

## **Geronimo's surrender - Skeleton Canyon, 1886**

By James W. Hurst

On May 17, 1885, Mangus (son of Mangus Colorado), Chihuahua, Nachite, old Nana, the shaman Geronimo, and their followers fled the San Carlos reservation in Arizona in an attempt to regain the freedom they had known before the reservation system was instituted by the United States government.

On Route 80 south of Rodeo, New Mexico, near Apache, Arizona, restrictions of reservation stands a marker commemorating Geronimo's surrender. Life was difficult for these semi-nomads, and they longed for the openness of the land the Spaniards had called *Apacheria*. Although the Chiricahuas could not have foreseen it, this was to be their last attempt to recapture the old ways that many of their cousins had already forsaken.

The "renegades," or "hostiles," as they were called, consisted of thirty-five men, eight boys, and one hundred and one women and children.

They would occupy the attention of five thousand troops, five hundred Indian auxiliaries, and an unknown number of civilians. In an area roughly the size of Illinois and comprising some of the roughest desert and mountain terrain in North America, they maintained themselves for sixteen months. In that time they killed seventy-five citizens of the United States, twelve White Mountain Apaches, two commissioned officers and eight

soldiers of the regular Army, and an unknown number of Mexicans. The Apaches lost six men, two boys, two women and one child.

Following the breakout, some of the Apaches moved toward the mountains to the east, striking settlers and miners as they found them. General Crook arrived at Fort Bayard, New Mexico to establish a command post, and by the first of June the hostile bands had struck near Alma, Silver City, Camp Vincent, and Grafton, killing eighteen civilians. Believing that the Indians would move south through the slot between the Chiracahua Mountains and the Peloncillos and move through the San Simon Valley to Skeleton Canyon or through the San Bernadino Valley to Guadalupe Canyon, Crook ordered troops to all water holes between the railroad and the Mexican border.

In Skeleton Canyon, called Canon Bonita by the Mexicans, Chihuahua's band surprised eight troopers of Troop D, Fourth Cavalry, killed three men, burned the wagons and supplies, and drove off forty horses and mules. The Apache tornado moved south. They hid in the canyons and fought only when it pleased them. When they camped and were in fear of attack, they chose a place where surprise was impossible and where there was an easy line of escape. Skeleton Canyon was but one of many ideal canyons on the way to Mexico. By the middle of June, the fugitives had slipped past the Army's

patrols and were in the Sierra Madre of Sonora, Mexico.

Crook sent two columns into Mexico, one in June and the other in July. The former was commanded by Capt. Emmet Crawford, the latter by Capt. Wirt Davis. Crawford's command consisted of one troop of cavalry (normally forty men) and ninety-two Apache scouts; Davis' command consisted of one troop of cavalry and one hundred Apache scouts. Through the summer and into the fall the columns pursued the Apaches, undergoing terrible hardships. Geronimo led them into Chihuahua, turned north, and crossed the border into the United States. By the end of September, hostile raiding parties were again crossing the line at Guadalupe Canyon and moving north, raiding, killing, and stealing horses. Arizona and New Mexico were once again in turmoil.

In November, a band of nine hostiles led by a younger brother of Chihuahua named Josanie (some called him Ulzana), crossed the border and rode for the Florida Mountains, killing as they moved northward. They moved into the mountains near Hillsboro and continued their depredations, killing civilians and Indians alike, and stealing horses virtually at will. By the end of December, Josanie and his band had killed thirty-eight people, stolen over two hundred horses and mules, and escaped back into Mexico with the loss of but one man.

Crook, under increased criticism from Washington, launched a second expedition into Mexico, again led by Crawford and Wirt Davis. On January 9, 1886, Crawford located the Chiricahuas, and the next morning his scouts attacked, taking the hostiles' herd and camp equipment. The Chiracahuas, badly demoralized, agreed to negotiations for surrender. In a tragically confused incident, Mexican troops arrived, and [Geronimo] mistaking the Apache scouts for hostiles, opened fire and Geronimo mortally wounded Capt. Crawford. After the departure of the Mexicans, Lt. Maus conferred with the hostiles, who agreed to meet with General Crook and discuss surrender. Geronimo named as the meeting place the Canyon de los Embudos (Canyon of the Funnels), about twenty miles south of the American border and near the Sonora/Chihuahua border.

The conference was held March 25-27, 1886, and Crook told Geronimo that unless he surrendered he would be hunted down and killed, even if it took fifty years. On March 27, Geronimo agreed to surrender on the condition that he and his followers would be returned to the reservation after two years' exile. Crook agreed, believing that he had secured the most favorable terms possible. President Cleveland and General Sheridan were infuriated, and informed Crook that the conditions were unconditional surrender, only sparing the Indians' lives in the bargain. The dispute

between Crook's position and the position taken by Cleveland and Sheridan became moot, however, because on March 29, Geronimo, Nachite, and thirty-nine others bolted the encampment and fled for Mexico.

In a series of telegrams from Ft. Bowie to Washington, D.C., Crook defended his actions, his officers and men, and his Apache scouts against Sheridan's direct and implied criticisms. Finally, on April 1, he sent a telegram to Sheridan asking to be relieved of command of the Department of Arizona. Sheridan, who had never really been convinced of Crook's unorthodox approach to fighting Apaches, accepted Crook's request and, effective April 28, 1886, appointed Brigadier General Nelson A. Miles to take command of the Department.

Miles stationed infantry to guard passes and waterholes, established heliostat signal points on mountain peaks, and dismissed the Apache scouts. A unit was organized of one company of infantry and thirty-five cavalymen under Lt. H. W. Lawton, Fourth Cavalry, and Leonard Wood, an assistant surgeon. Twenty Indian scouts under Tom Horn, and a pack train of one hundred mules and thirty packers completed the command. In less than a week in the mountains, the horses were rendered useless and the cavalry became infantry. From April, when they entered Mexico, until August, the expedition marched and scouted but accomplished little.

In mid-July, General Miles, operating on a rumor that the hostiles were near Fronteras, Sonora, and talking surrender, dispatched Lt. Charles Gatewood from Fort Bowie with orders to seek out Geronimo. Gatewood crossed

into Mexico from Cloverdale, New Mexico, and made contact with Lawton and Wood by early August. They proceeded north, and by August 23 Gatewood and Lawton's scouts were on the hostiles' trail and closing.

The following day Gatewood met the hostiles on the bank of the Bavispe River. They were told to surrender and that they would be sent to Florida with their families to await the pleasure of the President of the United States regarding their final fate. Discussion continued all that day, and Geronimo was visibly shaken when informed that all his friends and relatives had already been taken to Florida. The following day, heeding Gatewood's advice, Geronimo said he would go to the border and surrender to General Miles.

The group came through Guadalupe Canyon to the San Bernardino Valley and moved north to a glade where Skeleton Canyon met its south fork, arriving there at the end of August. General Miles did not arrive at the surrender site until September 3, where he repeated to Geronimo, Nachite, and the others the terms of surrender given by Lt. Gatewood. The terms accepted, Miles returned to Fort Bowie the next day with Geronimo, Nachite, and several others. There had been nineteen men and twenty-eight women and children. Six of the Apaches, three men and three women, refused to accept the surrender and fled back to Mexico, where death at the hands of the Mexican border guards awaited them.

On the morning of September 8, 1886, General Miles sent the Apaches east on a train under heavy guard. Thus they began their years of captivity as

prisoners in a strange land, and with their departure the Indian Wars of the Southwest came to an end.

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On Route 80 south of Rodeo, New Mexico, near Apache, Arizona, stands a marker commemorating Geronimo's surrender. A short distance south of the marker is a road which leads east and then south/southeast to the actual surrender site. This is four wheel drive vehicle country, and heavy rains can render the road virtually impassible in spots. Once at the site, the canyon road leads east and ends about two miles inside New Mexico. From there, travel is by foot following either the canyon floor (the creek bed) or a higher narrow trail. For one who wishes to understand the elusiveness of the Apaches and the difficulties in the Army's attempts to capture them, a day spent hiking Skeleton Canyon will be an invaluable lesson.

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