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Ambush in Gavilan Canyon

*I seek for one as fair and gay
But find none to remind me
How sweet the hours I passed away
With [the girl I left behind me](#)*

Sometime during the day of August 18, two days after the Cuchillo Negro fight and one day after Taylor chased Nana into the Black Range west of Ojo Caliente, mounted raiders galloped through the little tent camp of Gold Dust, shooting wildly and yelling in what Texas cowboys on a spree in a Kansas cowtown would have called a “hooraw.” The miners were apparently all out in the hills working their claims and the few women and children remaining in camp were terrified but unhurt.¹

Gold Dust was south of Hillsboro, just a few miles from the raw new mining town of Lake Valley on the southeastern flank of the Mimbres Mountains. That’s about 50 miles as the crow flies and more than 120 by road from Wildhorse Canyon, where Taylor encountered Nana. Incredibly, Nana and his men apparently made this trip and then back over the mountains in no more than 24 hours on horseback and foot.

Or did they?

Presumably the Apaches had scouted Gold Dust enough to know it was vulnerable to these tactics, but this episode still seems out of character for Nana. One can imagine him looting and burning the little camp or skirting it entirely to pick off a few isolated prospectors and miners as he passed. Certainly the Apache had a great deal of anger at the miners for despoiling their homeland. But this 19th Century drive-by shooting appears both pointless and unacceptably reckless for a canny warrior like Nana. A determined washer-woman with a shotgun might have cost a brave man his life in an end without the honor gained in an encounter with a worthy foe.

The daring exploit does sound like the bold young Kaytenna, however, acting without the restraining guidance of the old man. These raiders were the decoys who had split off to the south in an unsuccessful attempt to draw Lt. Burnett away from support of Lt. Valois in the fight in the Cuchillo Negro two days before.

After Burnett broke off his pursuit the Indians stopped briefly at the Trujillo place, midway between Chloride and the town of Cuchillo. Bentura Trujillo was 73 and so a contemporary of Nana’s, and he called his little family settlement *Chiz* after Cochise, who he claimed as a close personal friend.² Trujillo was on such good terms with the Chihenne that some Anglos thought he was part Apache himself (very unlikely, since he had been born in Alamosa, Colorado) and suspected him of selling guns and ammunition to the Indians.

For whatever reason, the hostiles did the Trujillos no harm but continued south along the eastern slope of the Black Range, leaving a trail of destruction designed to draw pursuit away from Nana and the main body on the other side of the mountains. They passed close enough to Hillsboro to rouse the populace there and a hastily organized posse rode out in pursuit, guided by the smoke from burning ranches along the way. The hostiles killed Perry Ousley and burned his ranch and then pounced on Absalom Irwin’s spread west of Lake Valley. Irwin was not home, and his wife Sally escaped into the brush with her baby while the Apaches looted and burned the house, according to one account. According to another report, “Sally and their five children made a run for it. Some of them got away, but Sally was severely beaten and a baby was snatched from her arms.”³

The Hillsboro volunteers arrived in Lake Valley the evening of August 18 to find the town filling with alarmed cowboys and miners from around the area. William Cotton’s saloon was doing a

¹ Lekson, p. 28

² Sierra Co. Historical Society, [History of Sierra County](#), p. 49.

³ Silva, Lee A. “*Warm Springs Apache Leader Nana*,” [Wild West](#), December 2006.

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booming business. The mood at the bar was not improved by the arrival of Abe Irwin, distraught over the loss of his wife and child, who he believed either dead in the fire or captured by the raiders.

The excited mob found a voice and a leader in George Daly, the town's most prominent citizen and – either by coincidence or through the ineffable workings of divine justice – one of the men in the territory Nana would have most wanted to kill, had he known of him at all.

One tale credits a wandering Chinese cook with the first discovery of “pure horn silver” in the hills south of Hillsboro, but it was a cowboy and sometime prospector named George Lufkin and local rancher R.D. McEvers who filed the first Lake Valley claims in the summer of 1878. News of their find drew other prospectors to the area and dozens of claims were staked. But assayed samples were disappointing, with silver content that would scarcely repay the cost of mining, shipping and refining the ore. It wasn't until Daly arrived on the scene that the boom began to pick up steam.

Daly was an associate of George D. Roberts, an unscrupulous stock promoter notorious for his role in what the *San Francisco Chronicle* called “the most gigantic and bare-faced swindle of the age,” the Great Diamond Hoax of 1872, and a player in dozens of other dubious mining ventures in the West.⁴

Daly specialized in operating mining properties for the benefit of such speculators, manipulating current production figures and future prospects to allow the owners to either “bull” or “bear” the stock as needed to victimize unwary investors. Run out of Bodie, California, in 1879 after instigating a violent confrontation that left a man dead, Daly moved on to Leadville, Colorado, where Roberts was peddling stock in a mine that had been artfully “high graded” – worked out but left with a veneer of ore visible along the walls of the drifts to make it still appear to be a valuable property. To delay discovery of the fraud, Roberts intentionally provoked a strike that shut down the mine. As mine manager, Daly's role in this scheme was to keep the mine closed by tactics designed to inflame the situation and prevent any settlement of the strike until Roberts and his cronies had succeeded in unloading their shares in the worthless property.

After this unsavory episode, Daly traveled south to New Mexico Territory. Financed by Roberts, Daly bought up the most promising claims in the Lake Valley district and resold them to four new front companies that concealed Roberts' interest. While Daly took on the task of managing these properties, Roberts and his fellow conspirators back East promoted the fabulous but as yet untapped wealth of their new mines aggressively and creatively – when President Rutherford B. Hayes passed through the area in October 1880, he was persuaded to stop for lunch in the new camp, where First Lady Lucy Hayes was presented with a “silver brick” allegedly from the local mines.⁵

The promoters also recruited a prominent paleontologist, Edward Drinker Cope, as figurehead president of one and with seats on the boards of the other three companies. The most charitable explanation of Cope's unfortunate endorsement is that he was a far better fossil collector than geologist, and so even though he personally visited the site several times he somehow failed to discover what Roberts, Daly and the other principals in the scheme already knew: the hills above Lake Valley contained occasional rich pockets of silver chloride embedded in limestone like blueberries in a giant muffin, but prospects were poor for a profitable sustained mining operation.

The credulous boosterism of the *Albuquerque Journal* and other New Mexico newspapers brought a flood of hopeful miners and prospectors to the area, placer gold was found in nearby Berrenda Creek, and by the summer of 1881 there were an estimated 2,000 men scrabbling optimistically in the nearby hills.

The Apache barely tolerated the shepherds, farmers and ranchers swarming into their homeland, but they hated the miners. To speak of gouging out your mother's flesh might have seemed a hyperbolic metaphor to white men, but to Nana and his people it was a perfectly accurate description of what they saw as a horrifying violation of their sacred ground.

⁴ Milford, Homer, *History of Lake Valley Mining District*, New Mexico Abandoned Mine Lands Project, 2000.

⁵ *Other than some shallow prospect holes, no actual mining activity occurred at Lake Valley until March 1881.*

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Many years later, Juh's son Daklugie recalled an occasion when raiders returned to his father's camp in the Sierra Madre with the loot of a Mexican village, including a mule loaded with "the yellow and white metals that the White Eyes love." Nana warned the men that the yellow metal was sacred to Ussen; it might be picked up if found lying on the ground, but digging for it aroused the terrible wrath of the Mountain Gods. Turning a nugget in his hands so that it glittered in the firelight, the old man prophesied gloomily, "it is this stuff that will bring our people to ruin and cause us to lose first our land and then our lives." ⁶

It's impossible to guess what Nana would have thought if someone could have explained to him that all the frenzied digging at Lake Valley was really nothing more than window dressing for a Gilded Age swindle, a scheme for one group of white men to steal money from other white men in cities far to the east. He would, however, soon have the opportunity to express his opinion of the miners.

Also newly arrived at the edge of town late that afternoon was 2d Lt. George Washington Smith, who had left Fort Cummings August 17 on patrol with 44 men of 9th Cavalry Companies "B" and "H."

When Daly angrily demanded to know why the lieutenant was not in hot pursuit of the murdering redskins, Smith might have tried to explain that his role was not to chase the hostiles but to block their escape.

Smith left Fort Cummings before Col. Hatch arrived, but his telegraphed orders contained enough information for the lieutenant to grasp his commander's intent. And like every other officer and man in the 9th, he probably recognized by now how futile and dangerous it was to try to track Apaches without Indian guides. Valois and Burnett with Co. "I," together with Cooley's "A" Co. and Lt. Taylor with Navajo scouts and part of "B" and "H," were sweeping down through the Black Range, driving Nana and his war party before them. Smith and his men were part of the cordon Hatch was throwing across southwestern New Mexico to catch the raiders when they were flushed out of the mountains.

The lieutenant was no West Point shavetail but an old soldier, a Civil War veteran who had ended that war a Lt. Colonel and had spent the past eight years fighting Indians; he probably recognized the hoorawing of Gold Dust and the smoke of the burning ranches as a diversion. If the hostiles were laying a clear trail it was because they wanted the soldiers to chase them.

Rather than try to explain military strategy to a crowd of belligerent drunks, however, Smith fell back on protesting that his men and horses were worn out and in need of a rest before continuing the chase. But when Daly announced he would lead his saloon regulators after the Indians with or without the soldiers, Smith reluctantly agreed to mount up.⁷ He took 16 men – perhaps all that had serviceable horses at that point – and Sgt. Brent Woods, leaving First Sgt. Richard Anderson at Lake Valley in charge of the rest of the command, presumably with strict orders to keep the troopers out of Cotton's Saloon, and led out sometime after midnight.

The trail led west along Berrenda Creek, across Macho Canyon and up Pollock Canyon and then over the crest of the Mimbres Mountains down into Dry Gavilan Canyon.⁸ About 10 o'clock on the morning of August 19, after a long night in the saddle, Smith called a halt. Surveying the terrain ahead, he hesitated to venture any farther without first scouting the heights on either side. Perhaps he had already heard about Captain Parker's defeat in Carrizo Canyon, or he was simply canny enough to sniff a trap before he put his foot in it.

Half the civilian volunteers had dropped out during the hard night's ride as Cotton's whisky wore off, but Daly was still in the hunt with about 20 followers. Riding up to the head of the column, he angrily upbraided the lieutenant for his timidity and may have impugned that officer's courage and that of his soldiers. Those would have been hard words to hear for a man who had

⁶ Ball, *Indeh*, p.10

⁷ *It could be that both civilians and soldiers were influenced by concern for the missing Sally Irwin, who wouldn't turn up in town with her baby, footsore but otherwise unharmed, until the next day.*

⁸ *There's some difference of opinion as to whether the ambush occurred in Dry Gavilan Canyon or Pollack Canyon. A local rancher tells me he's found old .45-70 brass in the rocks above Pollack Canyon.*

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fought at Chickamauga and was now doing a dirty, dangerous job in his country's service for far less money than this blustering civilian was making peddling watered mining stock. And as it happened, Lt. Smith was risking his life for free that day. He was under stoppage of pay for some irregularity in his accounts, and before he left Fort Cummings he had penned an appeal to the Army bean-counters to at least place him on half-pay so he could support his wife and daughter.



Sergeant Brent Woods

For whatever reason Smith let Daly's bullying over-ride his own better judgment, it was a fatal mistake for both men. Whether it was Kaytenna or Nana in person laying the ambush, he knew his business. The hostiles waited until the column was well into the defile before opening fire, and their first volley was aimed at the leaders in front and the pack mules bringing up the rear to trap the soldiers and their allies in the kill zone. Daly was one of the first killed in the fusillade from the cliffs above and Smith was hit and knocked from the saddle. As he was being helped back on his horse he was struck again and killed. The panicked posse fled, colliding with the pack train coming down the narrow canyon behind them, and horses, men and mules dissolved into a chaotic tangle under the murderous fire.

With Smith dead command devolved upon Sergeant Woods. According to his Medal of Honor citation, the 35-year-old Woods "by his coolness, bravery, and unflinching devotion to duty in standing by his commanding officer in an exposed position under a heavy fire from a large party of Indians saved the lives of at least three of his comrades."

Woods extricated the survivors from the canyon but was forced to leave behind his dead, as well as 30 horses and pack mules loaded with 1,000 rounds of ammunition. While most of the posse didn't stop running until they reached Lake Valley, Woods regrouped his troopers and the remaining civilians behind the rocky outcrops scattered on the saddle of the pass. From there he held the hostiles off until Sgt. Anderson arrived that afternoon with the remainder of the detachment to relieve him.

The lieutenant and three troopers – Privates Thomas Golding (Kühn gives the name as Giddings), James Brown and Monroe Overstreet – were killed. Pvt. William Hollins survived a bullet through the lungs but received a medical discharge five months later, Pvt. John William was shot in the thigh and eventually lost his leg, and Pvt. Wesley Harris was shot in the right breast.⁹ Daly and at least one other civilian were killed and seven or eight others wounded in the six-hour firefight.

According to one account, "small pools of blood in the canyon battlefield indicated that at least a few of the warriors had been killed or wounded."

"Daly was found shot four or five times and mutilated, with sticks stuck into his body. Smith was found lying on his face with his back and arms burnt. His face had been slashed, with his nose, ears and other body parts cut off. The lieutenant's mustache was found hanging in a nearby bush."¹⁰

Moving down Gavilan Canyon, Anderson and Woods met up with Captain Bryan Dawson and Lt. Eugene Dimmick with the rest of Companies "B" and "H" and Lt. Taylor and his company of

⁹ According to Sheridan (*Record of Engagements*, p. 115) Lt. Smith and four men were killed.

¹⁰ Silva, Lee A. "Warm Springs Apache Leader Nana," *Wild West*, December 2006.

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Navajo scouts.¹¹ Dawson sent the casualties back to Fort Bayard, where Sgt. George Turpin delivered the sad news to Lt. Smith's widow.¹²

She may have escorted her husband's coffin back east for burial, but given her financial straits it's possible he is buried in the national cemetery at Silver City. Daly was presumably laid to rest in the new cemetery at Lake Valley, although his grave is unmarked today.

On Friday, August 19, the same day as the fight in Gavilan Canyon, Apaches surprised a party of Hispanic woodcutters in their camp near Mule Springs, a few miles from Fort Cummings. "Desadario Hereda and Patronillo Chacon were killed at the camp, and Manuel and Juan Chacon, lads of twelve and fourteen years of age, are supposed to have been carried off prisoners, as their bodies could not be found."¹³ Four men were killed, according to another account, which added that: "In Las Cruces, Apaches attacked a wagon, killing six Mexicans and severely wounding the lone survivor."¹⁴

The next evening two men were killed by Apaches near Eureka, a small mining camp in the Little Hatchet Mountains in the New Mexico Bootheel.¹⁵

The ambush in Gavilan Canyon had blown a hole in Col. Hatch's cordon between the mountains and the border. The soldiers who should have been blocking Nana's movement south were left far behind him and short on horses and ammunition. Nana passed eight miles west of Fort Cummings, probably on the night of August 20, and rode on into the Florida Mountains, crossing into Mexico two or three days later.¹⁶

¹¹ Eugene Dumont Dimmick served with both the 5th NY Cavalry and the Veteran's Reserve Corps during the Civil War and with the 5th, 9th and 10th Cavalry during the Indian Wars. In 1890 he was brevetted Captain for gallant and meritorious service in action against the Indians in the Black Range on September 23, 1879.

¹² Kenner, p. 230.

¹³ *Silver City Chronicle*, August 25, 1881.

¹⁴ Silva, "Warm Springs Apache Leader Nana," *Wild West*, December 2006

¹⁵ Kühn, p. 247.

¹⁶ *If there were still Navajo or Mescalero warriors with the main party, they may have turned back northeast (which would account for a final attack near Las Cruces) and made their way back to their respective reservations through the mountains east of the Rio Grande.*