

The Alma Massacre

In 1870, Sergeant James C. Cooney was transferred to Fort Bayard, near Silver City, New Mexico. While on duty as a scout for the 8th U. S. Cavalry, he discovered silver ore on Mineral Creek in the Mogollon Mountains, east of Alma and a short distance north of Mogollon. After he was discharged from the Army in 1876, he and two companions began working the claim. By 1880, helped by his brother, Captain Mike Cooney, and hired miners, he'd developed a prosperous silver mine attracting new settlers.

Agnes Meader was the daughter of settlers near Alma...

Agnes Meader, in her early teens in 1880, and her family were settlers farming near Alma. She told, when she was interviewed in 1937, what she remembered about the attack in the later part of April, 1880. Most of what follows is adapted from her oral history, collected and preserved at the Library of Congress.

She said that Indians, under their chief, Victoria, were spotted approaching Sergeant Cooney's silver mine in the hills above Alma. The Indians attacked the miners as they were quitting work for the day. Three miners were killed, and another, a Mr. Taylor, was shot in the leg, the shot breaking his leg. Mr. Taylor hid out in a nearby cave while the rest of the miners scattered into the hills.

The evening of the attack, Agnes recalled, her mother and the other children in her family went to bed in their wagon for their house was only a lean-to. She remembers that as she went to the wagon to go to bed she heard strange noises up in the hills and she called out, "There's something up in the hills!"

Her entire family came to listen, but when they didn't hear anything further, her father and mother soothed the fears of the children telling them the sounds were probably made by the frogs in the swamp.

That night, after everyone had finally gone to bed, Agnes laid awake worrying about that noise in the hills. She got up and sat on a big trunk in the front of the wagon. Next she heard loud talking, and decided it was over at the Robert's ranch house, their nearby neighbor. Perhaps, thought Agnes, someone was sick and needed help?

Just as she was about to wake her mother, she heard a horse approaching the far side of the lean-to at a fast gallop. She called out, "We are on this side of the house!"

A man rode around the house and shouted, "Where is your father?"

Agnes replied, "In the house, asleep."

"Go, wake him and tell him the Apaches are out, he had better get all of his stock in the corral at once and get ready for an attack. I haven't time to awaken him as I must go warn others."

Agnes thanked the man and ran to the lean-to to wake her father. The family soon was very busy--her father put the stock in the corral and went after her brother and her uncle sleeping in the store across Mineral Creek. When the men came back, her uncle and her oldest brother stayed at the corral to guard the stock. Agnes and her mother started molding bullets for their old 44 Winchester.

Sergeant Cooney rides to the Meader farm...

At dawn, Agnes heard horses approaching again. She recognized the riders as Sergeant Cooney and he was accompanied by a man named Chick. The Sergeant told the Meaders that he and Chick had been hiding in the hills after the attack on his silver mine. During the night they yelled to get the dogs barking so they could get their bearings. Agnes concluded that was the noise she heard.

Agnes knew that Sergeant Cooney had been an Indian scout. He told the Meader family that they need not worry as the Indians would raid the mine and the cabins of the miners and would probably not bother the settlers at all. Agnes remembered, "We stopped worrying as we thought Sergeant Cooney knew what the Indians were likely to do. We all laughed but we kept on molding bullets the rest of the day and into the night."

The next morning, Chick wanted to return to the mine. But Sergeant Cooney discouraged him, "The Indians might still be at the mine or raiding our cabins, and it's not safe to go up there now with Indians still nearby." Chick insisted he was going--finally, rather than let him go alone, Sergeant Cooney agreed to go along if they could borrow some horses. But the Meaders only had their two mules to make their crop.

So Chick and the Sergeant walked over to the Robert's Ranch and here they were able to borrow horses to ride back to their mine.

The horses returned riderless and bloodied...

Several hours later, the horses returned to their corral, but riderless and covered with blood. Mr. Potter and Mr. Motsiner of the ranch jumped on the horses and took off to the mine fearing the Sergeant and Chick had run into trouble and needed help. Nearing the mine, they, too, were ambushed by Indians. Potter's gun was shot from his hand, the jar of the shot injuring his arm, but he drew his six-shooter and fought his way out of the ambush, and he rode back to the ranch before the Indians killed him.

When the horses first returned riderless, the Roberts family sent a man to our house and told us to hurry to their ranch. Agnes' father thought we should fortify our place rather than take off to the Robert's ranch since the Meader's house was on a plain and the ranch was at the foot of a hill where the Indians could shoot down upon it. Agnes' mother disagreed, insisting the family go to the Roberts. Agnes' older brother said he would stay with the stock at the corral.

The Meaders finally hitched the two white mules to the wagon and started for the Robert's ranch. As they rode, they saw cattle standing on a hill watching something. Agnes remembers her mother pleading, "Paw drive faster, the Indians are coming! The cattle are watching them!"

"Oh, mother, there's plenty of time--those cattle are watching us and the Indians aren't near yet."

"But," Agnes said, "when we came to the top of the hill, the cattle started to run, and we heard bullets whiz by and we saw the Indians were coming toward us!"

Agnes grabbed the rifle, but her father called, "It isn't loaded. The shells are in my belt." The belt was a new belt and very stiff. Agnes tugged but couldn't get any of the shells out. Now her father was finally driving very fast.

Agnes pointed the gun at the Indians in hopes that they would stay back when they saw a gun. She recalled, "If I had been able to load the gun I could never hit an Indian as the gun was bouncing around so!" Agnes' father was now making a race for the Robert's ranch. He yelled for the family to lay low in the wagon so the Indians couldn't hit them easily. Bullets were whizzing around and Indians were getting nearer all the time.

Agnes' brother was standing at the corral watching the attack, but couldn't help at that distance. The men at the Robert's Ranch saw the trouble the Meaders were in and six rode out to help--risking their lives riding between their wagon and the Indians. But the Indians shot at the men on the horses diverting attention away from the wagon and giving the Meaders a better chance to get to the ranch.

They pulled up behind an old log shed. Just as they halted one of the white mules fell dead, the first shot of the Apaches to take effect. Agnes recalled, "We got out of the wagon down by the wall. My little sister complained that she hadn't seen any Indians as she had been lying down in the wagon. She decided to peep around the corner to see an Indian. A shot missed her head about one inch!"

Safety at the Roberts Ranch...

To get to the house the Meaders had to leap a ditch--the men told them as soon as there was a slack in the firing to make for the house. The firing ceased, and we knew the Indians were surrounding the place. The Meaders made a dash for the house, the children made it across the ditch fine, but could mother leap across the ditch? She was short and about one hundred and sixty-five pounds. When she came to the ditch, Agnes reported, she leapt across as spry as a deer. She said it was time to get in a hurry.

The ranch house was long and made of logs with a door at each end. Beds were placed around the wall of the room, with beds for the women and children in the center of the room for protection. There were thirty-one men in the house besides the six members of the Colter family, five in the Roberts family and six in the Meader family.

Outside, the Indians kept up a constant fire--fifteen warriors would ride up and fire, then drop back to reload their guns and another fifteen would take their place, always moving in a circle. There were two hundred and thirteen warriors counted.

The Indians surrounded the house and did some shooting down the hill--many of the shots lodged on the dirt roof--others knocked holes in the wall making it unsafe to move about as the Indians could see any movement in the house through the cracks.

Mr. Wilcox was standing on the other side of the room and saw his partner in the yard trying to get to the house. Mr. Wilcox stepped to the door to aid his partner by exposing himself. Then he cried, "My God, boys, I'm shot." He stood his gun down by the door and staggered over to the fireplace and laid down. Before anyone could reach him he was dead.

Mr. Foster understood the Apache language and signs. He told the boys that Victoria was trying to get his warriors to rush down the hill on the house. As our ammunition was low, he cautioned the boys to never shoot unless they were sure of the shot. Agnes believed that the Indians always had ammunition because each Indian scout working for the Government went out on patrol with a lot of ammunition, but when he returned he never had any, telling his commanding officer that he shot at rabbits and birds-- when he was really sending ammunition to his tribe.

And that evening...

The warriors made several rushes for the house, but the boys made it hot to get too close. The Apaches were superstitious about fighting in the night, and when dark came, they made camp near what is the present site of Alma. They yelled and whooped and danced and made merry, for they believed they had the settlers penned. The men inside the ranch house soon became tired of their fun making, and sent a few shots over in their direction. The Indians moved a little farther away and no more was heard of them so close to the ranch.

Getting help from Silver City...

Two men volunteered to try to get through to Silver City for help and ammunition. To go to Silver they had to ride by the Indian camp. Agnes remembered that these men came around and said good-bye to every one, never expecting to live to come back. Probably no one in the room believed they would survive.

At ranches along the way were able to secure fresh mounts. They arrived in Silver City early the next day and gave the alarm. Then they rushed over to the Fort. Captain Madden had been out on an Indian scouting trip and was just returning to the post with thirty-five of his troops and scouts and he ordered his men to turn and march to the Valley. Seventy-five citizens joined the troops, many afoot.

The morning after the battle, the settlers in the Robert's ranch house were surprised they weren't fired on. They learned later the attackers had decided the settlers weren't to be taken so easily, and had sent a runner over to the San Carlos Reservation for more warriors.

Outside, they found all the seventeen head of stock in their corral were all dead. But the Meader's old white mule stood safe and sound and was never hit.

When Captain Madden and his troop came in sight of the ranch, he used his field glasses to see conditions at the ranch. He shouted, "I see a white man!" The cry of rejoicing that went up from that group could be heard for many miles. The Indians had moved into the hills when they heard the soldiers coming. Later Agnes learned they had gone to a place where shepherders were living and killed an additional thirty-five men.

When the Meaders returned to their lean-to home, they found nothing left. Sheriff Whitehill was in the valley at the time of the attack and came on to the ranch, and the Meaders children were sent back to Silver City with him. Agnes concluded, "The families in the valley never did receive anything for their losses from the Government. But we had no more Indian problems after the Alma Massacre."

Sergeant Cooney's brother and some of the Sergeant's friends decided to erect a monument to the dead Sergeant. In a large boulder in the Canyon where he was killed, they dynamited a tomb. His body was placed into the rock, and the opening sealed with cement mixed with ore from the mine he discovered. Today that rock tomb is visited by many tourists every year who pay their respects to the fallen Sergeant.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20081007024700/http://www.huntel.com/~artpike/almamass.htm>