of the NHS, or ranged out in almost random directions from the ridge, pausing occasionally to fire their weapons.

On the ridge the team recovered seven Henry cases, all fired from the same weapon (Figure 9, inset a). They were found in a line suggesting the movement of the person carrying the weapon along the ridge, pausing occasionally to fire. The Henry was not an issue weapon for the cavalry. The gun could have belonged to an officer or scout with the Seventh Cavalry or to a Native American opponent of the Seventh. The fact that the cases all belong to a single gun,

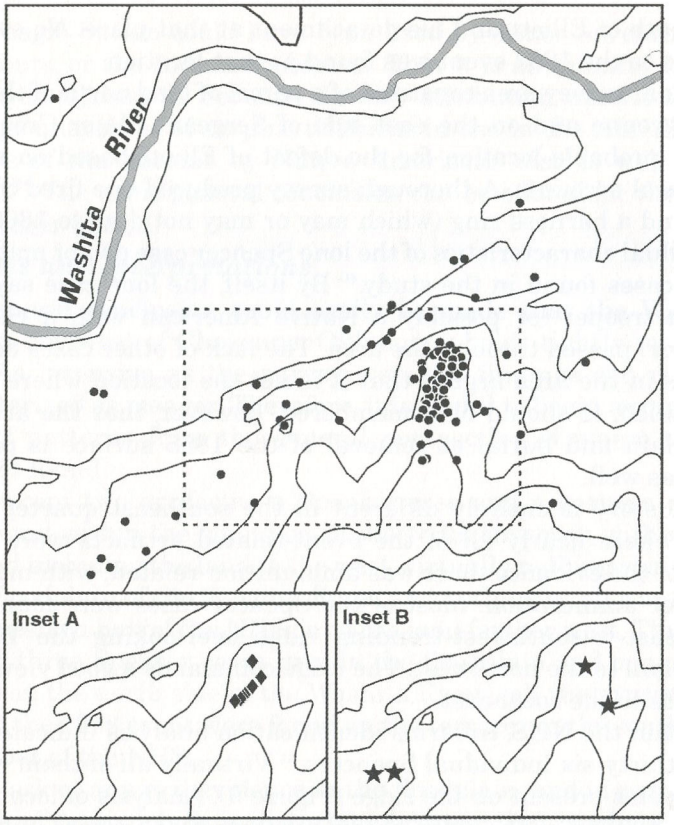

Fig. 9. Dispersion of Spencer cartridge cases: inset a., Henry cartridge cases; inset b., .50/70 cartridge cases.

and that they are all found in the heart of the Seventh Cavalry position on the ridge argues that the gun was in some way associated with the Seventh, and officer or scout ownership becomes more likely.

Surveyors also found the four .50/70 cases fired in the same Model 1866 Springfield in that area (Figure 9, inset b). The weapon also was on the ridge in the midst of the Spencer cases, but also ranged towards the west far from the ridge. It could have been owned by scout, officer, or opponent of the Seventh, but like the Henry its presence on the ridge supports the argument that it was a weapon of the Seventh, with ownership by a scout the most plausible.

A few round balls for approximately .50 caliber guns and perhaps the bullets and balls fired in revolvers are evidence of Native American resistance, although their numbers do not allow substantial conclusions. The paucity of fired Spencer bullets also does not allow conclusions on the direction the troopers on the ridge were firing. If the Spencers were aimed towards Black Kettle's village in the floodplain, the bullets would have landed on ground that geologic studies suggest has long since eroded away. If the Spencers were aimed to the east or southeast, the spent bullets are likely located on private land beyond the study area.

Overall, then, the Seventh Cavalry position on the ridge in the southeast corner of the NHS is the primary evidence of the 1868 attack on Black Kettle's village found in the 1995 and 1997 studies. That demonstrates beyond any doubt that the NPS property at Washita was involved in the event. It also provides indirect support of the location of Black Kettle's village in the floodplain below and northwest of the troop position. The troop position is on a commanding ridge that could have served an offensive position early in the fighting or a defensive position later in the day. As an offensive position, it would have faced the floodplain and, presumably, Black Kettle's village (Figure 10). As a defensive position, it would have, also presumably, had its back to Black Kettle's village.

Who were the troopers of the Seventh Cavalry that occupied that ridge on November 27, 1868? The most likely candidates are men from Capt. William Thompson's command, who approached the village from the southwest, or, perhaps more likely, men from the ill-fated Maj. Joel Elliott's command. Elliott approached the village from the northeast, but is known to have taken position on the south side of the Washita. It is even conceivable, although far from certain, that Elliott was on the ridge when he saw and decided to pursue Indian refugees heading downstream. Should the site of Elliott's defeat be found, a comparison of cartridges from the ridge and that site would be most informative.[42]

Conclusions

The conclusions reached in this study have only been possible by a methodology recovering both the artifacts and their precise locations. It also has been possible only because individuals present along the Washita on November 27, 1868, left behind artifacts that marked their locations, if only for a moment. By determining where individuals were located, and then where groups of individuals

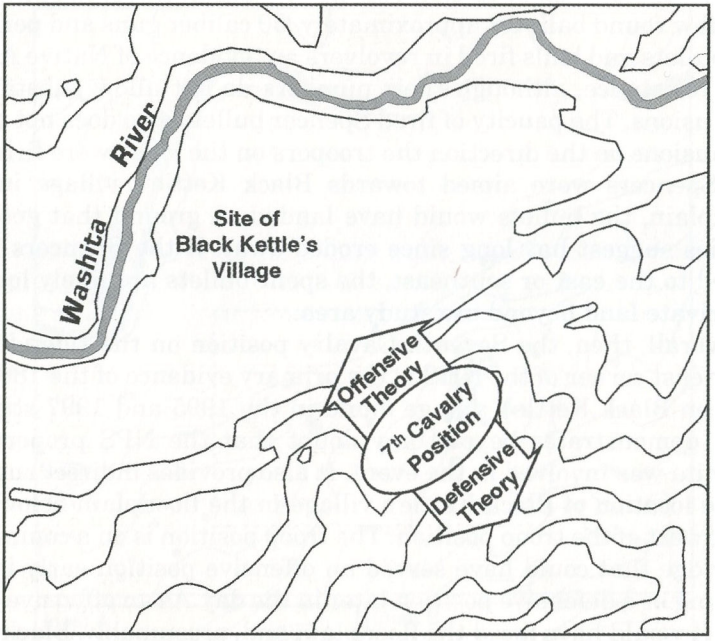

Fig. 10. Interpreted location of Black Kettle's village based on defensive/offensive model of Seventh Cavalry position.

were located, archaeologists and historians are able to build an interpretation of a very small portion of the Washita battlefield.

In all, the team discovered evidence for only 37 of the approximately 630 troopers who participated in the attack. Likewise, there are very few artifacts that can, with confidence, be associated with the Native American defenders of Black Kettle's village. Much of the story is apparently either unknowable from archaeology due to loss of the evidence through time or awaits discovery on land not yet traversed.

It is likely that substantial evidence of the event is still present to be discovered. Private lands beyond those surveyed most certainly contain other evidence of military forces and Native American positions on that fateful day. Discovering and professionally recording the other locations has the potential to add much to an understanding of the place and a more complete reconnection of the historical narratives with the landscape of today.

ENDNOTES

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[1] On November 12, 1996, Congress passed Public Law 104–33, subsequently signed by President Bill Clinton, authorizing the addition of the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site to the National Park System. The site was dedicated on November 1, 1997.

[2] Fieldwork in 1995 and 1997 was funded with grants from the American Battlefield Protection Program, National Park Service, to the Oklahoma Historical Society.

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[6] Hoig, *Sand Creek Massacre*, viii.

[7] Craig Miner, *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865–1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 18–19.

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[9] Hoig, *Battle of the Washita*, 93.

[10] Ibid., 89-94.

[11] Ibid., 112–113; Douglas C. McChristian to Bob Rea, July 19, 1996.

[12] Hoig, *Battle of the Washita*, 124–125.

[13] Bob Rea, "Battle of the Washita: An Estimate of the Combat Strength, Seventh Cavalry Regiment, November 27, 1868," unpublished manuscript, 1998, 2, Historic

Sites Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City (hereafter cited as HSD/OHS).

[14] Hoig, *Battle of the Washita*, 137.

[15] Ibid., 141–142.

[16] Custer estimated that around 100 Cheyennes were killed, most of them warriors. Cheyenne oral tradition places the number of Cheyenne killed well below that figure, probably in the twenties.

[17] Scott, *Archaeological Perspectives.*

[18] Charles M. Haecker, *A Thunder of Cannon: Archeology of the Mexican-American War Battlefield of Palo Alto*, Southwest Cultural Resources Center Professional Papers, no. 52 (Santa Fe, New Mexico: National Park Service, Divisions of Anthropology and History, Southwest Regional Office, 1994); Charles M. Haecker and Jeffrey G. Mauck, *On the Prairie of Palo Alto: Historical Archaeology of the U.S.-Mexican War Battlefield* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997); William B. Lees, "Archaeology of the Mine Creek Civil War Battlefield, Linn County, Kansas," unpublished report, 1998, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka; William B. Lees, "When the Shooting Stopped, the War Began," in *Look to the Earth: Historical Archaeology and the American Civil War*, ed. Clarence R. Geier, Jr., and Susan E. Winter (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 39–59.

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[36] Hoig, *Battle of the Washita*, 137.

[37] David F. Johnson, *Uniform Buttons: American Armed Forces, 1784–1948* (Watkins Glen, New York: Century House, 1948).

[38] Douglas C. McChristian, *The U. S. Army in the West, 1870–1880: Uniforms, Weapons, and Equipment* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 7–40 .

[39] Lees, "Historic Burial," 217–219.

[40] Scott, *Firearms Identification Analysis*, 6–9.

[41] Ibid.

[42] The lone cartridge found north of Cheyenne was not fired in any of the weapons that fired the cartridges on the ridge.