

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1991

Review of Cheyennes and Horse Soldiers: The 1857 Expedition and the Battle of Solomon's Fork

Donald J. Berthrong
Purdue University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Berthrong, Donald J., "Review of Cheyennes and Horse Soldiers: The 1857 Expedition and the Battle of Solomon's Fork" (1991). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 556.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/556>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Cheyennes and Horse Soldiers: The 1857 Expedition and the Battle of Solomon's Fork. By William Y. Chalfant. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989. Foreword, maps, photographs, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xii + 415 pp. \$24.95.

During the summer of 1857, Colonel Edwin Vos Sumner and his troops invaded Cheyenne and Arapaho land. By the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie the two tribes were recognized as the occupants of western Kansas and eastern Colorado between the Platte and Arkansas rivers. The treaty also tried to prevent intertribal warfare and to protect emigrants and commerce over the Platte River road and the Santa Fe Trail. After a conflict in 1856 at the Upper Platte bridge, Cheyenne war parties attacked wagon trains on the Platte River road. Whether the raiders were all Southern Cheyennes or if they were joined by their northern kinsmen is unknown. But Colonel Sumner was despatched with cavalry, dragoons, infantry, and a few pieces of artillery to confront the Cheyenne who were viewed as "an unruly race" (33).

Colonel Sumner divided his command into two columns. Major John Sedgwick led one column from Fort Leavenworth on 18 May 1857, proceeding westward over the Santa Fe Trail, then northward to the South Platte River. Sumner's column moved over the Platte River road to Fort Laramie then south to a rendezvous on the South Platte. The united command prepared for its penetration into Cheyenne and Arapaho country. Sumner selected six companies of the First Cavalry and three companies of the Sixth Infantry that joined the command at Fort Laramie to fight the Cheyennes. Guided by Pawnee and Delaware scouts, the column was mobile using only one hundred pack mules to sustain it in the field. The troops moved slowly southeastward for about a week, crossing the upper tributaries of the Republican River, observed by Cheyenne scouts, before locating Cheyenne villages. The tribe's warrior leaders selected the field of battle, confident that Ice's and Dark's medicine would protect them from the white soldiers' bullets.

On 29 July, about three hundred to three hundred and fifty Cheyenne warriors waited for their adversaries on the south fork of the Solomon River. Sumner, without infantry or artillery support, faced the warriors with about the same number of cavalry. Fall Leaf, a Delaware scout, fired the first shot, answered by a few shots from the Cheyennes. When Sumner ordered a sabre charge, the warriors broke off their own charge, fired arrows, and sped away. Ice's and Dark's medicine would not protect them in fight with sabre-wielding cavalymen. In military terms the encounter was a running fight of pursuit and individual combats. The army suffered eleven casualties including two dead while four Cheyennes died (Sumner reported nine), one was captured, and possibly a greater number were wounded.

After the encounter, Sumner tried to find more Cheyennes to fight. He moved his troops to the Arkansas Valley and the Santa Fe Trail, failing to inflict any damage to Cheyennes. His command had been in the field for three months and the cavalymen and their mounts were exhausted, so Sumner and his men spent the last month marching back to Fort Leavenworth, arriving there on 16 September 1857.

The author's comprehensive research into archival records, diaries, and printed documents allows him to write a definite chronicle of the Sumner expedition. Details about the expedition overflow from the author's narrative, but new knowledge about the Cheyenne is minimal. The author maintains a balanced stance toward troopers and warriors who performed their duties "as God [or Maheo] gave them the light to see it" (296). But, perhaps, the author, reflecting upon subsequent Cheyenne history, agreed with Percival G. Lowe, the expedition's wagon master, that "the Cheyenne never sinned until the white man, with his tyranny and fraud, forced it upon them" (297).

DONALD J. BERTHRONG
Department of History
Purdue University