

CHAPTER ~~XXII~~~~XXX~~

THE MASSACRE AT OLD FORT EL PUEBLO:

AN AUTHENTIC VERSION OF THE EVENT, DERIVED ^{CHIEFLY} FROM ONE OF THE EARLIEST
INHABITANTS AND FROM A LATER FREQUENTER OF THE ESTABLISHMENT.~~(An advanced chapter from a book on The Early Far West.)~~

By F. W. Cragin.

On a spot now in the heart of the City of Pueblo, Colorado, and which was then just outside of the limit of the Republic of Mexico, — a spot not far from the left bank of the Arkansas river, but whose close vicinity that fickle stream has now long since forsaken, — a small colony ~~suspicion~~ of Americans, in 1842, built and occupied an ~~small~~ adobe-walled fort, as a place of domicile, farming and trading.

This establishment later became and was for a number of years a common stopping place and rendezvous of traders, trappers and travellers, not only of Anglo-saxon, but also of French, Spanish, and Indian extraction. It was known as "Fort el Pueblo", or as "el Pueblo de San Carlos", or "the Pueblo of St. Charles": the two latter names from the Rito San Carlos (St. Charles creek), crossed a little before reaching it from the settlements of New Mexico. But for short, it was ^{by Americans} ~~either~~ generally, "the Pueblo", or "St. Charles".

It is not my purpose, in this article, to give an account of the history of this fort and community; but rather to narrate the event that terminated that feudal or presidial period of the history of the locality.

In the days when the territory south and west of the upper Arkansas river belonged to Mexico, the wild tribes had been an almost constant scourge to the inhabitants of New Mexico; and the situation was by no means at once relieved when in 1846 that territory was occupied by the United States. ~~WARRIOR/SCOURGE/DESTRUCTION/DESTRUCTION~~ In the forties and fifties, military expeditions were sent into the Navajo country again and again, — namely, in 1846, '47, '48, '49, '52, and '58, — resulting always in treaties and promises which were ~~broken~~ broken almost as soon as made. The Apaches and Southern Utes, likewise, but rarely ceased from depredations on the settlements of New Mexico, plundering, murdering and taking captive; and they were often at open war, not only with the natives of the country, but ~~with~~ with the United States troops as well.

A military campaign against the Jicarilla Apaches, became necessary early in 1854; and before the close of that year, the Muache Utes — ancient allies of the Jicarillas, and closely related to them by intermarriage, though of a different linguistic stock — had made common cause with the latter and begun open hostilities.

The other Southern Utes, —Capotes, Weminuches, and Tabeguaches—, like the Navajoes, held aloof from the war.

In their operations against the whites, the two confederated tribes acted in correlation, the war parties of the one ~~mixing~~ tribe moving for the most part separately from those of the other, for the furtherance of their common ends; but to some extent, individuals of the Jicarillas entered the ranks of the Muaches, and vice versa.

On Christmas day of 1854, occurred at Fort el Pueblo a tragedy which ~~was~~ was part of that war and which wound up the affairs of the old fort —though not of its locality— as a seat of human activity and habitation; and this was no less than a wholesale massacre of the inmates of the fort, by the Indians.

The story of the massacre has been often told; but in none of the accounts that I have been able to find, has it been told very correctly, or the strategy been related by which the ~~Spanish~~ chief, Blanco, and ^{sixty or more} ~~with perhaps a few Jicarilla Apaches~~, who were the chief actors in this affair, — contrived the opportunity for their bloody work.

~~as given differently by different writers~~

~~contemporaneous records of the military operations in the Department of New Mexico in those days, however, leave~~

I shall here tell the story mainly as it has been related to me by Mrs. Juana Maria Simpson, by the kindness of her daughter and son, Isabel and Robert, as interpreters; and by her son-in-law, Mr. Geo. S. Beard. Mrs. Simpson (née Suasa) was the wife of Mr. Robert Sibley Simpson, one of the original builders and owners of the fort; she lived in the fort for a while ^{late in 1842 very} soon after it was first established. Mr. Beard was first at the fort in 1850.

Before listening to their account of the massacre, let us glance for a moment at the chief, Blanco, its leader, as described ~~in reports by~~ ^{circumstances attending} ~~agents of the Department of War and of the Indian service,~~ in Peters' Life of Kit Carson; and also for a moment at his prede-

cessor, Chico Velasquez, ^{have a knowledge} that we may ~~know~~ not only of the arch-conspirator, but also of the reputation which evidently Blanco supposed himself bound to maintain.

In the Indian troubles of 1848 and several years following, in New Mexico, the most notorious and dreaded war chief among the Muaches and Jicarillas was ~~Chico Velasquez~~ known to the Mexicans as Chico Velasquez. "His name, for many years," says Peters, "was a terror to the surrounding country. His savage brutality knew no bounds, and he was truly in his element, only when he was tearing the bloody scalp from his half-lifeless victim. He was the sworn enemy of the Americans and Mexicans, and his hunting-knife was rarely clean of human blood, until his cruel life, by the wise decrees of an all-seeing Providence, was suddenly cut short. He fought against his disease (small-pox) with that rashness that had been his ruling spirit through life, and thus ingloriously terminated his days. The pride of this man was to strut through the Mexican towns and gloat over his many crimes. To the gazing crowd, he would point out the trophies of his murders, which he never failed to have about him. To his fringed leggins were attached the phalanges (or finger bones) of those victims whom he had killed with his own hands. On the one side, he proclaimed to his auditors, were the fingers of the Mexicans; while on the other, were the same tokens from the Americans; and it gave him great delight, ironically to dwell upon the latter name. With whip in hand, he struck out right and left when anything displeased him." Only once have we the record of this bullying chieftain being cowed; and this was on the occasion of his threatening to use his ready whip on the body of the famous Mexican hunter, Armador Sanchez, who sprung to his feet and, ~~smashing~~ with a lump of lead uplifted in his hand, warned him that he would dash his brains out with it if he but ^{used} ~~were~~ the whip to strike him, once.

The death of Chico Velasquez occurred in the fall of 1854, not long before the Fort el Pueblo massacre.

In October of that year,⁵⁴ the Muaches had met Governor and Indian Superintendent Merriwether, of New Mexico, and Agent Kit Carson and others, in a council at the little Mexican village of Abiquiu, ^{on the river Chama, a branch} ~~and had received there, from the Superintendent, a distribution of provisions and other articles.~~ west of the Rio Grande. Not long prior to this, a Ute warrior, highly esteemed by his tribe, had been foully and unprovokedly murdered by some Mexicans for the sake of an old coat that he wore; and this ~~murder~~

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had greatly outraged the feelings of the Utes, whose position, all the year had been equivocal, their sympathies inclining them to join the Jicarillas in the war which the latter ~~were~~ had been waging. The matter was with difficulty smoothed over in the council, and not wholly to the satisfaction of the Muaches, who departed from Abiquiu, notwithstanding their presents, considerably dissatisfied, so that Carson, at least, feared they yet would make trouble.

Shortly after this council, and while the Muaches were proceeding up the San Luis valley to their hunting-grounds, an epidemic of small-pox broke out among them, resulting in the death of ^a considerable number of them, in a camp which they established for the sick ones in the western part of the valley. By this sudden scourge, they lost several of their head men, and among others, their redoubtable Chico Velasquez.

In a council which the Muaches held concerning the appearance of this epidemic amongst them, they ~~were~~ concluded that the Superintendent was the cause of it, and "that he had collected them together in order thus to injure them, and to further his designs he had presented to each of their distinguished warriors a blanket-coat. They found that nearly every Indian who had accepted and worn this article had died." Believing as they did, that ~~was~~ a second and greater outrage had been deliberately added to the first one by the whites, it is perhaps little to be wondered at that they decided to go on the war-path, in quest of revenge:

The successor of Chico Velasquez, as war-chief, was Tierra Blanca, whose name may or may not be in some way connected with that of the creek formerly of that name, west of Cochetope pass, where Muache joins Tabeguache Ute-land, a stream now known only by its English equivalent ~~the~~ name of White Earth. He was usually briefly called "Blanco", and he "did his utmost to walk in the footsteps of his illustrious predecessor; but he was not so cunning, and was less successful in his encounters with the Americans and Mexicans, and therefore had not that influence with his tribe which the former possessed. Still, he performed his quantum of mischief, and", says Peters, writing in 1858 or '59, "yet lives to play his part in the great drama of Indian life." On another page of Peters, we read, "This Chief, Blanco, was a man who stood in his moccasins about five feet nine inches. He was rather thickset, but, to use an Indian phrase, as straight as an

an arrow. The chief attraction about this Indian was his head, which was finely developed. His lustrous black eye, filled with animation, showed an active brain, which, unfortunately, was turned to bad account. His forehead was lofty, yet was symmetrically chiseled, and every feature about his face was as regular as if it had been carved for sculptured perfection. Blanco was a man who, in any sphere of life, would have become most certainly distinguished; and, under the influence of education, he might have risen even to greatness. In his unreclaimed state he showed to a decided disadvantage".

"The Muache band of Utahs, under their renowned Chief, Blanco," says Peters, who on another page of his book inadvertently represents both Blanco and his predecessor as Apaches, "after trading for all the powder and lead which they required, joined the Apaches and commenced the war in earnest. They waylaid and murdered travelers on the roads, attacked towns, killed and made prisoners the people who inhabited them, and became so formidable that for a length of time everything was at their mercy. They lost no opportunity in showing their power and in possessing themselves of the finest herds of horses, mules, cattle and sheep within their reach".

By December of 1854, the dwellers in the Fort el Pueblo were well aware that the Utes were "mad"; and a raid upon this and the ~~three or four~~ other little settlements of the upper Arkansas valley, was about half expected to take place at any time.

The fort had not, for several years, been occupied by any of its Anglo-American builders and original owners; and it was at that time inhabited exclusively by native Mexicans from Taos, and their families, and one or two Indian women.

The Commandante, or leading man, in the Pueblo at the time of the massacre, was Benito Sandoval, an uncle of Mrs. Simpson. He was well acquainted with Blanco, and the two had been on friendly terms.

Blanco therefore the more readily accomplished his bloody purpose by the following trick, in which he assumed the continuance of their previous friendship, disarmed the suspicions of Sandoval, and put him completely off his guard.

Coming to the fort, he addressed Sandoval pleasantly, and engaged him in a friendly conversation, in the course of which he presently began to banter him playfully on the matter of their relative skill as marksmen with the rifle. The two had often tried their skill together, in this line, but, it would seem, not with results so decisive as to bury the question of their respective merit beyond a renewal of controversy. Blanco insisted that he could beat Sandoval in shoot-

ing at a mark; and Sandoval as confidently affirmed his own ability to outshoot Blanco. The result was that a shooting-match was arranged, to take place at once, which should settle, for the time at least, the mooted question.

Accompanied by a number of the inmates of the fort, they repaired to a spot a short distance from the latter, and began the contest.

Soon after the match had begun, a couple of Ute Indians came along as if by chance, and stopped to watch the sport. A little later, two or three more "happened" along, and also stopped to see the fun. And at close intervals, others, two or three at a time, came in the same way, until quite a crowd of ^{with doublets some Gicarillas} ~~Utes~~ ~~besides~~ ~~the~~ smaller number of Mexicans from the fort, was present, watching the contest.

At the conclusion of the match, Sandoval thought that he couldn't very well let Blanco and his Indians go without giving them food, as the Indians invariably extend such hospitality to the whites who visit them and claim their friendship, in their camps, and they ^{from the latter} expect ^{similar} treatment. Not to be accorded such, by professed Mexican friends, especially at a time of somewhat strained relations between the white and red communities, would almost surely be considered as a serious and intentional affront. Moreover, ~~it was now about mid-day, and Sandoval's watchful eye had detected no sign of anything but the most cordial feeling on the part of his old-time friend Blanco, and associates, — so well did the crafty old partisan and his smooth politicians play their appointed parts.~~

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 The commandante, therefore, — ~~though "Uncle Dick", as the latter, in command, secures us, living further down the Arkansas valley, had cautioned him only the evening before, not to let Indians into the fort,~~ asked Blanco and the dusky spectators of the shooting-match to come in and have something to eat. All hands now repaired to the fort, and went in. Food was soon set before them. With it, of course, according to the custom of the country at the time, they must have something to drink; and that something a little stronger than water. We are not informed just what beverage was used on the occasion; but it was presumably of the species which was most readily obtainable from the distilleries of Taos and vicinity, and which was known to the American trappers, ~~and~~ traders and others, owing to the speediness and effectiveness of its quality, as "Taos lightning."

The whole company were soon celebrating — if not strictly a merry — at least a hilarious Christmas.

But Blanco and his followers were careful not to drink as freely as did the Mexicans; and when the latter had begun to get well under

the influence of the "tangle-foot", the chief gave a signal, and a general massacre of the ~~Mexican~~ Mexicans by the Utes was begun. So sudden and complete was the surprise, and so helpless the should-be defenders of the fort, that scarcely one of the latter escaped.

There were killed in this massacre, said Mrs. Simpson and Mr. Beard, fifteen persons, including Benito Sandoval, the commandante. Of the others who were killed on the spot, Mrs. Simpson remembered the names of ~~but~~^{three or four} ^(one) who were Benito Baca, Manuel Trujeque, and Miera?, one Nasario. Little wonder that at her advanced age she was unable to recall the names of the remainder. At the same time, the Utes carried off captive from the Pueblo, a young married woman, Señora Chipeta Miera, and two boys, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ Felix Sandoval and Juan Isidro Sandoval, sons of the commandante.

Señora Miera, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ who is said to have been a handsome young woman, scarcely more than a girl, was afterward killed by the Utes at the Arroyo Salado (now known as Salt creek), south of Pueblo.

Only three persons whom the Utes had intended to apprehend or to kill, escaped from the fort at the time of the massacre. Two of these were women: one, Andrea, the Mexican wife of one of the men killed in the massacre; and the other, an Indian woman called Rosa, who had been an inhabitant of the fort. These two women escaped by hiding in the brush of the river bottom-land. The third person who got away from the Utes, and the only adult male ^{survivor who was in} ~~male~~ of the fort at the time of ~~xxxxxx~~ the attack, was a Mexican named Rumaldo, who escaped after being shot through the mouth, with the loss of his tongue. This man was familiar with the Indian sign-language, by which means he afterwards conversed about the massacre and his escape.

Of the two Sandoval boys, the older one, Felix, was given up to the Americans at Taos, when peace was afterward negotiated, in 1855. The younger one, Juan Isidro Sandoval, was recovered a year or two later. He was traded by the Utes to the Navajoes, as a peon, and was found among the latter Indians by a Mexican trader, who bought him as a speculation. The buying of captives — both white and red — as slaves and for profit, from the Indians, had for many generations been carried on by a class of traders in Mexico as a business, and continued, even under the American regime, in New Mexico for a decade or more after the Mexican war. Juan Isidro was restored to his mother on the payment of three hundred dollars in money and merchandise, to the trader. ^{was sent by Mrs. Simpson, and it} The merchandise included,