

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 3: "A Cheyenne Odyssey"

Iron Teeth on the Escape from Oklahoma and Fort Robinson

Iron Teeth was a Northern Cheyenne woman born in 1834. She was 95 years old when Thomas B. Marquis, a former doctor for the Cheyenne agency interviewed her in 1929. Her memoir is a valuable source of information on Northern Cheyenne life on the Great Plains during the transition to reservation life. She was a survivor of the Northern Cheyenne trek north from Darlington Agency and the Fort Robinson escape, which she describes in this excerpt.

On Oklahoma we all got sick with chills and fever. When we were not sick we were hungry. We had been promised food until we could plant corn and wait for it to grow, but much of the time we had not any food. Our men asked for their guns to given back to them, so they might kill game, but the guns were kept from them. Sometimes a few of them would take their bows and arrows and slip away to get buffalo or other meat, but soldiers would go after them and make them come back to the agency. The bows and arrows were used at times for killing cattle belonging to white men. Any time this happened, the whole tribe was punished. The punishment would be the giving of less food to us, and we would be kept still closer to the agency. We had many deaths from both the fever sickness and starvation. We talked among ourselves about the good climate and plentiful game food in our northern country hunting lands. After about a year, Little Wolf and Morning Star, our principal old men chiefs, told the agent:

"We are going back North."

The agent replied: "Soldiers will follow you and kill you."

My two sons joined the band determined to leave there. I and my three daughters followed them. I think that altogether, there were about five hundred Cheyennes in this band. The white soldiers chased us. They came from every direction. Some of the Indians were back as soon as the bullets began to fly. But my older son kept saying we should go on toward the North unless we were killed, that it was better to be killed than to go back and die slowly.

Only one buffalo, a calf, was killed by our men during the long flight back to the old home country. A few cattle belonging to white people were killed. Our chiefs told the young men not to do this, but our people were very hungry, and no other food could be found. I have heard it said they killed some white people who started the fight. At that time all of us were trying to stay entirely away from all other people, so we could travel without interruption.

Chills and fever kept me sick all along the way. We had not any lodges. At night, when we could make any kind of camp, my daughters helped me at making willow branch shelters. Day after day, through more than a month, I kept my youngest daughter strapped to my body, in front of me, on my horse. I led another horse carrying the next-youngest daughter. The oldest daughter managed her own mount. The two sons stayed always behind, to help in watching for soldiers. . . .

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We dodged the soldiers during most of the way of our long journey. But always they were near us and trying to catch us. Our young men fought them off in seven different battles. At each fight, some of our people were killed, women or children the same as men. I do not know how many of our grown-up people were killed. But I know that more than sixty of our children were gone when we got to the Dakota country.

We separated into two bands when we got near to the old home regions. The two bands were led by Little Wolf and Morning Star, or Dull Knife. I and my family stayed with the Morning Star band. At Salt Creek, as we got to the old Red Cloud Agency, my younger son and the oldest daughter set off with some other Cheyennes to go forward to the agency. Some of our friends warned them not to do this, that the Pawnees and Arapahos who belonged to the soldiers would kill them along the way. But they were determined to go. It turned out they did what was best. They got through without serious trouble. I and my three remaining children and the other people with us had before many days of hard trail.

Morning Star said we should be contented, now that we were on our own land. He took us to Fort Robinson, where we surrendered to the soldiers. They took from us all of our horses and whatever guns they could find among us. They said then that we must go back to the South, but our men told them it was better to die by bullets. After a few weeks of arguing, our men were put into a prison house. We women and children were told we might go to the agency. Some of them went there, but most of us went into the prison with the men. In the one room, about thirty feet square, were forty-three men, twenty-nine women and twenty or thirty children.

"Now are you willing to back to the South?" the soldier chiefs asked us.

Nobody answered them. The quantity of food given to us became less and less every day, until they gave us none at all. Then they quit bringing water to us. Eleven days we had no food except the few mouthfuls of dry meat some of the women had kept in their packs. Three days we had no water.

Guns had been kept hidden in the clothing of some of the women. One day, a woman accidentally dropped a six-shooter upon the floor. Soldiers came and searched us again, taking whatever weapons they could find. But we kept five six-shooters, with some cartridges for them. I had one in the breast of my dress. We hid all of these under a loose board of the floor. My family blanket was spread over this board.

The men decided to break out of this jail. The women were willing. It was considered that some of us, perhaps many of us, would be killed. But it was hoped that many would escape and get away to join other Indians somewhere. Women cut up robes to make extra moccasins. I made extra pairs for myself and my three children. We piled our small packs by the two window and the one door, or each woman help her own pack ready at hand. The plan was to break out just after the soldiers had to bed for the night. I gave to my son the six-shooter I had. He was my oldest child, then twenty-two years of age.

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After the night bugle had sounded, my son smashed a window with the gun I had given him. Others broke the other window and tore down the door. We all jumped out. My son took the younger of the two daughters upon his back. The older daughter and I each carried a little pack. It was expected the soldiers would be asleep, except the few guards. But bands of them came hurrying to shoot at us. One of them fired a gun almost at my face, but I was not harmed. It was bright moonlight, and several inches of snow covered the ground. For a short distance all of the Indians followed one broken trail toward the river, but soon we had to scatter. My son with the little girl on his back ran off in one direction. We had not any agreed plan for meeting again.

I and the daughter with me found a cave and crawled into it. We did not know what had become of the son and his little sister. A man named Crooked Nose came also into our cave. We could hear lots of shooting. The next day we still heard shots, but not so many. Each day after that there was some further firing of the guns. We stayed in the cave seven nights and almost seven days. More snow kept falling, it was very cold, but we were afraid to build a fire. We nibbled at my small store of dry meat and ate snow for water. Each day we could hear the horses and the voices of soldiers searching for Indians. Finally, a Captain found our tracks where had gone out of and back into the cave. He called to us. I crept out. He promised to treat us well if we would go with him. He and his soldiers then took us back to Fort Robinson.

My toes and fingers were frozen. Others who had been caught and brought back were in the same condition, some of them in worse condition. A soldier doctor told us to rub snow on the frozen parts. I did this. At first there was great pain and burning, but this soon passed away. The frozen parts continued sore, but finally they got entirely well. . . .

All of us were put again into the prison house, a day or two later. The number now was only about half what it had been. The soldier chief at the fort came and talked to us through an interpreter. He said he pitied us and did not want to kill any more of our people. He then asked if we were willing now to go back to Oklahoma, so that no more of us would be killed. But we were mourning for our dead, and we had no ears for his words. Everybody said: "No, we will not go back there."

We expected then that the soldiers would come at once into the prison and shoot all of us. But they did not. Instead, a few days later we were taken to the Pine Ridge Agency and were put among the Oglala Sioux. Little Wolf and his small band, who had separated from us in coming from Oklahoma, went to Fort Keogh and then were put upon lands by the Tongue River, in Montana. Other Cheyennes were with us in association with the Oglalas on Pine Ridge Reservation. Finally, after twelve years, all of us were brought together on this Tongue River Reservation.

Source: *Cheyenne and Sioux: The Reminiscences of Four Indians and a White Soldier*. Compiled by Thomas B. Marquis, edited by Ronald H. Limbaugh, 1973.

