

HOWARD McCORD

The Apache Kid

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The Apache Kid

I have twice been on mysterious jungle treks that were finally as empty as dreams; if what we sought was found, I did not know it. The way was hard and long, and the goal obscure, or worse, never shared with me. There were good reasons, doubtless, I should be ignorant. Tactical reasons, security reasons, I did not complain, for who, engrossed in such a mystery, can complain? I would not have had the pleasure of the mystery had I complained. But the small way, however steep, that Charlie and I had to go to search out the grave of the Apache Kid, was as clear as the air over the San Mateos.

The place was known, at least to a few, perhaps. It was generally known, let us say. It was on Cyclone Saddle, a little to the NW from the trail coming up from Cold Spring Canyon, between Apache Kid Peak to SE and West Blue Mountain to NW. Some years past the grave was marked, but no longer. Somewhere I saw an old photo of the grave, a neat rectangle marking it out, and a headboard. The Forest Service says of old that there is a tree blazed with two old crosses near it. Charlie Mangus, David Burwell, and I had decided to rediscover the spot, and celebrate that old Apache spirit we would pay homage to, described by Ed Dorn with these words:

The most absolute of the predatory tribes
Apache policy was to extirpate

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Every trace of civilization
From their province

Recollections of Gran Apacheria

Massai, later known as the Apache Kid, was the son of White Cloud and Little Star, Chiricahua Apaches, and born at Mescal Mountain near Globe, Arizona. A member of Geronimo's band, he and his friend, Gray Lizard, escaped from the prison train carrying the Apaches to Florida after their surrender to General Crook in 1886. General Miles, in his *Personal Recollections*, remarks on their escape. He made the long journey home with Gray Lizard, who went on to Mescal Mountain. Massai paused long enough in the Mescalero area, at a spot called the Rinconada, to steal a woman, and then headed into the San Mateo range, just west of the Rio Grande at the northern end of the Jornada del Muerto. Exactly how he escaped from the prison train, and made the walk back without being seen, so far as we know, is an Apache secret, or as unknown a thing as how many breaths he took on any given day. It was not worth remarking on.

His wife told afterwards that at first he kept her chained, but not long. They raised five children in the San Mateos, and she said Massai was "not bloodthirsty. He never killed anyone unless he was running short of ammunition or grub or needed a fresh horse, or something like that." At least, that's what Eugene Manlove Rhodes reports (*New Mexico Highway Journal*).

Massai escaped from the train in 1886. He got back in the San Mateos in 1887. He lived there close to twenty years. He was outside all law but his own for about as long as Eyvindur of Iceland was, and neither was the worse for it.

St. Augustine, quartered by Christianity, said, "Love, and do as you will," depending on love to give

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control. I don't know what Massai thought. He wanted to be free, and to live as he liked. He felt no need to love anyone who did not love him.

One version of the story has Massai picked up by Anglos as an infant, after a slaughter of Apaches in Skeleton Canyon, near Duncan, Arizona. This was Nana's band. The infant was fed burro milk, and raised by someone until he was sent east to an Indian School, where he perfected his English. In this story, he left school, bummed his way back, stole a wife, and went on as in the story. Annette Smith is telling this, and it can be found in *Chaparral Guide*. The Apache Kid would go to gambling halls to win money for his family, and sometimes people would be found dead in their cabins. Horses would be stolen. A man must do what a man must do, *nicht wahr?*

We drove the Jeep up White Mule Ridge to trail 87, not marked. But it was there. You can't miss a canyon that big. David was ill. He tried to walk in with his pack, but fell after two hundred yards, his legs giving out. We left him at the Jeep with a quart of Scotch, much water and food, and instructions to fight off the devils, no matter which direction they came from. Stay naked during the day, drink the Scotch, and we would be back on the morrow. Devils are everywhere. Charlie and I made a stumbling passage down the first quarter-mile of trail, which dropped from the ridge to the arroyo. Then we began a pleasant walk up the bottom of the canyon.

The trail was plain, but without sign of any passage. In three miles, as it narrowed and steepened, we walked quietly, and stopped when we heard a rock click on the hillside south. We looked up, and two mountain lions were bounding up the hillside to the crest. First time either of us had seen lion in the wild. They

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were yearlings and still hunting together. In a hundred yards, we kicked out a squad of mule deer from the brush, and they went clattering over the slope in their haste to escape. We had interrupted two lions' stalk for breakfast. Two more miles and we had come to such a narrowing of the canyon as to send us up the hillside in a series of switchbacks. We were at about 9000 feet, and I was breathing hard. Too many years at 600 feet. We decided to lay our big packs aside and continue with water and light gear only. This made the switchbacks easier, but they were still pitched at the angle of agony, and my method was will-over-sense: some few steps up, then rest, then some few more steps. I am old and wickered, and doubtless about 10,000 feet is my maximum without acclimatization. The col, Cyclone Saddle, was about that. Finally, we reached it. Beautiful ponderosa still, some aspen, and miles to see to the ne. I looked across the Jornada to the Oscuras, out of which such heavy storms had marched towards us two years before, as David and I walked the Jornada. A bit south were the San Andres, grey-brown and distant. I rested to find my breath and, after five minutes, began to amble through the trees in the saddle. This was an area of two or three acres, a rough park high up, with an Apache buried somewhere under the rock's skin. I could not imagine digging any grave here. If he were buried on this col, it would be only a foot or two down, and then be heaped with stones. He kept his wife and children nearby. They lived high to avoid those searching for missing horses, or out to avenge a death. Winters must have been very hard, even when they moved down in the canyons. It was more than two miles to the nearest spring, called on the map, "Twenty-five Yard Spring."

Henry Walter Hearn was in on the killing of the

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Apache Kid, and wrote up an account of it. In the December 1, 1988 edition of the *Magdalena Mountain Mail*, the tale was reprinted. Hearn says on September 4, 1906, Charles Anderson came by his place and asked him to help him to help tail someone who had broken into Charles' cabin, broke the dishes, slashed open the pillows, and left the place in a terrible mess. He had also stolen some horses. Hearn couldn't go that day, but four days later he met another of Charles' friends riding to get fresh horses for Charles. Harry James, and Jim Hiler Hearn came along then, and got Bill Keene and Charlie Yaples from the R bar R Ranch. They went by the Winston store to get some cheese, crackers, and sardines to take along, and he picked up his .30-30 Winchester and two .30-40s (probably 1895 Winchesters but perhaps Kraggs). Six of them rode out toward McClure's place at Poverty springs. The six split up, three going to Adobe Ranch, and Hearn and two others went to Sorrel's Ranch. There they found that Charles and his two friends had gone into the San Mateos. Cebe Sorrel went over to Adobe to fetch the other three, with word to meet at old Fort Ojo Caliente. About sundown, they finally spotted some sign on a faint old Indian trail. They followed it until they could no longer see. They unsaddled and lay with their heads and shoulders on the saddles, but did not sleep. All night long they watched a campfire in the distance. As soon as there was light enough to see by, they headed toward the fire. In about a half an hour they came upon Charlie's stolen horses. Bill Keene, Mike Sullivan, and Cebe Sorrel went ahead, leaving the others behind, watching the horses and keeping guard. The three came upon two Indians.

The first one was unarmed, carrying a rope; the second had a .30-40 rifle and a rawhide scabbard.

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They shot the first Indian, and when he went down they shot the second one. But then the second one jumped up, gave a war-whoop that could be heard a long distance, a bloodcurdling yell, and ran down the hillside on the San Marcial side. He left a blood trail, but they did not follow it. The dead Indian had three bullets in his heart.

There was a considerable reward for the Apache Kid, but the men did not claim it. Charles Anderson said, "We weren't just dead sure right then that it was the Kid we killed. Maybe we had killed some wandering Navaho. Uncle Sam had a way of a whole barrel of trouble for anybody that killed one of his Indians." John James made the gruesome suggestion that they cut off the Kid's trigger finger, but they just buried him there on the saddle.

The article goes on to say that a year later Tom Wilson and H. A. Faust opened the grave and took the skull to the Smithsonian Institute. It was identified as the Apache Kid's. How this was done is not reported. Some years after that George Messer of the Forest Service blazed the trees near the gravesite so it could be found again. The Apache Kid's wife stole a horse and rode to the Mescalero Reservation, and later her children were brought there. That is where Eve Ball interviewed Alberta Begay, the Kid's daughter, in the early fifties and included it in her *Indeh: An Apache Odyssey*.

Another twist in the story is given by Ball who quotes a letter from Mrs. Evelyn Dahl, "who carried out years of research on the Apache Kid," and relates that she had heard that the body was not buried at all, and Ed James, who caught up with the posse after the shooting, found Bill Keene boiling the Apache Kid's head in a vat. The Kid's family was hiding in the brush, says Alberta, and watched the men build a big fire. Af-

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ter they left, the Kid's wife went to examine the ashes, and found the Kid's belt buckle.

So perhaps what we look for is less than a grave, but a death site. An ash deposit and bits of bone, long blown away and ground into dust. After a half hour of wandering on the saddle I found what might have been a broken headboard, and some worked sticks that might have been posts for a small fence, and a long heap of stones about the size one would expect to cover a body. Charlie and I decided this was the place, and so we had a drink to Massai's memory, took a photograph, and turned back down the trail.

Jason Betinez, in his memoir *I Fought with Geronimo*, says the wounded Indian was Massai's son, who survived and fled with family across the Jornada and on to the Mescalero Reservation.

As with most histories, it is probably safe to say that if things didn't quite happen this way, they happened in some similar way, maybe. After the Indian's death, the problem with horse-stealing, cabin burglaries, and murders seemed to have stopped, so most people think it was the Apache Kid who was killed that day.

Whatever, Charlie and I can now point out where he just might be buried. The downhill walk was fast, and we decided to push on and get back to David and the Jeep to make sure he was ok. We had no need to camp for the night just yet, and so we pushed hard and covered ground. We were back before the sun went below the mountain ridge behind us, and found David working on the Scotch bottle, just about naked, and doubtless many dead devils out there in the bush. We rested a while, then drove out the ranch road to the highway and headed for a steak supper in San Antonio, there on the Rio Grande in the Bosque del Apache. The Bosque is a National Wildlife Refuge on the Rio

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Grande flyway, and thousands of birds stop by on their migrations, the thick woods entwined with old river channels, cattails, tamarisk, cottonwood, and the ghosts of many old Apache warriors who gather by the river to listen to the cries of the birds in the old language they remember.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

HOWARD McCORD was born in El Paso, Texas, in 1932. He is the author of more than twenty-five volumes of poetry, short fiction, essays, and a novel, including *The Great Toad Hunt and Other Expeditions* (Crossing Press), *The Wisdom of Silenus: Collected Essays* (St. Andrews College Press), *The Old Beast* (Copper Canyon), and, with Walter Lowenfels, *The Life of Fraenkel's Death* (Washington State U. Press). From 1971 to 2000 he taught at Bowling Green State University, Ohio, first as director of the Creative Writing Program, later as director of the Ph.D.—Creative Emphasis degree program. Along with Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, he introduced the Indian poets of the Hungry generation to Western readers.

Among his many honors are two NEA fellowships, the 1990 Ohioana Award for poetry, the Golden Nugget Award (UT at El Paso), the Hart Crane Award, a National Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, a Fulbright fellowship, and in 1996 he won the Loveless Award for the best article in *Gun Digest*.

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