

■ The Surrender of Geronimo

Date: 1886 (published 1906)

Author: Geronimo, with S. M. Barrett

Genre: autobiography

Summary Overview

Geronimo's autobiography, from which these passages are taken, was one of the few records that told of the Native American-white conflict from the Native American perspective. As such, it was and is of great value. Additionally, the fact that it was Geronimo, the last Apache leader to try to retain his freedom through the use of arms, made it even more significant. He was the last major American Indian leader to surrender to the US government, having fought on and off for three decades, and successfully evaded thousands of army troops. The inclusion of Geronimo's thoughts, in addition to his account of which events he deemed important, has made a substantial contribution to a full understanding of the conflict and its resolution. The surrender of Geronimo, and his followers, the focus of the text, brought to an end the last major deployment of army troops within the United States for a military purpose. For those settling in the American Southwest, Geronimo's surrender signified that this region was finally to be fully integrated into the United States.

Defining Moment

Although the Indian groups collectively known as the Apaches were not exceptionally large in number, they did make their presence known through their fierce interaction with their neighbors. When the Spanish, and later the Americans, came into contact with them, this pattern continued. However, these outside groups had not had historical interaction with the Apaches, and thus did not understand the Apache culture. The nineteenth-century transition from Spanish to Mexican to American claims for this territory, did not always go smoothly. The lack of understanding lingered, stirring up discontent and a series of wars between Apaches and the group currently claiming ownership of the re-

gion. During this transitional period, miscommunication and less than honorable negotiations, first with Mangus Coloradas (Central Apache), then with Cochise (Chiricahua Apache), and later with Geronimo (Bedonkohe Apache) stimulated the on-again, off-again fighting. Geronimo demonstrated an extraordinary ability to survive not only difficult living conditions, but also the battle with any number of opponents. By the end of the struggle there were more than 5,000 American Army troops, hundreds of Indian scouts, and hundreds more civilian volunteers arrayed against Geronimo and his fewer than forty Apache warriors. Special communication lines were established, in order to try to get any information about Geronimo quickly to these forces. Although he had evaded his opponents for years, it seems ultimately to have become clear to Geronimo that the Americans could not be stopped from taking over the region.

This was something that Native American tribes across North America had come to realize as American settlers came to find the region desirable. The Apache homeland just happened to be the last area, in what became the lower forty-eight states, where settlers arrived in large numbers. Thus, the surrender of Geronimo was the surrender of the last leader of a major tribe that had tried to use traditional warfare to preserve their freedom and way of life. While there were later battles and massacres, never again was there a Native American leader who systematically tried to defeat the deployed forces of the United States. This was the end of an era and part of what was known as the closing of the American frontier. Geronimo's autobiography was dictated two decades after the surrender, when the Apache leader sought to let Americans know his side of the story.

Author Biography

Geronimo (1829–1909) was born in what is now Arizona and became a leader of the Bedonkohe Apache people. His given name could be written as Goyathlay. His father had been tribal chief, but died before Geronimo reached maturity. Becoming a warrior at sixteen, he married the next year and had three children. In 1851, while he was peacefully trading in town, Mexican soldiers raided his camp, killing dozens, including all his family. From that day on he saw himself as a warrior, and attacked Mexicans whenever he had the chance. Trying to protect their traditional way of life, Geronimo joined with other Apaches to contest American intrusion, as well as in ongoing differences with Mexicans. From 1851 to 1886, Geronimo was a feared warrior,

but he also tried several times to make peace with the Americans. In the 1880s, the American Army had more than 100 soldiers for each Apache warrior and finally ground down their resistance. Geronimo surrendered and lived the rest of his life as a prisoner of war, although relatively freely after the first few years. The last fifteen years of his life he lived in Oklahoma and became a national celebrity. His last words were that surrendering had been a mistake.

Geronimo was not literate, so he dictated his autobiography to S. M. Barrett, who had been superintendent of education in Lawton, Oklahoma. Barrett had previously helped Geronimo in another matter and was accepted as his friend by Geronimo when he discovered that Barrett had been wounded by a Mexican.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

CHAPTER XVI IN PRISON AND ON THE WARPATH

Soon after we arrived in New Mexico two companies of scouts were sent from San Carlos. When they came to Hot Springs they sent word for me and Victoria to come to town. The messengers did not say what they wanted with us, but as they seemed friendly we thought they wanted a council, and rode in to meet the officers. As soon as we arrived in town soldiers met us, disarmed us, and took us both to headquarters, where we were tried by court-martial. They asked us only a few questions and then Victoria was released and I was sentenced to the guardhouse. Scouts conducted me to the guardhouse and put me in chains. When I asked them why they did this they said it was because I had left Apache Pass.

I do not think that I ever belonged to those soldiers at Apache Pass, or that I should have asked them where I might go. Our bands could no longer live in peace [32] together, and so we had quietly withdrawn, expecting to live with Victoria's band, where we thought we would not be molested. They also sentenced seven other Apaches to chains in the guardhouse.

I do not know why this was done, for these Indians had simply followed me from Apache Pass to Hot Springs. If it was wrong (and I do not think it was wrong) for us to go to Hot Springs, I alone was to blame. They

asked the soldiers in charge why they were imprisoned and chained, but received no answer.

I was kept a prisoner for four months, during which time I was transferred to San Carlos. Then I think I had another trial, although I was not present. In fact I do not know that I had another trial, but I was told that I had, and at any rate I was released.

After this we had no more trouble with the soldiers, but I never felt at ease any longer at the Post. We were allowed to live above San Carlos at a place now called Geronimo. A man whom the Indians called "Nick Golee" was agent at this place. All went well here for a period of two years, but we were not satisfied.

In the summer of 1883 a rumor was current that the officers were again planning to imprison our leaders. This rumor served to revive the memory of all our past wrongs—the massacre in the tent at Apache Pass, the fate of Mangus-Colorado, and my own unjust imprisonment, which might easily have been death to me. Just at this time we were told that the officers wanted us to come up the river above Geronimo to a fort (Fort Thomas) to hold a council with them. We did not believe that any good could come of this conference, or that there was any need of it; so we held a council ourselves, and fearing treachery, decided to leave the reservation. We thought it more manly to die on the warpath than to be killed in prison.

There were in all about 250 Indians, chiefly the Bedonkohe and Nedni Apaches, led by myself and Whoa. We went through Apache Pass and just west of there had a fight with the United States troops. In this battle we killed three soldiers and lost none.

We went on toward Old Mexico, but on the second day after this United States soldiers overtook us about three o'clock in the afternoon and we fought until dark. The ground where we were attacked was very rough, which was to our advantage, for the troops were compelled to dismount in order to fight us. I do not know how many soldiers we killed, but we lost only one warrior and three children. We had plenty of guns and ammunition at this time. Many of the guns and much ammunition we had accumulated while living in the reservation, and the remainder we had obtained from the White Mountain Apaches when we left the reservation.

Troops did not follow us any longer, so we went south almost to Casa Grande and camped in the Sierra de Sahuaripa Mountains. We ranged in the mountains of Old Mexico for about a year, then returned to San Carlos, taking with us a herd of cattle and horses.

Soon after we arrived at San Carlos the officer in charge, General Crook, took the horses and cattle away from us. I told him that these were not white men's cattle, but belonged to us, for we had taken them from the Mexicans during our wars. I also told him that we did not intend to kill these animals, but that we wished to keep them and raise stock on our range. He would not listen to me, but took the stock. I went up near Fort Apache and General Crook ordered officers, soldiers, and scouts to see that I was arrested; if I offered resistance they were instructed to kill me.

This information was brought to me by the Indians. When I learned of this proposed action I left for Old Mexico, and about four hundred Indians went with me. They were the Bedonkohe, Chokonen, and Nedni Apaches. At this time Whoa was dead, and Naiche was the only chief with me. We went south into Sonora and camped in the mountains. Troops followed us, but did not attack us until we were camped in the mountains west of Casa Grande. Here we were attacked by Government Indian scouts. One boy was killed and nearly all of our women and children were captured. [33]

After this battle we went south of Casa Grande and

made a camp, but within a few days this camp was attacked by Mexican soldiers. We skirmished with them all day, killing a few Mexicans, but sustaining no loss ourselves.

That night we went east into the foothills of the Sierra Madre Mountains and made another camp. Mexican troops trailed us, and after a few days attacked our camp again. This time the Mexicans had a very large army, and we avoided a general engagement. It is senseless to fight when you cannot hope to win.

That night we held a council of war; our scouts had reported bands of United States and Mexican troops at many points in the mountains. We estimated that about two thousand soldiers were ranging these mountains seeking to capture us.

General Crook had come down into Mexico with the United States troops. They were camped in the Sierra de Antunez Mountains. Scouts told me that General Crook wished to see me and I went to his camp. When I arrived General Crook said to me, "Why did you leave the reservation?" I said: "You told me that I might live in the reservation the same as white people lived. One year I raised a crop of corn, and gathered and stored it, and the next year I put in a crop of oats, and when the crop was almost ready to harvest, you told your soldiers to put me in prison, and if I resisted to kill me. If I had been let alone I would now have been in good circumstances, but instead of that you and the Mexicans are hunting me with soldiers." He said: "I never gave any such orders; the troops at Fort Apache, who spread this report, knew that it was untrue." Then I agreed to go back with him to San Carlos.

It was hard for me to believe him at that time. Now I know that what he said was untrue, [34] and I firmly believe that he did issue the orders for me to be put in prison, or to be killed in case I offered resistance.

FOOTNOTES [from original publication]:

[32] Victoria, chief of the Hot Spring Apaches, met his death in opposing the forcible removal of his band to a reservation, because having previously tried and failed he felt it impossible for separate bands of Apaches to live at peace under such arrangement.

[33] Geronimo's whole family, excepting his eldest son, a warrior, were captured.

[34] Geronimo's exact words, for which the Editor disclaims any responsibility.

CHAPTER XVII THE FINAL STRUGGLE

We started with all our tribe to go with General Crook back to the United States, but I feared treachery and decided to remain in Mexico. We were not under any guard at this time. The United States troops marched in front and the Indians followed, and when we became suspicious, we turned back. I do not know how far the United States army went after myself, and some warriors turned back before we were missed, and I do not care.

I have suffered much from such unjust orders as those of General Crook. Such acts have caused much distress to my people. I think that General Crook's death [35] was sent by the Almighty as a punishment for the many evil deeds he committed.

Soon General Miles was made commander of all the western posts, and troops trailed us continually. They were led by Captain Lawton, who had good scouts. The Mexican [36] soldiers also became more active and more numerous. We had skirmishes almost every day, and so we finally decided to break up into small bands. With six men and four women I made for the range of mountains near Hot Springs, New Mexico. We passed many cattle ranches, but had no trouble with the cowboys. We killed cattle to eat whenever we were in need of food, but we frequently suffered greatly for water. At one time we had no water for two days and nights and our horses almost died from thirst. We ranged in the mountains of New Mexico for some time, then thinking that perhaps the troops had left Mexico, we returned. On our return through Old Mexico we attacked every Mexican found, even if for no other reason than to kill. We believed they had asked the United States troops to come down to Mexico to fight us.

South of Casa Grande, near a place called by the Indians Gosoda, there was a road leading out from the town. There was much freighting carried on by the Mexicans over this road. Where the road ran through a mountain pass we stayed in hiding, and whenever Mexican freighters passed we killed them, took what supplies we wanted, and destroyed the remainder. We were reckless

of our lives, because we felt that every man's hand was against us. If we returned to the reservation we would be put in prison and killed; if we stayed in Mexico they would continue to send soldiers to fight us; so we gave no quarter to anyone and asked no favors.

After some time we left Gosoda and soon were reunited with our tribe in the Sierra de Antunez Mountains.

Contrary to our expectations the United States soldiers had not left the mountains in Mexico, and were soon trailing us and skirmishing with us almost every day. Four or five times they surprised our camp. One time they surprised us about nine o'clock in the morning, and captured all our horses [37] (nineteen in number) and secured our store of dried meats. We also lost three Indians in this encounter. About the middle of the afternoon of the same day we attacked them from the rear as they were passing through a prairie—killed one soldier, but lost none ourselves. In this skirmish we recovered all our horses except three that belonged to me. The three horses that we did not recover were the best riding horses we had.

Soon after this we made a treaty with the Mexican troops. They told us that the United States troops were the real cause of these wars, and agreed not to fight any more with us provided we would return to the United States. This we agreed to do, and resumed our march, expecting to try to make a treaty with the United States soldiers and return to Arizona. There seemed to be no other course to pursue.

Soon after this scouts from Captain Lawton's troops told us that he wished to make a treaty with us; but I knew that General Miles was the chief of the American troops, and I decided to treat with him.

We continued to move our camp northward, and the American troops also moved northward, [38] keeping at no great distance from us, but not attacking us.

I sent my brother Porico (White Horse) with Mr. George Wratten on to Fort Bowie to see General Miles, and to tell him that we wished to return to Arizona; but before these messengers returned I met two Indian scouts—Kayitah, a Chokonen Apache, and Marteen, a Nedni Apache. They were serving as scouts for Captain Lawton's troops. They told me that General Miles had come and had sent them to ask me to meet him. So I

went to the camp of the United States troops to meet General Miles.

When I arrived at their camp I went directly to General Miles and told him how I had been wronged, and that I wanted to return to the United States with my people, as we wished to see our families, who had been captured [39] and taken away from us.

General Miles said to me: "The President of the United States has sent me to speak to you. He has heard of your trouble with the white men, and says that if you will agree to a few words of treaty we need have no more trouble. Geronimo, if you will agree to a few words of treaty all will be satisfactorily arranged."

So General Miles told me how we could be brothers to each other. We raised our hands to heaven and said that the treaty was not to be broken. We took an oath not to do any wrong to each other or to scheme against each other.

Then he talked with me for a long time and told me what he would do for me in the future if I would agree to the treaty. I did not greatly believe General Miles, but because the President of the United States had sent me word I agreed to make the treaty, and to keep it. Then I asked General Miles what the treaty would be. General Miles said to me: [40] "I will take you under Government protection; I will build you a house; I will fence you much land; I will give you cattle, horses, mules, and farming implements. You will be furnished with men to work the farm, for you yourself will not have to work. In the fall I will send you blankets and clothing so that you will not suffer from cold in the winter time.

"There is plenty of timber, water, and grass in the land to which I will send you. You will live with your tribe and with your family. If you agree to this treaty you shall see your family within five days."

I said to General Miles: "All the officers that have been in charge of the Indians have talked that way, and it sounds like a story to me; I hardly believe you."

He said: "This time it is the truth."

I said: "General Miles, I do not know the laws of the white man, nor of this new country where you are to send

me, and I might break their laws."

He said: "While I live you will not be arrested."

Then I agreed to make the treaty. (Since I have been a prisoner of war I have been arrested and placed in the guardhouse twice for drinking whisky.)

We stood between his troopers and my warriors. We placed a large stone on the blanket before us. Our treaty was made by this stone, and it was to last until the stone should crumble to dust; so we made the treaty, and bound each other with an oath.

I do not believe that I have ever violated that treaty; but General Miles [41] never fulfilled his promises.

When we had made the treaty General Miles said to me: "My brother, you have in your mind how you are going to kill men, and other thoughts of war; I want you to put that out of your mind, and change your thoughts to peace."

Then I agreed and gave up my arms. I said: "I will quit the warpath and live at peace hereafter."

Then General Miles swept a spot of ground clear with his hand, and said: "Your past deeds shall be wiped out like this and you will start a new life."

FOOTNOTES [from original publication]:

[35] These are the exact words of Geronimo. The Editor is not responsible for this criticism of General Crook.

[36] Governor Torres of Sonora had agreed to coöperate with our troops in exterminating or capturing this tribe.

[37] Captain Lawton reports officially the same engagement, but makes no mention of the recapture (by the Apaches) of the horses.

[38] See note page 37.

[39] See page 33.

[40] For terms of treaty see page 154 [in original publication].

[41] The criticisms of General Miles in the foregoing chapter are from Geronimo, not from the Editor.

GLOSSARY

Apache Pass: a mountain pass in southeast Arizona, the location of a temporary reservation and Fort Bowie

Geronimo (location): The location of Fort Thomas in eastern Arizona, south of Safford; Geronimo and Fort Thomas are now abandoned, but the San Carlos Reservation remains

Mangus-Colorado: an Apache war leader from 1820–1862 who was tortured and murdered by Americans soldiers when he tried to negotiate a peace agreement

Document Analysis

Having spent two years on the San Carlos Reservation, Geronimo and his followers left the reservation in 1881. It was during this period off the reservation that Chapter XVI began. These two chapters of Geronimo's autobiography continue to document much of what had been contained in the previous fifteen, concerning the uncertainty of relations between the Apaches and the Army, or the Mexicans. When off the reservation, continual small skirmishes took a toll on both sides. Ultimately, Geronimo recognized that those who followed him could not continue to live a hard life on the run, and he decided to make peace. He did not believe anything promised him, having seen promises made to previous leaders disappear, as well as having personal experience with broken promises. However, at the time of the last chapter, about one-fourth of the US Army was trying to capture him, while he was supported by fewer than forty warriors, and accompanied by just over 100 others, who needed protection and were traveling with him. When Geronimo believed it was finally time to give up the fight, he arranged a meeting with General Miles, the commander in the region. They then reached an agreement to bring peace to the area, with the result that Geronimo and those with him were deported to military bases in Florida, and then Alabama, and finally ending up at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. As Geronimo stated, he did follow his end of the agreement for the remaining years of his life. With this peaceful surrender, at the end of the historical document, for the first time since the massacre of his family in 1951, he vowed to "quit the warpath and live at peace hereafter."

This autobiography was intended for the general public, in order that they might understand what the Apaches had faced. Because it was dictated, many scholars have said that it follows the form of oral histories that had been handed down as part of the Apache

heritage. Obviously told from Geronimo's perspective, it does seem to have followed the viewpoint of a traditional warrior. Because Geronimo was trying to avenge the loss of his family, or trying to help his people retain their way of life, he does not show any remorse for the fighting or the killing of so many people. The way his story unfolds, these were just events to be expected for someone in his position. When the tribe was attacked, it was the warrior's job to repel the attacker, whatever defensive or offensive efforts were necessary. While Geronimo adapted to the new way of life after his surrender, well into the 1900s when he was in Oklahoma, whenever the opportunity availed itself, he asked everyone—up to the president himself—to allow his people to return to Arizona. When he surrendered, the war had been lost and this request was never granted.

Essential Themes

Geronimo's recollection of the major events during the early 1880s are obviously one-sided, although if compared with army records, the central points are similar. However, what is not in the American or Mexican records are the feelings of mistrust felt by Geronimo and the other Apaches, and the belief that these outsiders could not be trusted. The Apaches did not live what would be viewed by Euroamericans as a "civilized" life, but they did have a way of life that was predictable. The lack of respect felt by Geronimo pushed him to the extreme. Thus, when he mentions that, toward the end of his time in Mexico, he killed every Mexican who crossed his path, reports made by the Mexican commander were that probably 600 people were killed in one to two years by Geronimo, with no appreciable losses among the Apaches. All of that killing was the result of Mexican soldiers thirty years earlier attacking an Apache encampment, while most of the men were peacefully trading with their neighbors. If that had not

happened, Geronimo, the medicine man and warrior, might have remained the peaceful man that others had experienced in previous years.

It is clear that the American leaders did not understand the Apaches (or the various groupings within that designation). From the text, it is also clear that the Apaches did not fully understand the Americans, either. The hard life in this rather desolate region affected everyone. However, for decades, Geronimo was willing to live that hard life, scrambling from one place to another rather than face the uncertainties of living with and dealing with the Americans. For the Americans, this was unthinkable. This lack of understanding of the extremes to which Geronimo and the Apaches would go made the gulf between the two groups even wider. Fortunately, in the end, both General Miles and Geronimo were willing to look beyond the current situation and their personal preferences, to craft a solution that would end several decades of war, with Geronimo

as the Apache leader for the last three. Calling upon the power of the unseen “President of the United States,” Geronimo hoped that this agreement would be beneficial to everyone, even though he knew it meant the end of the traditional Apache way of life.

—Donald A. Watt, PhD

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