

INDIAN LIFE
BY CAPT. JOHN S. FORD.

The chief of a band of Comanches usually makes a talk to his people very early in the morning, imparting the news, and discussing its purport, this is succeeded by his orders.

When a change of camp is contemplated, the women gather the animals, saddle and pack them. The lodges are taken down, and placed on animals. The men and women ride after the same fashion. Very young children are on horseback, at an age they would not be suffered to manage a horse, with us, in an inclosed country. The point of destination is known to all. The families leave as they get ready, except on some extraordinary occasion, or when danger is apprehended. If, in any event, they have a number of warriors on look-out on every side. It is almost impossible to approach a Comanche camp without being discovered.

When moving with their women and children, a party of Comanches exhibit scenes of liveliness, the women talking, laughing and making such animals to play with the children. With bows and arrows in hand, beating thickets for small game, shooting snakes, running better skater in every direction—mules going at half speed over rocky places, with long lodge poles trailing on either side, making a noise louder than so many empty wagons—young warriors, with gaudy trappings, frolicking and gibbling—when all these things are jumbled together into a discordant mass, then it is really exciting to be traveling with the red children of the forest.

Comanches are supposed to give additional variety to the scene. On such an occasion, the dogs of the celebrated chief, Buffalo Hump, fall called upon to do something; they gave chase to the running horses. Buffalo Hump became furious—was strung bow and ready arrow followed the dogs. The race was over an unulating prairie kind of country, and lasted some mile or so. The enraged Indian shot his dogs and stopped his horses. The snoring of the animal seemed the impending harm. The old chief, with his subsidiary, was a long time following his canine companions. The secondary—the stamped—the chased—the maddered Indian, made a panorama worth seeing, but hardly paying for the trouble of reading.

When made, the women arrange everything—take care of the horses, set up the lodges, pack the wood and water, and cook.

The warriors lounge about, gather in groups, and talk over matters and things in general. In things they cannot properly comprehend and account for, in some way, they resort to their invocations. They deny that they hear of the speed of a railway locomotive. When some of them were informed a steam car could run from the Colorado to Chihuahua, in Mexico, in less than a day, they declared it impossible—"a horse could not run that far in a day."

They have a game which may be called "Hunt the bullet." The players sit down in a circle—sing a curious kind of song, one takes a bullet, changes it to a stone, and throwing his arms in every direction, he is throwing his arms in every direction. When a player has his manipulations have sufficiently mystified the man appointed for that purpose, he holds out both hands, and lets him guess in which the bullet is. Every guess counts on one side or the other. The number constituting the game, is, we believe, a matter of agreement; the tallies are kept with arrows. In this way a great many articles change hands. There is one garment, and one only, an Indian never parts with. It stands by his side, and is painted black, counted by the way, and is a white ball, as white as the ball; so many sticks or spots falling in a certain way counting so much. We never could understand the game.

While this going forward the women get a resting spell. They are talkative, great laughers, and seem to enjoy a bit of scandal with as much gusto as their more civilized neighbors. One of their peculiar amusements would not be much related in circles polite. A Comanche woman never seems to be happy till she has "vermined" her children. She looks little animals are drenched by those upon whom they have fasted; they get the full benefit of the *lex talionis*.

The children are roaming about examining every thicket and every hole, bathing, shooting arrows, and making all those interesting noises incidental to promising juvenility.

The Comanches formerly owned large droves of horses. They have thinned them greatly within the last few years, by being compelled to kill them for food. The Comanches and the Rio Grande, being cut out from the Comanches, is preferred to any other. The peck, immediately beneath the mane, is considered a rare delicacy. The meat has a coarse fibre, is glutinous, smells badly, has a peculiar sweet taste, which remains in the mouth for nearly a day. We never liked it, not even when starting for war of the Indians. The Comanches use it for nothing. A sudden rebellion of the stomach often follows such an act of infatuation. Mule meat resembles beef in flavor. A fat mule makes very palatable eating. Young fawns are fine—Terapias, rattle-snakes, prairie dogs, and pole cats are very good.

The Mesquero Indians take their names from the mesquit plant. It belongs to the order of plants usually called "legumes," and is a white head like a pea, and is cooked by digging a hole in the ground, building a fire in it, removing the coals and ashes, and lining the bottom and sides with prickly pear leaves, deprived of horns by burning, putting in the mesquit, covering with coals and building a fire upon the same, which must be kept up for twelve or fourteen hours. The edible part is soft, and tastes a little like an Irish potato. It is covered by a thin fibrous substance. When an opossum is cooked in this Pease and Rice, the Comanches use this and a species of magpie. The latter is cooked in a similar way. It has an unpleasant taste. These plants will grow upon sterile uplands. A Comanche will eat liver, young fawns, and many other things, while raw. In Scharo's camp, we saw an old rascal who offered to be he could eat anything. For a plug of tobacco he proposed making a breakfast upon a substance bearing the furthest possible distance from our tables. He was the naughtiest looking thing in human shape we ever saw.

The Comanches live, as our phrase is, "from hand to mouth." They have little provisions. When provisions are plenty, they consume enormous quantities. They do not bear the pang of hunger with the stoical resignation one would suppose. In this particular, as in almost every other, the Delawares are infinitely superior to them.

The Comanches have a religion; they practice oracles, and believe in removing disease by charms and incantations. A Comanche enjoys a medium of real pleasure. His roving, devil-may-care kind of life has attractions even to the white man.

New Definition.—The sword—the first hope of the oppressor and the last hope of the oppressed.

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