

Visions of COMANCHERIA

By SUSAN and BILL DRAGOO

PHOTOGRAPHY by SUSAN DRAGOO

Generations ago, members of a Native culture, rich in horses and with lives centered around the bison, made their way to the mountains and prairies of what became Oklahoma, eventually claiming it as their homeland. Today's traveler can follow in their storied wake at sites that blur the demarcation between past and present.

Medicine bluff, I afterwards learned, figured prominently in Indian history, superstitions, and tradition. The bluff, from time immemorial, had been held in high reverence by all the tribes who had dwelt or hunted in the vicinity, and by none more so than by the Comanches and the Wichita [sic]. The hill was considered to possess miraculous and mysterious influences. There the Great Spirit often descended, and from the bluff looked over and cared for his people, saw that game was abundant, and that his children were prosperous and happy. Upon the summit of the principal knoll, the Comanche medicine men had erected a cairn of stones about six feet in height. Here the sick repaired, or were brought by their relatives or friends, and were left to the invisible presence and subtle power of the Great Father.

—DE BENNEVILLE RANDOLPH KEIM IN
SHERIDAN'S TROOPERS ON THE BORDERS, 1870

Comanches have long rested and prayed on the steeps of the Wichitas, where the views from Elk Mountain—and from many other areas in southwestern Oklahoma—remain restorative.

ALONE HIKER NEGOTIATES the rocky trail to Medicine Bluffs. The escarpment rises 320 feet from the blue-green waters of the creek that bears its name.

Looking across, she is rewarded with a majestic view of this sacred place. A hawk circles overhead, buoyed effortlessly by the wind's lift. She treads on, each step taking her closer to the base of the steel blue bluffs and back, through a window of time, 150 years.

This is Comancheria, more than 240,000 square miles of the Southern Plains dominated by the Comanche Indians for much of

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the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Encompassing the Llano Estacado, or "Staked Plains," of the Texas Panhandle, Comanche territory was bounded on the east by the Cross Timbers, a thick tangle of scrubby woodlands extending from southeast Kansas to central Texas that includes the majority of eastern Oklahoma.

IN 1706, WHEN history first records their emergence, the indigenous peoples who came to be known as Comanches were a small tribe of hunter-gatherers living on the northern frontier of New Mexico. It was here, at the advancing edge of the Spanish empire, that they launched an explosive expansion, buying and stealing horses, reinventing themselves as mounted warriors, and forcing their way southeast. Becoming known as "Lords of the South Plains," they carved out a vast territory and forestalled Euro-American intrusions into the Southwest well into the second half of the nineteenth century.



The word *Comanche* comes from a Ute word meaning "enemy," but to themselves, the Comanches have always been Numunuu, or "The People." Historians believe they came from the Rocky Mountain country north of the headwaters of the Arkansas to that river's valley in what is now eastern Colorado and western Kansas in about 1700 before they moved on to present-day New Mexico. One backstory, however, goes deeper.

"There were many different peoples under the name of the Comanche and different stories about their origins," says Comanche Nation historic preservation officer Jimmy Arterberry, who suggests the Southern Plains, including the part of southwestern Oklahoma which became the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache Reservation, may have been the ancient homeland of The People. "It is much broader than what history has recorded. Our relationship with the Creator defined where home would be and put us on that path. The Great Spirit said, 'This is your place. You'll be able to see for miles and miles and miles.'"

Regardless of their specific origins, what is beyond dispute is that after their migration to the Southern Plains in the early part of the eighteenth century, the Comanches organized their lives around the bison, and their horses thrived in the new environment. Abundant grasses provided year-round forage; streams and playa lakes yielded sufficient water. In the early 1800s, there were 50 to 60 million bison in North America. They provided food, clothing, utensils, shelter, fuel, rope, saddles, and trade goods for the Indians until the 1880s, when the

Sumac grows in the Black Kettle National Grassland near Cheyenne.



The Antelope Hills, south of the Canadian River in Roger Mills County, once were known as the Boundary Mounds and designated the border between the United States and Spanish territory.

great herds were decimated to satisfy the buffalo hide market in the expanding Euro-American population.

Ultimately, the Comanche empire would diminish as well, consolidating around the Wichita Mountains and culminating in surrender at Fort Sill in June 1875. The People's transition to a new way of life was led by Principal Chief Quanah Parker and is documented in S.C. Gwynne's bestselling 2010 book *Empire of the Summer Moon*, which made Comanche history a topic of recent interest.

WHILE THE COMANCHE lordship of the Southern Plains is past, the rivers, canyons, mountains, and prairie of Comancheria remain. The landscape is remote, its beauty often

subtle. Where the casual observer sees grass and gullies, the student of history finds buffalo pasture, forage, and shelter. Most areas are accessible by vehicle, and a willingness to linger or hike into the backcountry can reward the adventurer with a bond to the past. In Oklahoma, those connections are everywhere, emerging through themes of grass, water, bison, and horse.

In the two centuries preceding their surrender, the Comanches followed bison herds, moving to fresh hunting grounds and seeking windbreaks in winter and open spaces where the breezes flowed in summer. They camped near water, favoring creeks and springs along major rivers—the Arkansas, Cimarron, Canadian, Washita, and Red—with thoroughfares for commerce and raiding parties.

"You could walk from here to the Rocky Mountains on native sod," says Chris Hise, director of the Four Canyon Preserve, a gem of a wild place in Ellis County.

The landscape is rugged, and the Nature Conservancy, owner of the 4,000-acre preserve, works to keep it in a state resembling pre-European settlement. Its deep canyons and high ridges offer challenging hiking, but the scenic views make the steep climbs well worth the effort.

The preserve incorporates property on the Canadian River. The land here remains much as it was hundreds of years ago, but taking in the wide floodplain with its narrow stream shows how the river has changed over time.

"Historically, the Canadian was much broader, a half-mile or more," says Hise.

"Today, its channel is about a hundred yards wide."

Visitors can experience the preserve by appointment, driving a high-clearance vehicle into the river valley, trekking across mixed-grass prairie to overlooks, and exploring canyons canopied by cottonwoods. The bark of these trees once served as winter forage for Indian ponies.

"Plains Indians would cut cottonwoods into logs about four feet long," says Hise, "and the horses would eat the bark off the log like corn off the cob, holding the log with a hoof."

Southwest of the preserve lie the Antelope Hills, a series of buttes in the bend of the Canadian that were landmarks for early travelers. They mark the site of an 1858 battle in which Texas Rangers attacked a Comanche village

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on nearby Little Robe Creek, inflicting a decisive defeat.

Ascending to the flat, 2,600-foot summit of the hills requires a scramble over rough, porous, and sometimes crumbling rock. From a perch on the edge, the view in every direction is a scene from a Hollywood western, lacking only the tiny dust cloud on the horizon likely to betray an approaching enemy. The hills are easily accessible from county roads, and according to locals, most landowners don't mind visitors climbing them as long as they leave the terrain as they found it.

Near the Antelope Hills, another historic site commemorates the Battle of the Washita. Here, in 1868, Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer led the Seventh U.S. Cavalry on a surprise dawn attack against the Southern Cheyenne village of Peace Chief Black Kettle.

“The reason Custer was in such a hurry to get in and out of there was that Comanches and Kiowas were also camped in the area and were coming to the aid of the Cheyenne and Arapaho,” says Towana Spivey, a historian and archaeologist who retired as director and curator of the Fort Sill National Historic Landmark and Museum in 2012. “The Comanche/Kiowa support prompted Custer to quickly return north to Camp Supply, leaving some of his soldiers behind, something commanders do not like to do. Those soldiers, under Major Joel Elliott, were massacred. As a result, Custer's own subordinates hated him for leaving Elliot behind. This followed him to Little Bighorn and could have been a major factor in those subordinates not going to his aid there.”

The Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, administered through the National Park Service, is located within the 31,000-acre Black Kettle National Grassland near Cheyenne. Like Four

Canyon, it preserves a significant remnant of mixed-grass prairie. The battlefield's Cultural Heritage Center blends into the landscape through its architecture and materials. Red brick and tan stripes represent the natural surroundings, and its broad gallery window offers an impressive view of the Washita River valley. In the grasslands, campsites near water are abundant, and unpaved scenic drives offer a truly off-the-beaten-path experience.

Another example of pristine prairie is the Sandy Sanders Wildlife Management Area southwest of Sayre. The 19,100-acre preserve overseen by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation stands in stunning contrast to the seemingly featureless landscape that can be seen from Interstate 40. The approach from the northeast presents a broad valley punctuated with white-topped pyramids of red shale and gypsum best viewed at sunrise or sunset, when low rays intensify the reds of the buttes and sparkle on flecks of gypsum.

The Sandy Sanders WMA is accessible with a high-clearance vehicle on dirt roads for primitive camping, hiking, trail riding, bird watching, and hunting.

Sayre is an access point for the North Fork of the Red River, a place to find wild plants Comanches would have used in making *tha-ab*, commonly known as pemmican. Partially dried wild plums or berries gave flavor to the dried meat, which was pounded thoroughly, softened over a fire, and mixed with fruit or pecans. Tallow was added to make a food both palatable and portable.

Along the North Fork of the Red and just south of Sayre, the Red River Ranch Retreat offers lodging and a venue for hunting, trail riding, and plum gathering in the thickets along the river.



Four cliffs stretching a mile in length form the Medicine Bluffs at Fort Sill, which are on the National Register of Historic Places. This geographic feature has long served as a landmark and sacred site for local tribes. When the base was established in 1869, the Indians of the area called it the “Soldier House at Medicine Bluffs.”



Road Map to Comancheria in Oklahoma

THIS STORY INCLUDES SACRED VISTAS, MOUNTAINS RICH IN HISTORY, AND NATIVE GRASSES. HERE'S HOW TO FIND THEM.

- 1. FOUR CANYON PRESERVE** is approximately 16 miles southeast of Arnett. Visitors are required to make an appointment prior to visiting. For appointments and directions, visit nature.org/Oklahoma.
- The **ANTELOPE HILLS** are approximately six miles north of State Highway 33 on N1740 Road in Roger Mills County. The hills are located on private property, and permission is required to visit parts of the site. Call Charlie or June Hartley at (580) 983-2413 before making a trip.
- The **BLACK KETTLE NATIONAL GRASSLAND** is located at 18555 U.S. 87A in Cheyenne. (580) 497-2143.
- The **Cultural Heritage Center** at the **WASHITA BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE** is inside the Black Kettle National Grassland at 18555 S.H. 47A in Cheyenne. (580) 497-2742 or nps.gov/waba.
- The **RED RIVER RANCH RETREAT** is approximately six miles southeast of Sayre. From Interstate 40, take Exit 20 to U.S. Highway 283 South. Turn left on East 1210 Road. Continue for three-and-a-half miles. When pavement ends, continue east through the Maranatha gate. Call (580) 928-2074 before visiting. redriverranchretreat.com.
- The **SANDY SANDERS WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA** is nine miles south of Erick on State Highway 30. (580) 471-3371 or wildlifedepartment.com/facts_maps/wma/sandy.
- The **WICHITA MOUNTAINS WILDLIFE REFUGE** begins seven miles west of Interstate 44 on State Highway 49 northwest of Lawton. The refuge headquarters is at 32 Refuge Headquarters. (580) 429-3222 or fws.gov/refuge/Wichita_Mountains.
- CHARONS GARDEN WILDERNESS AREA** is on the west side of the refuge. The Charons Garden and Elk Mountain trails begin at the Sunset Picnic Area south of State Highway 49.
- To visit **MEDICINE BLUFFS**, take Exit 41 off Interstate 44 to access Key Gate at Fort Sill. Continue on Sheridan Road to Fort Sill Boulevard. Turn right on Fort Sill Boulevard until it ends at King Road. Turn left on King Road and cross the bridge over Medicine Creek and turn left onto Punch Bowl Road. Past Sportsman Services, drivers will reach Chattord Road, which leads to a left turn on another gravel road and the scenic view of the bluffs. All visitors to Fort Sill must have a government-issued identification card (driver license, military ID, etc.). Visitors are not permitted on the bluffs themselves but can view them from the north, across Medicine Creek, or hike to the creek itself.



The cactus and dry, rocky terrain of the Sandy Sanders Wildlife Management Area are home to bobcat, coyote, deer, black-tailed prairie dogs, and a variety of birds.

Southeast of Sayre, the Wichita Mountains feature prominently in the landscape, covering approximately 600 square miles. Through the ages, these ancient ridges sculpted by climactic forces into the knobs and domes visible today offered hiding places, hunting grounds, and encampment for the Comanches.

Now, the intrepid hiker can find a backcountry experience, while those seeking milder adventure can drive up the mountain to enjoy the spectacular views atop 2,464-foot Mount Scott. A winding road through the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge allows prairie dog and bison viewing and access to picnic areas and hiking trails.



The area is home to some of Oklahoma's best hiking, with the Charons Garden Trail inside the Charons Garden Wilderness Area topping the list. There, navigating the "Valley of Boulders" requires a steady nerve and is among many opportunities for adrenaline-pumping adventure in the Wichitas, which also boast some of the finest rock climbing areas in the Southwest.

In his 2010 book *Silent Witness: The Diary of a Historic Tree at Fort Sill*, Towana Spivey pays tribute to the Medicine Bluffs, which mark the southeastern edge of the Wichitas: "These steep, ancient cliffs relentlessly stand guard over the flowing creek at their base and present an imposing break in the landscape between the grassy meadows to the south and the rugged, boulder-strewn mountains to the north. The native people . . . have been coming to this region for more generations than I can count to take advantage of the cool, sweet water and the many grassy plants that dominate the area."

As many as 1.7 million people per year visit the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, including the Charons Garden Wilderness Area.

AS OKLAHOMANS, WE are challenged by our short history as a state to learn about the people who occupied this land before us and fortunate to have vivid geographical illustrations of their presence within reach. While it is possible to see the past only through what others have recorded and the windows of the imagination, many of the places where the Comanches lived, fought, and died are well preserved and welcome the traveler to connect with one of Oklahoma's rich layers of history—an era that in many ways still can be touched, trod, and breathed.

Comanches still revere the Medicine Bluffs, and at their base in the creek's wooded quiet, the mental image of a thriving village fires in the imagination. Tepees dot the landscape, buffalo meat dries in the sun, and ponies graze. A Comanche woman dips clear water from the stream.

In sheltered stillness beside that gentle stream, amid breezes and bird song, today's explorer is free to connect with Comancheria's past, perhaps to cup a hand in the cool waters or peer skyward along the soaring cliff face and offer her own prayers. Here, a connection is forged from the bonds of place and love of the land. It is kinship through a window in time. 🐾