

SAND CREEK

In 1851, a treaty signed at Fort Laramie between the U. S. government and leaders of the Cheyenne, Arapaho and Sioux tribes had lowered tensions in the Colorado territory. The chiefs saw many whites come into their lands. Because Black Kettle and White Antelope of the Cheyenne and Little Raven of the Arapaho knew what fighting had cost other tribes to the east, they had been willing to make room for the whites rather than risk war. However, things changed in 1864.

The Indian leaders' peace-keeping tactics worked successfully until early in 1864, when the new territorial governor, William Evans, and the district's military Commander, Colonel John M. Chivington, raised a large army of volunteers. The reasons were not made clear at the time, but were understood to concern the Indians. There followed several clashes between army troops and Indians, all of them started, the soldiers claimed by the Indians. The Cheyenne and Arapaho were also blamed for a number of wagon-train raids to the north that were actually the work of the Sioux. In the summer of 1864, Governor Evans declared that the state of war existed between the Indians and the territorial government. He ordered all friendly Indians to report to a reservation near Fort Lyon. Indians not at the reservation were to be considered hostile, and civilian groups as well as army units were authorized "to kill and destroy as enemies of the county wherever they may be found, all such hostile Indians."

The killing and destroying had already begun when news of the governor's proclamation reached the Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders. Although they could not imagine how they would survive if they were not free to follow the buffalo, most members of the two tribes agreed to report to the reservation. The problem was getting there. With the help of a sympathetic army officer, Major Edward W. Wynkoop, seven Indian leaders traveled four hundred miles to Denver to request a safe passage for their people. When they arrived in late September they found that the governor did not want to see them. It took Wynkoop some time to persuade him to change his mind. At the meeting, Black Kettle told Evans:

...Major Wynkoop proposed that we come to see you. All we ask is that we may have peace with the whites. These braves who are with me are willing to do what I say. We want to take good tidings home to our people, that they may sleep in peace. I want you to give all these chiefs of the soldiers here to understand that we are for peace, that we may not be mistaken by them for enemies. I have not come here with a little wolf bark, but have come to talk plain with you. We must live near the buffalo or starve.

Evans responded by accusing the Cheyenne and Arapaho of forming an alliance with the Sioux, and he refused to make a peace treaty with the delegation. He did, however, arrange for the safety of those who wished to go to Fort Lyon.

For a short time things were peaceful. The Indians established their main camp on the reservation at Sand Creek, about forty miles north of Fort Lyon. The Indian leaders often visited the fort, which was commanded by their friend, Major Wynkoop. Game was scarce on the reservation that winter, and Wynkoop began issuing army rations to the camp. This action did not meet with the approval of army officials.

On November 5, 1864, Wynkoop was replaced by Major Scott J. Anthony. Anthony spoke peaceful words to the Indians and gave them permission to send hunting parties outside the reservation until he could obtain more rations from the government. A few weeks later he requested additional troops for the fort. The reinforcements, led by Colonel Chivington, arrived within twenty-four hours. Just before dawn on November 29, several hundred soldiers armed with rifles and a battery of four cannons rode to the camp at Sand Creek.