

Battles of the Red River War



Cavalry Charge on the Southern Plains by Frederick Remington. Courtesy of the Amon Carter Museum.

Though most of the battles of the Red River War were brief skirmishes that involved a small number of combatants and resulted in few casualties, a number of larger and more significant battles also occurred. These include the Battle of Red River, Sweetwater Creek, and Palo Duro Canyon. The battles of Lyman's Wagon Train and Buffalo Wallow also are notable.



A metal arrow point (left) and knives used by the Indians at the Battle of Lyman's Wagon train.

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*Major battles of the Red River War
Courtesy of the Texas Historical*

The first battle of the Red River War came on August 30, 1874, when troops of the Sixth Cavalry and Fifth Infantry under the command of Colonel Nelson A. Miles caught up with a large group of Southern Cheyenne near the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River in what is now southern Armstrong and northern Briscoe counties, Texas. The military records describe the daylong Battle of Red River as a running battle across the rugged canyonlands north and south of the river. Though the Army soldiers numbered some 650 strong with two Gatling guns and a 10-pounder Parrott rifle, the Indians were able to hold them off long enough for the Indian families to safely escape up

Tule Canyon and vanish across the Staked Plains.

A week earlier, Major William R. Price and companies C, H, K, and L of the Eighth U.S. Cavalry had left Fort Union, New Mexico, and headed east toward the Texas Panhandle as the westernmost column in the campaign against the Southern Plains Indians. The column consisted of 216 soldiers and included two mountain howitzers and a large supply train. Crossing the Texas Panhandle south of the Canadian River, the column followed the old Fort Smith-Santa Fe Road. On September 4, Price divided his command, directing Captain Farnsworth to take H company, all of the wagons, and one howitzer toward Adobe Walls to establish a supply camp near there.



Portion of an 1875 map showing the general location of the Battle of Red River. Courtesy of the United States National Archives.

Major Price took C, K, and L companies and one howitzer as the main column. On September 12, as the column moved northeast between Sweetwater Creek and the Dry Fork of the Washita River, they encountered a large band of Kiowa and Comanche Indians led by Kiowa chief Lone Wolf. The ensuing engagement, known as Price's Engagement or the Battle of Sweetwater Creek, took place along a high ridge north of Sweetwater Creek in present Wheeler County, Texas.

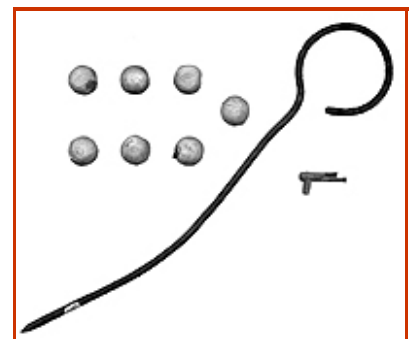
Though Major Price and the soldiers were not aware of it while the battle was occurring, a large number of Indian families apparently were behind the high ridge trying to evade the troopers and make their escape to the southwest. The Indian warriors likely were trying to lead the troops away from the women and children and were trying to keep the troops occupied long enough to give the families time to escape, which they did successfully. The running battle lasted some four hours and covered a distance of about seven miles.

Meanwhile, Miles had decided to establish his headquarters camp on Red River and send a military escort under the command of Captain Wyllys Lyman with 36 empty supply wagons back toward Camp Supply in Indian Territory to restock the provisions. Lyman's command consisted of 36 infantry, 20 cavalry, and 36 civilian teamsters, of whom only 10 were armed.

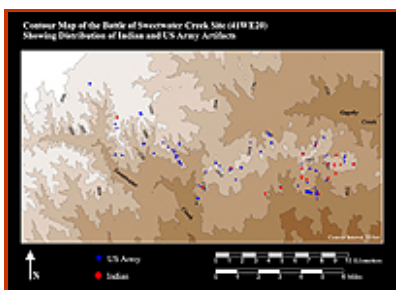
On September 9, the train was returning to the Red River with supplies when it was attacked by a group of Kiowa and Comanche warriors at the



Lines of U.S. Army advance and Indian retreat at the Battle of Red River site.



Artifacts from the Battle of Sweetwater Creek: shot from Howitzer canister; a priming wire; and a friction primer. Photo courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission.



Contour map of the Battle of Sweetwater Creek site showing the distribution of U.S. Army and Indian artifacts. Courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission.

divide between the Canadian and Washita rivers. The Indians began firing from long range, but the defensive maneuvers of the cavalry enabled the train to move 12 miles farther south until it reached a steep ravine about a mile north of the Washita River. As the train approached the river, the Indians began to press the attack and Lyman ordered the wagons to form into a protective corral for better defense.



*Colonel Nelson A. Miles, Fifth Infantry.
Courtesy of Panhandle-Plains
Historical Museum.*



*A Kiowa ledger drawing possibly
depicting the Buffalo Wallow battle.
Courtesy Texas Memorial Museum.*

As the train was circling, a group of about 70 warriors attacked from the right and rear of the train and almost overran the skirmish lines that had been established by the infantry. The skirmishers held and repulsed the attack but a sergeant named DeArmond was killed during the assault and Lieutenant Granville Lewis was severely wounded. One of the teamsters, a man by the name of Sandford, was mortally wounded while carrying ammunition to the troops. When the initial attack failed, the Indians retreated to the surrounding ridges and began to lay siege to the wagon train. It was later learned that, in addition to Lone Wolf, several other prominent chiefs also took part in the battle including Satanta and Big Tree.

With the onset of darkness, the fighting fell off, but it was now apparent to Lyman that the Indians intended to continue their siege for an indefinite period and he ordered the men to dig rifle pits around the perimeter of the circled train to afford additional protection for the men. The next morning the Indians resumed their fire. On the night of September 10, seeing that the situation was desperate, Lyman sent one of the scouts, W. F. Schmalsle, to Camp Supply to get help. As he left the wagon train, Schmalsle was chased by the Indians but he managed to evade them and he arrived at Camp Supply two days later. On the morning of September 12, the Indians began to abandon the siege.



*Comanche chief Mow-Way
participated in several of the Red
River battles.*



*Captain Wyllys Lyman. Courtesy of
Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum.*

Later in the afternoon, a cold rainstorm set in and continued through the next day. Even though the command was almost out of supplies, Lyman decided not to try to move the train in the storm. Several of the horses had been injured and 22 mules for the wagons had been killed. In the early morning hours of September 14, Company K arrived from Camp Supply with medical aid and an ambulance. With the siege broken, Lyman moved out with the wagons and later that morning joined Colonel Miles. On the recommendation of Colonel Miles, 13 of the troopers were awarded the Medal of Honor for their bravery in the fight

and Lyman was eventually promoted for his performance.

On the morning of September 12, 1874 about 125 of the warriors who had laid siege to the Lyman wagon train decided to move south of the Washita River to join their families. As the warriors reached a small rise north of Gageby Creek they ran into a small detachment of six men from Colonel Miles' command who were riding with dispatches and were charged with locating Lyman's wagon train. The detachment consisted of civilian scouts Billy Dixon and Amos Chapman and four soldiers of the Sixth Cavalry. The ensuing engagement between the warriors and the six men has come to be known as the Battle of Buffalo Wallow.

The Indians quickly encircled the couriers, stranding them with essentially no cover. The little group of men dismounted and prepared to fight. A Private Smith was given the horses reins to hold. Within moments of the battle's outbreak he was shot in the chest and fell to the ground as the horses stampeded.

After about four hours of the Indians taunting and firing at them, all of the whites except Dixon had been wounded. He spotted a small buffalo wallow, a shallow depression on the plain. Determined to make use of what little cover there was, Dixon made a run for the wallow, and three of the other men quickly joined him. Once there, the men began digging with knives to deepen the depression, throwing the sandy soil up as a breastwork around the perimeter of the wallow. The two men who remained outside the wallow were Private Smith who had been shot first and was believed dead, and Chapman who had suffered a crippling wound to his leg. After several attempts, Dixon was able to reach Chapman and carry him back to the wallow.



Pony Tracks in the Buffalo Trails by Frederick Remington. Courtesy of the Amon Carter Museum.

As the afternoon wore on, the men began to run low on ammunition and it was decided that the revolver and ammunition belt should be retrieved from the body of the dead Private Smith. One of the soldiers, a Private Rath, ran to the motionless body and recovered the items, but when he got back to the wallow he reported that Private Smith was still alive. Dixon and Rath made their way back to Smith and carried him back to the wallow, but it was obvious that he would not survive. *"We could see that there was no chance for him. He was shot through the left lung and when he breathed the wind sobbed out of his back under*



Major William R. Price, Eighth Cavalry. Courtesy of Paul V. Long.

the shoulder blade," Dixon wrote in his memoirs. Later that night Private Smith died in his sleep.

By mid-afternoon a storm came up and a heavy rain began to fall. As miserable as the men were in the buffalo wallow the storm had an unseen benefit. With the advent of the inclement weather, the Indians broke off the fight and disappeared into the night.



Lone Wolf, Kiowa Chief. Courtesy of Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum.

The next morning Dixon left the wallow on foot to try to find help for the wounded men. After a short while, he encountered the Eighth Cavalry under Major Price's command. Upon learning of their situation, Colonel Miles had the men rescued. Although all six men were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, Dixon's and Chapman's were later revoked because they were not officially enlisted in the Army. In 1989, the Army Board for Correction of Military Records restored the medals to Dixon and Chapman.

The critical battle of the Red River War began as the sun rose on September 28, 1874. At least five Indian villages had sought protection in the hidden isolation of Palo Duro Canyon. Then Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie, in command of the Fourth Cavalry, charged into the canyon. With their people scattered, Indian leaders Iron Shirt of the Cheyenne, Poor Buffalo of the Comanche, and Lone Wolf of the Kiowa could not mount a united defense and fell back before the onrushing horsemen. The soldiers captured and burned the villages, including the Indians' winter food supply. They also captured 1,424 Indian horses that they drove some 20 miles from the scene of the fight where they killed more than 1,000 of the horses to prevent them from being retaken by the Indians.

After this battle, with no provisions to see them through the winter and with no horses, many of the Indians began to drift back to the reservations. Over the next several months, the U.S. Army would sweep the remaining Indian holdouts from the Texas Panhandle and force them onto the reservations. Thus ended the Indian War on the Southern Plains.



A U.S. Cavalry button.



Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie, Fourth Cavalry. Courtesy of Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum.