The Sand Creek Massacre by Michelle Schulten

[Warning: Quotes in this article include derogatory language, in accordance with the racism of the time and the original writers, also descriptions of the massacre may not be appropriate for sensitive persons.]

History tells us that the events of November 29, 1864, were tragic at the least and a blatant disregard for human life at a more heinous level. The event has had several names over the course of history: The Sand Creek Massacre (my preference), The Battle of Sand Creek, The Chivington Massacre, and The Battle of the Glorious Third. None do justice to what happened that day in Kiowa County, Colorado, along the Sand Creek.

I want to start this article by stating that this subject is very sensitive and emotional. The information that I am presenting has been selected by me and presented with my emotional and personal interpretations. I know journalists are not supposed to have a side, but as a writer I will take what liberties that I can. Hopefully, what I present will allow you to see my research, the questions it presents, and understand the complexities of this extremely emotional part of Colorado's, the Nation's, and human history.

November 29, 1864! How and "why" did "we" get to this?

First, who are "we"? The Arapaho People, the Cheyenne People, the citizens of Colorado, the families of those murdered, the Hungate Family, the Bent brothers or their spouses or their children, the U.S. Cavalry - Colonel John Chivington - Colonel George L. Shoup - Captain Silas Soule - Lieutenant Joseph Cramer - over 600 volunteer Colorado Territory Militia including 100 of the 3rd Colorado Cavalry Unit (more of a militia than a cavalry unit) - Governor John Evans - the War Department in Washington D.C., the list could go on. Who really are the "we" that should be highlighted? Do we rightfully honor the First Peoples (Native Americans) that were affected by this heinous act in history? My opinion is absolutely yes, but I am not of their blood or of their heritage, and because of this I will only state the obvious as I write this article. This was one of the most heinous atrocities committed by white men in fear! Fear of an overly publicized and dramatized story of who "those heathens" really were. Were the "heathens" the "Indians" or the publicists of the stories and the gossip mongers?

To get to the "why" we need to do a bit of back story into the history of the U.S., Colorado Territory, and European encroachment of America. Too much for this article, but the Colorado Territory piece is important. Prior to the discovery of gold at the Ralston Gold Discovery site in 1850 and the subsequent gold rush in 1858/9, that brought hundreds of miners and settlers to the foothills, mountains, and Front Range of what is now the State of Colorado, there was relative peace between whites and the First Peoples. There were expeditions and scouting of the area by whites with very little problems. There were whites that had trading posts and made close friends of the Natives of the area. Some of the whites who came and stayed married into the Native families. One of the most prominent was William Bent who married Owl Woman of the Cheyenne People. William and some of his children played an important role in the events of November 29, 1864. Another example of the attempt of camaraderie between

the U.S. citizens and the Cheyenne was the *1825 Treaty* and known as the *Treaty of Friendship.* When the gold rush started much of the past relations were forgotten. The whites were seen as aggressive, possessive, and having a lust for gold and ownership of the land. Land ownership was foreign to the Indigenous Peoples of the area. They believed that the land belonged to all living things. Shortly after the gold rush began, towns and camps began to appear all along the Front Range and foothills. Of course they were in areas where the gold was thought to be, which started out along the creeks and rivers. These areas were also prolific with wild game and good forage for mules, oxen, and horses. These areas were also thought to be some of the best areas for the Indigenous Peoples of the area. These were their hunting grounds and summer or winter camps and had been for a very, very, long time.

In 1861, Colorado became a territory and on May 20, 1862 with the Homestead Act settlers flocked to the newly formed territory that was described in newspapers back east “as having a wealth of land, rivers, and mountains, good areas for farming and building of towns”. This was difficult on the Indigenous Peoples of the area. Their camps and hunting grounds were being sold by the U.S. Government and purchased by people with different values and beliefs. Some of the youth and leaders of the different tribes didn’t want to let the white man take over their lands. Others in the tribes, especially the Cheyenne and Arapaho in the area made peace with the situation and had agreed to cooperate with the government, many of those agreements were in the form of treaties and reservation agreements.

Then it began; the mass hysteria from gossip and the media about the “red heathens”. Stories were told and exaggerated, not that there weren’t outright murders and raids on both sides, but as you are very familiar with today's social media, things can get blown out of proportion. With the hysteria that was brewing on the frontier, then Governor John Evans put out a plea to the U.S. War Department to give him more soldiers and volunteers to fight the Indians. At the time the War Department was busy with the Civil War and had initially declined. In April 1864, Gov. Evans called for Col. John Chivington, to “kill Cheyenne’s whenever or wherever found,”[1] regardless of guilt. Adding fuel to the fire was the murder of the Hungate Family, near present day Elizabeth, Colorado, on June 11, 1864. On June 13, the family's bodies were put on public display with the presumption that the slaughter was done by Indians. The following day an inquest was held and the decision was that they were killed by unknown people, likely Indians. Although Jim Beckwourth, an experienced frontiersman, postulated that the manner of death was not consistent with either the Cheyenne or Arapaho. At this point it didn’t matter, the hysteria was out of control. Was it true, was it the Indians, or was it something or someone else.

Governor Evans posted an editorial in the Rocky Mountain News on August 10, 1864, stating that the people have “a most remarkable state of apathy” regarding the need for defense from the Indians. I find it odd that our citizens thought that the problem was not a problem at all, but yet the Governor did. Since he wasn’t getting what he needed from the people he actually decided to incite who he could by posting an article in the

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[1] Brown, Dee. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971.

newspaper. He goes on to say that if needed we may not have the defenses we need from the government to protect ourselves. Evans states, “Any man who kills a hostile Indian is a patriot…”[2] He goes on to explain that some of them are friendly and they shouldn’t kill those Indians. Although I personally am not sure how the terrified citizens are to know the difference. Eastern advice was “...A few months of active extermination against the red devils will bring quiet, and nothing else will.”[3] That statement was also published by William Byers, the owner and editor of the Rocky Mountain News, with Gov. Evans' endorsement. Shortly before the events of November 29, 1864, Gov. Evans met with some of the chiefs that were later killed that day and told them to go to Sand Creek under the protection of the government and wait for aid.

With all of this in mind, on November 29, 1864, Colonel John Chivington who was appointed by Gov. Evans, led a group of over 600 Colorado Territory Militia, including the 100 of the 3rd Cavalry Unit (also referred to as the ‘bloodless 3rd’) out of Fort Lyon and attacked the Sand Creek camp. In the camp, under the U.S. flag and a white flag, as well as direction and advice of the government, were a group of Arapaho and Cheyenne people, mostly the elderly, women, and children. At dawn, Chivington and his troops opened fire on those in the camp. It is estimated that over 163 Indigenous People were killed, over half of them were children. Many of the bodies were mutilated, including the children and pregnant women, and valuables were stolen. The “spoils” of the conflict, including body parts were brought back to Denver and a parade was held displaying those “spoils” and celebrating the “victory” by Chivington and his troops. Ironically most of the elderly chiefs that were killed were ones that had signed peace treaties. Among the soldiers were; Captain Silas Soule and Lieutenant Joseph Cramer who both refused to have their companies engage in the battle and both wrote letters about the atrocities to Maj. Edward Wynkoop. Wynkoop opened an investigation and in 1865, the Joint Committee on the Conduct of War stated, “As to Colonel Chivington, your committee can hardly find fitting terms to describe his conduct. Wearing the uniform of the United States, which should be the emblem of justice and humanity…he deliberately planned and executed a foul and dastardly massacre…”[4] George Bent, the son of William Bent and Owl Woman, was at the massacre as well as their other children Charley and Julia. George testified against Chivington. He told of the massacre and what he had seen including children that were scalped and a pregnant woman who’s unborn baby was cut from her and lying alongside her lifeless body. Captain Silas Soule also testified to those exact facts.

There is nowhere to go but forward in a quest to repair what damages “we” have caused. The blame lies with falsehoods prior to the atrocities of that day and the heinous events that were made against the Indigenous Peoples of America.

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[2] EVANS, JNO. “Appeal to the People.” *The Rocky Mountain News (Daily)*, 10 Aug. 1864, pp. 2–2.

[3] “William N. Byers: Contributing to a Massacre.” *William N. Byers: Contributing to a Massacre | Denver Public Library Special Collections and Archives*, 12 July 2021.

[4] Report of the Joint committee on the conduct of the war at the second session Thirty-eighth Congress." In the digital collection *Making of America Books.* https://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABY3709.0003.001. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed October 3, 2024.

For further reading on the findings of Maj. Wynkoop's report:
https://kclonewolf.com/sand-creek-reports-wynkoop-investigation.html