



Episode 4, 2012: Chief Black Kettle

George Bryson: My name is George Bryson. About sixty years ago, my grandmother, whom we called Muzzy, gave me several Indian relics. These leggings and breastplate have been to every "show and tell" of my two sisters and my children.

Child George Bryson: "I know they're very special."

George: And in fact, I hate to admit it, but I did wear these to class one time when I was probably ten years old. As the story goes in our family, my Great-Great Uncle Taylor took these from a Indian Chief by the name of Black Kettle at the Battle of Washita, in Oklahoma in November, 1868. I would like to learn, did he actually bring these back from Chief Black Kettle?

Wes Cowan: I'm on my way to see this guy George. Who's got an ancestor who supposedly was in the Seventh Cavalry.

Not many relics survived the Battle of the Washita, also known as the Washita Massacre. To have items from Black Kettle himself would be almost too good to be true.

I gotta tell ya', it sounds like a pretty farfetched story to me and this may be a dry hole.

George: You know, when you're young this is all very intriguing. If you would look at what we call a breastplate, the front of it has, it looks like four birds that you're looking down on with their heads. And it's I think kind of a very neat etching on it. But the back tells a whole different story.

Wes: Okay. Oh, wow. Those were what I would call pictographs.

George: Okay.

Wes: Some people would call this as a gorget or a pectoral. It's meant to be worn, you know, on the front of the body.

George: Both Muz and my mother felt that, uh, we shouldn't have these. My mother wouldn't look at them. She felt that they needed to be in the grave.

Wes: Were there other things that got, you know, passed along?

George: Discharge papers of my Great-Great Uncle Taylor signed by General Custer.

Wes: I can tell you definitely, that is George Armstrong Custer's signature. No question about that. You know, the Battle of the Washita, of course, was a huge, pivotal moment in the Indian wars. And, uh, it was a big deal for Custer, too.

Custer's scorched earth assault on a large village filled with sleeping women and children, and the killing of a leader regarded as a peacemaker, only added to his controversial reputation. It was a blow from which the Southern Cheyenne would never recover.

Looks like he was in Company A of the Seventh Cavalry. Enlisted for five years. He got out after three years. So, something must have happened.

George: The story passed on was that he had been shot in the eye with an arrow. And, uh, subsequently was discharged.

Wes: Wow.

George: So my question quite simply is, what do we have here?

Wes: Well, if we can tie these to, uh, to Black Kettle at all, they're pretty significant things.

Both of these artifacts are in really great shape. Leggings were worn by chiefs, but they were also standard dress for other members of the tribe. I have a quick test to confirm that they're from the correct era.

See the white thread here?

By the late 1800's, cotton thread was being made with more industrial methods, using acids and other chemicals. If the thread glows brightly under a black light, then it likely dates from later than the Battle of the Washita.

Yeah, not really flashing too bright. So, this is probably from the 1800's, but to confirm, I'm going to get the dye tested. So I want to take just a little snippet of this red cloth.

However there's a more fundamental problem with the leggings. Black Kettle was Southern Cheyenne.

Based upon my experience with American Indian material, these are not Cheyenne leggings. The Cheyenne used buckskin, or leather, and they're beaded with very distinctive, uh, rows of triangles on the, uh, on the outside. This style of legging was made by prairie Indians: the Osage, the Kaw...

Now, the gorget brings me a little closer to Black Kettle. Southern Cheyenne men did wear these. It's made out of a metal called German silver.

It's not really silver. It has very high nickel content. It was the kind of silver that was used by traders to sell to American Indians.

The front is engraved with geometric designs and arrows, but the back is different.

There is a pictographic figure of a man with braids, flanked by two other figures, a rearing pony, or horse. And then, you know, what I think may be quivers or maybe other figures. But, a story is being told here.

So far, I have a lot of story, but nothing here puts these artifacts or Taylor even near Black Kettle or the Battle of the Washita.

I'm at the Oklahoma History Center. And I'm gonna be visiting with a guy named Jerry Greene. Jerry is the author of "Washita," the definitive account of the engagement.

Jerry: Come on, Wes. We'll take a look at this stuff right here.

Wes: Terrific.

As we unwrap the artifacts, Jerry describes the powder keg of tension waiting to explode that winter of 1868.

Black Kettle believed the tide of European settlers rolling over the plains could not be stopped. But many of his own warriors resisted his counsel that the tribe head south to reservations in Indian territory or what is now Oklahoma.

Jerry: The Cheyennes and the Arapahos, not all of them wanted to go on the reservation. They didn't want to leave the hunting grounds in Western Kansas, where the buffalo roamed.

Cheyenne warriors raided settlers. General Philip Sheridan ordered an attack in winter, when the tribes thought they were safe.

Jerry: The purpose was to destroy not only the people, but to destroy anything that would have to do with their ability to make war and to attack whites.

Wes: Okay, there are the leggings.

Now, I know that these are not Cheyenne leggings. These, in fact, are probably Osage leggings.

Jerry: Well, of course, Custer's scouts were Osages. So there's a connection right there, with, um, with the leggings.

So, George's great-great uncle could have gotten them from one of the Osage scouts riding with Custer.

Jerry: And what about this item.

Wes: Well and you can see the engraving on the top. What's really neat about this though is what's on the back. I just want you to take a look at that.

Jerry immediately makes a connection.

Jerry: Well, it reminds me of that picture of Black Kettle at Camp Weld.

Wes: Jerry shows me the picture in his book, one of two known images of Black Kettle.

Jerry: Looks like that's our man. That's amazing.

Wes: I tell Jerry the items may have been taken from Black Kettle at Washita by one of Custer's men, named William Taylor.

This discharge is dated June 4th, 1869.

Jerry: And he's discharged from the Army in consequence of Special Order Number 125. Special orders pertain to individuals. For example, men with disabilities often got special orders.

Wes: You know, that's really interesting, because Taylor, he was actually wounded in the eye, uh, with an arrow.

Jerry: My gosh.

Wes: Jerry's book includes all the Washita casualties on both sides.

Jerry: Here is a list of some fifteen men who were wounded at the Washita. And, well, you know, I don't see Taylor's name on here. I don't believe that if the man was wounded in the eye by an arrow that he would have avoided being, being put on this list.

Wes: Yeah, and I would think if he was wounded in the eye with an arrow he would be on the deceased list.

Jerry: I think he might be the first on the list.

Wes: In the meantime, I get the results back from the lab. What did you find out?

Voice on Phone from Lab: No synthetic dye, we put an 1850 or earlier date of manufacture on them.

Wes: Fantastic. I knew that was going to be the case.

The dye on the leggings dates to the mid 1800s, so the artifacts are period, but where did they come from?

I've got to find out if my guy Taylor was even at the Battle of the Washita. And what better place to find that out than at the battlefield itself? So, I'm on my way.

Joel Shockley is a park guide at the Washita battlefield National Historic Site. He has access to the official roster of who was there that day, and he's made a discovery.

Joel: We have on a muster roll of the time of the fight. And if you'll look at this very bottom, you'll see Taylor, William H., Corporal, August 17th, 1866. From Philadelphia.

Wes: So, he was actually here.

Joel: He was actually here. He was also with the sharpshooters. W. Cooke's Sharpshooters. They were the best marksmen in the Cavalry. Basically, their job was to keep the Cheyenne from crossing the river.

Joel explains how the large Indian encampment was alongside the Washita River. On the eve of Custer's attack, the chief had heard that soldiers might be in the area, but it was too cold to move till morning.

Joel: They went to bed that night thinking that they'll move and that they weren't in any danger at all.

Wes: Dawn, November 27, 1868. A Cheyenne scout spots Custer's men and wakes up chief Black Kettle, who fires a warning shot. Panic and terror descend on the village.

Joel: Custer hears the shot, he has the bugler sound "charge." That was the cue for them to come in for the attack. While all this is going on, Black Kettle is down in the village and he's telling those that will hear him to hurry, to run, to get away.

Wes: Black Kettle's village is over here.

Joel: Right.

Wes: On this side of the river.

Joel: On this side of the river.

Wes: Custer's men are over here.

Joel: Right.

Wes: And the line of sharpshooters, where were they?

Joel: They were across the river here.

Wes: So, our man Taylor was over here?

Joel: Over here.

Wes: Chief Black Kettle and his wife reach the river.

Joel: As they're crossing the river, he is shot, and the bullet goes through him and through his wife. The second shot, they fall into the water.

Wes: Within 20 minutes, the village is overrun by Custer's troopers.

He starts destroying the village. He starts taking, having his men pull down the lodges and build big, huge bonfires and throw 'em on there.

Wes: There's plenty of time to collect souvenirs. They torch the teepees and then spend hours killing hundreds of ponies.

Even if Black Kettle was not wearing the gorget, Joel says it could have easily been taken from the encampment.

Chief Gordon Yellowman teaches Cheyenne and Arapaho language and is descended from a long line of Cheyenne chiefs. He says the Cheyenne see Washita as hallowed ground.

Chief Yellowman: You know, was it a battle? Was it a massacre? For the Cheyennes, we say massacre. And for the, uh, soldiers and the Europeans, they say battle. So, in order for us to accept really the atrocity that did occur, then we have to educate one another.

Wes: To honor the significance of the artifacts, Chief Yellowman puts on his war bonnet.

Chief Yellowman: It's out of respect for [Cheyenne language], Black Kettle as a chief. And, uh, out of respect for that, uh, I just kinda want to use my, my stick to honor the spirit of these items that, uh, have a spiritual connection.

Wes: He agrees the leggings are not Cheyenne. But the gorget is, and often signified a person of high status.

Chief Yellowman: When the sun reflected off of this, it acted as a mirror. It radiated, this is a person of leadership.

Wes: Right.

Chief Yellowman: You have the four directions. So these signify arrows. They're coming together as a unified nation.

Wes: What I really want your opinion about, though, is on the back.

I tell George that his great-great uncle may have been a witness to Black Kettle's death.

The sharpshooters were stationed along one bank of the Washita River. And their job was, as Indians were starting to leave the camp, to take care of the problem.

George: Take 'em out.

Wes: We don't know the details of what George's relative saw or did that day.

The leggings were almost certainly not Black Kettle's, but could have belonged to one of Custer's Osage scouts. And Chief Yellowman had some strong ideas about the metal ornament.

Chief Yellowman: And so this part here is definitely reflecting a man, then here on the leggings you have the man design, which is the mountains. Would have been white background. I mean that could have been, this is, I'm saying it's probably a chief blanket. And here you have Black Kettle.

Wes: Although he couldn't be sure, the chief thought the gorget could have been worn by Black Kettle. What he is certain of is its connection to the Cheyenne people.

George: Oh my gosh, wow.

Wes: I tell George that Chief Yellowman had been deeply affected, seeing items from a history that remained painful for his people.

Chief Yellowman: These things have energy of that time. And when we talk of them today, it empowers and radiates the energy. It brings it back.

I would have a ritual done with them, a personal Cheyenne ritual, a blessing to end a lot of that hatred.

George: My children are already talking about going out to see it. So maybe that's something we could do.

Wes: I think that it would be, I think that it would be a pretty powerful thing.

George: Contact the Chief.

Wes: Yes.

George: Mhmm.