

APPENDIX E

THE BATTLE OF BEECHER'S ISLAND, COLORADO TERRITORY, SEPTEMBER 17-25, 1868.¹

The building of the Kansas Pacific Railway to Denver during the summer of 1868 aroused the bitter hostility of the plains Indians, and the Cheyennes and Arapahoes in particular, were a constant menace to the railroad builders. To quote from Brady's *Indian Fights and Fighters*: "The Cheyennes swept through western Kansas like a devastating storm. In one month they cut off, killed, or captured eighty-four different settlers, including their wives and children. They swept the country bare. Again and again the different gangs of builders were wiped out, but the railroad went on." Conditions on the frontier finally became so desperate that Major General P. H. Sheridan, commanding the Division of the Missouri, took personal command of the troops in the field in an effort to eliminate the Indian menace. However, the troops at his command were hopelessly inadequate for the task at hand, and recourse was had to the calling out of local volunteers and the enlistment of scouts to augment the regular troops. Among the parties of scouts thus raised was one which was later known as the "Forsyth Scouts," and which was organized at Forts Harker and Hays, Kansas, in August, 1868. Brevet Colonel George A. Forsyth, an officer on General Sheridan's staff, was detailed to the command of this particular troop of scouts, and his second in command was Lieutenant Frederick H. Beecher of the Third U. S. Infantry. Dr. John H. Mooers was surgeon, and the balance of the troop was made up of forty-nine scouts, part of whom were seasoned hunters and trappers of the west and the others veterans of both the Union and Confederate Armies. Sharp Grover, the guide, was one of the best known plainsmen of the day, and W. H. H. McCall, the first sergeant, was a former brigadier-general of United States Volunteers of the Civil War. The force was mounted on the best horses procurable, was armed with the Spencer carbine and a Colt's revolver, and the baggage train was limited to four mules carrying extra ammunition and medical supplies; each man carried his own rations and one hundred and forty rounds of carbine ammunition and thirty rounds for his revolver. It was intended to be a mobile force, and the usual equipment of a regular troop was dispensed with in order to secure the desired mobility.

This efficient organization of hard-bitten fighters left Fort Hays, Kansas, on August 29, 1868, and reached Fort Wallace, Kansas, on September 5th. Here word was received of an attack on a freighter's train near the town of Sheridan, thirteen miles east of Wallace, in which two teamsters had been killed and several teams captured. The troops proceeded to the scene of the attack, and followed the trail of the Indians until dark. The trail was picked up on the following day, and day after day was followed until the fifteenth of September when the command found itself in a valley through which flowed a stream afterwards identified as the Arickaree, a tributary of the Republican. The trail had considerably broadened and indicated the nearby presence of a rather large body of Indians. On the night of the sixteenth camp was made on the south bank of the stream opposite a small island and located in what is now known as Yuma County, Colorado. Shortly before dawn a sentry gave the alarm, "Indians!" He had

¹ Adapted from an article, "Chief Roman Nose and the Battle of Beecher's Island," by Major P. H. Kastler, 157th Infantry, Colo. N. G., published in the *Infantry Journal*, February, 1930.

detected a group of six of the enemy creeping upon the picket line to frighten the horses. Some few of the animals were stampeded by the waving of blankets and beating of tom-toms before the daring group was driven off. The camp was aroused instantly and prepared for anything that might develop.

As dawn crept over the low-lying hills and river-bluffs the dim light revealed to the startled eyes of the expectant scouts a dramatic sight. On all sides the hills were literally covered with Indians who had arrived at this rendezvous with an uncanny stealthiness. Colonel Forsyth took a good look at the situation and decided to defend himself on the little island.

At no place was the Arickaree at that time of the year more than a foot deep. It was the work of but a moment for the soldiers to cross it and intrench themselves, using to best advantage the few bushes and trees that grew on the place. The island was at that time about one hundred yards long and sixty yards wide—an ideal location for the business in hand.

For several hours desultory fighting went on between the scouts and the Indians. The accuracy of the fire being returned from the island let the attackers know that these were no ordinary riflemen, and discouraged rash exposure or careless tactics. A council of war was held among the chiefs and it was decided that Chief Roman Nose should organize and direct the attack.

Roman Nose was a Cheyenne. For some time his tribe had been peaceful, being at one time under the care of the Indian Agent at Ft. Laramie. It was here, possibly, that Roman Nose gained his knowledge of formations and tactics. He was observant and intelligent. He watched closely and studied carefully the maneuvers of the white cavalry. Later he practiced the movements with his own tribesmen and became a proficient drillmaster with his dexterous subjects.

If we are to believe tradition, Roman Nose possessed what we would now call a magnetic personality. Typically Indian in his pride of bearing, he was a dashing and an inspiring leader. He was described as tall, muscular, very straight, and with a physique of masculine beauty and perfection. In imagination we might picture him as the model for those famous old Western artists who depicted the "Noble Indian."

As Roman Nose arranged his plans and made his preparations there followed a lull in the battle. Colonel Forsyth and Lieutenant Beecher took the opportunity to check up on their losses and prepare for what they felt the sudden quietness of the enemy portended. The gallant Forsyth had been twice wounded and was directing his courageous band from a rough couch that had been hastily prepared for him. Firearms belonging to the dead and wounded were loaded and placed beside the more expert marksmen in the company. The crude sand intrenchments were strengthened and the scouts settled down grimly to await eventualities.

In a gully out of rifle range from the island, Roman Nose completed his plans. While the main body of the Indians was to conduct a holding engagement, Roman Nose at the head of a selected band of "shock troops" would conduct an assault. For this purpose about three hundred of the finest and best-mounted braves were chosen. Following the example of Roman Nose, these stripped down to breech-clouts and bedecked themselves with their most hideous war paint and feathers. Roman Nose, painted with alternate stripes of red and black, mounted a superb chestnut horse and took his place at their head. The formation was to be in six mounted ranks, or waves, with a front of about sixty warriors.

With his glasses Forsyth watched the formation of this formidable attack. The closer hills and bluffs were dotted with squaws, children, medicine men, and the non-combatants of the tribes, excitedly awaiting the final charge that was to be, they felt, the annihilation of the hated Whites.

The action started upon the signal of Roman Nose. Instantly the ominous lull was split by fanatical screeches and yells from the hills. A searching and intense fire was directed at the scouts by the braves who supported the attack from positions of concealment nearby. As the charging savages swept down upon the white men they were a fearsome sight. It was a moment of appalling uncertainty, a moment to try the courage of stout hearts; but there were among the scouts men who had, behind the breastworks at Gettysburg, awaited in just such a terrible moment Pickett's desperate charge. Each man picked out his particular Indian, and all aimed coolly. Let Colonel Forsyth describe the charge in his own words:

" * * * and as he (Roman Nose) came swiftly on at the head of his charging warriors, in all his barbaric strength and grandeur, he proudly rode that day the most perfect type of a savage warrior it has been my lot to see. Turning his face for an instant towards the women and children of the united tribes, who literally by thousands were watching the fight from the crest of the low bluffs back from the river's bank, he raised his right arm and waved his hand with a royal gesture in answer to their wild cries of rage and encouragement as he and his command swept down upon us; and again facing squarely towards where we lay, he drew his body to its full height and shook his clenched fist defiantly at us; then throwing back his head and glancing skywards, he suddenly struck the palm of his hand across his mouth and gave tongue to a war cry that I have never yet heard equalled in power and intensity. Scarcely had its echoes reached the river's bank when it was caught up by each and every one of the charging warriors with an energy that baffles description, and answered back with blood-curdling yells of exultation and prospective vengeance by the women and children on the river's bluff and by the Indians who lay in ambush about us. On they came at a swinging gallop, rending the air with their wild war-whoops, each individual warrior in all his bravery of war-paint and long braided scalp-lock tipped with eagles' feathers, and all stark naked but for cartridge belts and moccasins, keeping their line almost perfectly, with a front of about sixty men, all riding bare-back, with only loose lariats about their horses' bodies about a yard apart, and with a depth of six or seven ranks, forming together a compact body of massive fighting strength, and of almost resistless weight. 'Boldly they rode and well' with their horses' bridles in their left hands, while with their right they grasped their rifles at the guard and held them squarely in front of themselves resting lightly upon their horses' necks.

"Riding about five paces in front of the center of the line, and twirling his heavy Springfield rifle around his head as if it were a wisp of straw (probably one of those captured at the Fort Kearney massacre), Roman Nose recklessly led the charge with a bravery that could only be equalled, but not excelled, while their medicine man, an equally brave but older chief, rode slightly in advance at the left of the charging column. To say that I was surprised at this splendid exhibition of pluck and discipline, is to put it mildly, and to put it further, that for an instant or two I was fairly lost in admiration of the glorious charge, is simply to state the truth, for it was far and away beyond anything I had heard of, read about, or even imagined regarding Indian warfare. A quick backward glance at my men was most reassuring. Each scout had turned in his rifle pit towards the direction from which the charge was coming. Crouching low, and leaning

forward, with their knees well under them, their rifles grasped in a grip of steel in their brown sinewy hands, their chests heaving with excitement, their teeth set hard, their nostrils aquiver, their bronzed countenances fairly aflame, and their eyes flashing fire, they grimly lay waiting the word of command, as brave and gallant a little company of men as ever yet upheld the reputation of Anglo-Saxon courage. No sooner were the charging warriors fairly under way than a withering fire was suddenly poured in upon us by those of the Indians who lay in ambush around us intently watching our every movement, in the vain hope the they might sufficiently cow us to protect their charging column against our rifles. I had expected this action, but I well knew that once their horsemen came within a certain radius their fire must cease. For eight or ten seconds it seemed to rain bullets, and then came a sudden lull. Sitting upright in my pit as well as I was able, and leaning backward on my elbows, I shouted, 'Now!' and 'Now!' was echoed by Beecher, McCall and Grover. Instantly the scouts were on their knees, with their rifles at their shoulders. A quick flash of their eyes along the barrels, and forty good men and true sent their first of seven successive volleys into the ranks of the charging warriors.

"Crash!

"On they came, answering back the first volley with a ringing war-whoop.

"Crash!

"And now I begin to see falling warriors, ay, and horses too; but still they sweep forward with yet wilder yells.

"Crash!

"They seem to be fairly falling over each other; both men and horses are down in heaps, and wild shrieks from the women and children on the hill proclaim that they, too, see the slaughter of their braves; but still they come.

"Crash!

"They have ceased to yell, but yet come bravely on. What? No. Yes, down goes their medicine man; but Roman Nose still recklessly leads the column. But now I see great gaps in their ranks, showing that our bullets have told heavily among them.

"Crash!

"Can I believe my eyes? Roman Nose is down. He and his horse lie dead together on the sand, and for an instant the column shakes; but a hundred yards more and they are upon us!

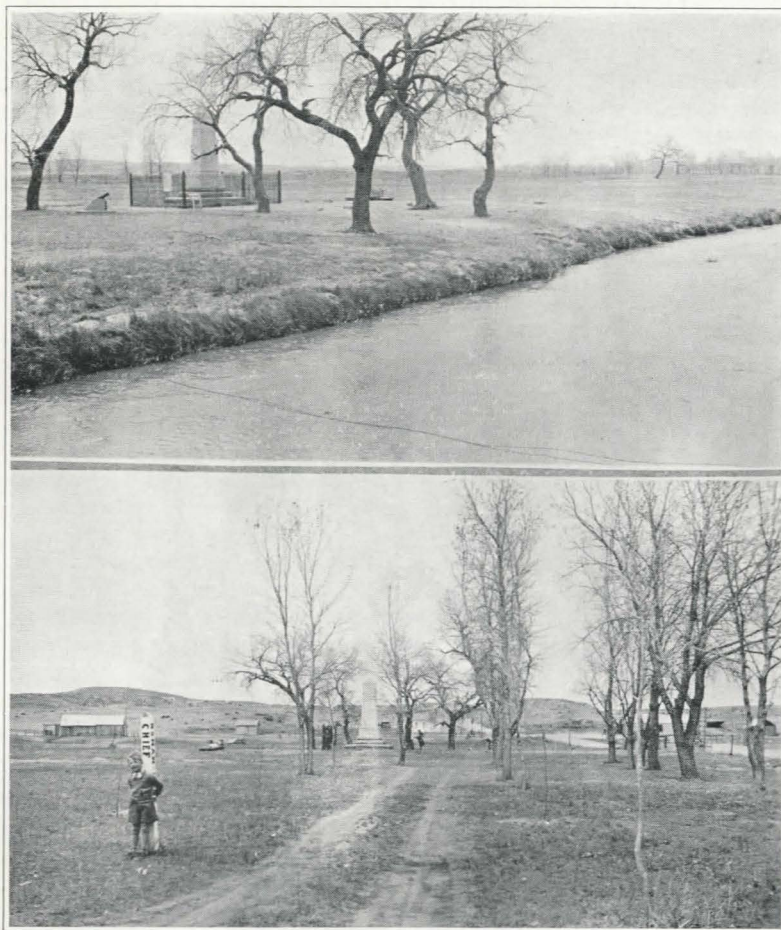
"Crash!

"They stagger! They half draw rein! They hesitate! They are breaking!

"Crash!

"And like an angry wave that hurls itself upon a mighty rock and breaks upon its rugged front, the Indians divided each side of the little breastwork, threw themselves almost beneath the offside of their chargers, and with hoarse cries of rage and anguish break for either bank of the river, and scatter wildly in every direction, as the scouts spring to their feet with a ringing cheer, pour volley after volley from their revolvers almost in the very faces of their now demoralized and retreating foe."

The attack had failed, and the disconcerted survivors withdrew. Roman Nose, the idol and the hero of a hundred lodges, had met crushing defeat, and his life's blood was flowing from a fatal wound in the side.



THE BEECHER ISLAND BATTLEFIELD AS IT APPEARS TODAY

Upper: Looking southwest across the Aricaree—Monument is approximately in the center of the circle of rifle pits.

Lower: White post (against which boy is leaning) marks the spot where Chief Roman Nose was killed when the Indians charged the defenders of the island.

On the hills exultation gave way to rage and grief. The medicine men screamed, the squaws beat the death tom-toms for the warriors whose blood red-dened the water that flowed past the bluffs. Several more attacks were made, all half-hearted and unsuccessful, and then darkness came. Through the night the quavering death-cries of the sorrowing mourners of Roman Nose told the crouching Whites that they were still besieged.

The victory over their savage foes had been a glorious one for the scouts, but it was purchased at the price of the lives of Lieutenant Beecher, Doctor Mooers and four of the scouts. This, together with the wounding of Forsyth and nineteen of the scouts, was a severe blow to the gallant little command, and the outlook was far from bright for the morrow.

Under cover of the darkness Forsyth sent two scouts out with messages to Ft. Wallace for aid. Fortunately they eluded the Indians, and after four days of anxious traveling through country infested with the enemy they reached the fort. From here on the story of the battle reads like the continuity of a wild west movie thriller—the excitement at the fort, the speedy assembly of the troopers, saddling of horses, and the start of the brilliant and forced ride to the rescue.

In the meantime the suffering of the band on the island was extreme. As the days passed it became apparent that the savages intended to starve them into submission. The horses had all been killed, and, as long as it was fresh, the scouts lived on horsemeat. For water they scooped little holes in the sand into which a brackish liquid seeped from the river.

A deathly stench filled the air. Buzzards hovered expectantly and with a ghastly idleness over the place. By day the defenders were subjected to a constant fire which, to save ammunition, they were forced to return very sparingly. By night the savages kept up an infernal tumult; their falsetto yells and hideous cries drove the half-delirious wounded almost insane.

On the morning of the ninth day the sunken, glaring eyes of the despairing sentries searched the hills and bluffs with leaping hope. During the night the besiegers had disappeared as stealthily as they had assembled, and the original peace and quiet of the country greeted the dawn. A few hours later a troop of the 10th Cavalry rode into sight of the wildly rejoicing scouts. Tears streamed down the faces of ordinarily unemotional frontiersmen and hardened troopers. The siege was over and more than half of the hardy band had been killed or wounded. The total Indian loss during the eight days' fighting has never been accurately determined, but Colonel Forsyth mentions in his book "Thrilling Days in Army Life" that an Indian whom he met in later years and who was present at the fight admitted that the Indians lost seventy-five killed and "heaps" wounded.

The battle of the Arickaree, or "Beecher's Island" as it is now generally termed, was one of the most desperate fights in the long warfare between the red men and the white, and it marked the beginning of the end of Indian raids in Kansas and Colorado.