

## Chapter 6: A Burning Wagon

As sabe el diablo por viejo – *Mexican dicho*

*(The devil is wise because he's an old man)*

The trail down from Monica Saddle does not lead directly to the spring – the slope is too steep. Instead, the road follows the ridgeline down to Monica Cabin, where the canyon debouches into a broad meadow surrounded by rolling, open rangeland. There was apparently a small settlement of some kind either here or higher up toward the spring that had been vacated under the Indian threat some months previously.

According to Wellman the fight occurred “near the Santa Monica Springs.”<sup>1</sup> Lekson gives a detailed description of the site “about two miles up the canyon,” based on his own examination of the terrain.<sup>2</sup> Sweeney says Guilfoyle caught up with Nana at Monica Springs “less than two hours” after Nana left Stapleton’s mill,<sup>3</sup> but I couldn’t make the drive over the saddle from Bear Trap Canyon in a 4WD in less than an hour without taking serious risks. It’s much more likely the encounter happened the next day, August 3, 1881.

Where ever the exact location, it’s clear that Guilfoyle and his men were just a little late in arriving for the party. Instead of surprising Nana in an ambush, they found the raiders already watering their horses. Soldiers, scouts and hostiles exchanged fire without any decisive result. As in the San Andres, Guilfoyle claimed to have wounded two of the raiders and captured 11 horses, but Nana and his men escaped back up the canyon into the mountains.

For the cavalry, the skirmish at Monica Spring was a small tactical victory at best; Guilfoyle had momentarily thwarted Nana’s move north to Navajo country, but the hostiles were not badly hurt in the encounter, and they could quickly replace the lost stock at the next ranch they came to. But the hard ride had used up the troopers’ horses. Guilfoyle could do no more than detach Bennett and his scouts to stay on Nana’s trail, while the lieutenant and his weary buffalo soldiers camped at the spring to recuperate.

Forced back up the canyon, Nana was once again faced with limited choices. Moving east over the shoulder of Mount Withington was likely to cost him his remaining horses and bring him closer to Fort Craig. Retracing his steps down Bear Trap Canyon risked colliding with another cavalry patrol coming north on his trail. Instead, he almost certainly chose to turn west.

Roland cites “southwestern explorer Charles Fletcher Lummis” as authority that Bennett and the Apache scouts had a 16-mile running battle with the hostiles as they escaped from Monica Springs into the Datil Mountains.<sup>4</sup> Since other reports agree that Guilfoyle pressed the Indians back up Monica Canyon into the mountains, that chase could not have begun at the mouth of that canyon. Nana and his men must have exited from the San Mateos at some other point. That would be consistent with a descent down from the San Mateos at Point of Rocks and a chase west across the Plains of San Augustin, roughly along the route of today’s US60.

Nana captured three dozen horses in Red Canyon, and certainly swept up more from the two ranches he raided as he came up Bear Trap Canyon, plus the two mules “borrowed” from Stapleton. He lost 11 to Guilfoyle at Monica Spring, but he must have emerged from the San Mateos with enough stock to mount his whole force if he had a “running fight” across the Plains of San Augustin.

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<sup>1</sup> Wellman, *Death In The Desert*, p. 200

<sup>2</sup> Lekson, Stephen H. *Nana’s Raid: Apache Warfare in Southern New Mexico, 1881*. pp. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> Sweeney, *From Cochise to Geronimo*, p. 176.

<sup>4</sup> Roland, A.E. “Bob”, ed. “The Ballad of Placida Romero,” *New Mexico Historical Review*, Summer 2011, p. 318.



**Looking northwest from the foot of the San Mateos over the Plains of San Augustin toward the Datil Mountains on the horizon.**

Then as now the Plains were open grassland with scarcely a tree or bush in sight. The terrain is not as flat as it appears from a distance, but a gently rolling landscape. By dropping one or two rear guards with good rifles on a rise, Nana could keep pursuers at a distance in a running fight.

From the Datils, Bennett would have sent one of his scouts back to Monica Springs to pick up the cavalry and guide them back on Nana's trail. At the same time, Guilfoyle almost certainly dispatched a courier to the nearest telegraph line with a report updating Col. Hatch on the unexpected direction the hunt was taking. On August 6, three days after the skirmish at Monica Springs, two companies of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry rode out of Fort Wingate headed south and east in an attempt to head Nana off.

One of these patrols, a 15-man force led by Lt. Henry Wright, encountered Guilfoyle "north of Monica Springs" on August 9, six days after the skirmish at Monica Spring.<sup>5</sup>

Nana probably entered the Datils through Main Canyon, climbed up past Blue Spring and descended the north side down Red Canyon. "Not far west from the mouth of the Red Canyon along Alamocita Creek, two graves are still visible today," according to Roland. The victims were Hispanics freighting supplies to their sheep ranch near Quemado, according to descendants of local settlers. A third man escaped on foot, "and did not stop running until he got into Colorado."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lekson, *Nana's Raid*, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Roland, p. 318.

Guided by the two Navajo renegades Stapleton had seen with him at the mill, Nana was on his way to seek friends among the people today known as the Alamo Band Navajo, somewhere in the rugged country west of Ladrone Peak.

Separated from the Big Rez by the Zuni, Acoma and Laguna pueblos, the history of the Alamo (sometimes referred to as the Puertecito) people is murky. Some say they are descendants of the few survivors crafty and lucky enough to evade "Rope Thrower" Carson's 1864 roundup and the subsequent "Long Walk" to Bosque Redondo. But some of the words in their language and some of their names are clearly Apache in origin, and it's likely some Chihene refugees escaped the closing of the Ojo Caliente Reservation and the forced exile to San Carlos by melding into the little Navajo bands scattered through the rough country west of Sierra Ladrone.

Whatever their origins, in 1881 – more than a decade after the chastened Navajo had been allowed to return to their homeland – there were small groups of these Indians scattered in the mountains and canyons south of the new reservation, and they included men like Nana who were yet unreconciled to defeat.

It was a hard existence on marginal ground. By their own tradition, Apaches had once been agriculturists, until they were driven into the mountains by Spanish slave raids – the Chihene were growing crops at Ojo Caliente before they were forcibly removed to San Carlos in 1877,<sup>7</sup> and the Navajo were sheep-herding pastoralists, rich in orchards and fields before the Long Walk. But now the best farm and grazing lands were being rapidly taken up by Hispanic and Anglo homesteaders, the mountains were full of prospectors, miners and loggers, and the wild game was hunted almost to extinction. The ecological niche remaining for the few Navajo and Apache holdouts still off the reservations was being squeezed to the vanishing point. They were men who "carry their lives on their fingernails," in the words of another Apache chief in similar circumstances,

In 1877, Victorio brought his followers in to Fort Wingate (near present-day Grants) and indicated their willingness to settle on land near there. It's indicative of their growing desperation that the People were prepared to accept a reservation that was even farther north than Tularosa, which they had disdained no more than a year earlier. The Navajo – surprisingly, in light of their long-standing feuds with the Apache – were agreeable, and the Army was prepared to accept any resolution that would put an end to the long and frustrating pursuits through the mountains.

But the Indian Bureau in far-away Washington was not just indifferent to the Indians' plight but adamant in opposition to their pleas. The Chihene were assigned to the San Carlos Reservation; if the Army would round them up and deliver them there, the Bureau would undertake to feed and care for them, in its fashion. But Indians not on their assigned reservation were the Army's problem, not the Bureau's. And allowing any group of aborigines to live where they wanted to live – rather than where the Bureau had determined in its wisdom was best for them – was likely to set a "bad precedent" among the Indian Bureau's other hapless charges.

If that seems bone-headed even by Washington standards, remember that the Indians were not just penniless indigents trespassing on the public lands and purse, they weren't even voters, and so the Bureau's real constituency was not its official wards but the unscrupulous Western businessmen whose "rings" profited from plundering the pittance Congress appropriated for the upkeep of the dispossessed tribes.

And so the Victorio War continued to its inescapable, tragic conclusion with the near-destruction of the Chihene people.

Nana was on the Mescalero Reservation when Victorio was negotiating at Fort Wingate, but there was communication between the Mescalero, Chihene and Navajo as Victorio desperately sought to avoid being forced back to the hated San Carlos Reservation. At that time the fugitives were reported camped in the Mangas Mountains, about 90 miles south of Fort Wingate, where they were certainly in contact with the scattered bands of Navajo in the area. Now, with Victorio dead and the surviving Chihene either penned on the reservation in Arizona or in exile in Mexico, Nana turned to the Navajo for reinforcements.

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<sup>7</sup> Faulk, Odie B. *Crimson Desert*. New York, 1974, p. 177.

Whether from the desire for loot, for revenge, or simply from the kinship born of shared grievances, “some ten Navajos, led by Margacito and Cibusto, joined him.”<sup>8</sup>

Just when and where these new recruits met up with Nana is unclear. Roland believes the rendezvous was in the Datils, and that the expanded raiding party then split into two separate groups, one heading due north and the other northeast. According to Roland, the two Hispanic ranchers were reported killed in the Datils on August 7, although this may have been the date the bodies were discovered and the murders actually occurred a day or two earlier.<sup>9</sup> (That would seem more likely, given that Nana skirmished with Guilfoyle at Monica Canyon on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and was chased across the Plains of San Augustin into the Datils by Bennett and Chihuahua on the 4<sup>th</sup>.)



A puzzling detail mentioned by Roland is that in the attack on Alamocita Creek the hostiles burned the ranchers' wagon. It's hard to believe that Nana, knowing he was so closely pursued, would have countenanced an act of destruction that would send up a column of smoke visible for miles – unless the old man intended it *should* be seen. It may be significant that the site of the attack was three or four miles west of where Nana's raiders would have come down Red Canyon. Perhaps by laying an obvious trail to the west, Nana intended to draw the cavalry away while the main body rode north.

If my imaginative scenario is correct and Guilfoyle was in fact decoyed west through the Sawtooths and down into the Mangas Mountains while Nana and the main war party escaped to the north, there must have come a moment when the lieutenant realized that the tracks they were following were thinning out as the decoys split off one by one and disappeared into the mountains. There was nothing for it but to retrace his path and try to take up the trail of the main war party again, somewhere back on Alamocita Creek. That bitter pill could not have cheered the mood around the campfire, or improved the relationship between Guilfoyle, Bennett and Chihuahua.

Whether or not Guilfoyle and his scouts were misled by a false trail, they were back on Nana's track somewhere “north of Monica Springs” by August 9, six days after the brush at Monica Canyon. Tragically, they were by then more than two days behind the old man.

## **Maps**

### **Datil Mountains**

## **The Warpath**

### **A Wild Goose Chase**

## **The Raid**

## **Home**

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<sup>8</sup> Sweeney, *From Cochise to Geronimo*, p. 176.

<sup>9</sup> Roland, “Ballad of Placida Romero,” p. 318.