

## QUANAH PARKER'S NARROW ESCAPE

By Ronnie Tyler\*

For years hostile Comanche and Kiowa Indians roided in the staked plains of north Texas, capturing livestock wherever they could and spreading terror among the unprepared settlers. They fought to keep the white hunter from the buffalo, to keep the white rancher from the land. But in 1874-75, after General Ranald S. MacKenzie had destroyed native resistance, the government placed the Indians on a reservation, and by 1886 difficulties between white men and Indians had diminished considerably.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the work of a few influential men, border tension had been reduced. One such person was the Quahadi (from Kwahadi) Comanche chief Quanah Parker, who once had been the leader of one of the most feared tribes in the Southwest. From the moment of his surrender in 1875, however, Quanah had adopted civilized habits and become one of the most respected figures on the Kiowa, Comanche, and Wichita reservation.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Comanches did not adopt the Anglo-American culture as readily as their chief, no serious problems appeared likely as long as he maintained their respect and coaxed them toward civilization. At Quanah's suggestion, for example, the Indians raised livestock and leased large tracts of reservation land to Texas cattlemen.<sup>3</sup>

Because of his position, Quanah frequently visited Fort Worth representing the Comanches in various enterprises. He became close friends with such famous cattlemen as W. T. Wag-

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Wallace and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Comanches: Lords of the South Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), pp. 310, 327; Ernest Wallace, *Ranald S. MacKenzie on the Texas Frontier* (Lubbock: West Texas Museum Assn., 1964), p. 170; Rupert N. Richardson, *The Comanche Barrier to South Plains Settlement* (Glendale: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1933), pp. 394-397.

<sup>2</sup> Zoc A. Nighman, *Quanah, the Eagle of the Comanches* (Oklahoma City: Harlow Publishing Corp., 1938), pp. 68, 99-100, 127-128.

<sup>3</sup> William T. Hagan, "Quanah Parker, Indian Judge," *Probing the American West*, ed. K. Ross Toole, John Alexander Carroll, Robert M. Uley, and A. B. Mortenson (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1962), pp. 71-73; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, pp. 347-348.

goner, Samuel B. Barnett, and Cal Suggs, and thoroughly enjoyed his trips to "Cow Town." To Waggoner and his brother, such meetings were opportunities to influence the chief, and they lavished gifts upon him: a \$1,000 carriage, fine suits, and entertainment. It was such a trip, however, that ended in grief and almost the death of Quannah.<sup>4</sup>

Quannah arrived in Fort Worth on Saturday, December 19, 1885, accompanied by his uncle, Yellow Bear.<sup>5</sup> In addition to purchasing wire and fencing material for their pastures, the Indians planned to discuss overdue rent from leased reservation land with Captain J. Lee Hall, agent for the Kiowas, Comanches, and Wichitas. After the pair registered at the most modern hotel in the city, "The Pickwick," Yellow Bear retired and Quannah left with George W. Briggs, the foreman of the Waggoner ranch.<sup>6</sup>

When he returned in approximately two hours, Quannah noticed nothing unusual. He went to bed, but apparently did not shut off the valve on the gas light completely, for after a short time coal gas fumes awakened him. Not realizing that gas was dangerous, he pulled the cover over his head and fell asleep. He became so sick, however, that he awoke again and aroused his

<sup>4</sup> Tilghman, *Quannah*, pp. 128-129; Interview with George W. Briggs, June 17, 1937, in "Indian Pioneer History, XVI, 6-11, Indian Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 20, 1895, p. 8. Many sources indicate that Yellow Bear was the father of Weckeah, Quannah's second wife. See Tilghman, *Quannah*, pp. 73-74; Clyde L. and Grace Jackson, *Quannah Parker, Last of the Comanches: A Study in Southwestern Frontier History* (New York: Exposition Press, 1963), p. 132; *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1895, p. 8; *The Dallas Morning News*, Dec. 21, 1895, p. 3. This, however, is not true. Old Bear was the father of Weckeah (Quannah's first wife) and Yellow Bear was his brother. Thus Yellow Bear was Quannah's uncle by marriage. Interview with Gillette Griswold, Director, Fort Hill Museum, April 6, 1966. Mr. Griswold obtained his information principally from interviews with Quannah's remaining daughter. At this time Yellow Bear was approximately fifty and Quannah was thirty-six. See "1870 Comanche Census," pp. 95-99; "July, 1895, Comanche Census," pp. 2-4, in Indian Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society; *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1895, p. 8. This information agrees with the latest estimate of Quannah's birth date. Mr. Griswold said that plans have been made to change the date on Quannah's grave stone to show 1848 as the year of his birth. Some sources also indicate that Yellow Bear was a chief. Neither is this so. He was a member of Quannah's band. See the "1870 Comanche Census" and the "July, 1895, Comanche Census."

<sup>6</sup> *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 8; *The Dallas Morning News*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 3; Interview with George W. Briggs. Briggs stated that his employers designated him to stay with the Indians and "provide them with entertainment and . . . keep them in a good humor."

uncle, only to find that he too was ill. Both men were soon unconscious.<sup>7</sup>

Fate and circumstances combined to prevent anyone from discovering the pair until Sunday afternoon, almost thirteen hours after Quanah had turned off the flame. One of the boarders, awakened by gas fumes, reported a leak at approximately 6 a.m. But the night janitor, T. B. Ellis, made a cursory search and found nothing. He failed to check the contaminated room, however, because Captain G. C. Hudgins, the hotel owner, had lived there, and he did not know the captain had moved. When Quanah and Yellow Bear did not come down for breakfast, another employee checked on them. Looking through the keyhole, he saw the unconscious Yellow Bear, but unfortunately assumed that the red man was sleeping off a drunken spree. Captain Hudgins finally became suspicious when the two did not appear for lunch. He opened the room and found them both on the floor—Yellow Bear, crouched near the bed, appeared dead, but Quanah had fallen near a window and was still gasping for breath.<sup>8</sup>

The situation was potentially explosive: If both men died, the Comanches might not understand that it was an accident. Hudgins immediately summoned two nearby doctors, Hays W. Moore and Elias J. Beall, and moved the braves out into the street for fresh air. Yellow Bear did not recover, but after giving a few hypodermic injections, the doctors pronounced Quanah out of danger. Captain Hall took Yellow Bear's body to Fakes and Company. A hastily assembled coroner's jury, directed by Justice of the Peace J. F. Zinn, ruled that Yellow Bear died "by inhalation of gas" because someone "failed to turn off the gas" and blew out the light.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 8; Dec. 22, 1885, p. 8; *Fort Worth Evening Mail*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 1; *The San Antonio Daily Express*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 4; *The Dallas Morning News*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 8; *The Dallas Morning News*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 3; Dec. 22, 1885, p. 1; *Fort Worth Evening Mail*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 1; *The Galveston Daily News*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 1; *The San Antonio Daily Express*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 4; *Corpus Christi Caller*, Dec. 27, 1885, p. 1; *Austin Daily Statesman*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 8; Dec. 22, 1885, p. 5; *The Dallas Morning News*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 3; Dec. 22, 1885, p. 3; Dec. 23, 1885, p. 1; *Fort Worth Evening Mail*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 1; Dec. 22, 1885, p. 1; *The Galveston Daily News*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 1; *The San Antonio Daily Express*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 4; Interview with Judler Lee Dunklin in "Research Data: Fort Worth and Tarrant County," (Texas Writers' Project) H. 527. In Southwest Collection, Fort Worth Tinker Library. Judge Dunklin said that he was walking downtown and saw a crowd gathering. When he got to the hotel he saw two Indians lying naked in the street and men trying to revive them.

Still there was danger that the Comanches would misunderstand. Quannah had been a friend of the white man for almost ten years, and many of the more radical band chiefs had begun to distrust his leadership. They accused him of working hand-in-glove with the ranchers. Tebananeka, an equally important chief, often disagreed with his policy. After hearing various prophecies of a return to former greatness, several other Indians had become demoralized on the reservation and began to gather around a rattle-raising Kiowa chief, Sun Boy, who encouraged insubordination to the agent. Of them, Quannah wrote, "it seems to make no difference what I start to do, some of the Kiowas or Tabanaca [sic] object . . . to it." When Quannah revived the following day, he too feared that his tribesmen would not believe him, and requested that a copy of the inquest—with a mammoth seal—be sent to the Indian agency for display. According to Briggs, the chief also got a lawyer and took depositions from those who knew about the incident.<sup>10</sup>

On Tuesday, Hall, Captain E. F. Ikard, and Burnett accompanied Quannah to Harrold, Texas, the northernmost terminal of the Fort Worth and Denver Railroad. Still fearing for the chief's health, the agent left him in the care of Doctor N. B. Gearhart, and returned to Fort Worth. Messengers had already notified the relatives of Yellow Bear in the Indian Territory of the tragedy.<sup>11</sup>

A group of only twenty-five to fifty Indians met the dead brave at Harrold, although several sources stipulated a much

<sup>10</sup> Quannah Parker to Captain J. Lee Hall, July 9, 1885, in the Quannah Parker papers, Indian Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society; U. S. Congress, House, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 40th Cong., 2nd sess., H. R. D. No. 1, Pt. 5, p. 546; Dora Nell Raymond, *Captain Lee Hall of Texas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1940), pp. 270-242; *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 5; Dec. 23, 1885, p. 8; *Fort Worth Evening Mail*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 1; *The Galveston Daily News*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 1; *The San Antonio Daily Express*, Dec. 23, 1885, p. 1; Interview with George W. Briggs.

<sup>11</sup> *The Dallas Morning News*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 3; Dec. 23, 1885, p. 1; *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 5; Dec. 23, 1885, pp. 2, 8; Dec. 24, 1885, p. 8; *Fort Worth Evening Mail*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 1; *Carpus Christi Caller*, Dec. 27, 1885, p. 1; *Ogden Leader*, Dec. 31, 1885, p. 1; Dr. N. B. Gearhart to Capt. J. Lee Hall, Dec. 24, 1885, in the Quannah Parker papers, Indian Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society. A messenger left Harrold with news of the tragedy at 11 a.m. on December 21 and the Indians arrived at approximately 3 a.m. on the 22nd.

larger number.<sup>12</sup> Because of respect for Yellow Bear, the group including several Indian women, observed some of their mourning customs, and residents of the village heard wailing and mourning while the Indians were still a long distance from town. The Comanches loaded the body in a wagon and took it to Curtis Mound for a traditional burial.<sup>13</sup>

Quanah undoubtedly was relieved when he saw that the Comanches apparently accepted his version of the accident. Still he elected to spend the night at the Indian headquarters where he revealed his newly acquired respect for gas lamps by leaving the light on all night. Emerging from his room the next morning, he was dressed in the full regalia of a chief and returned to the reservation in Indian Territory to accept the judgment of his people.<sup>14</sup>

This small incident has confused historians for several years, perhaps because of a reliance upon personal interviews made decades later, rather than upon written, factual accounts.<sup>15</sup> Quanah's original biographer, for example, cited the date as 1886, while the chief was in Fort Worth for the Fat Stock Show. If this referred to what is today the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show, which Quanah visited frequently, it is incorrect, because the Exposition did not begin until 1896.<sup>16</sup> Several other

<sup>12</sup>George W. Briggs, in his interview, said that some 5,000 Indians came to Harrold to escort Yellow Bear's Body back to the reservation. Clyde L. and Grace Jackson, *Quanah Parker*, pp. 132-133, cited 2,000 as the number. According to Captain Hall, there were only 4,147 Indians on the entire reservation. U. S. Congress, House, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, H. E. D. No. 1, Pt. 16, p. 300; and the *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 3; *The Dallas Morning News*, Dec. 23, 1885, p. 1; *The Galveston Daily News*, Dec. 23, 1885, p. 1; *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 23, 1885, p. 2; *Gravham Leader*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>Identical accounts appear in *The Dallas Morning News*, Dec. 23, 1885, p. 1; Dec. 24, 1885, p. 1; and *The Galveston Daily News*, Dec. 23, 1885, p. 1; Dec. 24, 1885, p. 4. A copy of the first article appears in the *Corpus Christi Caller*, Dec. 27, 1885, p. 1. Also see the *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 23, 1885, p. 2; and the *Gravham Leader*, Dec. 24, 1885, p. 1, for similar reports on the arrival of the Indians. For an account of Yellow Bear's burial, see Jannie R. Morgan, *History of Wichita Falls* (1931), pp. 84-85.

<sup>14</sup>Raymond, *Lee Hall*, pp. 227-238.

<sup>15</sup>Tilghman, *Quanah*, p. vi; Clyde L. and Grace Jackson, *Quanah Parker*, note on p. 133.

<sup>16</sup>Tilghman, *Quanah*, p. 133; Oliver Knight, *Fort Worth, Outpost on the Trinity* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), pp. 101-102.

authors repeated this error, while still others suggested additional erroneous dates.<sup>17</sup>

There is, however, a more complex problem. Most historians have assumed that either Quannah or Yellow Bear blew out the light, information which does not agree with Quannah's description of the accident.<sup>18</sup> Before interviewing the chief, reporters incorrectly theorized that Yellow Bear blew out the lamp. After the interview, however, the *Fort Worth Evening Mail* announced in headlines that "Quannah killed Yellow Bear." Quannah stated that he lit the light upon entering the room, then extinguished it when he retired.<sup>19</sup> Had Yellow Bear blown out the lamp before he went to bed, the room probably would have been full of gas when Quannah returned. But Yellow Bear was not a likely victim of such an accident, because Quannah had explained how to turn off the lamp before he left.<sup>20</sup> The idea that Yellow Bear blew out the flame was nothing more than the official speculation of the coroner's jury and reporters.<sup>21</sup>

The decision of the Comanches to support Quannah in this incident was important, because his influence on the reservation

<sup>17</sup> Knight, *Fort Worth*, p. 137, cited 1878 as the date. Clyde L. Grace Jackson cited 1880 as the date of the incident, as did Zor A. Tilghman. See Grace Jackson, *Cynthia Ann Parker* (San Antonio: Naylor Co., 1950), p. 121; Clyde L. and Grace Jackson, *Quannah Parker*, pp. 132-133; and Tilghman, *Quannah*, p. 133. Jennie R. Morgan, *Wichita Falls*, pp. 84-86, cited 1901 as the approximate date. Various interviews in "Research data Fort Worth and Tarrant County," reveal even more erroneous dates: 1882, in II, 527; 1879, in V, 1600-1679; the 1860's, in XI, 4050, 4063, and XVIII, 6022-6023, P. B. Parlock, *History of Texas, Fort Worth and the Northwest Texas Edition* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1922), II, 873-874; J. W. Wilbarger, *Indian Depredations in Texas* (Austin: Hutchinson Publishing House, 1980), pp. 344-346; and W. S. Nye, *Carbine & Lance: The Story of Old Fort Sill* (2nd ed.: Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942), p. 308, all mention the incident, but give no date. Margaret Waldreave-Johnson, *The White Comanche: The Story of Cynthia Ann Parker and Her Son, Quannah* (New York: Court Press Books, 1965), p. 70, cited 1887 as the date. Raymond, *Lee Hall*, p. 237, correctly cited December, 1885.

<sup>18</sup> Tilghman, *Quannah*, p. 133; Knight, *Fort Worth*, pp. 109-102; Jackson, *Cynthia Ann Parker*, p. 121; Clyde L. and Grace Jackson, *Quannah Parker*, pp. 132-133; Wilbarger, *Indian Depredations*, pp. 344-346; Raymond, *Lee Hall*, p. 237. The account as given in Wilbarger is slightly misleading. He cited a "recent" issue of the *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, then took the bulk of his quote from the *Fort Worth Evening Mail*, Dec. 21, 1885.

<sup>19</sup> *Fort Worth Evening Mail*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 1; *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 8; Dec. 22, 1885, p. 5; *The Dallas Morning News*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 3; Dec. 22, 1885, p. 3; *The San Antonio Express*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 4; *Austin Daily Statesman*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 1; and interview with George W. Briggs.

<sup>20</sup> *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*; *The Dallas Morning News*, Dec. 22, 1885, p. 3; *Fort Worth Evening Mail*, Dec. 21, 1885, p. 1.

and his relationship with the Indian agents continued to improve. When, in the following year, the government established the Indian Court at Anadarko, the agent asked Quanah to serve as one of the first judges. Continuing in that position until January, 1898, he was even more influential in civilizing his tribesmen.<sup>23</sup> At his death in 1911, Quanah was a famous, respected, and wealthy man.

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<sup>23</sup> Tligman, *Quanah*, pp. 192-198.