

Geronimo

Apache Leader Became an American Legend

Geronimo was born in about 1829. Following the Apache customs, his father had moved from his Nednai homeland in the Sierra Madre of Mexico to an area near the headwaters of the Gila River, where his wife's people, the Bedonkohe, lived. Coming of age in that arid and mountainous terrain, Geronimo learned how to worship Apache spirits, hunt, plant, and fight enemies. He also married a woman named Alope and had three children with her.

An 1858 episode of genocide in Mexico, together with U.S. expansion into the West, changed Geronimo's life forever. In that year Mexican troops slaughtered many Bedonkohe women and children, including Geronimo's wife, children, and mother, after which the Bedonkohe prepared to retaliate. Geronimo was entrusted with the task of encouraging the other Apache bands to join the war. During subsequent years of fighting, Geronimo avenged the death of his loved ones many times over. He also acquired a reputation among his people as an intrepid, if not reckless, fighter. His success in war was attributed to a mystical power that prevented guns and bullets from killing him. The Mexicans called him Geronimo, or Jerome, for reasons that are not entirely clear. Some claim it was a transcription of the Spanish attempt to pronounce his true name Goyathlay; others believe that his enemies, when attacking his forces, appeals aloud to S. Jerome for assistance. In any event, the name stuck.



The details of Geronimo's personal life during the 1860's and 1870's are obscure. After Alope's death, he apparently wed women from the Chiricahua and Bedonkohe bands. Though these marriages produces children, at least one child, along with its mother, was killed by the Mexicans.

Meanwhile, encroaching U.S. miners, settlers and military men had begun to disrupt Apache life, taking land, instigating conflict, and subjecting the Indians to white laws. In 1863, when U.S. soldiers used force to establish a post in Chiricahua country and murdered Chief Mangas Coloradas under a flag of truce, bloody warfare ensued. Geronimo fought under Cochise, Victorio, and others, but the Apaches were overpowered.

By the early 1870's, most Apache bands, threatened with extermination and starvation, had accepted peace terms and reservations. Yet many of the detested the new life. They were expected to become Christian farmers under deplorable conditions that included confinement, hunger, and white supervision. Soon after moving with his family to the Chiricahua Reservation, Geronimo became a leader in opposing the planned dismantling of Apache culture. Geronimo's reputation as a warrior, his oratory skills, and his wisdom enabled him to command a following and have a hand in matters of war and peace. His rising influence filled a void caused by the deaths of Cochise and the other prominent Apaches. Conversely, other Apaches, who viewed armed resistance as a threat to the delicate peace, cooperated with U.S. military and civilian authorities, working as reservation policemen and scouts.

In 1876, Geronimo protested the Chiricahuas' removal to the desolate San Carlos Reservation by fleeing with his family. Although captured, arrested, and transported to San Carlos guardhouse, he did not end his opposition to the government's program. IN 1878 Geronimo and his supporters joined other Apaches in Mexico, but in the winter of 1880, tired of fighting, the returned to San Carlos. In September 1881 Geronimo and several others bolted after U.S. soldiers forcefully suppressed a religious gathering. Geronimo and his group stormed San Carlos the following spring and led hundreds of Apaches in a desperate bid for freedom.

During these outbreaks, defiant Apaches raided Mexican and U.S. settlements, fighting soldiers and settlers on both sides of the border. Though Mexicans and white Americans have been massacring Apaches for years, land-hungry settlers and government officials nevertheless branded the Apaches as murderous renegades who deserved death, imprisonment, or banishment. Geronimo in particular became targeted for elimination.

Apache scouts under General George Crook, the commander of U.S. troops in Arizona, located the Chiricahuas in Mexico during the spring of 1883. Pursuant to an agreement reached with Crook, the Chiricahuas returned to San Carlos. In 1884, Geronimo's followers were placed at Turkey Creek, within the San Carlos reserve, but the fled the following year with a small group of followers and their families after hearing rumors that their leaders would be executed. With five thousand U.S. troops, several hundred Indian scouts, and hundreds of Mexican soldiers in pursuit, the Chiricahua leaders surrendered to Crook, consenting reluctantly to live in Florida for two years. Before reaching San Carlos, however, Geronimo and some thirty followers raced back to Mexico. Low on ammunition and not wanting to risk more deaths, they surrendered to General Nelson A. Miles, Crook's replacement, in September 1886.

U.S. Soldiers quickly shipped the captives to three Florida internment camps, where other Apaches had previously been sent. Among the exiles, who eventually totaled 469 people, were Apache scouts and their families, people who had once provided invaluable assistance to the United States. Irrespective of which side they had fought on, the Apaches now not only were held as prisoners of war, but also were expected to adopt white culture. Incarcerated at Fort Pickens, near Pensacola, away from their wives and

children, several men, including Geronimo, performed hard labor, sawing logs. Many Chiricahuas died from heat, humidity, and disease. The survivors were forced to cut their hair, wear Euro-American clothing, and send their children to distant boarding schools.



In 1887, military officials reunited the Apache families at Mount Vernon Barracks, Alabama. While there, one of Geronimos' two wives received permission to move to the Mescalero Reservation in New Mexico Territory. She took their two children Lenna and Robbie, with her.

In 1892, 388 survivors were shipped to Fort Sill, Indian Territory (Oklahoma). Once there, Geronimo converted to Christianity, apparently without forfeiting his traditional beliefs and values. He sustained his family by ranching, farming, and selling autographed pictures of himself. He gained celebrity status, appearing at President Teddy Roosevelt's inaugural parade and the St. Louis World's Fair. He also told his experiences to S. M. Barrett, who recorded and edited his story in *Geronimo's Story of His Life*, published in 1907. Still a prisoner of war and longing for home, Geronimo died of pneumonia at Fort Sill on February 17, 1909. He was survived by a daughter, Eva Geronimo, at Fort Sill and the two children at Mescalero.

Congress finally released the Apache prisoners in 1913. One hundred eighty-seven of them went to the Mescalero Reservation, and seventy-eight stayed in Oklahoma. By then, Geronimo had become an American legend.

SOURCE: Territorial News