

Survivor of Custer's debacle firmly at KU

Dep. H. G. H. 28175

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For The Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. (AP) — Some say he was born in 1863. Others, 1860, and that's what the U.S. Army records indicate. But whatever the year, most authorities believe that the bay colt, foaled by a mustang mare on the rolling prairie of southwestern Oklahoma, is the most famous steed in United States military history.

The horse's name was Comanche. It was the only living remnant of Gen. George Armstrong Custer's forces found by a military burial party after the battle of the Little Big Horn, 99 years ago this month.

The mounted remains of Comanche may be seen today on the fifth floor of the Natural History Museum at the University of Kansas. Still life-like, the remains are sealed behind glass. But time has not treated Comanche kindly.

The gloss on his coat is gone. A humidifier operates 24 hours a day to keep the animal's hair and hide moist. And museum personnel perform regular maintenance to preserve the remains.

Though the years, claims on the old horse have been made by prestigious groups and individuals. But a long line of chancellors at the university have refused to give up the horse.

As a colt, Comanche roamed free across the southwestern plains until 1868 when he was captured in a wild horse roundup, taken to St. Louis and sold to the Army.

The light bay gelding was shipped west to be used by the 7th Cavalry, then fighting Indians in Kansas. The horse became the personal mount of Maj. Myles w. Keogh.

During a skirmish with Indians, an arrow struck the horse's right hind quarter. The animal made a sound like a Comanche yell. Keogh named the horse Comanche.

During the spring of 1873, the 7th Cavalry was transferred to Ft. Abraham Lincoln on the Missouri River near Bismarck, Dakota Territory. Keogh and Comanche moved with the regiment.

White settlers, prospectors and miners soon moved onto the Great Sioux Reservation created by the Laramie Treaty of 1868.

Resentful of the white man's encroachments upon their lands, some Sioux warriors went on the warpath. The 7th Cavalry tried to keep the whites out, but many ignored the Army and some were killed by the Sioux.

The Army began a large campaign to control the Sioux. In the spring of 1876, from the west, south and east, three columns of soldiers converged on Indian country. The largest column was under the command of Brig. Gen. Alfred H. Terry and included Custer's 7th Cavalry with Maj. Keogh and Comanche. They marched west from Ft. Lincoln across Dakota into Montana and the Powder River valley.

After a scouting party found fresh Indian signs, the 7th Cavalry moved on the Little Big Horn from the south, while Terry's remaining forces entered the Little Big Horn valley from the north. The soldiers hoped to trap the Sioux from two sides.

But that did not happen. Waiting was one of the greatest concentrations of Indians ever gathered on the North American continent — more than 12,000, historians say.

On June 25, 1876, Gen. George Custer, Maj. Myles Keogh and every other officer and man in five companies of the 7th Cavalry were killed in what has often been called Custer's Last Stand.

Three days later a burial party moved onto the battlefield. One of the soldiers saw something moving some distance away. He investigated and found a severely wounded horse.

The late Theodore Goldin of Kansas City, Mo., a member of the burial party, recalled in 1921: "Many of us went over and recognized Comanche. The poor fellow was too weak to stand, and many of the men mounted, galloped to the river and returned with water carried in their hats which was given the poor famished horse.

"Later, he was able to get to his feet and in time was brought into camp where his wounds were washed and the soreness relieved as much as possible."

Comanche had seven wounds. Three were severe, four were flesh wounds.

Other cavalry horses probably survived the battle, but they were taken away by the Indians who probably believed that Comanche would die from his wounds.

Comanche was taken to Ft. Lincoln aboard the steamer Far West. Too weak to stand, the horse was placed in a sling. Gustave Korn, a blacksmith, nursed the horse back to health.

On April 19, 1878, Col. Samuel D. Sturgis, then commander of the 7th Cavalry, ordered that Comanche would never be ridden again nor put to any kind of work. Sturgis directed that Comanche be saddled, bridled, draped in mourning and paraded in all regimental mounted ceremonies.

Comanche roamed at will over the parade grounds at Ft. Lincoln. He became a great pet of the soldiers. When the bugles sounded, Comanche often trotted to his old place in front of the line of his master's troop.

Comanche adopted Korn, the blacksmith, as his new master. Sometimes Comanche would follow Korn around the post like a pet dog.

When the 7th Cavalry was transferred to Ft. Meade in the Black Hills in 1879, and later, in 1888, to Ft. Riley, Kan., Comanche moved with them.

The horse remained in good health

until late in 1890 when Korn was killed at Wounded Knee in South Dakota. The 7th Cavalry had been ordered to the Pine Ridge Agency to control the Sioux.

After the 7th Cavalry returned to Ft. Riley without Korn, Comanche appeared to lose interest in life. Veterinarians tried to keep the horse alive, but Comanche died on Nov. 6, 1891. He had lived about 31 years. A veterinarian said the animal died of the colic.

The officers of the 7th Cavalry moved quickly. They asked Dr. L. L. Dyche of the University of Kansas to preserve Comanche. Dyche, a zoologist, hurried to Ft. Riley, measured and skinned the horse, and returned to the University to mount the remains. Dyche was to have received \$400 for his services.

Dyche, with the cavalry's permission, took Comanche to the Chicago Exposition in 1893, and the horse was the center of much attention. Comanche was then returned to the University of Kansas.

Dyche asked the cavalry if they wanted Comanche, but officers of the 7th reported that they had not been able to raise the money.

Lt. Col. Ezra B. Fuller, secretary and treasurer of the United States Cavalry

Association, wrote in 1913 that the cavalry was unable to raise the money and gave the horse to the University of Kansas.

For more than 50 years the matter was forgotten. In 1947, however, Gen. Jonathan M. Wainwright, hero of Bataan and an old cavalryman, led a movement to persuade the university to return Comanche to the Army at Ft. Riley. The story made headlines from coast-to-coast.

But Chancellor Deane Malott refused to give up Comanche, saying: "He's almost an alumnus of the institution!"

In 1953, the Lewiston, Mont., Kiwanis Club, led an effort to move Comanche to the museum at Custer Battlefield National Monument. But Franklin Murphy, then chancellor of K.U., refused. Edward Arn, then governor of Kansas, supported the university's claim to perpetual possession of Comanche.

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All remained quite until the early 1970's when a group of Indians objected to the wording on a placard inside Comanche's glass enclosure. The wording claimed that Comanche was the "only survivor" of the battle of the Little Big Horn. The group pointed out that thousands of Indians had survived the battle.

The wording was changed to clarify that Comanche was the only survivor among Custer's command found after the battle.