# George Pingree, Scout, 1827-1927

**(The following is the story of one of the most daring scouts of the West at the time when the West was earning its title of "Wild and Wooly," in the decade between the late 1850s and '60s. He was a boon companion of the famous Kit Carson and shared with him many early adventures. The story from which this synopsis is taken was published in the Denver Post March 4, 1911.)**

The life span of George Pingree stretched across more than a hundred of the most thrilling and eventful years of America's history. It began at Bangor, Maine, in 1826 and closed in Platteville, Colorado, in 1927. In early life he went to sea, but sea life did not satisfy because, though the ocean looked big and wide yet travel over it must be confined to the movements of a vessel; so he soon returned to land where movements could be untrammelled. He became a trapper, hunter, lumberman and finally found his own as a scout, first independently and later in the employ of the U. S. Government. The most thrilling event of his life, as declared by himself after all adventures had been lived through and all returns were in, was his part in the Sand Creek encounter under Col. Chivington in 1864. "Encounter" was what Pingree called it, but the U. S. government at Washington named it "massacre." However, whatever its name, to Pingree it was adventure.

## THE BATTLE OF SAND CREEK AS PINGREE SAW IT.

At this time Pingree was a government scout and had been assigned to the command of General Anthony at Fort Lyons in Colorado.

In October of 1864 Chief Black Kettle of the Cheyennes and Chief Left Hand of the Arapahoes expressed to Governor Evans their desire for peace and asked that their people be settled somewhere for the coming winter. Governor Evans assigned them a winter camp on Sand Creek about forty miles northeast of Ft. Lyons, north of the Arkansas river. Here they pitched their tents and settled down for the winter. There were between 600 and 700 of the two tribes and they were housed in about 150 tepees.

In the absence of General Anthony, Col. Chivington was in command. This officer had no faith in the sincerity of the Indians. He believed that their desire for peace was in fact only a desire for food and shelter through the winter. He did not believe in their sincerity in anything, nor their desirability, and he had openly expressed the belief that sooner or later a war of extermination would have to be fought to rid the country for all time of their presence. Holding this conviction, and believing that many others held it though less openly, he doubtless planned the Sand Creek massacre in full confidence of a hero's laurels. And immediately after its consummation it seemed it was to be so, but there came a change when the government investigated.

As a first step toward the successful carrying out of his plan he engaged George Pingree and a famous mulatto scout by the name of Jim Beckwith to reconnoiter and get the exact lay of the land about the Indian camp on Sand Creek. Then, when all was ready, in perfect secrecy the two trusted scouts led the troops in the darkness of the night, silently assembling within striking distance at break of day. It was late November, the 29, and the weather was cold. In the dim early light not an Indian could be seen. Cautiously and noiselessly Chivington surrounded the camp and then, what has gone down in history by names ranging all the way from "encounter" to "massacre" began. As the volley of bullets rained down upon the camp panic ensued and pandemonium reigned. The surprise was complete. In the wintry dawn the Indians poured from their tents in great confusion. Chief Left Hand, waving a flag of truce, ran toward the attackers but was riddled with bullets before reaching the line. Men, women and children ran wildly in all directions, and then it was that the soldiers, hardly knowing what to do about the children turned to their commander and received the famous command: "Nits make lice; kill 'em all."

Pingree never believed that Chivington gave that command; to the end of his days he stoutly maintained it was not true; but it somehow got into history. And children were killed, indiscriminately, and women too. Pingree declared that could not have been avoided because of the uncertain light; but the time and the

light were of Chivington's choosing, as were all other conditions. Nevertheless, to the end of his days Pingree was a wholehearted defender of his commander; even when the War Department in Washington utterly repudiated his act and stripped him of all military honors, Pingree declared him to be "a brave man and not afraid of a dinged thing that walked the earth or swum or flew."

Of all the incidents of that eventful day the one thing best remembered by the scout to his hundred and first birthday was the thrill that was his when his horse ran away and plunged him into the very middle of a group of Indians. His was a big horse, much better suited for plowing than battle and in the excitement hard to manage. "Finally," said Pingree, "he ups and breaks into a run" straight for the bunch of Indians, and on he went, plunging and jumping until at last he gave one big leap into the air and fell down dead, plunging Pingree over his head into the very thickest of the Indians. Naturally the whole bunch set upon him, and he ran; he ran like the wind with the arrows of his pursuers whizzing all around him, chopping his clothes into shreds and some of them sticking into him; one went through his right cheek, plugged out a tooth and stuck in the hole. Pingree always believed he must have had a charmed life, for he reached the troop line alive. Sam Dorsey was the soldier who pulled the arrow out of his face. He was just a boy then, but Pingree said he had nerve. He was the same Dorsey that years later was claim agent for the Denver Tramway.

After the "encounter" was all over at Sand Creek—because there were no more Indians to shoot, Pingree found himself in possession of thirteen Indian scalps; but on his return to Ft. Lyons instead of being received with the honors he considered his due he was thrown into the guard house. "What in thunder is this for?" he indignantly demanded, and when informed that it was because he had been scalping Indians shouted: "What the devil if I have? Why shouldn't I?" And then for the first time he learned that it was against the law to scalp Indians. It had not always been so, and he did not know the law had changed. However, having now no use for the scalps he traded them to a

barber in Denver for two years' haircut and shaves—if he should need them.

There was another incident in the life of George Pingree, much earlier and less dramatic than the Sand Creek adventure, but plenty exciting while it lasted. It was when General Fremont was the Republican candidate for president in 1856; Pingree, who at that time was cutting railroad ties in Missouri, voted for him. This, he found, was about as fool-hardy a thing as riding a runaway horse into a camp of hostile Indians. It did not take long for the irate citizens in his voting precinct to trace the one lone Republican vote to its source; then they called on him; they called enmasse, in the middle of the night, and gave him one emphatic command—"GIT." He stated afterwards that he "got" quite promptly and without argument; he outran the citizens to the bank of the Mississippi River, saw a row boat, leaped into it and rowed for dear life, while the citizens, missing him, shot away one of his oars, leaving him but one with which to reach the bend in the river and safety.

After that he went to Minnesota where Republicans were more respected and became a trapper and hunter. But Minnesota was too tame and monotonous, and in 1858 he mounted his horse and headed westward. He stopped at the junction of Cherry Creek and the Platte River, and there met Kit Carson, a man after his own heart, and so cast his fortunes with the Colorado that was to be. In 1861 at the outbreak of the Civil War, the prospect for adventure looking hopeful, he joined the First Colorado Cavalry. In 1863 along with Kit Carson he was detailed for service as government scout and it was in this capacity that he connected up with Col. Chivington and all that followed.

After George Pingree had lived eight-five years and become convinced that Platteville was the best spot on earth, he literally pitched his tent and there lived for sixteen more years when the final summons came. And there, in an honored niche in the Platteville cemetery still lies the body of the famous scout, linking Weld county with the adventurous years of the past.