Cochise Stronghold

by

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I climb into the truck and check the map again. Once I leave Tucson, I-10 E to El Paso drifts past towns with names like Dragoon, Cochise and Bowie.

My daughter should be with me. This should be her pilgrimage.

As I drive, the sights and smells of the Southwest bombard me through the gap in the driver's side window—dry desert sand, sage, the smoky smell of mesquite. I'm headed to sacred places that don't belong to me.

With my iPod blaring my favorite oldies — "Wild Horses" is the song of the day — I take AZ-186 past Willcox for about 33 miles. I pass hills with the faces of recumbent deities, lips open, praying to the skies. The road rises up and down, following the gentle curves of the valley floor. Dry, sandy grasslands dotted with cattle extend for miles. There must be water somewhere, but I can't see any.

The valley is surrounded on two sides by craggy hills and on the third side by a range of mountains sprinkled with snow. The mountains rise like spiky islands from the grassy valley surrounding them. These peaks are named after the Athabaskan people who once roamed over 15 million acres of land, including southwestern New Mexico, southeastern Arizona and the Mexican regions of Sonora and Chihuahua.

I turn right onto AZ-181 and head toward the snowy peaks. In seven more miles I reach Bonita Canyon, part of the Chiricahua National Monument in the Chiricahua Mountains.

My daughter, Dana, has a legitimate claim to the sacred places of the Chiricahua. My ex-husband and I adopted her when she was a week old. Our sweet, dark-haired, dark-eyed baby was born four weeks early to a 15-year-old mother. We whisked Dana away and took her home.

It was only later, several years after the adoption was completed, that we learned about the rich heritage we had unwittingly taken from her. Still later I would wonder whether the loss of family ties going back for generations could be the source of my daughter's pain.

Dana is part Apache. We'll never know whether withholding this information was an oversight on the part of her birth mother, Teresa, or a calculated strategy. When I did find out the truth, I felt guilty about depriving Dana of her legacy.

"*Childhood living is easy to do*," sings the iPod. "*The things you wanted, I bought them for you*."

The history of the Chiricahua people is a compelling story of migration, survival and confrontation with a European culture that preferred to dominate rather than co-exist. Descendants of Siberians who crossed the Bering Straits more than 13,000 years ago, the Apache traveled south from what is now Alaska, then wandered east. The exact timing of these migrations and the history of the Apache and other Athabaskan peoples is fiercely debated by geneticists, archeologists, anthropologists and the people themselves.

The Warm Springs Apache (a branch of the Chiricahua) used Cañada Alamosa, New Mexico, and the nearby hot springs as a sacred seasonal encampment. The Apache survived by hunting and gathering, subsistence farming and raiding the Mexicans who also inhabited the region. The Mexicans raided back. In fact, years of mutual raiding and kidnapping resulted in the mixing of the two peoples. Many Apache family names are Mexican names.

European settlers who moved to the region decades later found the proximity of the Apache to be an "inconvenience." The Chiricahua had established what the Europeans thought were temporary encampments along the banks of the Alamosa River. Depending on the season and the availability of game and other food, the Chiricahua would migrate from one encampment to another. These movements were not consistent with the European notion of land ownership, so the European settlers thought the lands were theirs to claim. The Chiricahua tried to take back their sacred lands.

In the 1800s, the United States Army decided to remove the Chiricahua from the Cañada Alamosa region. Plans to resettle the Apache backfired, and a series of battles with chiefs like Geronimo, Mangas Coloradas, Victorio and Cochise ensued. Outgunned and outmanned, the Chiricahua eventually retreated to a small area in New Mexico not far from Cañada Alamosa, where many were eventually subdued.

One of their most fearless leaders, Geronimo, was arrested and taken far from his home. He died in prison, never seeing his sacred lands again. Chiricahua families were separated and dispersed. Many children were sent to government boarding schools where they were forced to cut their hair, wear European clothes and give up their language. Remnants of the Chiricahua people joined other Apache groups, such as the Mescalero, on reservations in the Southwest.

Dana's adoption was open, so we had contact with her birth mother over the years until Teresa hit some rough spots, making it risky to remain in communication. Before we drifted out of touch, Teresa provided a few clues to Dana's origins. Her ancestors were from Monticello, New Mexico, the name the Europeans gave to Cañada Alamosa. This meant that Dana was likely Chiricahua.

In a California restaurant one day I saw a picture on the wall of a young Native American girl who looked just like Dana did at the age of 5. The girl was the granddaughter of Cochise, a Chiricahua Apache warrior.

Over the years we tried to interest Dana in her heritage; but she brushed it off—the same way she brushed off the taunts of her peers. "Wetback" or "dirty mutt," they called her. My heart broke, but Dana was tough.

Like her birth mother, Teresa, Dana hit a few rough patches in her teen years. When her classmates' taunts finally got under her pretty brown skin, Dana became a hair-pulling, fingernail-scratching fighter with a nasty right hook.

Eventually the cultural conflicts were too much for Dana to bear. To save her, we had to risk destroying her by sending her away. We felt as if we were repeating an unholy history.

"*You know, I can't let you, slide through my hands*."

It was around that time that I began my search for something that would help me to understand my daughter. I found solace in a visit to Cañada Alamosa. The Internet site where I found a map of Cañada Alamosa called the place a "ghost town," but when I visited, there was still a small community nestled in the valley. In about 2004, the village square consisted mostly of dilapidated buildings. I took a few pictures, planning to return in the future.

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Chiricahua National Monument is beautiful. The air is cooler and crisper in the mountains. The canyons and valleys there are green. Animal life is abundant, and sheltering trees line the banks of streams that flow in the spring. The mountains rise up in strange, organic columns—formations that look as if they are about to topple. From the outlook at the top, you can see more craggy peaks. It looks like a perfect spot for an encampment.

Explaining my quest, I ask a Forest Service employee about the Apache. Yes, they were here, but Cochise Stronghold, less than an hour away, was better suited to the needs of the Apache. In the Chiricahua Mountains, she says, you would not be able to see who was sneaking up on you.

I head back to the highway, back past the cattle grazing, back past the praying heads until I hit AZ-191. I take it toward Sunsites, passing roads and gravel pits named "Apache" this and "Apache" that.

Overhead I see a flock of birds—hundreds, maybe thousands of them, wheeling and turning like a school of fish. They turn and disappear—dark backs turned away from me, white bellies blending with the light-colored sky. This is a place where one could hide in plain sight.

I turn right onto Ironwood Road and drive until the lane turns to gravel. The dry, grassy valley gives way to a fertile riparian canyon. The trees are filled with mistletoe, luring the sweet-sounding phainopepla. The Dragoon Mountains rise above like a fortress—not as high as the Chiricahuas, but high enough to be a great vantage point. From the Dragoons, Cochise would have been able to see anyone who might be approaching.

Cochise was never really conquered. After his death, he was buried in a secret location, somewhere in the Dragoons.

There's no time today to go to Cañada Alamosa. That will have to be a trip for another day. I want to do more research before I visit Monticello/Cañada Alamosa again. I want to be prepared—and there's someone who should be with me when I go.

When Dana came back from boarding school, she had changed. She understood that to survive, she had to choose her battles. She had to learn to find a place and a way to fit in while still remaining true to self. She's a lovely non-conformist who knows what she wants. Nothing will stand in her way. She's brave enough and tough enough to work in a prison fearlessly, side-by-side with the inmates, but tender enough to remember Mother's Day.

She's in college now and doing well—Phi Theta Kappa, even. She has a tattoo of an Indian maiden on her left arm. She found some distant Native American relations on Facebook. Someday I'll visit Cañada Alamosa with her.

"*Wild horses—we'll ride them someday*."

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