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QUANAH PARKER: A GREAT INDIAN SPOKESMAN

Lynn R. Osborn

Quanah Parker, son of a Comanche chief and a white mother, was an eloquent and persuasive Indian spokesman. For more than thirty-five years, from 1875 until his death in 1911, he served as advocate and representative for the Apache, Comanche, and Kiowa peoples of Oklahoma. This brief essay chronicles some of the high points of Chief Quanah's speaking career.

Introduction

Although some uncertainty exists regarding the exact date, it is generally believed that Quanah Parker was born in 1845 near Cedar Lake on the southwest edge of the Staked Plains of Texas. Quanah's father was Peta Nocona, a chief of the Nocone band of Comanche warriors. His mother was Cynthia Ann Parker, a white woman taken captive by Comanche raiders in 1836 at the age of nine. During his younger years, Quanah attained prominence as a cunning and resourceful war chief. It was during the period 1875-1911, however, that his reputation as a speaker of great influence and considerable eloquence was established.

On June 2, 1875, Chief Quanah's small Quohada band surrendered to Colonel Ron-

ald S. Mackenzie, United States Army, at Fort Sill, near the present town of Lawton, Oklahoma. Quanah was the last Comanche chief to accept reservation life, and an era of American history was concluded with his action. From the outset, his leadership abilities were evident in the shaping of a confederation of the Apache, Comanche, and Kiowa populations of the reservation and his political efforts in their behalf. Jackson and Jackson report that:

He served as a member of the Indian police, went to Washington several times as a delegate for his people, and was appointed one of the three judges of the Court of Indian Offenses. . . . He was chosen as president of the board in the Parker School District on June 20, 1901 . . . Quanah was elected deputy sheriff at Lawton, Oklahoma, in 1902 . . .¹

It was in these roles that Quanah Parker's true skill in the art of oratory was revealed.

Quanah the Orator

One must first look briefly at Quanah's prereservation background in order to chart adequately his development as a speaker. As Balgooyen has observed, "Quanah Parker's speaking ability helped him gain prominence as a chief very early in his adult career."² One occasion upon which his influence was felt in this regard occurred during the famous Medicine Lodge Treaty Council of 1867.

There was much heated discussion among the leaders of the various Comanche bands assembled for the treaty talks. Ten Bears, the wise old chief of the Yamparika band, in what Jackson and Jackson have called "a masterpiece of common sense and good will,"³ advocated acceptance of the treaty terms by his tribal fellows. Quanah, however, as chief of the Quohada warriors of the Staked Plains, was adamant in his refusal to sign the treaty documents and lobbied diligently against their approval. Finally unable to dissuade many of his Comanche peers from accepting the gifts offered by the federal negotiators in exchange for their agreement to reservation life, he delivered one last impassioned plea and departed with those who shared his views.

Before the Quohada surrender in 1875, Quanah set the stage for eight more years of conflict with these words:

My band is not going to live on a reservation. Tell the white chiefs that the Quohadas are warriors and will surrender when the blue coats come up and whip us on the Llano Estacado.⁴

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It was this display of proud and defiant eloquence that, in the eyes of many, kept the Medicine Lodge Council from completely achieving the goals the government had established for it. Herman Lehman, a close friend of Chief Ten Bears, and whose father was an interpreter at the meetings, declared: "Too few signed and far too great a number walked away for the treaty to be a success."⁵

Following his surrender, Chief Quanah's leadership abilities and speaking skills were turned to the service of the Indian peoples on the Oklahoma reservation lands. Although there is a consensus concerning his oratorical prowess, there is some disagreement as to whether, when, or how well Parker spoke in English. Some researchers claim that his command and use of the language were outstanding. One biography notes: "He spoke both English and Spanish fluently."⁶ Jackson and Jackson agree in their observation that "Quanah knew the Comanche dialect well, spoke good English and fair Spanish."⁷

Other Indian scholars hold a contradictory view and state that, although Parker was a powerful and influential speaker, his addresses to English-speaking audiences were delivered through an interpreter. The eminent Indian historian William T. Hagan states: "He spoke only broken English. . . . he is usually speaking Comanche. . . . so what you get is a secretary's version of what the interpreter said Quanah had said."⁸ Gillett Griswold, Director of the Fort Sill Museum, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where the Quanah Parker Collection is housed, comments: "All accounts that I have seen regarding Quanah's public talks to white audiences state that he spoke in broken English. . . . he must have made many speeches in his native Comanche tongue. . . ." (Hagan and Griswold's observations have been corroborated by communications I made with members of the Parker family still living at the time of my study.)

Space does not permit a complete analysis and development of all of Chief Quanah's speaking career following his eventual acceptance of reservation life. However, brief reference to selected examples will serve to illustrate his oratorical accomplishments.

On October 7, 1879, just over four years after his surrender, Quanah Parker had an introduction to one of the earliest of the mass media of spoken communication. Two Phelps-type telephones, to be connected to the Fort Sill-Fort Reno telegraph line had been

received at Fort Sill. J. D. Hewitt, the Fort Sill operator, invited Quanah to a demonstration of communication by voice across the seventy miles separating the forts. The chief was astounded and asked many questions regarding operation of the equipment.¹⁰

In 1898, Quanah was invited to speak at a Fourth of July picnic given by Congressman Bird McGuire at Hobart, Oklahoma. The following excerpt from this address reveals the biting humor that he often exhibited in his public speeches:

We love the white man, but we fear your success.
This pretty country you took away from us, but
you see how dry it is now. It is only good for
red ants, coyotes, and cattlemen.¹¹

Chief Quanah was a capable impromptu speaker and was called upon many times to perform in this manner. Jackson and Jackson relate the circumstances surrounding one of the most famous of these occasions:

The white Comanche was very popular as a picnic speaker and entertainer. He attended the yearly celebration in Ardmore, Oklahoma, on July 4, 1899. The speech of the day was to be given by Geronimo, the famous Apache. . . . He had been sentenced for murder and sent to Florida, but was out on parole and back at Fort Sill. It was noticed by noon that every wagon had a 30-30 Winchester in it. Too many of the men wore coats and their shirts bulged a little too much. The sheriff and his deputies put their ears to the ground and soon learned they were after Geronimo. The noted Apache chief had intended to wear his scalp coat, with at least one hundred sewn into it. There was great concern among the people and Geronimo was spirited away. Quanah Parker arose to the situation and made what some called his best speech.¹²

Although a good friend of the Republican President Theodore Roosevelt, Quanah Parker gave close allegiance to the Democratic party. In 1904, he backed his nephew, Democrat Judge Parker, in the latter's try for political office. Quanah's economy of words was quite evident in this brief but pointed speech of support for Judge Parker:

He heap big Democrat, he heap big judge. He
my man; named for me; he my nephew; my
Indians all Democrats, all for Parker. He win.¹³

When Theodore Roosevelt was inaugurated as president of the United States in 1905, Quanah Parker was among those invited to the nation's capitol to ride in the inaugural procession. While not Parker's first trip east, this event marked the beginning of a close friendship between the two leaders,

during which Quanah frequently spoke in Roosevelt's presence, in Washington, Oklahoma, and Texas. Visiting in Washington for a period of time after the inauguration, the chief discussed with President Roosevelt and members of Congress many of the problems faced by his people. Upon his return to the reservation, Quanah made to the Indian people a series of speeches outlining the discussions he had participated in while in Washington. Two examples of these addresses that readers may wish to examine in detail are recorded in Oklahoma newspapers of the day, the *Lawton Constitution*¹⁴ and the *Kingfisher Press*.¹⁵

Two other addresses of this period, the zenith of Parker's career as a public speaker, are worthy of note. The first was a strong admonition by the chief with regard to drinking and gambling among his people and his desires for reform in these areas. The following translation of his remarks was printed in the *Daily Oklahoman*, February 21, 1906:

I want my people to quit their idleness and go to work. They loaf about from place to place and do not stay at home one-third of the year. Look how they are camping around the Red Store now. They ought to be at home cultivating their lands and learning to make good citizens. The Comanches have always been idle, but it's time they were getting over it.

I want the Indians to improve their lands, pay taxes and be permitted to vote. I want them to be citizens with the civilized people rather than savages. They have been savages long enough.

The Indians are prone to the drink habit. They ought to break themselves of it. I am ready and willing to give the authorities any assistance in prosecuting men that sell them liquor; but I am working now trying to teach my people the wrong in getting drunk and beating their wives.

Gambling ought to be stopped. I don't like card playing. It is mean. The slick white men get the Indians' money as fast as the government pays it to them. I am trying to get the Indians to quit playing cards and be decent.

These reforms have become my sole object in living. As chief of my people, I want to teach them the way of civilized people should help rather than hinder me. I expect to go to Washington this spring in company with Geronimo, and I am going to talk to the President about these matters. I believe he will help me all he can.¹⁶

The second address concerned pending tax revisions to which the Comanche people objected and the Comanches' desires to continue some of their traditional religious practices. A summary of Chief Quanah's

presentation on this occasion was printed in the *Daily Oklahoman*, December 18, 1906:

He (Quanah) declared that his people were all property owners and tax-payers of their county, and they felt that if a portion of Comanche County, in which many of them lived, was cut off and added to Kiowa County, the result would be a poor county, where the rate of taxation would be very high.

With pathetic sentences the aged warrior announced that the Indian ways were fast dying out, and that the new ways of the paleface were coming in. His people desired to be citizens of the new state, but hoped to be allowed to retain some of their old customs. Among these, the most important to his mind, and one that was in danger of being taken away, was the right to use the mescal bean as a medicine.

"We will use the medicine of the white doctors, but we desire to be allowed to use the pey-o-te also."¹⁷

Toward the end of his life, Quanah Parker's success in speaking was such that, had he lived longer, there were those who would have predicted his entry into the national political arena. Following an address at the Texas State Fair in Dallas in 1909, one newspaper editor had these words of praise for the Comanche leader:

Quanah Parker is developing his talents of oratory that soon may challenge Congressman Carter and Senator Owens of Oklahoma to their very best. The next thing you hear, there'll be a Comanche chief running for Congress.¹⁸

One of Quanah's last great speeches before his death was delivered on October 24, 1910. The place was the State Fair Grounds in Dallas, Texas, on the occasion of the dedication of the Quanah, Acme, and Pacific Railway Company. In one segment of this address, the old chief again expressed his preference in political parties:

I want to tell you one matter, something else, ladies and gentlemen. You see my two hands? Here is one Indian way (right hand) and here is another road (left hand). These are the Republican Party and this the Democrats. I watched both parties close, which is best? The Democratic Party is trying to work for good of all us. It looks at the rich man and poor man, the same. The Republican Party for rich man, but not the good poor man. The Republicans have all the offices—holds money tight. Democrats want them to turn loose.¹⁹

Conclusion

Quanah Parker died in his twenty-two-room ranch near Cache, Oklahoma, on February 11, 1911. Thus ended the colorful life

of a truly remarkable man, a leader of the Indian people, and one skilled in the arts of public communication. Though opinions may vary about his language proficiency, his reputation as a speaker remains strong among the Comanche and his non-Indian admirers as well. If this brief essay accomplishes no more than to create an interest and a desire on the part of one scholar to investigate and record in depth the story of this native American orator, the writer will be well-pleased. In the words of Quanah Parker's grandson:

I . . . charge you to seek and hunt out the necessary information of this important man, thereby better enabling you to inform those whomever may make inquiries of the Last Great Chief of the Comanches, Quanah Parker. I do furthermore charge you to pay and enforce the proper respect due this great and honorable personage, Chief Quanah Parker.²⁰

NOTES

1. Clyde L. Jackson and Grace Jackson, *Quanah Parker, Last Chief of the Comanches* (New York, 1963), pp. 125-126.

2. Theodore J. Balgooyen, "The Public Speaking of the Typical North American Plains Indians of the Nineteenth Century," unpublished dissertation (Stanford University, 1957), p. 134.
3. Jackson and Jackson, p. 62.
4. Martin F. Schmitt and Dee Brown, *Fighting Indians of the West*, (New York, 1948), p. 64.
5. Quoted in *Indian Pioneer History* (Oklahoma Historical Museum, Oklahoma City), vol. 90, p. 236
6. Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Famous Indians: A Collection of Short Biographies* (Washington, 1966), p. 41.
7. Jackson and Jackson, p. 163.
8. William T. Hagan, personal communication, September 1, 1967.
9. Gillett Griswold, personal communication, July 19, 1967.
10. W. S. Nye, *Carbine and Lance: Story of Old Fort Sill* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1937), p. 286.
11. Quoted in *Indian Pioneer History* (Oklahoma Historical Museum, Oklahoma City), vol. 87, p. 368.
12. Jackson and Jackson, pp. 126-127.
13. *Vinita Weekly Chieftain*, July 21, 1904, p. 4, col. 1.
14. *Lawton Constitution*, May 4, 1905, p. 8, col. 3.
15. *Kingfisher Press*, May 18, 1905, p. 5, col. 4.
16. *Daily Oklahoman*, February 21, 1906, p. 3, col. 5.
17. *Daily Oklahoman*, December 18, 1906 p. 6, col. 1.
18. *Daily Oklahoman*, October 29, 1909, p. 6, col. 4.
19. Quoted in *Indian Pioneer History* (Oklahoma Historical Museum, Oklahoma City), vol. 87, p. 389.
20. From a copy of an undated address delivered at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, by Mr. Edward Clark, grandson of Chief Quanah Parker, and given to the writer by Mr. Clark.