

TREASURE OF THE WHITEWOMAN ANCIENT STREAM OF THE PLAINS



The Century Magazine, May, 1891. Long-Tom rifle on the skirmish line, by Frederic Remington



U.S. Springfield Allin Conversion Model 1866

W By Clyde W. Blackburn
Whitewoman Creek, the dry bed stream which goes nowhere. Heading upon the plains of Eastern Colorado, this one-time flowing creek meanders into Kansas near the center of the western border in Greeley County. From that point it continues in an easterly direction for some 60 miles until it ends in a large basin south of Scott City, Kansas. Looking at the dry, sandy bed today, it is difficult to realize that in the past there was much activity along most of its length: or harder still to think it harbors treasure, which it certainly does.

That it is one of the most ancient of streams on the plains of Western Kansas there can be no doubt. Along it has been found the fossilized remains of camel, mastodon and bison, as well as evidence of a vast early Indian occupation. Artifacts and stone tools ranging from a few hundred to a thousand years in time have been uncovered over

the years. And then there is the ancient trail still in evidence along most of the stream's length. Crossing the channel many times, it was worn so deeply it will be evident for ages to come.

Whitewoman is but one of the names the creek has had since first being discovered. The first record of white man camping along its banks is found in the diary of Juan Ulibarri, the Sergeant-Major of New Mexico, when he came upon the plains in 1706 to rescue some Pueblo Indians who were being held as slaves by the Apaches. When he made camp along it he gave it the name of San Ygnacio. The next name the stream acquired was Poison Creek, which is found on many of the early maps of the area. This name may have come into use because of some of the odd fish caught in its waters prior to the turn of the century. One newspaper account tells of two men showing grotesque looking fish they had hooked. The

This column is reprinted in loving memory of Clyde W. Blackburn, 1917-1999 (Barbara Oringderff, Editor)



fish had small legs which enabled them to drag themselves over the ground. It wasn't until the 1880s that the name Whitewoman came into use. There have been many versions of the origin of the name. A 1932 story in the *Scott City News Chronicle* tells of the Indians capturing a white woman who became the wife of a chief and bore him his first son. All was well until the child died and the mother was thought to have caused his death. In revenge she was killed along the banks of the stream. An account credited to R. W. Wright, one of the founders of Dodge City and early plainsman, is basically the same.

While nothing but a dry sandy bed today, at one time the creek had running water and good springs. As late as 1906 an irrigation ditch was started from the stream with the intent of using the water to grow crops. In Greeley County one of the more plentiful watering spots was called Barrel Springs and was a stopping place on the old Fort Wallace-Fort Lyon trail in use in the 1860s. In the past this site has yielded some interesting items, including an unusual medalion. Nearby was Jumbo Spring, a favorite swimming hole for years in the early part of the century.

West of this, in western Greeley County, was the huge cavern known as Wild Horse Corral. Used in the 1870s and '80s by parties of wild horse hunters, it was one of the most renowned sites along the stream. For a time it was inhabited by what was known as the "Wild Bunch," about 30 outlaws who rustled horses and cattle almost at will. Due to their large number they were feared by the cattlemen along the Arkansas River who had line camps along the Whitewoman. Whether this was the main headquarters of the outlaws is not known, as the remains of a half-dozen stone corrals have been found in canyons along the creek. Many interesting finds have been made at many of these sites and more is awaiting. But then so is the rattlesnake, so beware.

That there is treasure along the

Whitewoman is a certainty: it all depends on what you are looking for. The author has spent months along its dry banking, finding not only ancient flint utensils used by the native Indian a thousand years ago but also the cast iron banks and utensils used and lost by the homesteaders at the turn of the century. At one point along its banks there is still evidence of rifle pits used at the time when cavalry and Indians often had a pitched battle. An early settler of Wichita County, Lafe Henry, told me that as a boy he herded cattle over this site and at that time around thirty pits could be seen. He said most of them were about three or four feet deep and at the bottom of them could be found parts of guns and spent bullets. How much still remains in many of them will probably never be known, as nature has obliterated all but a few. It was in a blind canyon at this spot were many beautiful projectile points were found.

Then there is the treasure known or thought to be buried along the sandy bed. One day I was visiting with a couple who lived along a part of it which still had clear, running water. The lady of the house had lived there as a girl and told me about an incident of a most intriguing nature. It was about 1920 when an old man came to their home and talked to her father. The man had been a trapper and hunter in his younger days and this area had been one he had spent time in. He told the father that during the days when Indians were robbing travelers along the Smoky Hill and Santa Fe trails they had buried much of their loot in land just east of the house. While the father thought this could be true there was such a vast expanse of land one didn't know where to start looking. And even the modern day treasure hunter with his electronic detectors has problems. While evidence of such a treasure has been found, the "big ticket" still eludes the hunter.

But the most fascinating tale of buried treasure along this ancient stream was not born of a legend or

hearsay but from one who helped bring it about, my great uncle. For a 10-year period, from 1869 to 1897 he was one of about 20 army scouts working out of Fort Wallace and the surrounding territory, especially to the south. One of their semi-permanent campsites was near a spring along Whitewoman creek. Established in the 1860s it became one of the main camps during the Indian campaign following the Civil War. A "very large camp" it was called by those who saw it after it was abandoned. Used not only by the scouts but by troops from Fort Wallace, it was important enough to cause the building of a cedar corral near a dirt bank close to the stream. Cedar logs were shipped to Fort Wallace, then hauled by wagon to the site. In 1923 my father took my brother and I to this location to show us the remains of the corral, which by this time was visible only as stumps.

It is in the vicinity of this long-obliterated corral site, where an unusual course of action was taken by the group of scouts. In the early 1870s the government issued new guns to their troops and main scouts, but not to the groups who were considered of lesser importance. Unhappy about this they hit upon a plan. Staging a mock battle with non-existent Indians, plenty of phony evidence, and an agreed-upon explanation, they buried most of their guns in the vicinity—then claimed they had been lost during their "battle" with superior forces of red men. The ruse apparently worked, for they were issued new weapons. It was years later when the story was told to my father by his uncle, but the location of the gun cache remains a mystery to this day. It was near here where, in the 1940s, children of the Fairchilds who then lived on the land, found boxes still in their original form. The children played with them, and when the family left none of them could be found. Also in the area can still be seen dug out depressions where the scouts and others bivouacked while doing duty there.

Campsites, trails, and line shacks . . . they all contain treasure of some kind, but the guns along Whitewoman is a treasure worth seeking.

