

Then They Shot the Ponies

As late as the 1930s locals still found bones right here, on a flat spot of ground in what was once a wide river bed. Bones--the skeletons of ponies that had belonged to Black Kettle's Cheyenne people.

In the middle of the Seventh Cavalry's rampage that snowy November morning, one of his officers had approached his boss, General George Armstrong Custer, who was likely standing up on a knoll watching the action beneath him. That officer told Custer he'd seen the troops killing women and children. Custer commanded a stop to such things. That his order did much good is questionable.

When the madness was over, he and his men rode over to the big herd of Cheyenne ponies. If you come up on Washita from almost any direction today, you can understand why Black Kettle and his people were here that winter. There was water, for starters, and there would have been grass, lots of it, in a river valley that stretches a half-mile wide or more, creating a fulsome prairie. Great place to winter because it had to have been a great place for the ponies.

So right here, on this stretch of flat ground, Custer ordered his men to destroy 850 Cheyenne ponies, a formidable task certainly; but after slaying 102 Cheyenne (the number is in dispute actually, Native people claimed many less), killing horses may not have felt like some staggering moral problem. Their horses have to go.

Those Cheyenne who were captured and survived remembered the torrent of shrieking that had its origins right here. The army began by cutting the ponies' throats, but that methodology got too tedious. Eventually they just shot them, one after another, killed them all and left their bodies to rot. Most of a century later, this spot was still a cemetery of old bones, old dry bones.

The thing is, such wanton destruction was not totally senseless. Some Cheyenne escaped, of course, and teamed up with Arapahos and Kiowas, but no one got the ponies. They were all dead. Killing the horses was like taking the legs out from Native people.

Listen to the logic: if you want to stop the killing that's happening along those long trails west--honest, hard-working Americans who wanted a shot a fortune in gold and precious metals, the American west being a virtual Las Vegas--you simply had to stop the killers who were scalping all those entrepreneurs because good night, there was gold in them thar hills. Something had to be done. Shoot their buffalo, shoot their horses, and shoot them--get rid of all of 'em.

By way of white man's logic, that all made great sense. Shoot the horses too.

In a wonderfully soft-spoken memoir titled *Choteau Creek: A Sioux Reminiscence*, Joseph Iron Eye Dudley remembers the time when his Yankton Sioux grandmother--he lived with his grandparents--came home from a blood relative with chickens, a gift. His grandfather built a coop that Grandma said needed to be sealed up tight at night, lest somebody come along and want those chickens. Then he says that when his Grandma used the word *somebody*, she meant a skunk or a weasel, maybe a fox or a mink. Grandma was, if you believe her grandson's memory, about as wonderful a Christian woman as you could imagine anywhere on the reservation in the 1950s, for that matter in all of South Dakota.

Her profession of the Christian faith didn't mean, of course, that his grandmother had simply rejected all the ways of her people, and one of them was, Dudley says, that she regarded an animal, a fox maybe, as, well, *somebody*.

So throw that into the mix too. When the surviving Cheyenne heard their ponies being slaughtered, they were listening to *somebody* die. Perhaps it wasn't senseless killing, but it was heartless.

War is never senseless. It always makes good sense to someone, to somebody. But it is often heartless.

Right across the trail from the scene above, tree branches are decorated with ribbons, articles of prayer left by those keeping vigil yet today because somebody died here, somebody was killed.

Lord, bless us with good sense.