

A Boy Once Named Felix
by
Karen Weston Gonzales

When different groups of people fail to understand each other, ignorance and intolerance of cultural differences often leads to war. How many times in the past have a few individuals made choices which affect an entire population? Such is the case of an incident that started with a boy disappearing and ended with the demise of a traditional lifestyle for the last free-roaming Native Americans known as the Chiricahua Apaches.

In the winter of 1861, at Apache Pass, north of the Chiricahua mountains in Southeast Arizona, a drama unfolded that sparked the Apache Wars of America's southwest. Though there had been isolated instances of violence between the Apache people and the new Americans arriving to the area, all-out war did not ignite until an unfortunate situation developed between two men who clearly did not understand each other.

This historical drama which took place is known by two names. Commonly referred to as "The Bascom Affair," named after Lt. George N. Bascom, the Apache people call the incident "Cut The Tent" referring to Chiricahua Apache Chief Cochise's instantaneous reaction to, and escape from, an attempted arrest. Though the facts remain debatable, this we know: in January, 1861, a 12-year-old boy named Felix disappeared from a Santa Cruz area ranch in southern Arizona Territory.

The boy's stepfather, a rancher named John Ward, reported to officers at nearby Fort Buchanan that while he was away from home a band of Apaches ran off his livestock, and abducted the son of Carmen Martinez, his common-law wife. Some historians question what may have troubled Ward the most, losing his livestock or his step-son. However, Felix's mother is another matter. Carmen surely felt great anguish over the loss of her first-born child. This article will focus on the emotional impact of those involved in an attempt to understand what motivated their choices and actions.

Let's start with Cochise. In 1861, the chief of the Chokonon band of Chiricahua Apaches was then about 50 years old. Highly respected among the Apache people, Cochise was known as an accomplished warrior and powerful leader. The Butterfield Overland Trail had recently been mapped through Apache Pass, one of Cochise's favorite camping spots because of Apache Spring. A stage station was built. The Butterfield employees at the stage station were cautiously friendly with Cochise before this incident and it was common for Apaches to visit the station and occasionally trade firewood there for other items.

At this point in history, Cochise's warriors were known to attack and raid settlements in Mexico to steal livestock and supplies, also to seek vengeance on the Mexican people who they had been warring with for several hundred years. Though Cochise may have been wary of the new Americans, he also seemed curious about them and perhaps visiting the station regularly was his way of getting to know them.

Captain J.A. Sladen, who later spent 10 days in Cochise's camp in 1872, wrote this about the

chief in his journal: "He carried himself with great dignity, and was always treated by those about him with the utmost respect and, at times, fear." Son of Apache Chief Juh, Asa Daklugie, told author Eve Ball, that Cochise had a profound sense of honor. "Cochise was very proud of making his word good...Apaches hated liars." Cochise was definitely a man not accustomed to anyone questioning or doubting his word.

Now let's examine Second Lieutenant George Bascom. He was 24, from Kentucky, having graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1858, 26th in a class of 27. He served in Utah before being reassigned to Fort Buchanan in Arizona, had only been in the area for three months and knew little to nothing about the Apache people.

Charles D. Poston, explorer, prospector, politician and author, known as "The Father of Arizona" because of his lobbying efforts to create the Arizona Territory, had this to say about the young lieutenant: "Bascom was a fine-looking fellow, a Kentuckian, a West Pointer, and of course, a gentleman; but he was unfortunately a fool..." Poston, also from Kentucky, was in southern Arizona during this time. From the information we know about Bascom, including Poston's observation, we can surmise he was a young, eager officer trying to prove his worth.

His commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Pitcairn Morrison, ordered Bascom to "pursue the Indians and recover a boy...demand the immediate restoration of the stolen property...and (if necessary) use the force under his orders."

Morrison assigned Bascom a force of 54 newly arrived mounted troopers. The inexperienced lieutenant proceeded to lead his inexperienced troopers into the field. Finding tracks of the raiders' ponies leading eastward from Ward's ranch towards the Chiricahua Mountains, assumed Cochise's band was guilty of the raid. Had he known Chiricahua Apaches were not known at that time for kidnapping and that the livestock raiding they engaged in then was limited almost entirely to south of the border, Bascom may have approached the chief in another way.

How different might the outcome had been if the young army lieutenant had respectfully asked the elder Apache chief for his help in locating and retrieving the boy?

Instead, he led his troops to Apache Pass with the intention of confronting Cochise. The soldiers camped near the Butterfield Overland stage station and though stories vary, most historians believe Bascom informed the men working at the station that he wished to speak with the chief, though he did not reveal why. Some reports indicate Bascom may have been intentionally misleading about his presence, telling the Butterfield employees his troops were only passing through.

When Cochise did not immediately respond to a message sent to him to come in and talk to the officer, Bascom reportedly asked a Butterfield employee named Wallace, known to be friendly with the chief, to deliver a second request. Though Wallace hesitated, he eventually complied. Perhaps his reluctance to deliver the message was based on suspicion Wallace may have felt towards Bascom's intentions. Maybe he had a gut feeling Lt. Bascom wanted to do more than just meet the chief.

However, Cochise eventually did come to Bascom's camp, at dinner time. Because Cochise brought several of his family members to Bascom's tent to share a meal, he obviously believed this was a social visit. At some point during this meeting, Bascom accused the chief of kidnapping the boy. Though Cochise denied the accusation and told the officer he did not know the whereabouts of the boy he did say he would try to locate him and secure his release. However, the lieutenant told the chief he would not allow him to leave until the boy was returned.

Perhaps Bascom did not realize there were many different bands of Apaches. Much later, it was learned Felix had been carried off by a raiding party of another Apache band, most likely the Arivaipa, Pinal or Western White Mountain Apache.

When Cochise realized Bascom was holding him against his will, the chief sprang into action, reportedly slashing open the tent with his knife. He escaped by running up a hill while soldiers fired at him. His relatives however were not as fortunate. They became hostages and at least one of them may have been killed, while another was injured, trying to escape.

For the next several days, Cochise attempted to negotiate for the release of his family. Reports state he initially approached the soldier's camp under a white flag of truce. He again denied taking the boy and again offered to help find him, but he wanted Bascom to let his people go. Bascom refused to release his hostages unless the boy was returned, even though Cochise insisted he did not have Felix.

Cochise's warriors then attacked a wagon train coming into the pass along the Overland Trail, killing the Mexicans on it, and taking the Anglos hostage. His warriors also captured Wallace, the Butterfield employee. The chief then attempted to trade his hostages for Bascom's. Exchanging hostages was something Mexicans and Apaches had engaged in routinely and was a common practice of the time. In Cochise's mind, he probably saw this as a logical solution to the problem.

Again the lieutenant insisted he would not release his Apache hostages until the boy was returned. And again Cochise denied having any knowledge of the whereabouts of the boy, still offering to help find him if Bascom would let his relatives go. What was going on in the minds of all involved, we can only wonder now. Each of us can only try to imagine what we might have felt, and done, had we been in the situation ourselves. Can you imagine the anger Cochise must have felt after having trusted his family would be safe in Bascom's tent? Was he angry at himself for letting his guard down? Did he feel betrayed by Bascom's initial pretense of hospitality?

Most certainly, he was deeply offended the lieutenant did not believe he did not have the boy. Being a leader held in such high regard by his people it must have been incomprehensible to Cochise to have his word doubted. Try to imagine the mortification Bascom might have felt when the whole situation spun out of his control and escalated into violence. Was he ever really concerned about the missing boy or was he consumed with a sense of duty, an ambitious desire to carry out orders and advance his military career?

What about the hostages? Can you imagine the terror they were experiencing as the drama played out, knowing they were caught in the center of it? Why didn't Bascom exchange his hostages for Cochise's? Some historians believe even Bascom's soldiers were asking among themselves this very question. At some point, Cochise's frustration with Bascom's inflexibility turned to resignation, as he abandoned hopes of a peaceful resolution. At what point that frustration turned to murderous rage, we can only guess.

The end to this drama came as Cochise, or his warriors, or maybe even the women of the tribe, as was sometimes Apache tradition, tortured and killed their Anglo hostages in revenge, mutilated the bodies, broke camp and left the area. When soldiers discovered the grisly remains, they buried them in a mass grave. A decision was made by two higher-ranking officers who had arrived on the scene to hang their male Apache hostages above the graves of these Anglos. Cochise's wife and young son were released.

On their way to Apache Pass reinforcements had captured three other Apache men, of another band, not Chiricahua, and not involved with the incident. These men were also hung. Though Bascom reportedly did not want his hostages executed, he was out-ranked in the decision. The bodies were left dangling from an oak tree and the military rode away. Many months later they were still hanging, in sight of the Overland Trail. One must wonder what thoughts went through the minds of travelers along the stage road who came upon the horrifying scene.

Some reports state the bodies hung, swaying in the wind, until the skeletons finally fell apart. It was a symbol of intolerance and vengeance, not easily ignored, and the die was cast. Cochise never forgot the incident, or forgave those responsible for the execution of his relatives. For the next 11 years, the chief swore his own vengeance as Chiricahua warriors attacked settlers, travelers, miners, mail carriers, virtually everyone in their path.

Because this incident occurred just as the Civil War commenced, the military abandoned many forts and posts in the southwest shortly after the Bascom Affair to concentrate forces back east. Consequently, there were few troops available in this region offering any protection from Apache attack and many men, women and children fell victim to murderous acts of revenge. Cochise did not know about the Civil War. It must have seemed to him as if his warriors had succeeded in chasing the soldiers away.

Fort Bowie was established in 1862, a year and a half after the Bascom Affair, when Cochise and his father-in-law, Mangas Coloradas, another Chiricahua Apache chief, commanded about 150 warriors in an ambush against union soldiers from California as they marched through Apache Pass on their way to New Mexico and Texas in pursuit of confederate troops.

The Apaches may have thought these soldiers were coming to attack them. The chiefs and warriors watched them from a mountain top as the troops below entered Apache Pass. The soldiers entering the pass had no knowledge of what had happened there the previous year. They were only marching to the spring after crossing a long, waterless valley in July. Temperatures were more than 100 degrees. Little did they know they were going to have to fight for their lives to get a drink of water. A ferocious two-day battle ensued before soldiers

finally controlled the spring.

Because of this “Battle of Apache Pass”, General James Carleton ordered a military post established in the pass to protect travelers through it. Fort Bowie was established on July 28, 1862. For the next 32 years, the U.S. Army was a constant, vigilant presence in Apache Pass and Fort Bowie became the nerve center of the military’s campaign against the Chiricahua Apaches.

Though he made peace with General Howard in 1872, and he kept that peace for the rest of his life, Cochise remained bitter about how he and his relatives were treated by Lt. Bascom in 1861. The chief died of natural causes in 1874. He was buried by his people in a secret location deep within a rugged mountainous region he had often retreated to now known as Cochise Stronghold. His grave has never been found.

The brash Lt. Bascom was promoted to captain and died in the Civil War Battle of Valverde in New Mexico the following year. Nobody has ever accused Bascom of cowardice. He was buried at the Fort Craig post cemetery. When the post closed in 1885, military remains were moved to Santa Fe. Records indicate Bascom’s remains were unidentifiable and his grave is now one of many there marked “unknown.”

One has to wonder whether either of these men, exact final resting places unknown, ever realized the ramifications of their actions concerning what took place in Apache Pass on those cold February days, when clearly neither man understood the other. Did either of them have an inkling the choices they made would affect so many?

Even though Cochise made peace with the U.S. government in 1872, the war was far from over. Other Apache leaders continued to resist the encroachment of the new Americans. Thousands of people lost their lives during the Apache Wars of the southwest.

When it was finally over, after Geronimo surrendered for the last time in 1886, the Chiricahua Apache people lost their homelands forever. They were exiled from the territory and became prisoners of war for 27 years. Babies of these people were born prisoners. Some Chiricahuas spent their entire lives as prisoners.

When they were finally declared free, in 1913, surviving Chiricahua Apaches were given the choice to either stay in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where they had been living for many years, or move to the Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico. They were not given the choice to return to Arizona.

Before the Bascom Affair incident there were an estimated 1,500-1,800 Chiricahua Apaches. By 1913, there were only 241 left. Seventy-eight of these chose to remain at Fort Sill. One hundred and sixty three went to Mescalero. Descendants of both groups still live at these two places.

The young boy, Felix, whose abduction began the sequence of events leading to war, was never recovered and grew up with the Western White Mountain Apaches. In historical

photographs of young tribal warriors it is not easy to immediately pick Felix out. These group pictures show he had adapted well to Apache life.

As a young man he left the Apaches, eventually becoming a scout and interpreter for the military, helping to track the people he'd grown up with. Soldiers at the San Carlos Apache reservation reportedly re-named him Mickey Free. In his older years Mickey married several Apache women, living his final years near Fort Apache, among Apache people. He never saw his mother again and Carmen Martinez died not knowing her son's fate.

When the great-grandson of Cochise, Silas Cochise, was asked if he thought the outcome for the Chiricahua people would have been the same if there never had been a "Bascom Affair," he replied "They were always scheming to get our land. If that had not happened, something else would have later on." Still, one has to wonder how differently it might have been for all involved if Chief Cochise and Lieutenant Bascom would have respected each other and worked together to find and recover a boy once named Felix.