

Tracking Nana

Prologue

"It is difficult to describe the horror and dismay which the names of the bloodthirsty and relentless Geronimo, Victorio and Nana struck to the hearts of the settlers of the Southwest in those days."

- Col. George F. Hamilton¹

His people knew him as Kas-tziden (*"Broken Foot"*) for an old ankle injury that had never healed properly, or as Haškenadiltla (*"Angry, Agitated"*). But for the Anglo or Hispanic tongue, Apache names are almost impossible to pronounce correctly and even trickier to translate, so that most Apaches entered the historic record by their Spanish or English nicknames – names like Delgadito (*"Skinny"*) and Cuchillo Negro (*"Black Knife"*), Loco (*"Crazy"*), or Peaches.

Nana's name may be a contraction of *"nantan,"* or leader, although he was never an elected chief like Cochise.² The association with the affectionate equivalent of "grandma," is likely an example of the storied rough frontier sense of humor. It was a serious error to under-estimate him. For more than a few men it was the last mistake they ever made.

"He has a strong face, marked with intelligence, courage, and good nature, but with an understratum of cruelty and vindictiveness," wrote John Bourke, an Army officer who saw the old man in 1883. "He has received many wounds in his countless fights with the whites, and limps very perceptibly in one leg."³

No Apache called him "Broken Foot," a nickname that may be better translated as "Lame," to his face. He was no man to be defined by or even acknowledge his infirmities, and he bore the pain of his bad leg stoically, as he did the rheumatism that afflicted his later years. "He asked no odds because of either age or lameness," said his great-nephew James Kaywaykla, who as a little boy called the old man "grandfather."⁴

His other Apache name might be rendered in English as "Grumpy" or "Bad-tempered." He may have been a loveable grandfather to those around him, but in his best-known photograph he looks more like the "Hey, you kids! Get off my lawn!" type curmudgeon. In his case, the trespassing "kids" were the hairy, pale-eyed *gabachos* who suddenly showed up and started bossing people around like they owned the place when Nana was already approaching middle age.

Like many seniors, it made him angry to be treated like a child in his own home. When a portly young Army lieutenant presumed to instruct Nana and other chiefs on how to treat their wives, Nana abruptly stood up and told the interpreter: "Tell this fat boy I killed men while he was still in diapers! There's nothing he can teach me about women!" and stormed out.

Nana was born sometime before 1810 somewhere near the headwaters of the Gila River. He was a Chihenne (also Chihene, Chihende, Teihene and other variations), the "red paint people," one of the four bands whites generally lumped together as the Chiricahua. (The Apache themselves considered only the neighboring Chokonen and Bedonkohe to be "true Chiricahua.") Although they ranged far south into Mexico, their homeland was centered around Ojo Caliente, their sacred warm springs in southwestern New Mexico. At one time or another Spanish, Mexicans and Americans knew them as the Mimbres or Mimbrenos (for the Mimbres River, which rises in what is today the Gila Wilderness), the Copper Mines Apaches, or the Warm Springs or Ojo Caliente band.

Nana possessed two sources of supernatural help. The first was his Power over rattlesnakes. It's not clear whether he was able to cure snakebite or whether he could somehow control the snakes themselves. Either skill would have been highly respected by the Apache, who lived in a

¹ Schubert, Frank N. Voices of the Buffalo Soldier.

² While most sources spell the name as "Nana," others at the time spelled it with a tilde, as Naña, an additional "y" as Nanay, or with an accented "e" as Nané, indicating that pronunciation probably varied with the speaker.

³ Bourke, John C. An Apache Campaign in the Sierra Madre, San Carlos, Arizona, 1885, p.51.

⁴ Ball, Eve. In the Days of Victorio, U. of Arizona, 1970, p. 8.

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country where rattlers remain a danger today. The Apache reluctance to fight at night, disparaged by their white adversaries as the childish savage's superstitious fear of the dark, was at least in part a pragmatic estimate of the risks involved in crawling around in the brush after dark, when the snakes were most active.

The association may also have conveyed a warning that he was a dangerous man to cross.

Nana's second gift was Power over ammunition, and he repeatedly led raids that captured guns and ammunition.⁵

This Power would have grown in importance in the 1870's as Civil War-era guns (powder charge + bullet + percussion cap) wore out or broke and were replaced with cartridge arms (bullet, powder and cap all conveniently packaged in a metal case). The wide variety of calibers and powder charges for the available guns complicated the supply problem.

Whether armed with their favored Winchester repeaters or the Army's .45-70 Springfields, the hostiles found cartridges scarce in Mexico. As a result, the Apache committed a basic strategic error in waging war on both sides of the border. The Mexicans were a soft target, rich in horses and cattle, but it was necessary to raid *otra de lado* into the United States to resupply ammunition – and, despite long years of mutual hostility with the Mexicans, the Chiricahuas' basic *casus belli* was the loss of their homeland in Arizona and New Mexico to the encroaching Americans.

Pursued by both national governments acting in an uneasy commonality of interest, *los Indios bravos* ultimately found themselves without a safe sanctuary on either side of the line.

Nana was the uncle and right hand man of the great Victorio, chief of the Warm Springs Apache. At least one Army officer at the time believed Victorio (*"the Winner"*) owed much of his reputation for tactical genius to Nana, the canny veteran of years of raid and foray. Others credited Victorio's sister Lozen's uncanny ability to "see" the enemy from afar, sensing danger miles away. Certainly Victorio was without either of these trusted advisors when he made his final, fatal mistake.

As Victorio's *segundo* (second in command) in the fall of 1880, Nana had the dangerous honor of commanding the rearguard as the band rode across the barren Chihuahuan desert below the *Rio Bravo*, probing for an unguarded ford that would allow them to cross the river and strike back north. As a result, Nana was miles away when the Mexicans trapped Victorio at Tres Castillos.

It's not hard to imagine the sick, sinking feeling the old man must have felt in the pit of his stomach when he heard gunfire not from his backtrail but from far *ahead*, where Victorio was leading the women and children to the little lake at Tres Castillos. With too few warriors to contest the Mexican force directly, Nana tried to relieve the pressure on Victorio by lighting a brushfire in the hills to the south. He skirmished briefly with 30 Mexicans who were drawn off toward his fire, but the diversion was unsuccessful in breaking the ring trapping his chief.

The Mexicans credited a Tarahumara Indian with shooting Victorio dead, and they presented the killer with a nickel-plated Winchester. The Apaches believe Victorio fought until he was out of ammunition and then killed himself with his own knife rather than be taken alive. Half the band died along with him and most of the survivors were herded off to Chihuahua City.

Only Nana and the warriors who had been with him, a few more who had been away from the main body on a separate raid for ammunition, and a handful of women and children who



⁵ Sweeney, Edwin R. From Cochise to Geronimo; p. 168

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had somehow evaded their captors were left free. It was left to Nana to pick up the shattered pieces.

“We were too late,” mourned one of the warriors who had been absent that terrible day, after surveying the bodies scattered among the barren rocks.

“It is not too late so long as one Apache lives,” Nana responded.⁶

⁶ Ball, In the Days of Victorio; p.101