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Plácida's Sad Song

"Farewell unhappy parents
Give me your blessing
And always be careful
In whatever undertakings
With these accursed Indians."

– *El corrido de Plácida Romero*¹

Early in the morning of Monday, August 8, 1881, a band of 19 Indians rode down Cebolla Canyon, which winds around Cebollita Mesa on the border of the Acoma Reservation, east of the Malpais lava beds and today's NM Highway 117 in what is now the Cebolla Wilderness.

So common in its variants as to confuse our narrative for some time to come, it is probably worthwhile to pause here and consider that name. The wild onion (*allium bisceptrum*) is a perennial that thrives in meadows and damp, shady spots at higher elevations in the Mountain West. In New Mexico this common plant is familiarly known as *la cebolla*. Indians and Hispanics sometimes used the leaves as food flavoring, and elk, bear and other wildlife eat the bulbs, although people generally find the taste too bitter to be a welcome addition to their diet.



For whatever reason, "cebolla" and "cebollita" (little onion) are common place names in western New Mexico, frequently misspelled by Anglo and Hispanic alike.

In 1881, Cebolla Canyon was a broad, grassy meadow through which a small stream flowed and pooled. Overgrazing, the curse of the West, has since denuded the powdery soil and slashed a deep ravine that now runs in an ugly gash down the center of the canyon. The BLM has dumped tons of rock into the arroyo in an attempt to stem further erosion, but the damage has been done and the canyon will never again be stirrup-high in grass, at least not in our lifetimes.

But in 1881 it was virgin country, rich in graze and water. On a little knoll overlooking Cebolla Spring was *Rancho Cebolla*, home of Domingo Gallegos and his 29-year-old wife Plácida. That morning, five of their six children were 40 miles away in the village of Cubero, and only the youngest, 9-month-old Trinidad, was with her mother. By the corral below the ranch house Domingo's *compañero* José Maria Vargas was loading a wagon for a trip to Cubero for the annual *Fiesta de San Lorenzo* on August 10.

Plácida recognized some of the approaching riders as Navajo her husband had traded with in the past. Like many other Hispanic ranchers, Domingo probably assumed that relationship conveyed a certain degree of immunity from attack. It's hard to explain his actions that morning otherwise. Whether or not news of the Apache depredations to the south had reached his remote ranch, Domingo should have been put on his guard when he saw that the band included seven Apaches who were strangers to him, including an old man who appeared to be their leader.

Plácida and Domingo were just sitting down to breakfast, and it could be they offered something to their visitors, perhaps coffee if there was any to be had. After breakfast, one of the

¹ Roland, p. 308.

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Navajos told Domingo they had been boasting to their Apache friends of his marksmanship, and they were all eager to see a demonstration of his skill. Would he shoot at a target for them?

It's hard to understand why Domingo agreed to that proposal. He was 41 years old and had spent his life on the borderlands where Navajo and Hispanic had been locked in a bitter feud for generations before Gen. Carleton and Kit Carson finally imposed a scorched-earth peace. So he knew something of his indigenous neighbors. Perhaps he saw the challenge as a test of *machismo*, proving to his visitors that he was unafraid and that he trusted them. It could be he relied on the knowledge that, as with most traditional cultures, Hispanic and Apache shared the belief that offering and accepting hospitality imposes solemn mutual obligations on host and guest alike.

Whatever his reasons, he agreed to shoot at a target set up on a nearby fence post. When he had emptied his gun, the Indians shot him in the back. When that failed to kill him, they crushed his skull with a branding iron as he lay on the ground. When José Maria came running up from the corral, the Indians shot him too. Domingo may still have been alive when they picked him up and threw him into the henhouse, presumably so the chickens could peck at his corpse; José Maria's body they left lying on the path up to the house. Then they ransacked the house, pulled Plácida and her baby daughter onto a spare horse, and rode on.²

This sad tale is included here in gruesome detail first because Plácida left us a rare first-hand account of a tragedy that was all too common on the Southwest frontier and has since been dramatized in dozens of Western movies and novels (best told in Alan LeMay's *The Searchers*), and second because it forces us to curb any tendency to romanticize Nana and his men as heroic freedom fighters.

To understand the tragic fate of the Chiricahua, we must confront the reality of the outrages that so inflamed public sentiment against them. Whatever the Indians' grievances and provocations, it's hard to view the murder of Domingo Gallegos as anything but the most cowardly treachery and the kidnapping of his wife and child as simple banditry. This and similar crimes explain why the people of the Southwest were clamoring not just for the exile of Nana's people but for their extermination, and even 30 years later the governor of Arizona would vow to blow up the railroad tracks rather than allow the Chiricahua to return.

"Without pausing, except to gather up horses wherever possible, he traversed the desert to La Savoya. There, on August 11th, eight days after the brush at Monica Springs, Guilfoyle, still following, came upon the grim signs of Nana's recent presence to which he was by now becoming so accustomed – two Mexicans, their bodies bearing the unmistakable and horrible mutilations of Apache hatred. The troops learned later that two women had been carried off from this same place."³

"At Las Savoya, N.M. on August 11th, Lieutenant Guilfoyle found that two Mexicans had been killed and two women carried off by the hostiles." – *Col. George F. Hamilton*⁴

The only *Savoya* listed in [Place Names of New Mexico](#) is far to the west of Cebolla Canyon, on the outskirts of Ramah.⁵ Does Savoya=Cebolla? In the last quarter of the 19th Century, many Hispanics in rural New Mexico spoke little or no English, while most Anglos had only a rudimentary ear for the pronunciation of unfamiliar words and their spelling was crudely phonetic. It is probable these different accounts both refer to the raid on *Rancho Cebolla*.

Guilfoyle and Wright arrived at the ranch the evening of August 11, three days after the murders, and found a burial party already at work. Roland (on whose years of invaluable

² *Word of Domingo's gun and ammunition are probably what drew the raiders to this particular ranch. Nobody remembers the make today, but it may have been one of the Winchester repeaters the Apaches coveted. Good firearms were expensive and rare among Hispanic sheep ranchers in those years.*

³ Wellman, p. 201.

⁴ Schubert, [Voices of the Buffalo Soldier](#), p.97.

⁵ Julyan, [Place Names of New Mexico](#), p. 328.

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research most of this account is based) believes they were a search party dispatched from Cubero to discover why Plácida and Domingo had failed to arrive for the previous day's fiesta.

An imperfect translation from the voluble Spanish of the anxious and grieving civilians on the scene might have left the soldiers with the mistaken impression that two women had been stolen rather than a woman and her baby daughter. Lt. Wright sent a courier riding north to the telegraph at McCarty's with a dispatch for the commander at Fort Wingate:

"Lieut. Guilfoil (*sic*) and myself arrived here to-night. Found two men dead and women carried off. Captain Parker is at Alamosa. Lieut. Thomas had two fights lately and captured some stock. Have traveled day and night, and men and stock very much fatigued. Hostiles are between us and the Datil mountains. Suggest to Adjutant General to send troops to Monica and Suera to head them off.... Lieut Guilfoil has 25 men, I have fifteen."⁶

I have found no other mention of Lt. Thomas or his "two fights lately" in various accounts of the raid. Monica, of course, was where Guilfoyle had last encountered Nana more than a week before at the northern end of the San Mateos. "Suera" is an erroneous transcription of Lt. Wright's hasty 19th Century penmanship, in which "L" looks very much like "S." The lieutenant was pointing to Luera Spring, a favorite Apache campground southwest of Monica Spring.⁷

At this point, "Guilfoyle, his equipment worn out and his men as well, was forced to withdraw for refitting."⁸ Lt. Wright abandoned the chase at the same time. In an interview with an *Albuquerque Journal* reporter when he passed through that city on August 28, Guilfoil (the Journal's consistent misspelling of his name) said he "followed the trail as far as Savolla, on a line running parallel with the A&P road, from where the track was washed out by the heavy rains and could not be traced. He turned south again from here, but getting no more news of them, and the time for which his scouts were engaged having expired, he run into Fort Wingate."

That sentence badly needs a copy editor, and one could wish Tom Hughes or his reporter had done a better job of interviewing the lieutenant as that weary officer shepherded his scouts through a change of trains. But together with Wright's message, his remarks to the *Journal* summarize Guilfoyle's cogent reasons for abandoning the chase.

It's impossible to fault Guilfoyle for that decision. Over the past three weeks, he and his men had ridden and walked from present-day Alamogordo to the vicinity of Grants, a distance of more than 300 miles by today's highways and three to four times as far on the route Nana led his pursuers, over some of the roughest country in New Mexico, much of it still roadless and all but inaccessible today. (Bennett later said he and his scouts traveled 1,247 miles in 41 days.)⁹ Along the way they were broiled by the summer sun, soaked by sudden thunderstorms, choked by dust and tormented by flies, living on moldy rations and bad water. Whatever replacement mounts they had managed to scrounge at Fort Craig were certainly as used up as the horses they had ridden out of Fort Stanton, their uniforms were in rags and their boots shredded by rocks and cactus.

Finally, if he had not lost the trail altogether it had grown very cold. If Nana left Rancho Cebolla on the morning of August 8 and Guilfoyle and Wright arrived there the evening of the 11th, the hostiles were four days ahead of him. Much as he might have wanted to rescue Plácida and her daughter, it was time to quit.

Guilfoyle's long march across New Mexico was an epic of stubborn perseverance and a credit to him and the men he led. But consciousness of their heroic effort could not have alleviated the bitterness the troopers must have felt at finally accepting that they had been outfoxed and outrun by an arthritic old man with a limp.

⁶ *Albuquerque Daily Journal*, August 12, 1881.

⁷ It's less clear how Wright calculated Guilfoyle's force at 25. Guilfoyle left Fort Stanton with 32 Apache scouts, 20 soldiers and 8 civilian packers. Had some of these been left behind at Fort Craig or elsewhere on the trail?

⁸ Thrapp, *Victorio*, p. 214

⁹ Thrapp, *Dateline Fort Bowie*, p. 158.

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“The Warm Springs and Chiricahua Apaches possessed these advantages: They knew the terrain and how to scrape sustenance from it. That familiarity with valley, arroyo, cave and crag had bred in the denizens of the Sonoran desert a physical stamina that allowed them to out distance, out climb, and out scatter any U.S. Army pursuit. It imprinted upon their minds a map of every water hole and yielded up an instant inventory of the best ambush positions. This inhospitable desert, a country so harsh that it could not be traversed, according to one U.S. officer, without the aid of profanity, taught the longtime residents caution, resourcefulness and patience, the requirements for survival in a forge-hot environment in which little survived.”¹⁰

In November, Guilfoyle received a brevet promotion to First Lieutenant “for gallant services in action against Indians at White Sands, N.M., July 19, 1881; in the San Andreas Mountains, N.M., July 25, 1881; and at Monica Springs, N.M., Aug. 3, 1881.”

Ten years later, after serving as regimental adjutant during the Sioux Ghost Dance unrest in the Dakotas, he advanced to captain. In 1892 he was commander of a troop involved in the Johnson County War in Wyoming, and after a tour overseas chasing “insurgents” in the Philippines he made major in 1901. He rose another grade to lieutenant colonel five years later and to full bird colonel in command of the 9th Cavalry in 1911.

From 1912 until October 1915 Col. Guilfoyle and his regiment were once again defending the border, this time against the turmoil stirred up by the Mexican Revolution. At the end of 1915 he transferred to command of the 4th Cavalry in Hawaii and so just missed the chance to take the field against Pancho Villa the next year. He retired in February 1917 – missing World War I by little more than a month – and died in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1921, age 68. Altogether his military career spanned more than 40 years. Other than his brief interview with the *Albuquerque Journal*, I don’t know that Guilfoyle ever publicly commented on his pursuit of Nana or what he may have said or written in later years recalling his experiences.



Col. John Guilfoyle

Frank Bennett returned to Arizona, where he continued to lead Apache scouts, first under General Crook and then Gen. Nelson Miles. With Tom Horn, Archie McIntosh, Al Sieber, and a handful of others, Bennett was a member of an extraordinary fraternity, the Green Berets of their day, men who were not only physically tough and courageous but able to reach across the linguistic and cultural gap that separated them from the men they led.

Few came to a good end. Horn became a hired assassin and was hanged in Wyoming for the murder of a teen-aged boy; McIntosh was dismissed from government service for drunkenness and speculation; Sieber ended his career crippled and embittered, vindictively seeking revenge on the young Apache he blamed for his pain.

Bennett’s service earned him a sinecure as a postal inspector in Washington, D.C., but he apparently couldn’t remain silent at the perfidious treatment of the Chiricahua by Gen. Nelson Miles, who sent loyal scouts and their families to exile in Florida together with the surrendered hostiles. When Bennett added his voice to Crook’s in protesting this breach of faith, Miles – a man never tolerant of criticism, least of all when it touched on his professional and personal honor – may have gotten him fired from the Post Office. He found work as an Army teamster in the Spanish-American War, but reached the end of his rope in Hawaii in 1900 in a scandal lurid enough to reach the pages of the *San Francisco Call* and other West Coast papers.

¹⁰HUACHUCA ILLUSTRATED A Magazine Of The Fort Huachuca Museum.

NOTED SCOUT COMMITS SUICIDE AT HONOLULU

**DEBT MADDENED
HIM TO CRIME**

**Frank P. Bennett Expi-
ates His Foul Deed**

**Poisoned the Woman He De-
ceived and Killed Himself**

**Formerly Famous Indian Scout Shot
Himself to Escape Responsibility
for Having Caused the Death of a
Woman From Whom He Had Bor-
rowed Money**

Bennett left two notes, one addressed to the men employed under him at Camp McKinley, where he was chief teamster. It simply expressed his kind feelings for them and wished them well. The other note was to the commanding officer, Colonel Ennis.

"I never thought to go this way," it said, "but a woman is the cause of it all. Have worked for the Government since '67 and have always borne a good reputation, as my papers will show. Have faced death for the Government often and honorably, and expected to die facing an enemy of the country I loved. I don't know where I am going, but think it is the hardest trail I ever started on."

Still less do I have any insight into the mind of Sgt. Chihuahua. Certainly nothing he had seen on the long chase from Dog Canyon to Rancho Cebolla would have shocked or even surprised him. But the scouts returned from Fort Wingate to their home station at Fort Cummings by rail, a memorable if not terrifying experience for them. On that long trip Chihuahua would have seen for himself how numerous and active the white people were, busy like ants over the land and as numerous. A prudent man might have recognized that he could no more oppose that frenetic energy than he could stand in an arroyo and stem a flash flood after a summer rain. The only hope for his people was to find some accommodation that would allow them to survive the deluge that was upon them.

But then there was Nana, the indomitable old man who defied the whites and challenged their power and yet remained alive and at large, living as the Apache always had. Thirty years later, Emiliano Zapata – who was in many ways more Indian than Mexican – would say, "It is better for a man to die on his feet than live on his knees." In the language of the Tuareg, a nomadic people of the North African desert, the same verb means "he is free" and "he pillages."¹¹ Half a world away the Chiricahua would have understood and approved that sentiment.

Guilfoyle discharged Sgt. Chihuahua and the men of Co. B Apache Scouts at San Carlos on Sept. 6, 1881. A little more than three weeks later, Chihuahua followed Geronimo in a mass escape from the reservation. When he finally caught up with Nana in the Sierra Madre sometime that winter, the two met not as adversaries but as fellow outlaws. Chihuahua would surrender and even don the soldier coat again, only to finally discard it in a dramatic confrontation with the officer who sternly told him, "You can't quit! You're enlisted in the Army."

"I am quit," Chihuahua said, dropping his rifle and cartridge belt and walking out.

But all that was still in the future. From Cebolla Canyon, our own trail leads east and a few days backward in time, to Rancho Garcia. Garcia, or at least "S. Garcia," still appears on some maps, just off NM 6 south of I-40. But as a place on the ground it's gone even from local memory.

Although in some accounts it's referred to as "Rancho Garcia," this was never a single property on the Mexican model, with a *hacienda patrón* ruling in feudal splendor over his *vaqueros* and *pastores* and their dependents. Instead, a "cluster of families" sharing the same surname settled

¹¹ Porch, Douglas. Conquest of the Sahara, p. 65.

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“*Los Garcias*.”¹² The construction of the Atlantic & Pacific railroad tracks in the winter of 1880-’81 divided the little community into North Garcia and South Garcia, and presumably injected an exciting but brief bustle of activity before the workers moved on west. The Garcias apparently were uncommonly rich in horses. (It could be a railroad siding and loading pens there made it a convenient shipping point for animals gathered from area ranches.) This circumstance attracted the attention of predators. According to Lekson, Nana and his men appeared at Garcia on August 9, killed six people, and made off with 117 horses.¹³

The raiders also kidnapped a nine-year-old boy named Procópio García, by coincidence Plácida’s nephew and destined to be his aunt’s comfort and companion in adversity in coming weeks.

Kühn’s extensive compilation of sources questions whether this incident actually occurred. Citing several affidavits filed in support of claims for Indian depredations, Kühn lists three Mexicans killed by 15 Chihenne led by Nana on Aug. 10 two miles from Ojo Salado, and 19 horses and two mules stolen the same day by that same band at Jose Elauterio Garcia’s ranch at Ojo Salado. Reports of an attack on the settlement of Garcia are “probably a blurred version” of those incidents, according to Kühn.¹⁴

Two days later, “two more men were killed and a woman was carried off from the small Mexican town of Seboyeta (also called La Seboya, or La Cebolla), even farther north,” according to Lekson.

According to Bennett, after killing six men and a woman at Garcia the raiders “whipped to the east, killing two men and a woman at Servilleta (*sic*).”¹⁵ These accounts are so similar to the attack on Rancho Cebolla and the names so similar (Seboyeta, Servilleta and Sevilleta are yet more variants of “Cebolleta”) that, like the confusion surrounding “La Savoya,” it’s tempting to dismiss these reports as garbled versions of that earlier event, even though Plácida’s ranch was south and west of Garcia, not north or east, and her kidnapping occurred August 8 (although Guilfoyle and Wright did not arrive on the scene until Aug. 11).

There is another small town, now called Seboyeta but then known as Cebolleta, to the north of Garcia and another named Sevilleta southeast of Garcia on the Rio Grande. But there are no other contemporary press or military reports of attacks on either of those places.

It’s very unlikely raiders now so rich in horseflesh would linger in the area for two days after the attack on Garcia. They must have realized that Garcia’s proximity to railroad and telegraph would quickly bring pursuit on their heels, and there was no hope of concealing the trail left by a herd of more than a hundred horses. South from Garcia a broad, level valley leads directly into the heart of the Alamo Navajo country. Why ride north instead through the lands of the Laguna, who were no friends of the Apache, all the way up into the foothills of Mount Taylor to attack one of the best-fortified villages in New Mexico?

On the eastern shoulder of Mount Taylor, one of the Navajos’ four sacred mountains, the Cebolleta Land Grant straddled the much-disputed borderland between Navajo and Hispanic, and up until the 1860s the town served both as a base for raiding parties and a marketplace for trade in livestock, captives, guns and *aguardiente de cabeza*. In 1849 the U.S. Army judged both Seboyeta and nearby Cubero to be “notorious hangouts” for slave traders, gun runners and whisky peddlers.¹⁶ The little settlement was surrounded with a 10-foot stone wall surmounted by two watch towers (*torreones*) and pierced by just two narrow gates, fortifications so strong that on one occasion they stood off a siege by 500 angry Navajo.¹⁷

By 1881, more than a decade after the Navajo were tamed by the Long Walk to Bosque Redondo and back, Seboyeta’s defenses may have been in decay and the townspeople’s vigilance relaxed. But even so, it’s highly unlikely Nana or any of his followers had anything to do with

¹² Julyan, p. 144.

¹³ Lekson, p. 22.

¹⁴ Kühn, *Chronicles of War*, pp. 245-46. Kühn also asserts that Procópio Garcia was Plácida’s foster son and was kidnapped along with her and her baby in the raid on Rancho Cebolla, which Kühn dates as Aug. 9.

¹⁵ Thrapp, *Dateline Fort Bowie*, p. 158.

¹⁶ Julyan, p.329.

¹⁷ Robinson, *El Malpais, Mt. Taylor, and the Zuni Mountains*, pp 116-19.

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such an assault simply because they would then have had to turn back south and recross the railroad tracks, riding straight into the jaws of whatever pursuit was being organized out of Garcia.

Whichever of these accounts is true and in what detail is of little consequence. What's significant is to look at the pattern on a map. Nana's raiders were cutting a swathe of destruction across the western half of the territory, from the Arizona line to the Rio Grande through the borderland between Navajo, Pueblo and Apache. The raiders stole horses and mules, scattered the flocks, killed men and stole children.

Curiously, this week of terror coincided with the Feast of San Lorenzo, which is widely celebrated in the small Hispanic communities that had taken root in the western part of the territory. The date is also said to be of significance in the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, when the Indians under Popé drove the Spanish out of New Mexico. You don't have to believe these dates more than coincidence to suspect Nana was trying to incite a wide-scale uprising among the Navajo, who were already deeply discontented with their agent. Later that summer there were rumors of Navajo visitors on the fringe of the San Carlos and Fort Apache reservations. They were said to be trading blankets for ammunition and talking of fighting in the north.

Nana's Raid was terrorism in its classic definition: employing violence against a civilian population to achieve a political objective. When he stopped in the San Mateos to visit Bob Stapleton, Nana admitted to Stapleton what he had already discovered on his previous visit to Ojo Caliente that winter: the Black Range and Mogollons were filling with miners, ranchers were taking up the springs and streams, and farmers were tilling the bottomlands. There was no place for the Apache there.

But there was no gold or silver in the Datils and Mangas Mountains, few white men and only a scattering of tiny Hispanic settlements west and north of the Alamo country. Driving those out might force the government to give the Chiricahua their own homeland as the price of peace, at least close to their mountains and independent of the White Mountain and Mescalero reservations.

According to Roland's detailed reconstruction of the immediate aftermath of the raid on Rancho Cebolla, her captors took Plácida and her little daughter 12 to 15 miles east, to a Navajo camp by the Ojo Salado. There "the Apaches made Placida leave her child with the Navajo families."¹⁸

To the mother it was an act of heartless cruelty, but to Nana it was a pragmatic and even kindly decision. He was determined for whatever reason to carry the woman with him to Mexico, and he knew her baby was unlikely to survive the trip that lay ahead. Better the little girl be raised a Navajo – not as good as Apache, but far better than the despised Mexicans, and certainly preferable to death in the desert.¹⁹ Perhaps in exchange for the little girl, Nana took along with him Plácida's young nephew Procópio García.

¹⁸ Roland, p. 293.

¹⁹ *And despite her heart-broken natural mother's determined efforts to reclaim her, little Trinidad did grow up as a Navajo, marry a Navajo man, raise her own family and live to old age on the Reservation.*