

Chief Charles Little Coyote, Morning Killer, of the Cheyenne Nation
Interview conducted and compiled by Jeff C. Campbell, April 22, 2008

Hutchinson, Kansas was once in the range of the great North American buffalo herds and the Cheyenne people who followed and hunted them with their families, traded horses and met their enemies in life and death struggles. There on April 13th and 14th of 2008, we met with a living chief of the Cheyenne Council of Forty-Four, Charles Little Coyote.

The Cheyenne, “the People” known as *Tse-Tsehése-staestse, Ma-heo-o's* [the Creator’s] own chosen people, came from the north around Bear Butte, their sacred mountain north of the Black Hills in South Dakota, in the early 19th Century. They spread their influence throughout the plains of modern Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska and Kansas down into the Panhandle of Texas.

Through George Bent, son of William Bent (the trader and operator of Bent’s Old Fort), and Owl Woman, (daughter of White Thunder, Cheyenne Keeper of the Medicine Arrows), we know much about the Cheyenne people and their entry into Colorado. We also know much about their customs and how they came to the Arkansas River country.

From Bent, we also know that respect and order were essential elements of the Cheyenne way of life. Chief Little Coyote, in his youth called Mouse Trail, then after WWII known as Morning Killer, quietly let us have a glimpse of a man, who has lived the life of a man’s man as a horse breaker, rodeo rider, a Navy veteran of World War II, a Marine Corps veteran of the Korean Conflict, a gypsum worker, pitcher for a ball team, teacher and was crushed in the oil fields. He said, “I may not tell you the truth, but it’s what I remember.” “But I like to tell the truth, ... I don’t want anybody to say he’s lying to you...” A more forthright way to put it probably can’t be said. He was honest and truly unassuming, this descendant of chiefs.

During the two days we spent with the chief, not once was he boastful or arrogant, maybe not what one might expect from a man so honored and asked to take the place as a venerable traditional leader. Without asking for it, we knew he was a humble man. He graciously accepted traditional gift baskets of meat, tobacco, cloth and sweetgrass which he held close to his nose and breathed in, then told us of his memories.

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

Born in 1926, he explained, he was born in a sacred tepee near Seiling, Oklahoma “My real name is Charlie Little Coyote, [a white man’s name, his legal name].” His first name; “... was Mouse Trail, I went overseas [in WWII] and came back home they gave me another name, Morning Killer, ...”

Charlie learned to ride. “When I was a kid, just a little tiny kid, I had to learn, all the horses we had were kind of wild, you had to know how to ride in order to ride them horses, I know I got dumped a lot of times.” Before WWII he rode, dressed as an Indian, in a Wild West Show. “Ken Maynard had ... a Wild West Show, we went to San Diego ... we used to put on a show there, ...” “He had some buffalo ..., they brought those buffaloes in the arena and them sons-a-guns they went all over the place, ... rounded 'em up later, they didn’t do that anymore.”

When he was a kid he told us how he was a trickster of sorts. He was a rural Oklahoma farm and ranch kid who tried stealing eggs one time but got caught. Another time he moved the outhouse on a Halloween night and one of his relatives walked right into the open hole.

MILITARY SERVICE

Charlie is proud of his military service. The first day he wore a “Native American Veteran Marine” hat and the second a similar hat denoting him a veteran of the Navy. “I was fifteen years old, when I went in, [the service, Navy] ... I always volunteered...” “I was over in the Philippines, and Dad wrote, sent me my draft papers, ... let them know where you’re at, ... I can’t call ... that I’m already over here, and they want me, come in and sign up for the draft board...”

“In the Philippines, ... going to Manila, there was a lot of ships that got sunk there, you could just see them, ..., we were all scared, I was on [LST] 522 ... when that submarine was around, man I’ll tell I never was so scared in my life, just to think that son-of-a-gun would ...” torpedo them when they were carrying a load of ammunition. “... I know if it hit somewhere, all that ... powder, everything, I think all of us would’ve went if it hit, ...”

Not all his military memories were somber. He chuckled remembering learning how to be a helmsman on the big LST. “..., then they put me down in the wheelhouse, I learned how to steer the ship. A friend of mine helped me with that ... , you’ve got to watch it all the time, ... and I’ll tell you if you don’t watch it boy ..., then you’re way off.” “... I let one side go several degrees off, and boy here come ... the officer that was on duty, ... ‘what the hell are you doing?’” Charlie answered, “‘I’m just a learnin’ ... finally got it straightened out.”

He recalled other events with humor. During his time in the military the powers to be put him in with a group of other American Indians from all sorts of tribes like Navajos to form a ‘code-talker’ unit. Of course this didn’t work, since Cheyennes don’t speak the same language as Navajo, Apache or Crow.

Charlie said he became a Marine accidentally. “Well, ... a friend of mine was in the Marines, came home and went to Oklahoma City ..., he said ‘Hey, lets go get a pass to eat dinner,’ I said ‘Where?’, ‘Let’s go see the Marine Corps, they’ll give us a pass to eat,’ we was hungry, so we went over there and I’ll be god darned if I didn’t end up in the Marine Corps, ... Yeah, I ended up in the Marine Corps for quite awhile, for one meal.”

Charlie became quiet when recalling some moments in his various military experiences, much like other soldiers who faced the horrors of war. “We went up there [N. Korea] ... there’s a lot a places ... where a lot of guys got killed or slaughtered ...there’s times when you can remember all that stuff, ... a lot ... I can’t remember, and then there’s some of them things I don’t want to remember really ...”

Turning back to a funny matter he recalled, “My granddad, ... [at the beginning of] World War II, ... when they were asking for volunteers, he grabbed his shotgun and went up to the recruiting station somewhere, he was ready to go, they said, ‘I’m afraid not chief,’ he had a shotgun, he said, ‘I can hit a bird on the fly, ... and hit a jack rabbit’ ... they told him, ‘You better go back home.’” He laughed.

SAND CREEK MASSACRE, COLORADO

“My granddad, old man Red Bird Black, he described how they attacked them, I think, ... they waited until early in the morning, or they came in early in the morning ... the soldiers ... just picking them off, some of them run past and that’s how they got away, running and dodging and all that. They wanted to kill them all, as I understand my granddad, now why I don’t know, so the white man could move in I guess,...” “It was pretty miserable when they attacked them early in the morning, ... My granddad always said they was crying everywhere, the women and the children, the sound of the crying, [Cheyenne word],

the sound was crying, you know when somebody attacks you early in the morning when you're not quite awake, ..."

Sand Creek site: "I can remember, I wanted to see it, when I was a small kid, ... when I got out there, ... a lot of that they was talking about when I was a kid, it came back to me." "Really, they had them, they could have killed all of them then." "Sometimes I get to thinking of how they could've picked them all off, ..."

BECOMING A CHIEF

He took his duty, as chief like volunteering to fight in this country's wars. "My aunt, Jenny, ... called me, said, ... "I want you to take my Dad's place as one of the chiefs of the Cheyenne tribe. I say, 'You sure?' ... she said, 'Yeah, I want you in his place.'" "I didn't want to be one of the main chiefs." "There's a lot a things you have to do to be a chief, ... I didn't think I could measure up to a chief, I told her." She said, '... you think pretty hard about it, ...' Later, "... she said, 'Well, what do you think?' I said, 'O.K., I'll do that.' And at Sun Dance, "I took her Dad's place."

"To be a chief you've got a lot of rules to go by ... there's nothing written down ..." The role of chief is an honor and a duty, the People count on the chief in many ways. In full regalia he's been an honored resident of the Medicine Lodge, Kansas community and a distinct part of its triennial celebration of the 1867 treaties between the United States and several of the Southern Plains Indian nations. His photographs and interviews don the local museum for all visitors to see and read.

THE OLD WAYS

He hopes his knowledge of the Cheyenne ways of old will be taken up by the people. He explained about natural creatures and plants. Are there special or bad animals? "... badger is the main one, you're not supposed to harm a badger, ... if you do, bad luck, ..." will follow. "Dragonflies, and hummingbirds, you're not supposed to kill any of these, but... people will kill them, just like the eagle, ... and also buffalo." "You can kill it and eat it, you don't just shoot it and let it go [waste it, let it rot]."

Owl: "That son of a gun, they're bad, you don't want to fool around the owl, he always knows, he's smart..." "... the owls always come around and let you know that person is gone, ... they're bad luck sometimes, sometimes they're good luck, ... they're messengers of something's bad has happened ...".

RESPECT

The thread in his words during interviews was respect. Like the universal act of respecting elders and leaders, "If you go in where the chiefs are having their meeting, you don't cut in on somebody's that's talking, you wait until they get through talking,..." He is concerned for traditions of the Cheyenne nation.

As Chief, he talks to school children about the old ways. "Respect, ... it's disappearing, the respect to ... the people, ... they don't want to respect anything anymore, ..., I don't know what's wrong, ... the kids are getting out of hand, ... you try to tell them to respect, ... like myself, a chief, ... and sometimes it gets to them ..." What would you tell the Cheyenne kids? "I would tell them, ... they're still Indian, ..." "They

don't know ... about the old ways anymore,..." How would you get the balance back? "I don't know, you would have to get all the people to try ...".

The time Chief Little Coyote spent telling about his life and his hopes was good. If the chief could tell everyone about his Cheyenne way of life, the good and bad in his life, he would probably say for people to keep trying to do right and be respectful of their people's old ways and of each other.