

Life at an Indian Agency

Rufus F. Zogbaum

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THE treatment of the aboriginal inhabitants of the territories over which the government of the United States has extended its sway during the last twenty-five years has been — and still continues to be — one of the most difficult problems ever encountered in the development of any great nation. Marching eastward from the Pacific and westward from the turbid waters of the Missouri, stretching in two thin blue threads from the "British line" to the Mexican frontier, our gallant little army has steadily closed in on the savages, "rounding up" the scattered tribes and gathering them in upon the immense reservations of land set apart for their use. The government has established agencies to represent it with the various tribes with which it has made treaties, and it is the object of this paper simply to describe the life at one of these agencies.

The reservation allotted to the Southern cheyennes and Arapahoes is situated in the Indian Territory, south of the so-called "Cherokee Strip" and west of the famous promised land of the "Boomers," the Oklahoma country, and, according to General Sheridan's report to the President in 1885, contains within its limits 4,297,771 acres, "excellent for grazing, and most of the land susceptible of the highest cultivation." Extensive tracts of timber — scrub-oak, cotton-wood, pecan, and walnut — line the streams and the sides of many of the canons, and cover wide sections of rolling prairie country; game — such as wild turkey, prairie-chicken, quail, and deer — abounds. The enrolment taken during General Sheridan's visit showed a total of 2169 Cheyennes and 1300 Arapahoes, distributed in "bands" over the reservation.

Near the military post of Fort Reno, and on the North Fork of the Canadian, lies the collection of government buildings forming the agency for these Indians, and known to the post-office officials and marked down on the maps under the name of Darlington. Here the agent resides, and here — in a great brick building fronting a wide unpaved plaza or square, on the various sides of which stand the stores of the Indian traders, a hotel, and the livery and stage stables, whence the stage line carries the mail and passengers to the railroad, thirty miles away — is situated the main office or agency for the two tribes mentioned. On some streets branching off from a park of rather ragged and forlorn appearance, in which a few trees raise their crooked branches into the air, are placed the residences of the employes, the schools, and the saw-mill, the blacksmith, wagon, and tin shops.

Driving out from Fort Reno, we rattle over the prairie past the camp of the Indian scouts, their lodges pitched in military order on a little rise overlooking the plain toward the agency; past the cavalry horses on herd, scaring up great flocks of blackbirds, and causing the little prairie-dogs to pop into their burrows with shrill barks of anger and alarm; past some camps of redskins who have come in to draw their rations, their wagons standing near by, and their tough little horses "lariated" out to graze; through great thickets of sunflowers, past Indians on horseback, squaws and papooses in wagons, to the wooden bridge over the river, where some more Indians, tall, wild-looking, handsome fellows, are watering their horses, their figures reflected in the clear shallow stream. We move slowly over the not too firm-looking structure, and then more rapidly on again over the wide dusty road, skirted by the neat frame houses forming the residences of the agent and some of the employes, until, swinging to the right, we draw up at the door of the huge brick commissary building. Groups of shaggy, wiry ponies are tied to wagons, or held by waiting squaws, whose lords pass in and out of the wide doorway, or stand about in little knots chatting and smoking; now and then a mounted "buck" or Indian policeman, in army blue, slouch-hatted, with revolver swinging from belt bristling with cartridges, rides briskly by, while, crossing the wide square, comes a train of lumbering, creaking, heavily loaded freight wagons, their great wheels grinding up the dry soil,

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which, driven in whirling clouds through the air by the strong south wind, fills mouth and eyes with gritty substance, and powders bright-hued savage finery and the more soberly colored clothing of civilization alike with a thick coating of brown dust. Pushing our way through the motley crowd, we ascend the wooden staircase on the outside of the building, and enter the office, where we are most courteously received by the agent.

We have ample time to look about us here, for it is Monday, the busiest day of the week, and while the agent is engaged in listening to the various recitals of his tawny charges and in answering their questions, we sit back in the easy chair by the side of his desk and leisurely "take in" the scene before us. A number of the Indians have evidently come in for a "talk," for they are crowded into the room, some seated on the chairs lining the walls, some lounging, blankets drawn in graceful folds about them, in the doorways. A few are clad in their picturesque native dress, but almost all of them wear some articles of civilized clothing, and as seen through the blue clouds of cigarette smoke they present an interesting picture, with their wild but expressive and intelligent faces, each in its setting of long, black, straight hair, their bright eyes, and graceful gestures as they converse together in low guttural tones. Among them are some of the leading men of the Cheyennes, but a short time ago the fiercest and most formidable of the hostile tribes. Many of their most daring warriors and skilful soldiers, however, finally overawed by the strong arm of the government, and realizing the hopelessness of further armed resistance against their white conquerors, are now the most eager to learn how to travel "on the white man's road," and are rapidly proving themselves apt pupils. Some of them are quite well-to-do, owning horses and wagons bought and paid for by themselves, and following the occupation of "freighters," hauling all the supplies for the agencies from the railroads, and receiving the same rates of payment for the work as the white men engaged in the same business. Although under the treaty made with the Cheyennes and Arapahoes \$30,000 in clothing is distributed annually among them, and supplies of food (rations) are issued to each head of a family at regular intervals, every effort is being made to render the Indians self-supporting, and although the attempt to induce them to abandon their nomadic mode of life still meets with considerable opposition, every encouragement is given to those among them who have been persuaded to adopt some peaceful occupation as a means of gaining their livelihood. Two saw-mills are kept running for the purpose of sawing native lumber to be used in building farm-houses, about fifty of which have been erected at different points on the reservation in the last year and a half, the Indians performing all the unskilled labor in their construction, such as cutting and hauling the lumber, etc., at their own expense. The farms — of which there are now about four hundred and fifty, running from five to one hundred acres in extent under cultivation — are situated on three-hundred-and-twenty-acre tracts, with a view to allotment under the so-called "Severalty Bill." The future owner of one of these farms having selected his "location," it is staked out for him by one of the white farmers employed by the government as instructors, who encloses ten acres with a wire fence, the Indian cutting and setting out a sufficient number of posts for the purpose. The ground is then broken at the expense of the government; the necessary farming implements, seeds, etc., are furnished gratuitously to the embryo agriculturist, who, under the instruction of his white teachers, is left to work out his own salvation by the sweat of his brow. (Note: Mr. G. D. Williams, the agent at Darlington, in his report in August, 1887, says: "But a little over two years ago one-eighth of the entire force of the army was directed against the Cheyennes of the agency, who in large numbers were then opposed to any innovation tending toward civilization.")

Wild, untutored, unaccustomed to restraint, and suspicious by nature as the Indians are, the position of the government's agent is a difficult one, requiring great patience, tact, and careful judgment on the part of the official filling it. He is often called upon for advice even in matters concerning the family affairs of individuals, must listen to their complaints, and endeavor to see that all are treated with equal justice in their dealings with the "Great Father," whose representative he is. He must superintend and hold to account the sub-agents and employes, attend to the handling of the supplies intended for the use of the Indians, the issuing of rations, the wants of the schools, the enforcement of obedience to the local laws and rules of the reservation through the Indian police, and is responsible for the proper conduct of the whole of the complicated business of the agency. The employes at the Cheyenne and Arapahoe agency comprise a chief clerk and two assistants in the office at Darlington, two engineers for running two saw-mills, two carpenters, two blacksmiths, a wagon-maker, and five farmers engaged as instructors, and a large number of Indians, apprentices, drivers, herders, etc. The police force,

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divided into detachments at different stations, numbers thirty rank and file and three officers — a captain and two lieutenants — all full-blooded Indians, owning their horses and under regular pay, the officers receiving ten and the privates eight dollars monthly, and is composed of representatives of both tribes. The uniform, two suits of which are furnished annually by the government to each member of the force, is similar in cut and color to that worn by United States troops, and consists of a dark blue blouse, light blue trousers, and soft felt hat with a ribbon bearing the word "Police" in silvered letters. Officers and men are armed with revolvers, and are faithful and efficient, Mr. Williams, the agent, assuring us that they have never yet failed to make an arrest during his administration.

There are five sub-agencies at different points on the reservation, each under a sub-agent, at the largest of which, Cantonment, an abandoned military post, one thousand savages are rationed. Four schools for Indian children, two of which are mission schools and two of which are maintained at the expense of the government, furnish education to three hundred and twenty red-skinned youngsters of both sexes, whose well-washed faces and clean clothing, their excellent discipline and apparent docility, as they sit behind the straightly aligned rows of desks in their school-rooms, are in strong contrast to the bands of half-clad, painted, unkempt, and unmistakably unwashed little savages we have passed on our way over from the "post." But for an occasional untamed glitter of their bright black eyes and a flash of white teeth in relief against the dusky hue of their faces, as they stand singing Sunday-school hymns for all the world like white children, it is hard to realize that any one among them had been born and attained the school age under the influence of savage life. The dormitories, refectories, kitchens, etc., are scrupulously clean, and the schools can bear favorable comparison with similar institutions in more populous and enlightened communities.

As already mentioned, a fixed sum is expended annually for clothing, etc., according to a treaty made with these tribes; and in addition to this, regular supplies or rations of food are distributed every seven days. This weekly ration consists of twenty-one pounds of beef, three and a half pounds of flour, half a pound of sugar, three-eighths of a pound of coffee, and a certain quantity of beans, salt, baking-powder, soap, etc., for each individual Indian. Heads of families are provided with tickets — running for thirteen weeks, and on which numerals representing each week are printed — which on presentation at the agency entitle the holders to their share of the groceries, the issue clerk punching out one of the numerals mentioned at each weekly delivery of the supplies. Beef is issued every Monday "on the hoof," and "on block" at five different points, each band of forty-four Indians — men, women, and children — receiving one steer.

The distribution of beef at Darlington takes place at an isolated spot on the prairie, some distance from the agency, and the sights witnessed at a "big killing" present a scene at once picturesque and exciting, if somewhat revolting to the finer sensibilities in some of its details. Long before the hour appointed for the slaughter of the animals and the distribution of the meat, bands of savages take up the march for the rendezvous from all points of the adjacent country. Wagons — sometimes of the newest and most approved patterns, at others the veriest rattletraps to be found on four wheels, filled with squaws, and drawn by all kinds of teams, from the piebald, wall-eyed, pink-nosed ponies, to the patient and more or less broken-down mules, occasionally both horses and mules hitched to the same outfit — are crowded around the rough "corral" or fenced-in space on the prairie where the cattle are herded together, and over which, far up in the clear air, ragged-winged buzzards are circling. Mounted Indians gallop up, some armed with revolvers, others with carbines, and perched high up on the backs of their horses, ready for the exciting sport of pursuing and slaughtering the wild-eyed, long-horned Texan steers, that move restlessly about the narrow limits of the corral, bellowing nervously as if in dread anticipation of their doom. A fire is burning near by in which the branding-irons are being heated, and policemen and scouts, herders and agency officials, move about in the rapidly increasing crowd, busily preparing for the work of selecting and turning over the beeves designed for slaughter to the waiting Indian butchers. Descending from the "ambulance" in which we have driven over from the "post," accompanying the young officer detailed to be present at the "issue," we approach a rough log cabin, built close up to the fence, in which are placed the scales for weighing each steer as it is driven into the long narrow space connecting the corral with the gates out of which the brutes are liberated, only to fall victims to the eager savages awaiting them on the prairie. Bounded by a high fence on

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each side, this lane, so contracted in its width as to admit of the passage of but one animal at a time, is crowded with the frightened steers, who push and gore one another in frantic efforts to escape from the torture of the branding-irons and knives busily plied by the Indians perched on the top rail of the fence, as each one marks in his particular manner the "beef" intended for issue to his band.

Rapidly following one another, the brutes are released one by one through the gate opened at intervals by a single policeman, who frequently has to exert all his agility to escape the angry sideward thrust of their horns as the cattle rush through the narrow opening. Some of them dash frantically out over the plain, bellowing furiously and throwing up the dirt and dust with the sharp points of their cloven hoofs; others stop for a moment bewildered, foaming at the mouth and snorting with fear and rage, and then gallop away. Indians mount rapidly and start after, revolver or carbine in hand, and a regular hunt in all directions over the rolling prairie in front of us begins, as the maddened brutes vainly endeavor to escape from their ruthless pursuers. Jumping into the ambulance, we too drive out to get a nearer view, and we must confess that our participation in a sort of "Wild West" hunt in a "spring wagon," instead of on horseback, is a decidedly novel experience to us, particularly as the Indians are none too expert as marksmen and are apt to shoot wildly, while an excited Texan steer has no respect for government ambulances or "special artists." However, our object is to "git thar," to use an apt Western expression, and to procure a good opportunity for making our notes and sketches, so, under the circumstances, our means of transportation is the best we could have desired.

Under the pitiless shots of the butcher the victim falls to the ground, and before its limbs have ceased to move in the convulsions of death, the hunter has dismounted, and the long, keen-bladed knife is plunged to the hilt in the still quivering body of the dying brute. With a yell the Indian signals to the squaws, who, urging their horses on, come rapidly out in their wagons from the corral, to begin the work of flaying and butchering. They swarm around the carcass with savage eagerness, and the tidbits, such as the heart, liver, etc., are quickly cut out, and sometimes devoured on the spot. Every portion of the "beef" — entrails and all — is used for food, and soon the wagons, loaded with huge lumps of still warm meat, drops of blood oozing through the cracks in their floors, move away from the scene of slaughter, and the buzzards flock down to gather up such stray bits — scanty fare indeed — as may have been left on the ground.

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