BATTLE OF BEECHER
ISLAND
Nine Days of Arrows, Bullets and Horse Meat

story by MATT VINCENT

Scouts fight for their lives in Frederic Remington’s “Battle of Beecher’s Island.”

Frederic Remington
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
The scouts rode onto the Eastern Plains 150 years ago looking for Indians to fight. They found more than they bargained for at the Battle of Beecher Island.

Major George "Sandy" Forsyth was too anxious to sleep. Rising before daybreak on Sept. 17, 1868, he walked to the edge of camp and joined the sentries keeping watch. They peered into the dark expanse of prairie but saw nothing. Yet.

Forsyth and his handpicked band of Indian fighters were deep in the heart of Indian country – an area now known as Colorado’s Northeastern Plains. The Forsyth Scouts had camped for the night at this spot near the Arkacce River, south of present-day Wray, after their sixth day of hard riding. They were tracking an Indian raiding party whose trail they had followed here from western Kansas, though the scouts had yet to find a single Indian.

Darkness concealed the Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians by night, and the prairie concealed them by day. They had spent generations memorizing all the hiding spots and escape routes in this broken terrain of ridges, valleys, gullies and ravines. If the Indians wanted to stay hidden, this was the place to do it. And if they wanted to show themselves ... it would probably mean trouble for the scouts.

Trouble arrived at the first hint of sunrise. Forsyth and a nearby sentry spotted it almost simultaneously: Something out there was moving – and getting closer. Straining their eyes and ears, and readying their carbines, they heard the soft trud of horses’ hooves, then saw the mounted warriors riding toward them over the ridge. They fired their carbines while running back to camp, sounding the alarm, as Forsyth later recalled in his book *Thrilling Days in Army Life*.

"Indians!" he shouted. "Turn out! Indians!"

The scouts who were still sleeping bolted awake to the sight of eight warriors riding in at a gallop, lashing their war ponies.

"Saddle up quickly, men!" Forsyth ordered.

His two blue-coated officers were already on their feet. His buckskin-clad civilian scouts roused quickly, many of them holding tight to lariat lines while reaching for saddles and packs.

But the warriors didn’t attack. They bypassed the scouts and headed directly for the camps horses and pack mules, capturing several animals and galloping off again, shouting in celebration.

To the scouts’ relief, they left behind the mules carrying the priceless ammunition packs.

Though Forsyth had seen combat during the Civil War, where he rose to the rank of brevet brigadier general, he was new to this kind of fight. He peered through his field glasses to the northeast, where the raiders had disappeared over a ridge. Sharp Grover, his chief of scouts, touched his shoulder and nodded to the southwest, up the riverbed:

There were more Indians, and they were about to charge.

Forsyth brought his field glasses to his eyes. His heart quickened. In the distance, hundreds of mounted warriors were forming battle lines. Soon, the massive formation of men and horses began to move as one.

A combined force of Sioux, Cheyennes and Arapahos came thundering downriver on their war ponies. No one knew for certain how many warriors joined the charge – 600 to 700, according to most sources, with some estimates going as high as 1,000. Those present that morning didn’t need an exact count to know that the 53 men waiting to meet the charge were vastly outnumbered.

**Forsyth Made His Decision Quickly**

To retreat would mean being chased down and annihilated, so they would have to make a stand right here – or rather, on the nearby island in the river.

Beecher Island, as it came to be known, was perhaps 200 feet long and 40 feet wide. It was little more than an elevated sandbar during September, the dry season on the Plains. But there was cover – a solitary cottonwood stood at one end of the island, and a thicket of low willows and alders grew in the middle. The dismounted men picked up their horses, hastily began digging rifle pits, then waited...
for what was coming down the Arikarae seconds behind them.

"I thought we were all going to be killed and scalped or captured and held for torture," scout John Hurst wrote in an account published by the Kansas Historical Society. "I heard Colonel Forsyth call out and ask if anyone could pray. He said, 'We are beyond all human aid, and if God does not help us there is none for us.'"

The oncoming charge sounded like a herd of stampeding buffalo, according to one survivor. The warriors closed on the island with the rising sun shining in their faces, illuminating the bright feathers and war paint on man and beast.

The wave of Indians had nearly reached the island when the scouts' opening volley exploded across the small valley, splitting the attackers' formation. Warriors thundered past each side of the island like a raging prairie flood, unleashing a barrage of arrows and gunfire as they rode past.

Cheyenne warrior Wolf Belly rode directly through the scouts' rifle pits, eagle feathers braided into his long black hair and wearing a sacred panther skin blessed by a Cheyenne medicine man. Wolf Belly rode through the center of the island twice without being hit, astonishing Forsyth's men. Many of them assumed Wolf Belly was none other than the famous Cheyenne warrior Roman Nose - the Indian they feared above all others - and did their best to unseat him. They would have to face the actual Roman Nose soon enough.

**ALTHOUGH SURROUNDED AND OUTNUMBERED, the Forsyth scouts managed to blunt the first charge, and the fighting devolved into a chaotic whirlwind of individual attacks and feints. For the next few hours, warriors sped around the island on their ponies, firing from a full gallop.**

The scouts could hunker down in their rifle pits, but their horses and mules had no such protection. The helpless animals were riddled with bullets and pin-cushioned with arrows. With
coldblooded practicality, the men summarily shot their wounded horses and turned them into bleeding breastworks.

The island was an excellent defensive position, and the scouts were lucky to have it nearby when they were attacked. That wasn’t their only lucky break that morning. If that first small group of overeager young warriors hadn’t spoiled the Indians’ surprise attack, it’s most likely the white men all would have been killed by this point.

The scouts also were fortunate to be armed with Spencer repeating carbines. Unlike most rifles and carbines used up to this point, the relatively new Spencers could fire seven shots without reloading. Meanwhile, the Indians had to reload their guns after each shot, though most used bows and arrows.

The Spencer carbines would have been useless without ammunition, which Forsyth’s expedition packed in unusually large quantities: Each man carried 140 rounds on his person, while pack mules carried another 4,000 rounds to the island before

1858 and earlier
Colorado’s Eastern Plains are home to the Cheyenne and Arapaho people, whose territory also stretches into Kansas, Wyoming and beyond. They follow the vast buffalo herds, their main source of food.

1859
More than 100,000 white prospectors and settlers stream across Colorado’s Eastern Plains during the Pikes Peak Gold Rush, disrupting life for the now-outnumbered Cheyennes and Arapahos, who had lived in Colorado for generations.

1861
Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders sign the Treaty of Fort Wise, agreeing to live on a reservation on the southeast Plains. Treaty signatories didn’t represent all Cheyenne bands; the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers opposed any restrictions or reservations.

1864
At the Sand Creek Massacre in southeast Colorado, Col. John Chivington’s troops kill 183 people – mostly women and children – at Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle’s village, which the Army was supposed to be protecting.

1865
Cheyennes, Arapahos and their Sioux allies avenge Sand Creek by attacking ranches and stage stations along 150 miles of the South Platte River, from Fort Morgan into Nebraska. They burn the town of Julesburg to the ground.
The relentless Indian attack began to take its toll. During a brief late-morning lull, several of Forsyth’s men, who had remained hidden in the tall grass on the north bank, made a dash for the island. A small group of warriors fired from their own sniper positions, hitting one scout in the forehead, killing him instantly. Several other scouts were seriously wounded.

A combined force of 1,000 Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors in Wyoming ambushes 75 soldiers and two civilians under Capt. William Fetterman, killing them all.

Civil War hero Gen. Winfield Hancock orders the burning of an empty Cheyenne village in Kansas, starting “Hancock’s War” between the Army and Cheyennes. Roman Nose, already a bitter foe of whites, vows to drive them off the Plains.


The Cheyenne Dog Soldiers are decimated in a last stand against the U.S. Cavalry at the Battle of Summit Springs, south of Starling. It is the last major Indian battle on the Colorado Plains.

The Kansas Pacific Railroad links Denver to the coasts, cutting through the heart of Cheyenne land. Cheyennes leave Colorado. Some go to a reservation in Oklahoma; others go with the Sioux to fight the whites in Wyoming and Montana.

Forsyth had just two other uniformed Army officers helping him lead the civilian scouts. His second-in-command, Lt. Frederick Beecher, directed fire and oversaw construction of rifle pits behind the bloody horse and mule carcasses. Sgt. William H.H. McCall was grazed in the neck early in the battle but kept fighting.

The Indians began a second massive assault a few hours after the first. This time, the warriors crept on foot close to the breastworks, rising quickly to fire. The scouts responded, inflicting their own casualties. As the two sides traded shots, Forsyth suddenly toppled back into his rifle pit with a bullet in his right thigh. Moments later, another bullet hissed into the island defenses and broke the bone in Forsyth’s left leg just below the knee.

With their commander badly hurt but still conscious, more scouts started dropping. One took a bullet to the head, killing him instantly. Beecher was hit in the chest, tumbling back into his rifle pit, his blue military blouse turning crimson as he died. Dr. John Moores, the expedition’s lone surgeon, was shot in the head. The wound was mortal, but he would linger for three days while the scouts tried to keep him awake and the blowflies off.

Still, most of the scouts fought on and survived under occasionally miraculous circumstances. When an arrow hit scout Frank Harrington in the forehead, a comrade tried pulling it out but only succeeded in yanking off the arrow’s shaft. Harrington kept fighting with the metal arrowhead protruding from his forehead until an errant Indian bullet missed him but struck the arrowhead from the side, sending it flying harmlessly out of his skull and onto the sand.

Tall Bull, chief of the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers, was frustrated that his people hadn’t yet wiped out this small group of whites. He sent runners back to the Dog Soldier village to summon the man who could turn the tide for the Indians. His message for Roman Nose was simple: You are needed — come fight.

Word spread quickly that Roman Nose was coming. The Indians buzzed with excitement. Roman Nose’s arrival on a battlefield generally meant something big was about to happen.

His Cheyenne name, Woqini, literally meant “Hook Nose,” which whites interpreted as Roman Nose. By any name, he was the most famous and admired Cheyenne warrior of his time. As the tribe’s preeminent war leader, he rallied his people against
the soldiers, settlers, wagon trains, stagecoaches and railroads – revenge for the slaughter of peaceful Cheyenne women and children at the Sand Creek Massacre four years earlier.

Although Roman Nose was never a chief or a medicine man, the U.S. Army labeled him the head chief of all the Cheyennes. The whites saw that whenever Roman Nose went into battle against them – which was often – the young warriors of his tribe followed in great numbers.

“This fame so spread to the whites that they credited him with being leader in all the fights where the Cheyennes were engaged,” his friend, half white-half Cheyenne George Bent, wrote. This applied even to fights where Roman Nose wasn’t present.

He was, indeed, present at Beecher Island, yet he was uncharacteristically reluctant to face the enemy – the powerful “medicine” that gave him supernatural protection in previous fights had been broken.

Roman Nose wore a sacred war bonnet that made him bulletproof. That’s what the medicine man who created it told him, and Roman Nose believed it. His signature battle tactic was to gallop back and forth in front of the enemy to draw their fire and deplete their ammunition. At the Battle of Red Buttes in Wyoming, he rode circles around 22 soldiers, who wasted most of their bullets trying in vain to shoot him, allowing the Indians to close in and kill them all.

The sacred war bonnet came with a strict set of rules Roman Nose had to follow to keep its medicine intact. In particular, he was never to eat food that had touched metal, or else he would be killed in his next fight. But while visiting friends in a nearby Sioux village several days before the battle, he had inadvertently consumed food prepared with a metal fork. A purification ceremony could restore his medicine, but that would take many days.

Aware of the risk, Roman Nose answered the call to the battlefield but stopped at a hill just beyond it. As he explained his predicament, an old man named White Contrary confronted him, as recounted in The Fighting Cheyennes by George Bird Grinnell.

“All those people fighting out there feel that they belong to you, and they will do all that you tell them, and here you are behind this hill,” White Contrary said.

Roman Nose laughed grimly. He knew what he must do. He...
applied his war paint, donned his war bonnet and rode forward. "I know that I shall be killed today," he said before departing. His fellow warriors' tension turned to excitement as Roman Nose took his honored place at the head of the battle lines forming upstream of the island. Old men, women and children gathered on a ridge to watch the spectacle below.

Roman Nose came down the riverbed at a full gallop, riding low on his black war pony. The twin tails of eagle feathers on his war bonnet flew behind him. When the warriors came abreast of the island, the crack of Spencer carbines erupted in unison once more. Determined to ride through them like Wolf Belly had done earlier, Roman Nose rode straight for the head of the island and the lone cottonwood. Suddenly, he stiffened. His horse veered away from the island. An audible gasp rose from the hills.

He did not fall from his pony. Instead, the great warrior rode out of rifle range and dismounted. When Bull Bear and White Horse rode up to him, Roman Nose was lying flat on the earth, facing the blue sky of a late September afternoon turned evening, his eyes half closed. He had been shot, he calmly told them.
A monument at Beecher Island commemorates the battle. The white officers and African-American enlisted men of the 10th Cavalry rescue the scouts after nine days in an illustration from a popular 1895 magazine article Forsyth wrote about the fight.

As darkness fell over the valley, Forsyth realized his command's only hope of survival was to summon reinforcements. To do that, he asked for volunteers to sneak through the encircling Indians and walk 85 miles to Fort Wallace. Scouts Jack Stillwell and Pierre Trudeau stepped forward. Taking with them a compass, Forsyth's only map, a few provisions and two canteens filled with dirty seep water from the riverbed, the two scouts slipped off the island and began working their way through enemy lines.

The Indians began a gradual departure from the battlefield on the second day, though enough warriors remained around the island and in the surrounding sandhills to maintain the siege. occasional bullets and arrows sizzled through the air, slamming into the rotting, bloating breastworks, keeping Forsyth and his scouts alert and miserable inside their rifle pits.

The third day brought more of the same for the surrounded men. The scouts, Hurst wrote, "had nothing to eat but the dead horses which were decaying and decaying about us, and when we cut into this meat the stench was something frightful, and it had green streaks running all through it." They took to sprinkling the meat with gunpowder to partially counteract its awful taste.

Unsure of the fate of his first messengers, Forsyth sent two more volunteers, Allison Pike and Jack Donovan, on the third night.

By the fourth day, the dwindling gunfire ceased altogether. The Indians had abandoned the fight and were moving their villages to quieter parts of the Plains. The scouts, however, stayed put. They had no way to transport their many wounded, and they feared an ambush if they ventured from their fortified positions. As the days dragged on, the stench of rotten animals and wounded men, broiled under an unrelenting September sun, became overwhelming. Some men refused to eat at all.

"Still looking anxiously for relief," scout Chauncey B. Whitney wrote in his diary on the seventh day, "starvation is staring us in the face; nothing but horse meat."

On the eighth day: "Made some soup tonight from putrid horse meat. My God! Have you deserted us?"

On the ninth day: "Arose at daylight to feel all the horrors of starvation slowly but surely approaching. Had a light breakfast of rotten meat."

Relief came later that morning. The cavalry had arrived. Specifically, the Buffalo Soldiers of the 10th U.S. Cavalry, one of the Army's African-American regiments. Incredibly, both sets of messengers had managed to reach Fort Wallace to summon aid.

Forsyth was one of 15 wounded scouts to survive. Six died, including second-in-command Lt. Frederick Beecher. Forsyth named the fight the Battle of Beecher Island in his honor.

Forsyth claimed his men killed 35 warriors; Indian sources put it at nine. Both sides agreed that the Cheyenne's greatest warrior was among the dead.

On the day Roman Nose was shot, wails of grief and mourning filled his village as friends carried him back from the battlefield. Roman Nose lingered through the night and died the next morning just as the sun began to rise — and set — on the Plains Indians in Colorado.

Visit Beecher Island
150th Anniversary Events

On Sept. 15-16, there will be commemorations and activities at the battlefield for the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Beecher Island. Planned events include military reenactments, a black powder rifle shoot, merchant row and live country music. Camping sites are available. For information and a complete schedule of events, call the Beecher Island Memorial Association at (970) 630-0156.

While in the area, visit the Wray Museum to see Beecher Island displays and battlefield relics, as well as an extensive collection of Paleo-Indian artifacts from the Jones-Miller Kill Site. For information, call (970) 332-5063. 

Matt Masich contributed to this story.