The Comanches’ Conquest of the Southern Plains

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The Comanche were, at the beginning of their invasion of 250,000 square miles of the Southern Plains (Comanche and Comancheria), hunter-gatherers, eking out survival in the mountains. This was about to change in an enormous and irreversible way. Throughout this invasion, the relatively small, insignificant group who called themselves the Nermernuh (literally meaning “the People”) (Gwynne 27), through ruthless encounters with other tribes and world powers, strategic and cunning diplomacy, and control of all trade in the West, would become one of the most powerful tribes in Native American history, the Comanche.

It is important first to understand the fundamental principles of Comanche lifestyle; they were “short, dark-skinned, and barrel-chested” (see Appendix I) (Gwynne 27). The Comanche came from a sect of Shoshone who had broken off to form their own group. They began in the Sangre de Cristo Range (Hämäläinen 18), speaking a dialect derived from their great Shoshone ancestors of Western North America (Hämäläinen 22). One of the key facets of their nomadic social structure was individual freedom. Although they did have five major bands, the Quahadis, Kotsotekas, Nokonis, Yamparikas, and Penatekas, any Comanche who was a part of one could simply decide to leave and join another (Gwynne 27). They had no real chiefs; a man’s power came from his ability to rally a force of fighters (Gwynne 27). Even their religion was sparse, and certainly they had no religious leaders or priests. The world was just a “series of events with no deeper meaning” (Gwynne 43). The Comanche were also excellent diplomats and frequently made productive treaties that suited them despite their minimal organization, although what Anglo-Europeans would later find was that a treaty made with sixty Comanches only applied to those sixty people, as far as the Comanches were concerned (Gwynne 24). However, the Comanches would reveal a darker side in their dealings with captives and other tribes’ members.
Comanche brutality is nothing short of a legacy. What many people thought of Comanches is not altogether inaccurate (Wisconsin Historical Society Archive). “Comanche” is a Ute word generally accepted to mean “enemy” or “anyone who wants to fight me all the time” (Hämäläinen 20). Their history is littered with reports of them gang-raping women, torturing, and killing. Gang rape would have been unimaginable to an Eastern tribe such as the Iroquois, though they certainly killed and scalped women. Children were also victims, as in the case of Rachel Plummer Parker (a Comanche captive from the infamous Parker’s fort raid) and her newborn son who was dragged around behind a horse until dead (Gwynne 38). In one instance, a man named Herman Lehmann, who had been accepted as a full-fledged warrior reported this after his band attacked a Tonkawa camp (Tonkawas were notorious for their cannibalism) after finding a Comanche leg in one of their fires:

A great many were gasping for water, but we heeded not their pleadings. We scalped them, amputated their arms, cut off their legs, cut out their tongues, and threw their mangled bodies upon their own campfire, put on more brushwood and piled the living, dying and dead [Tonkawas] on the fire. Some of them were able to flinch and work as worms, and some were able to speak and plead for mercy. We piled them up, put on more wood, and danced around in great glee as we saw the grease and blood run from their bodies, and were delighted to see them swell up and hear the hide pop as it would burst in the fire (Gwynne 43).

The only exceptions to the awful treatment were the rare instances when a captive child would be taken in and accepted by the tribe. Cynthia Ann Parker, the “White Squaw,” was one of these
“loved captives.” She was another child from the Parker’s fort raid of 1836 (Comanche Timeline), but unlike Rachel, she was adopted into the tribe and eventually married Peta Nocona of the Nokonis and had children by him (Gwynne 37). These exceptions were few and far between, though, and the overwhelming majority of captives were either killed or sold as slaves. This was the standard on the Plains; the Utes and Apaches would have treated a Comanche prisoner no differently and would not have been expected to. But the Comanches had an advantage: their horsemanship.

Nearly every element of Comanche life revolved around the horse. The Comanches’ domination of nearly a quarter of the United States wouldn’t have been a possibility without them. The Comanches first encountered horses after the Pueblo Revolt when a large group of Pueblo Indians under Spanish rule took a fort and traded the entire herd of horses to other tribes (Hämäläinen 23). They quickly mastered the breeding of horses, expanding their herd, but also how to break horses; a Comanche brave could tame a wild horse in a matter of a few minutes, far faster than any other group on the Plains, maybe in history (Gwynne 34). Horses improved their travelling distance, hunting efficiency, striking range, and martial capabilities immensely. They were the clear difference in fighting effectiveness of the Comanches over other Plains-dwelling tribes and European-Americans, who were foot-bound, and therefore terribly ineffective against a Comanche onslaught. In one seemingly impossible manoeuvre, a Comanche would drop from the saddle to the side of his horse, using it as his shield, and fire twenty arrows, each accurate and deadly up to thirty yards, in the time it took a man on the ground to fire and reload a musket once (see Appendix II) (Gwynne 33). All of this he could do at a full gallop. The horse also allowed the Comanches to use different kinds of weapons. The average Comanche would have
carried with him into battle a fourteen to sixteen-foot lance, a shield capable of stopping a musket ball, and the favorite and quintessential weapon of Plains Indians, the bow and arrow (see Appendix VIII). With the horse beneath them, the Comanches quickly grew in power and began to contest for sole right to the largest buffalo herd in America (Gwynne 35).

This large-scale invasion of the Plains began when the Comanches followed groups of Jicarilla Apaches into the Texas Panhandle and what was then called Apacheria (but would later become Comancheria) to kidnap them to sell in Mexico as slaves (Hämäläinen 28). Captive trading was a major part of Comanche economy for the entirety of their reign atop the Llano Estacado (Hämäläinen 26). Once the Comanches got there they quickly evicted the resident Apaches, whose villages had once been a commonality along rivers across all stretches of Southern Plains. Their war for Comancheria was quick and bloody; the tribes who stood in their way simply could not match the mounted Comanches (see Appendix III). These were mainly Apaches, Arapahoes, Osages, Utes, Pawnees, Navajoes, Cheyennes, and Tonkawas (Gwynne 24). There were tribes like the Kiowas and Wichitas who became the Comanches’ allies (Gwynne 23). Most of the decimated Apaches fled to modern day South Texas. The Palo Duro Canyon (see Appendix V), an immense schism dividing the Llano, would frequently be a fallback position for the Comanches in years to come. The remaining Apaches fled to the Spanish, pleading for mercy and offering to convert to Christianity. The Spaniards baptized them, but then, strangely, sent them to mission forts outside the Spanish frontier (Hämäläinen 33). This may have been in an effort to create a buffer against Comanche raids.

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1 Llano Estacado, also known as the High Lonesome refers to a portion of the American Southwest, spanning from Northwestern Texas to the Easternmost regions of New Mexico (Gwynne).
If the tribes of Apacheria\textsuperscript{2} were desperate, they were nothing compared to the Spanish and Mexicans. In fact, the Spanish devised a strategy to cope with the Comanche threat that consisted of sending their subordinate groups, among them the defeated Apaches and early Anglo-European settlers from the East onto and beyond their frontier, in essence offering them up as meat for the Comanches who constantly raided Spanish settlements taking captives, food, iron scrap metal for tools and weapons, and, most importantly, horses (Hämäläinen 35). This only succeeded in offering up supplies and more horses to the ever-present Comanches. There is, in all the history of Spain’s relationship with them only one instance of true peace for the Spanish. It was won by governor Don Juan Bautista de Anza of New Mexico in 1778. His opponent was the legendary Comanche chief Cuerno Verde of the Kotsotekas, a notorious vengeance raider after the death of his father at the hands of the Spanish (see Appendix IV). Anza devised an aggressive strategy and marched straight into Comancheria. He took the camp by surprise, then waited for Cuerno Verde, ambushed him, and gloriously returned with captives and some five hundred horses (Alvarez). This was an extraordinary event, to say the least, however, and the usual defensive mindset of the Spanish proved useless at defending themselves from Comanche incursions. The Mexicans fared no better after winning their independence from Spain in 1810. It would not be until after the formation of the Republic of Texas, in fact, that there would be another major effort to stop the Comanches that was not an utter failure. There was one form of peaceful interaction between the Spanish/Mexicans and Comanches that existed between the two worlds; they were the Comancheros.

\textsuperscript{2} Apacheria here refers to the land surrounding the Llano Estacado that would later come to be known as Comancheria (Gwynne).
Comancheros were a sort of middle-ground where trade and commerce could be found, even in such contrasting cultures. They also serve to highlight the Comanches’ everlasting ability to adapt and create scenarios that were optimally beneficial to their needs. Comancheros were a gruff, unsavory sort who made their living by bartering and trading with Comanches for goods such as bison hides, hoses, and meat, among other things in exchange for foodstuffs, iron materials, gunpowder—though the Comanches seldom used guns—horses and anything else the Comanches might need or desire. Ultimately, Comancheros were more of an asset to the Comanches who frequently needed different foods to stabilize their meat-heavy diets (Hämäläinen 31), though the Spanish/Mexican/Texan side would have had some relief for their economy which struggled to keep up with the Comanche war, as well as a brief lapse in raiding pressure.

All too soon, however, Texans had finally figured out that they could beat the Comanches at their own game. With the introduction of Texas Rangers like the legendary Jack Hays (Gwynne 140) who fought on horseback and fought with their brand new Colt revolvers (see Appendix VII) (Gwynne 149), the Comanches could be hunted. The large-scale infantry campaigns into Comancheria had been totally useless and almost invariably ended in huge casualties for the soldiers and minimal damage toward the mobile and pernicious Comanches. Now the Rangers, who were durable and rugged, could surprise a large force of Comanches and defeat them with a headlong suicide charge into their ranks, yelling and firing their pistols wildly. This new battle strategy surprised the Comanches and caught them off guard but it also was working in tandem with two other key factors: railroads and a rapidly diminishing buffalo population on the high plains. Buffalo was the staple of Comanche diet (see Appendix VI) and
for this reason buffalo hunters were ultimately one of the main reasons that the mighty
Comanches finally submitted to reservation; but, even at their reservation in Fort Sill, Texas, the
Comanches were supervised by Quakers who could not control them and they inevitably came
and went freely, continuing to raid behind a young Quahadi chief named Quanah Parker (see
Appendix IX). It was not until 1875 (Comanche Timeline) that the last of the Quahadis were
gathered up by Ranald MacKenzie (see Appendix X), George Armstrong Custer’s successful
counterpart (Gwynne 236), and taken back to Fort Sill for good (Wallace 48). Quanah Parker
quickly helped them to assimilate and became a successful cattle man (Selcer 28). The once
untameable Comanches were confined and pacified.

Up until their final days of raiding and running, the Comanches were known to be the
most ferocious, brilliant in battle, quintessential marauders of the Southwest. Even their foes
could not resist but to respect them.

Being surrounded by horsemen, ready to cut them down if they left the thicket,
and unable to use their arrows with much effect in their situation their fate was
inevitable--they saw it and met it like heroes (Gwynne 144).

In all the history of the Plains, no other tribe held more influence over the outcome of which
foreign power would lay a stable claim to the Southern Great Plains and the Llano Estacado. The
spectacle of a small group of Comanche warriors charging across the desert leaving a path of
kicked-up sand in their wake is one of the hallmark images of the American West. George Catlin,
the famous chronicler of the days of the frontier, and especially of Native Americans, observed
Comanches as a naturalist observes a mountain lion from afar. His paintings are not of blood but
of beauty, and show a side of the Comanches that is otherwise unseen. The conquest of the
Comanches began with a tribe pushed from the mountains and ended with a great and powerful nation forever woven into the fabric of our nation’s history.
This photograph is of three Comanches on horseback. They were at a standstill at the moment of the picture. This picture shows for one thing, what an average Comanche would have looked like, and for two things, what their horses would have looked like. Their mustangs are rather small, but hardy and robust, athletic, in appearance. Another key feature of this photo is the unmistakeable landscape. It is not hard to imagine these three Comanches disappearing into the backdrop after a raid, leaving a Spanish mission or Texan rancheria to burn to the ground.


This painting is by George Catlin, one of the few examples of consistent, unbiased accounting of the West during the age of settlers. This particular painting, called *Comanche Feats of Horsemanship* depicts a series of Comanches in different stages of performing one of their most astounding battle techniques which Catlin describes thus:

> Amongst their feats of riding, there is one that has astonished me more than anything of the kind I have ever seen, or expect to see, in my life:—a stratagem of war, learned and practiced by every young man in the tribe; by which he is able to drop his body upon the side of his horse at the instant he is passing, effectually screened from his enemies' weapons as he lays in a horizontal position behind the body of his horse, with his heel hanging over the horses' back; by which he has the power of throwing himself up again, and changing to the other side of the horse if necessary. In this wonderful condition, he will hang whilst his horse is at fullest speed, carrying with him his bow and his shield, and also his long lance of fourteen feet in length, all or either of which he will wield upon his enemy as he passes; rising and throwing his arrows over the horse's back, or with equal ease and equal success under the horse's neck.
This is a map from *Comanche Empire*, by Pekka Hämäläinen. It shows the swathes of land controlled by the Comanches as well as another key factor: their reach. Not only did the Comanches control an area the size of Texas, they also made raids deep into Mexico and across the entire expanse of the “High Lonesome,” the Llano Estacado (Gwynne, 24). 1840 would have been just ten to twenty years before the Comanches were at the height of their power and influence on the high plains of the Southwest (Comanche Timeline).


The Comanche warrior shown in this photograph is the legendary leader Cuerno Verde [Green Horn] (Alvarez), famed for his vengeance and brutal raids against the Spanish after the death of his father. He was one of the most influential Comanches ever to have lived. What he is remembered for is not his bravery or skill in battle but one defeat he suffered. In 1780 (Comanche Timeline) Governor Juan Bautista de Anza of New Spain decided to give the Comanches a taste of their own medicine. He went with 500 soldiers and some Apache scouts (number is unknown) (Comanche Timeline) deep into Comancheria when he came across Cuerno Verde’s camp and attacked while he and his warriors were away on a raiding campaign. He then ambushed Cuerno Verde’s army when he returned and Cuerno Verde himself was killed in the skirmish that followed. After their chief’s death, the warriors quickly surrendered, as was often the case when one of their head men was killed, even when they far outmatched the opposing force. Cuerno Verde’s defeat is maybe the only one ever suffered by the Comanches at the hands of the Spanish that was not exaggerated or inflamed.

This is a modern photograph of Palo Duro Canyon which is sometimes described as the “Heart of Comancheria” (Palo Duro) and was often a fallback position in the time of the Comanches decline from power in the late 1870’s (Gwynne, 238). It is also the site of many a battle in all recorded wars in Comanche history (Emerson). It is not hard to imagine the Comanches disappearing into this landscape after a raid, leaving little or no tracks and taking heavy loot.


This is another painting by George Catlin. In this example, a Comanche is taking down a bison with his bow and arrow. The buffalo he is shooting probably weighed about one ton or two thousand pounds (National Bison Association). The skill required to take down such a large beast with the weapons at hand is unimaginable for today’s Americans. A single Comanche family group probably used about one whole bison every year but a Comanche man killed closer to sixty per year to trade (Gwynne 29).


This Colt Walker revolver was the weapon of choice for the Texas Rangers who would ultimately be one of the key factors in halting the Comanche onslaught on the Southern Plains. Samuel Colt designed the weapon, which was the first of its kind, but he was influenced by a Texas Ranger named Samuel Walker who also helped with the design (hence, Colt Walker) (Gwynne, 149). They used the Colt to great effect, firing six rounds in quick succession and easily reloaded with the extra forty cylinders a Ranger would carry into a fight (Gwynne, 146). Now the weapons of the Anglos could keep up with the bows of the Comanche, and more importantly, maybe, be fired from horseback. The Rangers soon became known for their gruff attitudes and also their stunning, reckless bravery that some would have categorized as suicidal, taking on larger forces in headlong charges that confused the Comanches proved an effective strategy.

Appendix VIII

In my third George Catlin painting, two warriors in full battle accoutrements gallop at full speed atop their mustangs. My focus is drawn to the one on the right with the lance. Catlin gives an idea what the Comanches may have been like in battle with most of his works involving them and this one is no different. The lance was often used in raids, as well as in fights with footbound soldiers, where it would have been a devastating weapon.


This is a picture of Quanah Parker, the “Last Chief of the Comanche,” (Iron Mike) an ironic title considering he was also the only true chief of the Comanches. Their social structure was based strictly on the needs of the individual. If a man wanted to leave one band and go to another, he could do so freely (Gwynne, 27). Parker was the exception. The son of Nokoni leader Peta Nocona and the famed captive who became a Comanche known as Nautdah, Cynthia Ann Parker, the “White Squaw” (Gwynne, 7). He led the Comanches through their first ever, and last, time of need by making sure the process of their assimilation into white culture went smoothly and they were not taken advantage of. He was very successful in this task and also made a good living for himself as a cattleman (Selcer) and became rich.

Appendix X

Headshot of Brev. Maj. Gen. Ranald Slidell MacKenzie. He was charged with the rounding up of the last of the wild Comanches: 400 or so Quahadis led by Quanah Parker. This final group was to be taken to reservation. While this proved difficult for MacKenzie, he eventually did find them stumbling into Fort Sill, marking the last days of the untamed Comanche. MacKenzie is often considered to be something like George Custer’s more successful twin; they held the same rank, were of the same age, went to the same school to become officers. MacKenzie, however, finally brought down, with much help from the Texas Rangers, the most powerful tribe of Native Americans ever on the continent.

Works Cited

Primary Sources


This newspaper article was one of very few primary sources available for this topic. It gave some perspective on the feelings of Eastern whites about the Comanches, which was one of awe and interest as opposed to hatred.


This was mainly used for one of its pictures although there were a couple of facts that were useful and a nice detailed report of the events. The photo is of Comanche chief Cuerno Verde, who fought Governor Juan Bautista de Anza and was defeated, killed in the fight in fact, in the only major victory for New Spain in their war with the Comanches. Cuerno Verde, or Green Horn, was famed for his thirst for revenge after the death of his father while fighting the Spanish.


This source not only provides an interesting distinction in perspective in the form of Catlin’s painting but also his own description of the painting and the skill depicted. Instead of the fear and anger commonplace in white settlers for other tribes (like Chivington’s famous massacre of Cheyenne at Sand Creek), there is certain splendor that Catlin perfectly describes in his depiction of Comanche equestrianism.

The picture in Appendix VIII was connected to this source from Google Images but it did not provide any new or relevant information.


This was very convenient source for information about Comanche customs and lifestyle. It was primarily a series of pictures (two of which can be found in Appendices I and III) with captions following beneath that described what was being shown and its relevance.


This source was only valuable because it had an image of a George Catlin painting of a Comanche taking down a bison that could be copied and pasted. It is seen in Appendix VII.


This Article described the advent of the Colt Walker, the name of which was the only pertinent information applied in this text. The picture of the gun was the main objective of the source, commented on in Appendix VII.


Quanah Parker’s title, “The Last Comanche Chief,” as well as his photograph, were the sole reason for using this source.

A picture of Palo Duro Canyon on the homepage of the site can be found in Appendix IV. Little or no information about the Comanches themselves was on this site but their home and frequented campsite (Palo Duro Canyon) was the main subject of it.


A picture of Brevet Major General Ranald Slidell MacKenzie in uniform. Appendix X.


Courtesy of the Wisconsin State Historical Society, this compilation of Ranald S. MacKenzie’s official correspondence from 1873-1879 was valuable in interpreting the goals and motives of MacKenzie’s campaigns into Comancheria. It also allows for vision into his relationship with Quanah Parker and Fort Sill. This also was beneficial in cross-referencing for *Empire of the Summer Moon*. 
Secondary Sources

This source provided an actual size of Comancheria that used in this paper (250,000 square miles). Size cross-checked later with Wisconsin State Historical Society.

This source’s purpose was almost exclusively to cross-reference other sources, including *Empire of the Summer Moon* by S. C. Gwynne (Source #11) and *Comanche Empire* by Pekka Hämäläinen (Source #12). It basically confirmed all of the important factual evidence from those sources and helped get a sense of which events were important and which were less so.

Comanche Timeline provided dates for the events used in elements of the main text and served the purpose perfectly. It would be adequate for devising a quick, accurate sequence of important events in Comanche history.

Two pictures (Appendices I and III) were taken from this source. It was also used to cross-reference for previous sources and to formulate ideas and gather information about Comanche rituals, customs, and lifestyle.


This source was useful for researching more thoroughly the Comanches’ reservation history especially in elements unrelated to Quanah Parker, which was useful because he was consistently the focus in all/most of the other sources otherwise used to get information regarding Fort Sill.


This book was without a shadow of a doubt the most helpful and most-used source. Its information was great and the actual writing was captivating. This would be a great leisure-reading book for anyone seeking a riveting historical novel, provided they had the stomach for it. This source is cited by far the most in this paper, and practically every chapter had a bounty of useful information and/or quotes. Five other sources were dedicated almost exclusively to cross-checking the factuality of the events in this text.


While only the first chapter of the book is used, this source was extremely helpful in acquiring a knowledge base for the topic, much like Empire of the Summer Moon. It is not, however, as well-written and pleasurable to read as Empire of the Summer Moon, though it does have some specifics that Empire of the Summer Moon does not, like the specific mountain range from which the Comanches made their descent onto the Southern Plains (the Sangre de Cristo Range).


The website yielded one important fact for my second George Catlin painting of the Comanche taking down a bison found to be within the range of one and a half to two thousand pounds.


This source is from the Wisconsin State Historical Society and it was used to cross-check some of my facts from other sources, especially *Empire of the Summer Moon*. It did differ in one main point, that being the time of Peta Nocona’s (Nokoni chief and Quanah Parker’s father) death. Selcer claimed that there were letters from Nocona after the supposed time of his death at the Pease River fight in which Cynthia Ann Parker, Quanah’s mother and the legendary “White Squaw” who was captured at the equally famous Parker’s Fort raid, adopted into the tribe, and came to prefer it over Anglo culture afterward, was recaptured. These letters were addressed in another source and declared to be false, the date of which source was later than that of this one so it was assumed that these letters either did not exist or were somehow false throughout this text.

This online book demonstrated the inner workings of the Comanche and offered a valuable new outlook on the Comanches not seen in other sources. Editions to the paragraph of this text devoted to describing the Comanches’ lifestyle in detail was affected by this text although it is not directly cited and there is no direct information used from this source.


This source helped in a similar way to “Comanche Indians” in that it was used for backing up points made by other sources, mainly book sources.


Most dates referenced in this text came from this source. It is an accurate sequence of events regarding the Comanches rise to power through their decline into reservation and assimilation.


This was another newspaper, although it was not from the time period and it should be concluded that it was a secondary source which was admittedly downputting because of the challenging nature of finding primary sources on the largely undocumented Comanches. It did help develop some opinions about this topic, though.