

Second Battle of Adobe Walls¹

Dixon's narrative:²

Turning to my bed, I rolled it up and threw it on the front of my wagon. As I turned to pick up my gun, which lay on the ground, I looked in the direction of our horses. They were in sight. Something else caught my eye. Just beyond the horses, at the edge of some timber, was a large body of objects advancing vaguely in the dusky dawn toward our stock and in the direction of Adobe Walls. Though keen of vision, I could not make out what the objects were, even by straining my eyes.

Then I was thunderstruck. The black body of moving objects suddenly spread out like a fan, and from it went up one single, solid yell - a warwhoop that seemed to shake the very air of the early morning. Then came the thudding roar of running horses, and the hideous cries of the individual warriors, each embarked in the onslaught. I could see that hundreds of Indians were coming. Had it not been for the ridgepole, all of us would have been asleep.

The Indians, meanwhile, had stopped near Adobe Walls the afternoon before.

Quanah said:

We put saddles and blankets in trees and hobble extra ponies-make medicine paint faces put on warbonnets then travel in columns fours until pretty near a red hill near a little creek where houses were-we walk all the time-hear trot a long way off-when we get pretty near somebody want to go to sleep-He Bear say dismount hold lariats in hand-I call you-mount again-some go to sleep--some smoke tobacco and talk until He Bear and Tabananaka call when we mount again and go until little light-pretty soon we make a line-the chiefs try to hold young men back-go too fast--no good, go too fast--pretty soon they call out 'all right to go ahead' we charge down on horses in wild charge-threw up the dust high-I saw men and horses roll over and over-some men ahead wanted to catch the horses they drove off the horses- I was in middle-I got in [on?] house with other Comanches and poked holes ... to shoot--we killed two white men in wagon-the white men had big guns that kill a mile away-that pretty hard fight-from sunrise until 12 'clock-then we go back-I had on war bonnet I gave you [Scott] long time ago- that time I got shot in the side-my 1st wife's Father [Old Bear] had his leg broken...

The first mighty war whoop had frightened Dixon's horse frantic. After a great effort, the young buffalo hunter managed to grab the rope and tie the horse to his wagon. He then dashed for his gun, thinking at first that the Indians were only after the hunters' stock. Then he saw the long line of warriors heading straight for the buildings, whipping their horses as they thundered over the prairie. "There was never a more splendidly barbaric sight" said Dixon. "In after years I was glad that I had seen it. Hundreds of warriors, the flower of the fighting men of the southwestern plains tribes, mounted upon their finest

¹ From <http://www.pan-tex.net/usr/p/pampa-hist/neely2.htm>. The following is an excerpt from an excellent book about Quanah Parker, Bill Neeley, "The Last Comanche Chief", 1995, John Wiley & Sons, page 83-101. This narrative include excerpts from remarks by Billy Dixon, as well as Quanah Parker.

² Billy Dixon was a buffalo hunter who had recently led some settlers into the settlement around Adobe Walls.

horses, armed with guns and lances, and carrying heavy shields of thick buffalo hide, were coming like the wind. Over all was splashed the rich colors of red, vermilion and ochre, on the bodies of the men, on the bodies of the running horses. Scalps dangled from bridles, gorgeous warbonnets fluttered their plumes, bright feathers dangled from the tails and manes of the horses, and the bronzed, half-naked bodies of the riders glittered with ornaments of silver and brass. Behind this head-long charging host stretched the Plains, on whose horizon the rising sun was lifting its morning fires. The warriors seemed to emerge from this glowing background.

Dixon fired one shot and ran for the nearest building, which was Hanrahan's Saloon. The door was closed, but opened as he shouted. At that moment, Billy Ogg also reached the door and fell exhausted on the floor, having run all the way from the creek. With Dixon and Ogg safely inside the adobe building, the hunters scrambled to prepare a defense. They had scattered from their bedrolls outside the post to the nearest building. In Hanrahan's Saloon were the proprietor and several other men. The men in Hanrahan's were alert and ready to barricade the doors with whatever they could find to stack against them, while hunters in the other buildings had to roll from their beds and get their guns and ammunition. Hurriedly, they pushed furniture and boxes of merchandise against the doors.

Quanah, riding among the leaders in the charge of yelling Indians, lanced one of the unlucky Shadler brothers, who were rousing from sleep in one of their wagons. The Shadlers did not hear the approaching Indians until it was too late. His brother and their big guard dog were quickly dispatched by other warriors. The scalps of all three were taken. Thus was partially fulfilled Esa-tai's promise of killing the white men in their beds. But the other whites were now very much awake, and further scalps would be hard to come by.

Even as the Indians whooped in their exultation of counting coup on the Shadlers, the grim reality of their situation slowly replaced their euphoria. Behind the two-foot-thick adobe walls, the hunters were firing desperately at the charging warriors. Quanah ordered repeated attacks, and repeatedly had to withdraw as casualties mounted. He often charged at the head of the pack, and once he backed his horse against the door of a building and tried in vain to batter it down. In an act of great courage, Quanah raced his war horse in front of Rath's store, through a hail of bullets, to pick up He-we-a, a wounded Comanche. "Lifting the body with what seemed miraculous strength, he clung with foot and arm to the pony and swept past to safety. His friend was dead, but the enemy must be given no change to scalp him and doom his spirit to eternal wandering.

But soon Quanah himself was to feel the sting of a bullet penetrate the shield of medicine paint that Esa-tai had prepared for him. In one more charge his horse was shot out from under him. Thrown free, Quanah crawled to cover behind a buffalo carcass, only to be shot in the side. Quanah told Goodnight in later years that "his life had been saved in battle when a bullet was deflected by the buffalo powder horn that he wore swinging from his shoulder. After he was wounded he made his way to a plum thicket where he remained hidden until he was rescued, mounted behind another warrior. When Quanah

was taken out of the battle, the Indians lost their most able war leader, and with him their thrust. They did not charge again as before, but only circled the adobe buildings. A council was called by the older chiefs, who were not actively engaged in the fighting, to try to determine who had shot Quannah. All of the warriors who had been in the vicinity were questioned, and it was soon established that none of them had shot the Eagle. Esatai and the other members of the council began to wonder whether the white men had some new gun or gift of powerful medicine by which they could make bullets strike from behind as well as from in front. For a moment the Indians' courage faltered. In the natural world, they could face the greatest dangers and even give their lives to prove their mettle, but they could not fight the supernatural.

In spite of their misgivings, however, they decided to continue the attack against the well-fortified, well-armed whites. While acrid smoke from the huge buffalo guns filled the small enclosures, the hunters' eyes burned, they were very thirsty, and they had trouble breathing, but these were minor annoyances compared to the alternative; torture and death at the hands of hundreds of angry Indians.

"Time and again," according to Billy Dixon, "with the fury of a whirlwind, the Indians charged upon the building, only to sustain greater losses than they were able to inflict. This was a losing game, and if the Indians kept it up we stood a fair chance of killing most of them. I am sure we surprised the Indians as badly as they surprised us. They expected to find us asleep, unprepared for an attack. Their 'medicine' man had told them that all they would have to do would be to come to Adobe Walls and knock us on the head with sticks, and that our bullets would not be strong enough to break an Indian's skin.

The whites were also surprised from early in the battle to hear a military bugle orchestrating the charges and retreats of the Indians. Bat Masterson, then a young man in his twenties, said of the bugler, "We had in the building I was in [Hanrahan's Saloon] two men who had served in the United States army, and understood all the bugle calls. The first call blown was a rally, which our men instantly understood. The next was a charge, and that also was understood, and immediately the Indians came rushing forward to a fresh attack. Every bugle call he blew was understood by the ex-soldiers and orders were carried out to the letter by the Indians, showing that the bugler had the Indians thoroughly drilled. The bugler was killed late in the afternoon of the first day's fighting as he was running away from a wagon owned by the Shadler brothers, both of whom were killed in this same wagon.... Armitage shot him through the hack with a 50-caliber Sharp's rifle, as he was making his escape." The bugler was a black soldier who was thought to have deserted from the 10th Cavalry.

During the course of the fighting, Dixon acquired the use of a "big.50" from a man named Shepherd, Hanrahan's bartender. As the ammunition for the buffalo hunter's own gun was in Rath's store, Dixon wanted a .50 caliber Sharps because there was some ammunition for it in the saloon. According to Dixon, "He [Shepherd] was so glad to turn loose of it, and handed it to me so quickly that he almost dropped it. I had the reputation of a good shot and it was rather to the interest of all of us that I should have a powerful

gun. We had no way of telling what was happening to the men in the other buildings, and they were equally ignorant of what was happening to us. Not a man in our building had been hit. I could never see how we escaped, for at times the bullets poured in like hail and made us hug the sod walls like gophers when a hawk was swooping past. If the Indians had organized early in the battle and breached the doors, as Quanah had tried to do, there would have been a massacre.

Soon Dixon's supply of ammunition ran low, and he and Hanrahan made a desperate run for Rath's store. "I have no idea how many guns were cracking away at us," said Dixon, "but I do know that bullets rattled round us like hail. Providence seemed to be looking after the boys at Adobe Walls that day, and we got inside without a scratch, though badly winded. Hanrahan urged Dixon to return to the saloon with him, but the men at Rath's store begged this expert marksman to stay with them. Besides, as Dixon said, "There were fewer men at Rath's than at any other place, and their anxiety was increased by the presence of a woman, Mrs. Olds. If the latter fact should be learned by the Indians there was no telling what they might attempt, and a determined attack ... would have meant death for everybody in the store, for none would have suffered themselves to be taken alive nor permitted Mrs. Olds to be captured.

Dixon's courage was unquestioned, and also his honesty, on the basis of his admitting to having missed twice an Indian crawling through the grass at no great distance. On his third try with the Sharps .50, he hit his target.

By midafternoon the Indians were firing from an increasingly wider circle, forced to move ever farther from the deadly guns of the hunters. All of the white men, according to Dixon, thanked their lucky stars that they were behind walls of adobe; otherwise, they would have been burned alive. "Still there was no telling how desperate the Indians might become, rather than abandon the fight; it was easily possible for them to overwhelm us with the brute force of superior numbers by pressing the attack until they had broken down the doors, and which probably would have been attempted, however great the individual sacrifice, had the enemy been white men.

About four o'clock that afternoon, Dixon and some of the men ventured out to pick up Indian relics. It was then that he heard that Billy Tyler had been killed while attempting to aid the distressed animals in the corral near Myers and Leonard's store. The hunters soon discovered that they were afoot, as the Indians had killed all of their horses. "For the time we were at the end of the world," said Dixon, "our desperate extremity pressing heavily upon us, and our friends and comrades to the north ignorant of what was taking place.

After burying the Shadlers and Billy Tyler, the hunters beheaded the Indian bodies and put the heads on stakes outside "the Walls." Then they rolled the thirteen decapitated bodies onto buffalo robes and dragged them away from the buildings. They removed several dead horses the same way, and buried twelve animals that had died in a pile. On the second day, the hunters fired at several Indians on a bluff across the valley east of Adobe Walls. The Indians vanished. "Our situation looked rather gloomy," Dixon later

said. "With every horse dead or captured, we felt pretty sore all round. The Indians were somewhere close at hand, watching our every movement. We were depressed with the melancholy feeling that probably all the hunters out in the camps had been killed. Late that afternoon our spirits leaped up when we saw a team coming up the valley from the direction of the Canadian.

It was George Bellfield and his crew of hunters and skinners. That same day Jim and Bob Cater came in to Adobe Walls from their camp to the north. It was decided to send a rider to Dodge City for help. Bellfield furnished a horse, and Henry Lease volunteered to make the dangerous journey to Dodge. Lease was to wait until cover of darkness before attempting this.

Also on the second day, the Indians held a council. In the face of their anger, Esa-tai defended his medicine by saying that the power of his magic paint had been nullified when some of the warriors on the way to Adobe Walls had killed a skunk. According to Zoe Tilghman, "the council was assembled on a lower slope, with the crest of the ridge between them and the fort, out of sight, and, as they considered, too far for effective gunfire, even if on a level. The pony of Esa-tai, wearing the protective painting that its owner declared would ward off arrows or bullets, stood by. Suddenly it jerked its head, staggered and fell, blood oozing from a hole in its forehead. In a moment it was dead. The mark of the heavy buffalo slug was unmistakable. The pony had been killed by a shot from the plainsmen's guns, coming over the hill." It was the end of Esa-tai's spiritual hold over the Indians.

Brandishing a quirt, an angry Cheyenne warrior named Hippy approached Esa-tai, but the chiefs intervened to spare the disgraced medicine man a thorough flogging. Quanah said, "... the Cheyennes were pretty mad at Esati-what's the matter you medicine ...'pole cat medicine' [a term of derision]..."

A few bands slipped away that night. In the middle of the afternoon of the third day; the chiefs held another council. Afterward, Quanah, Stone Calf, White Shield, and about twenty other warriors rode to the top of the butte beyond East Adobe Walls Creek. Billy Dixon and his companions saw them silhouetted against the eastern sky. The sun hung in the sky behind the little cluster of adobe buildings.

Dixon wrote:

... some of the boys suggested that I try my big .50 on them. The distance was not far from three-fourths of a mile. A number of exaggerated accounts have been written about this incident. I took careful aim, and pulled the trigger. We saw an Indian fall from his horse. The others dashed out of sight behind a clump of timber. A few moments later two Indians ran quickly on foot to where the dead Indian lay, seized his body and scurried to cover. They had risked their lives, as we had frequently observed, to rescue a comrade who might be not only wounded but dead. I was admittedly a good marksman, yet this was what might be called a "scratch shot."

The Indian had not been killed, however. Co-hay-yah, an aged Comanche veteran of the battle, later described the effect of Dixon's long shot to Colonel Nye:

We lost the fight. The buffalo hunters were too much for us. They stood behind Adobe Walls. They had telescopes on their guns. Sometimes we would be standin, 'way off, resting and hardly thinking of the fight, and they would kill our horses. One of our men was knocked off his horse by a spent bullet fired at a range of about a mile. It stunned, but did not kill him.

Thus ended the battle of Adobe Walls. The white man's medicine was too strong for the Indians to risk the loss of any more warriors. "Pretty soon," Quanah said, "all go back, get saddles and bridles and go to village-I take all young men, go warpath to Texas."