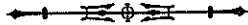


year of 1836, twelve years before Cynthia Ann Parker gave birth to Quanah in a patch of prairie flowers on Elk Creek near the Wichita Mountains in southwestern Oklahoma.¹

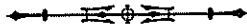
That year General Antonio López de Santa Anna made an epic blunder that changed the destiny of Texas, and thus of the North American continent. On March 6, while flying the blood-red flag of "no quarter given," some two thousand of his Mexican troops destroyed several hundred Texans at a small mission known as the Alamo in the town of San Antonio de Bexar. At the time it seemed like a great victory. It was a catastrophic mistake. He compounded it three weeks later at the nearby town of Goliad when he ordered his army to execute some three hundred fifty Texan soldiers after they had surrendered. The prisoners were marched out in columns, shot down, and their bodies burned. Wounded men were dragged into the streets of the presidio to be shot. These acts created martyrs and spawned legends. The murderous ferocity of the Alamo fighters was mere prelude to what happened next. On April 21, at the Battle of San Jacinto, a force of Texans under the command of General Sam Houston outnumbered Santa Anna's army, cornered it against a muddy bayou, and, with extreme bias, destroyed it. The victory marked the end of Mexican rule north of the Rio Grande, and the birth of a sovereign nation called the Republic of Texas.²

The news was cause for jubilation among the settlers, and in the spring of 1836 no citizens of the new republic had greater reason to celebrate than an extended family of religious, enterprising, transplanted easterners known to their neighbors as the Parker Clan. Drawn by the promise of free land, they had journeyed to Texas from Illinois in 1833 in a caravan of thirty oxcars. The deal they were offered seemed almost too good to be true. In exchange for meaningless promises of allegiance to Mexico (of which Texas was still a part), several Parker family heads were each given grants of 4,600 acres of land in central Texas near the present town of Mexia. In perpetuity. No taxes or customs duties for ten years. Pooling their resources, they had aggregated adjacent lands totaling 16,100 acres (25.2 square miles), a veritable kingdom by the standards of their native Virginia. (They supplemented their grants with another 2,300 acres they bought themselves for \$2,000.)³ The land itself was magnificent, located at the edge of Texas' prodigiously fertile blackland prairie, timbered with forests of post oak, ash, walnut, and sweet gum, and crossed with broad, rolling meadowlands. There was a bub-

Two



A LETHAL PARADISE



THUS DID QUANAH PARKER, the son of a white woman from an invading civilization, begin to fulfill an intricate destiny. He would soon become one of the main targets of forty-six companies of U.S. Army infantry and cavalry—three thousand men—the largest force ever dispatched to hunt down and destroy Indians. He was to become the last chief of the most dominant and influential tribe in American history. What follows is, in the largest sense, the story of Quanah and his family. It has its roots in both the ancient tribal heritage of the Comanches and in the indomitable, fate-cursed Parker clan, which came to symbolize for many nineteenth-century Americans the horrors and the hopes of the frontier. The two lineal streams came together in his mother, Cynthia Ann, whose life with the Comanches and fateful return to white civilization form one of the Old West's great narratives. Behind it all is the story of the rise and fall of the Comanches. No tribe in the history of North America had more to say about the nation's destiny. Quanah was merely the final product of everything they had believed and dreamed of and fought for over a span of two hundred fifty years. The kidnapping of a blue-eyed, nine-year-old Cynthia Ann in 1836 marked the start of the white man's forty-year war with the Comanches, in which Quanah would play a leading role. In one sense, the Parkers are the beginning and end of the Comanches in U.S. history.

The story starts, as it must, in Texas in the tumultuous and transformative

bling spring (a "gushing fountain"⁴) the nearby Navasota River. Fish and a dozen people representing six Parkers' fort on the property containing four letproof front gate, all enclosed by six high. There were gunports everywhere on the second story, and benches on which sat small—and prodigiously fortified—places most American pioneers dreamed of.

The fort had another distinction: it was situated on the absolute outer edge of the frontier. There were no Anglo settlements to the west, and no structures of any kind save for the grass shacks of Comancheros and other Indians. In Mexican California stood Santa Fe (in New Mexico.) And the fort was so remote that there were hardly any people nearby. A population of less than forty thousand in the doches and San Antonio had both their residents lived on farms and prairie river bottoms. Almost all were subsistence farmers of government protection at all. Where military forces had existed were now gone, and the only things to do than protect lunatic settlements beyond civilization's last outposts. In the neighborhood, the Parkers were left to be ruled entirely by Indians.

But the Parkers were even more isolated than the text suggests. To say that their fort was on the edge of that the entire Indian frontier in New Mexico toward Canada along that line of longitude where white civilization met hostility was pure Indian territory, a place where the middle Atlantic states were being forcibly displaced by plains tribes. The Indian-dominated states of Kansas, Nebraska, and Texas were ruled by anything like civilization. The f

bling spring (a "gushing fountain"⁴ in one description), several creeks, and the nearby Navasota River. Fish and game abounded. In 1835 about two dozen people representing six Parker families and relatives built a one-acre fort on the property containing four blockhouses, six log cabins, and a bulletproof front gate, all enclosed by sharpened, cedar-timber walls fifteen feet high. There were gunports everywhere, even in the floor of the blockhouses' second story, and benches on which shooters could stand. Parker's Fort was a small—and prodigiously fortified—pastoral utopia. It was exactly the sort of place most American pioneers dreamed of.

The fort had another distinction: In the year of Texas's independence it was situated on the absolute outermost edge of the Indian frontier. There were no Anglo settlements to the west, no towns, no houses, no permanent structures of any kind save for the grass huts of the Wichitas or the makeshift shacks of Comancheros and other Indian traders. (Between Parker's Fort and Mexican California stood Santa Fe and the small, scattered settlements of New Mexico.) And the fort was so far beyond the ordinary line of settlements that there were hardly any people *behind* it, either. In 1835, Texas had a population of less than forty thousand.⁵ Though a few towns like Nacogdoches and San Antonio had both histories and bustling cultures, most of their residents lived on farms and plantations and in small settlements along river bottoms. Almost all were subsistence farmers, and most lacked any sort of government protection at all. Whatever small and unresponsive Mexican forces had existed were now gone, and the fragile Texas republic had better things to do than protect lunatic Anglo farmers who insisted on living beyond civilization's last outposts. Along with a handful of widely scattered neighbors, the Parkers were left to their own devices in a truly anarchic place ruled entirely by Indians.

But the Parkers were even more alone on the frontier than this description suggests. To say that their fort was near present-day Dallas might suggest that the entire Indian frontier in North America in those days ran northward toward Canada along that line of longitude. But in 1836 the only borderland where white civilization met hostile Plains Indians was in Texas. Oklahoma was pure Indian territory, a place where beaten tribes of the South and middle Atlantic states were being forcibly relocated, often right on top of warlike plains tribes. The Indian-dominated plains north of that—part of the future states of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas—were simply unreachable yet by anything like civilization. The first fight between the U.S. Army and the

was bad advice. Dwight ignored it. In spite of his bravado, Silas had left his shot pouch back in his cabin. He then made another mistake, falling to tell his niece Rachel to join the others and run away with her fourteen-month-old son, James Pratt Plummer. "Do you stand here," he said to her instead, "and watch the Indians' motions while until I run into the house for my shot pouch."

But events were moving much faster than Silas Parker had expected. As Rachel watched in horror, the Indians surrounded her uncle Benjamin and impaled him on their lances. He was clubbed, shot with arrows at extremely close range, and then, probably still alive, scalped. This all happened very quickly. Leaving Benjamin, the Indians turned and charged the fort. Rachel was already running with her son in her arms toward the back door. She was quickly caught. In her own detailed account "a large sully Indian picked up a hoe and knocked me down."¹⁶ She fainted, and when she came to was being dragged by her long red hair, bleeding profusely from her head wound. "I made several unsuccessful attempts to raise my feet before I could do it," she wrote. She was taken to the main body of Indians, where she saw her uncle's mutilated face and body up close. She saw her son in the arms of an Indian on horseback. Two Comanche women began to beat her with a whip. "I supposed," Rachel recalled, "that it was to make me quit crying."¹⁷

Meanwhile the Indians attacked the men who had remained in the fort, killing Silas and his relatives Samuel and Robert Frost. All three were scalped. Next, the warriors turned to a task especially suited to mounted, raiding Plains Indians: running down heels, screaming victims. Elder John Parker, his wife, Sallie, and her daughter Elizabeth Kellogg, a young widow, had managed to travel three-quarters of a mile when the Indians overtook them. All three were surrounded and stripped of all of their clothing. One can only imagine their horror as they covered stark naked before their tormentors on the open plain. The Indians then went to work on them, attacking the old man with tomahawks, and forcing Granny Parker, who kept trying to look away, to watch what they did to him.¹⁸ They scalped him, cut off his genitals, and killed him, in what order no one will ever know. Then they turned their attentions to Granny, pinning her to the ground with their lances, raping her, driving a knife deep into one of her breasts, and leaving her for dead.¹⁹ They threw Elizabeth Kellogg on a horse and took her away.

In all the confusion, Silas Parker's wife, Lucy, and her four children had also run out the back gate of the fort in the direction of the cornfields. The

a white flag, which might have reassured more naïve settlers. The Parkers were too new to the western frontier to know exactly who this painted-for-war group was—seventeen-year-old Rachel Parker Plummer guessed incorrectly, and perhaps wishfully, that they were “Tawakonis, Caddoes, Keechis, Wacos,” and other sedentary bands of central Texas¹³—but they had encountered Indians before and knew immediately that they had made a disastrous error in leaving themselves so exposed. Had they fully understood whom they were confronting—mostly Comanches, but also some Kiowas, their frequent running mates—they might have anticipated the horrors that were about to descend on them. As it was, there was nothing to do but play along with the idea of a parlay, so forty-eight-year-old Benjamin Parker, one of the six men in the fort, walked out to meet the warriors.

What happened next is one of the most famous events in the history of the American frontier, in part because it came to be regarded by historians as the start of the longest and most brutal of all the wars between Americans and a single Indian tribe.¹⁴ Most of the wars against Native Americans in the East, South, and Midwest had lasted only a few years. Hostile tribes made trouble for a while but were soon tracked to their villages where their lodgings and crops were burned, the inhabitants exterminated or forced to surrender. Lengthy “wars” against the Shawnees, for example, were really just a series of Indian defeats strung out over many years (and complicated by British-French alliances). Wars against the northern Plains Indians such as the Sioux started much later, and did not last nearly as long.

When Benjamin Parker reached the assembled Indians, alone, on foot and unarmed, they told him they wanted a cow to slaughter and also directions to a water hole. He told them they could not have the cow, but offered other food. He returned to the fort through the open gate, told his thirty-two-year-old brother, Silas, what the Indians had said, remarked on the absurdity of their request for directions to water when their horses were still dripping wet, then gathered up a few staples and bravely went back out, even though Silas warned him not to. Meanwhile, seventy-eight-year-old family patriarch John Parker, his elderly wife, Sallie, and Rachel Plummer’s sister Sarah Parker Nixon were fleeing out the back exit, a low doorway—too low for a horse to pass through—that led to the spring.¹⁵ Another Parker in-law, G. E. Dwight, did the same with his family, prompting Silas to say, scornfully: “Good Lord, Dwight, you are not going to run? Stand and fight like a man, and if we have to die we will sell our lives as dearly as we can.” This

five miles away.²³ At one point James's group went thirty-six hours without food, finally eating only after he managed to catch and drown a skunk. They traveled for five days and finally gave up, too exhausted to continue. James went on alone to get help, covering the last thirty-six miles to Fort Houston, amazingly, in a single day. Four days later, the second group of refugees arrived at the same place. The survivors did not return to bury their dead until July 19, fully one month after the raid.

The preceding description may seem needlessly bloody in its details. But it typified Comanche raids in an era that was defined by such attacks. This was the actual, and often quite grim, reality of the frontier. There is no dressing it up, though most accounts of Indian "depredations" (the newspaper's favorite euphemism) at the time often refused even to acknowledge that the women had been victims of abuse. But everyone knew. What happened to the Parkers was what any settler on the frontier would have learned to expect, and to fear. In its particulars the raid was exactly what the Spanish and their successors, the Mexicans, had endured in south Texas, New Mexico, and northern Mexico since the late 1600s, and what the Apaches, Osages, Tonkawas, and other tribes had been subjected to for several centuries. Most of the early raids in Texas were driven by a desire for horses or whatever loot could be taken. Later, especially in the last days of the Indian wars, vengeance would become the principal motivation. (The Salt Creek Massacre in 1871 was an example.) The savagery of those raids would make the violence at Parker's Fort seem tame and unimaginative by comparison.

The logic of Comanche raids was straightforward: All the men were killed, and any men who were captured alive were tortured to death as a matter of course, some more slowly than others; the captive women were gang-raped. Some were killed, some tortured. But a portion of them, particularly if they were young, would be spared (though vengeance could always be a motive for slaying hostages). Babies were invariably killed, while preadolescents were often adopted by Comanches or other tribes. This treatment was not reserved for whites or Mexicans; it was practiced just as energetically on rival Indian tribes. Though few horses were taken, the Parker's Fort raid must have been deemed a success: There were no Indian casualties, and they had netted five captives who could be ransomed back to the whites for horses, weapons, or food.

The brutality of the raid also underscores the audacity of the Parker fam-

Indians caught them, too, forced Lucy to surrender two of her children, then dragged her, the two remaining children, and one of the men (L. D. Nixon) back to the fort, where they were somehow rescued by three men from the cornfields who had arrived with rifles. The two children who remained in captivity were soon to become household names on the western frontier: Silas and Lucy Parker's blue-eyed, nine-year-old daughter, Cynthia Ann, and her seven-year-old brother, John Richard.

Thus ended the main battle. It had taken barely half an hour and had left five men dead: Benjamin Parker, Silas Parker, Samuel and Robert Frost, and Elder John Parker. Two women were wounded, Cynthia Ann's mother, Lucy, and Granny Parker, who had miraculously survived. The raiders had taken two women and three children captive: Rachel Parker Plummer and her toddler son (the first child born at Parker's Fort),²⁰ Elizabeth Kellogg, and the two young Parker children. Before they left, the Indians killed a number of cattle, looted the place, and set fire to some of the houses. They broke bottles, slashed open the tick mattresses, threw the feathers in the air, and carried out "a great number of my father's books and medicines," in Rachel's description. She described what happened to some of the looters:

Among [my father's medicines] was a bottle of pulverized arsenic, which the Indians mistook for a kind of white paint, with which they painted their faces and bodies all over, dissolving it in their saliva. The bottle was brought to me to tell them what it was. I told them I did not know though I knew because the bottle was labeled.²¹

Four of the Indians painted their faces with the arsenic. According to Rachel, all of them died, presumably in horrible agony.

In the aftermath of the raid, there were two groups of survivors, neither of which knew of the other's existence. Rachel's father, James Parker, led a group of eighteen—six adults and twelve children—through the dense wilderness of trees, bushes, briars, and blackberry vines along the Navasota River, terrified the whole time that Indians would find them. Parker wrote: "every few steps did I see briars tear the legs of the little children until the blood trickled down so that they could have been tracked by it."²² Every time they came to a sandy part of the river bottom, Parker had them walk backward across it to confuse pursuers. Unfortunately this ploy also fooled the other group of survivors, who never found them, though both were headed to the same place: Fort Houston, near modern-day Palestine, Texas, roughly sixty-

the extended Parker clan were soon pushing restlessly westward again. They, more than columns of dusty bluecoats, were what conquered the Indians. In that sense Quanah's own genetic heritage contained the seeds of his tribe's eventual destruction. His mother's family offers a nearly perfect example of the sort of righteous, hard-nosed, up-country folk who lived in dirt-floored, mud-chinked cabins, played ancient tunes on the fiddle, took their Kentucky rifles with them into the fields, and dragged the rest of American civilization westward along with them.

While the survivors of the Parker's Fort raid crawled and stumbled through the lacerating brush of the Navasota River bottom, the Indians they feared were riding resolutely north, as fast as they could go with their five captives. They pushed their ponies hard and did not stop until after midnight, when they finally made camp in the open prairie. Such flight was ancient practice on the plains. It was exactly what the Comanches did after a raid on Pawnee, Ute, or Osage villages: Pursuit was assumed, safety existed only in distance. The raid had begun at ten a.m.; if the Indians rode twelve hours with few breaks, they might have covered sixty miles, which would have put them somewhere just south of present-day Fort Worth, well beyond the last white settlements.

Under normal circumstances, one might have been able to only guess at the fate of the hostages as they disappeared into the liquid darkness of the frontier night. But as it turns out we know what took place, and what happened on the ensuing days. That is because Rachel Parker Plummer wrote it down. In two roughly similar accounts, she told the story of her thirteen-month captivity in excruciating detail. These were widely read at the time, in part because of their often astonishing frankness and brutal attention to detail, and in part because the rest of America was fascinated to hear what became of the first adult American females to be taken by the Comanches. The accounts form a key part of the Parker canon; they are a principal reason for the fame of the 1836 raid.

Rachel presents an interesting, and compelling, figure. At the time of the raid, she was seventeen. She had a fourteen-month-old son, which suggests that she married her husband, I. T. M. Plummer, when she was fifteen. This would have been normal enough on the frontier. As the account proves, she was also smart, perceptive, and, like many of the Parkers, quite literate. She was sensible, hardheaded, and remarkably resilient, considering what was

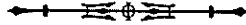
ily itself. Though they had built themselves a sturdy fort, they quite obviously neither farmed nor hunted nor gathered water within its walls. They were of necessity often outside its stockades, constantly exposed to attack and under no illusions about the presence of warlike Indians or about what they did to their captives. There was no quality of self-deception in their undertaking. And yet they persisted, bred prolifically, raised their children, farmed their fields, and worshipped God, all in a place where almost every waking moment held a mortal threat.

As a breed they were completely alien to the Plains Indians' experience of Europeans. When the Spanish empire had moved ruthlessly north from Mexico City in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dominating, killing, and subjugating native tribes along the way, it had done so in an extremely organized, centrally controlled fashion. Military presidios and Catholic missions were built and staffed first; soldiers arrived; colonists followed and stayed close to mother's skirts. The westward push of the Americans followed a radically different course. Its vanguard was not federal troops and federal forts but simple farmers imbued with a fierce Calvinist work ethic, steely optimism, and a cold-eyed aggressiveness that made them refuse to yield even in the face of extreme danger. They were said to fear God so much that there was no fear left over for anyone or anything else.²⁴ They habitually declined to honor government treaties with Native Americans, believing in their hearts that the land belonged to them. They hated Indians with a particular passion, considering them something less than fully human, and thus blessed with inalienable rights to absolutely nothing. Government in all its forms lagged behind such frontier folk, often showing up much later and often reluctantly. This was who the Parkers were. Elder John and his sons had lugged themselves westward out of the wet green forests of the east and toward the scorching treeless prairies of the country's heartland. They were militant predestinarian Baptists, severe in their religion and intolerant of people who did not believe as they did. John's eldest son, Daniel, the clan's guiding spirit, was one of the leading Baptist preachers of his generation and spent his life picking doctrinal fights with his fellow churchmen. He founded the first Protestant church in Texas. The Parkers were politically connected, too. Both James and Daniel were representatives to the political gathering in 1835 known as the "consultation" whose purpose was to organize a provisional government for Texas.

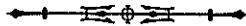
Though their lands were temporarily abandoned after the raid, parts of

THE PARKER RAID marked the moment in history when the western-most tendrils of the nascent American empire touched the easternmost tip of a vast, primitive, and equally lethal inland empire dominated by the Comanche Indians. No one understood this at the time. Certainly, the Parkers had no notion of what they were dealing with. Neither the Americans nor the Indians they confronted along that raw frontier had the remotest idea of the other's geographical size or military power. Both, as it turned out, had for the past two centuries been busily engaged in the bloody conquest and near-extirmination of Native American tribes. Both had succeeded in hugely expanding the lands under their control. The difference was that the Comanches were content with what they had won. The Anglo-Americans, children of Manifest Destiny, were not. Now, at this lonely spot by the Navasota River, the relentless American drive westward had finally brought them together. The meaning of their meeting, and the moment itself, became completely clear only in hindsight.

Though the idea would have astonished Texas settlers of the time, the Comanche horsemen who rode up to the front gate of Parker's Fort that morning in May 1836 were representatives of a military and trade empire that covered some 240,000 square miles,¹ essentially the southern Great Plains. Their land encompassed large chunks of five present-day states: Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, and Oklahoma. It was crossed by



WORLDS IN COLLISION



Three