

# AMBUSH IN SYCAMORE CANYON

By James E. Babbitt

In late November of 1867 a little-known episode in the Arizona Indian wars took place just below the Mogollon Rim in the depths of Sycamore Canyon. A party of railroad surveyors, accompanied by a cavalry escort, was making its way down the bed of the canyon toward the Verde Valley when it was attacked by an Indian war party.

For several hours, arrows, bullets and boulders rained down on the survey party from both canyon rims. Soldiers scaled the steep canyon walls, returning fire and eventually driving off the attackers. The Indians melted into the surrounding countryside with unknown casualties, while the surveyors and troopers suffered only minor injuries. They continued toward the mouth of the canyon, followed up the Verde River to Chino Valley and proceeded on to Prescott, capital of Arizona Territory.

The survey party was led by William Jackson Palmer, a Pennsylvania railroad developer and Civil War hero who in 1869

would become president of the Kansas Pacific Railway Company. In 1862 Congress had authorized construction of the first transcontinental railway from Omaha to Sacramento. While the Union Pacific Railroad built a line westward from Omaha to connect with the Central Pacific in Utah Territory, other promoters envisioned a transcontinental line through the Southwest to California. This second road, chartered by Congress in 1863, was first called the Union Pacific Railway,

Eastern Division (UPED). It would become the Kansas Pacific Railway in 1869.<sup>i</sup>

During the Civil War, Palmer had commanded the 15th Cavalry Regiment of Pennsylvania volunteers. Soon recognized for his military competence and leadership, he was promoted to brigadier general in 1864. At war's end he employed several veterans of his old regiment to work on the surveys for the UPED, of which he was the secretary-treasurer. One wartime associate, Lieut. Charles Hinchman, recommended his younger brother, Walter, to Palmer as a member of the expedition and Palmer hired Walter for his artistic skill.<sup>ii</sup>



General W. J. Palmer

In the summer of 1867, the UPED topographical engineers, under the leadership of General Palmer and General W. W. Wright (the "general superintendent" of the UPED), went into the field to survey feasible routes from western Kansas through southern Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona to the Pacific Coast. West from Albuquerque they explored two lines in detail. The first followed the Rio Grande south to the Thirty-second Parallel, then turned west along the Gila River to San Diego. A second line traced the Thirty-fifth

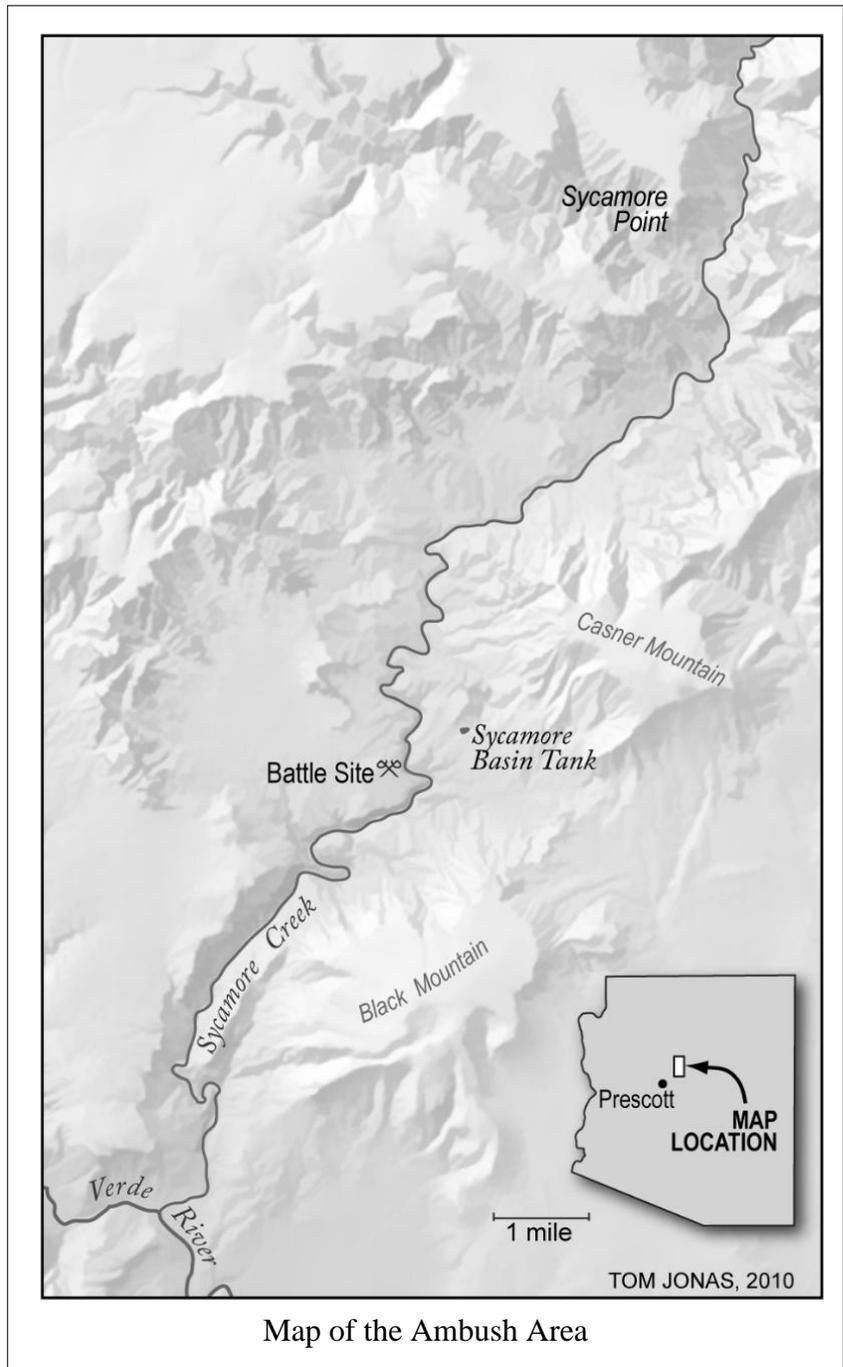
Parallel westward across northern Arizona to Los Angeles. At conclusion of the survey, Palmer would recommend the northern route that was later followed by the Atlantic and Pacific Railway in the 1880s.<sup>iii</sup>

When Walter Hinchman accepted General Palmer's invitation to join the UPED survey, he was given the title of "tapeman" and assigned to the second of two divisions under the direction of a civil engineer, J. Imbrie Miller. His duty was to assist Miller's crew in measuring and recording elevations and grades. It seems Miller also expected Hinchman to walk the whole way from Kansas to California. General Palmer, however, upon discovering Hinchman's drawing talent, promoted him to the position of "sketchist," and assigned him to document the landscape, people and events encountered on the way west. Palmer also assigned Walter a horse to ride, which made him "happy as a lark."<sup>iv</sup>

The UPED crews assembled at Salina, Kansas, in early June 1867, then marched west some two hundred miles to Fort Wallace, the official embarkation point for the expedition. While there, the fort was attacked by Cheyenne, Arapahoe and Sioux warriors led by Cheyenne war chief Roman Nose. A furious battle ensued near the fort, and seven members of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry were killed and five more were severely wounded. The Indians scalped,

stripped and mutilated several of the fallen soldiers.

This battle cast a pall over Palmer's party and caused them to take extra precautions as they struck out for Colorado including military escorts.<sup>v</sup>



Traveling up the Arkansas River, the engineer corps also explored the Purgatoire Valley in southern Colorado before turning south to Santa Fe. The crews regrouped south of Albuquerque at Fort Craig, and General Wright returned east to report to the UPED directors on their progress. Palmer then divided the survey into two parties: the first, including Dr. William A. Bell, a British physician and amateur photographer who accompanied Palmer and Wright, was to go south to the so-called "Gila route"; the second, including General Palmer and his sketch artist Hinchman, would go west along the Thirty-fifth Parallel. At Fort Craig, Company L of the Third U.S. Cavalry replaced the previous cavalry escorts.<sup>vi</sup>

The rugged, mountainous topography of northern Arizona presented major challenges to construction of a railroad. Steep grades ascending the San Francisco volcanic field, elevations that exceeded 7,000 feet, and tortuous canyons and gorges draining to the Verde and Little Colorado rivers were formidable obstacles. Palmer conducted exhaustive examinations of east-west routes north of the Mogollon Rim. A potential line around the north side of the San Francisco Peaks was considered but was discounted because of its length and cost. Palmer then turned his attention to possible lines that descended to the Verde and Chino Valleys south of the San Francisco Mountains. In need of supplies, and of a base from which to examine this southern route, Palmer led the expedition directly west along the Beale Road to the vicinity of the future railroad station of Ash Fork, thence south to Prescott. Palmer's party arrived at Fort

Whipple on November 14, 1867, and five days later they started back toward the Rim country and the sources of the Verde River.<sup>vii</sup>

Dr. Bell, who later chronicled the Thirty-second Parallel survey, also described much of the northern Arizona survey. Using Palmer's notes he wrote, "It was not the wish of our surveyors to carry a line of railway over

the actual base of the San Francisco Peaks at an elevation exceeding 7,000 feet for 100 miles." Palmer, therefore, "after having pushed rapidly forward in advance of the parties to Prescott, determined to retrace his steps through this intricate canyon country, and ascertain if there was any possibility of finding a practicable way through it. Hinchman accompanied him during these excursions. At some point General John Irvin Gregg, at that time commandant of Fort Whipple, joined him with



General J. I. Gregg

an escort." Like Palmer, General Gregg also had commanded a regiment of volunteer cavalry early in the Civil War, and, although Palmer had a company of the Third Cavalry with him, Gregg chose to personally escort Palmer's surveyors with some of his Eighth Cavalry troopers back to the rugged edge of Sycamore Canyon.<sup>viii</sup>

A military escort was a prudent safeguard, but until now the UPED survey had not been threatened in Arizona by Indians and they had just passed through Yavapai Indian country en route from the San Francisco Mountains. Yet as Palmer explored the canyons south of the Bill Williams Mountain, in the last ten days of November, he would write in his

journal that “very few days have passed . . . in which we did not meet recent signs of Indians; the rude wigwams of bunch grass and branches, which the Arizonans call ‘wicky-ups’; the moccasin tracks; the mescal heaps; the fresh trails. . . . We have been surrounded by these constantly.” Palmer and Hinchman would later report they had been attacked by Apaches, as these signs suggest.<sup>ix</sup>

On November 19, General Gregg’s party left Fort Whipple with Palmer and his surveyors to search for “a route from the Val de Chino, eastward to the Colorado Chiquito [Little Colorado River], by crossing the head-waters of the streams flowing into the Rio Verde close up to where they emerged from the . . . base of the San Francisco Mountains.” As the surveyors skirted the upper reaches of Sycamore Canyon, its drainage looked promising for a descending rail route. Dropping into it, Palmer’s sense of danger increased. He felt at once that traveling down the bed of a narrow canyon “violated the fundamental rule of Indian warfare.” Even so, the surveyors and their escort determined to push on to the mouth of the gorge as it emptied into the Verde River.<sup>x</sup>

Suddenly, a shot rang out from the brink of the canyon, and the dreaded war whoop burst upon the surveyors. Showers of arrows followed. The Indian yells echoed among the cliffs. In Palmer’s words, “It was a yell of triumph—of confidence. It appeared to say, ‘Oh ye wise and boastful white men, with your drilled soldiers and repeating guns, and wealth and power, who came out to hunt the poor Indian from his wigwam, look where we have got you!’ ”<sup>xi</sup>

The surveyors took cover in a brushy thicket close to the foot of the canyon walls, but the Indians rolled large boulders down on them, forcing them to keep moving. The muleteers scattered their animals and General Gregg’s

adjutant ordered his sergeant and six men to scale the west side of the canyon. General Palmer then ordered five of his men to provide covering fire to the scaling party. The Indians then began to fire from the east rim. Palmer ordered another scaling party of six men to go up the east side cliffs. “How we got up, God knows,” wrote Palmer:

“I only remember hearing a volley from below, shots from above. Indian yells on all sides, the grating roar of tumbling boulders as they fell, and the confused echoing of calls and shouts from the cañon. Exhausted, out of breath and wet with perspiration, boots nearly torn off and hands cut and bleeding, I sat down on the summit and looked around. Across the chasm I saw the other scaling party. Everything was quiet as death, the Indians had disappeared, melting away as suddenly and mysteriously as they had at first appeared. They had gone to their hidden lairs, cowed by our determined approach.”

Palmer later observed that, “It was nothing short of a miracle that nobody was hurt. These Indians are poor shots, which . . . must account for our escape. They are afraid also of our ‘heap-firing guns’ as they call the Spencers.”<sup>xii</sup>

The scaling parties remained on both rims to provide cover for the survey party as it moved downstream through the afternoon and night toward the Rio Verde. Palmer continued:

“By daybreak we had got well on our way. We scrambled along . . . faint from hunger and fatigue, having come nearly twenty miles on foot, up and down cañons and steep ravines, climbing through mountain passes and stumbling over the rocky bed of the streams. . . . We had had nothing to eat for over twenty-four hours, and very little sleep; the night was bitterly

cold, and our over-coats were left behind when we scaled the cliff during the Indian attack.”

Eventually darkness and rain overtook them and they camped a second night. The next day Palmer rejoined Gregg, who was camped near the mouth of Sycamore Canyon. Palmer’s greatest loss was his “noble grey horse, Signor” which “had helped to carry me faithfully from Santa Fe through New Mexico, and thus far into Arizona, but he has fallen a martyr to the topography of the sources of the Rio Verde. While George [Palmer’s servant] was leading him up a precipitous path he lost his footing in jumping over a rock, and tumbled to the bottom of the cañon, 100 feet, killing himself instantly.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Reaching the Verde River, the survey party rejoined General Gregg and his escort. Palmer’s notes do not say so, but he probably accompanied Gregg southward to Camp Verde and up the new wagon road to Prescott. Walter Hinchman shortly afterward made the drawing reproduced at the beginning of this article.<sup>xiv</sup>

Alfred R. Calhoun, a newspaper correspondent for Philadelphia’s *The Press*, accompanied the UPED survey and described the location and surroundings of Fort Whipple as “the best of any post we [have] seen since leaving Fort Wallace.” Calhoun also toured Prescott and described it:

“Yesterday I rode up the creek [Granite Creek] to Prescott and was delighted to find a snug little American town, three years old, and nestling among the hills. There are eight stores in Prescott, and more saloons than its three hundred inhabitants; two lager beer breweries; and a place where an old Mexican makes very queer pies with heavy crust and ambiguous stuffing.”<sup>xv</sup>

While in Prescott, Calhoun called on the territorial Chief Justice William F. Turner to organize a community meeting to discuss the UPED railroad project. The meeting was attended by territorial officials, miners, and ranchers from the area surrounding Prescott. It concluded with unanimous passage of a resolution urging Congress to grant a charter and subsidies to the UPED, in part because the railroad would bring a tide of emigration to Arizona and would forever settle the “Indian question.” Contemporary newspaper reports that cover this and earlier actions of Palmer’s surveyors make no mention of their close call with Apaches in Sycamore Canyon.<sup>xvi</sup>

Upon his return to Prescott, General Palmer and the 35<sup>th</sup> Parallel party wasted no more time searching for a railway line of descent from the Colorado Plateau. They made their way up the Chino Valley to Walnut Creek and headed west to Aztec Pass and on to Fort Mojave at the Colorado River. Forging north of The Needles, they crossed the Sierra Nevada at Tehachapi Pass, turned up the Central Valley of California, and reached San Francisco in September 1868.<sup>xvii</sup>

The railroad, renamed the Kansas Pacific, did not gain the necessary congressional support and was not built. General Palmer’s dream of a transcontinental railroad along the Thirty-fifth Parallel was not realized until the construction of the Atlantic & Pacific Railway in 1882–1883. Still, the survey he led produced valuable information about the topography, natural resources, and inhabitants of post-Civil War northern Arizona, and gave the American public a glimpse of life and events in the frontier Southwest.



END NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Despite its name, the UPED was totally separate from the Union Pacific RR chartered by Congress along with the Central Pacific RR in 1862. David H. Bain, *Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Viking Press, 1999), 161-62, 192-94, 454-57. Congress authorized the UPED to change its name to the Kansas Pacific Railway Company on March 3, 1869 (15 U. S. Statutes-at-Large, p. 348).

<sup>ii</sup> Walter Hinchman, the sketch artist, was born near Philadelphia on July 25, 1845, to a prominent Quaker family. At an early age, he moved with his mother to Cincinnati to live with her brother, Isaac Shoemaker. Shoemaker was a talented artist who taught young Walter to draw and sketch. Hinchman attended Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, and served for a short time in the Civil War as a corporal in a Union regiment, mustering out on September 5, 1864. He later went to work as a mechanical draftsman in the U.S. Patent Office in Washington.

<sup>iii</sup> William J. Palmer, *Report of Surveys Across the Continent in 1867-68, on the Thirty-fifth and Thirty-second Parallels* (Philadelphia: W. B. Selheimer, 1869) p. 5. William Wierman Wright (1824-1882) was a civilian engineer from Pennsylvania in charge of railroads that followed Gen. William T. Sherman's armies through Georgia. By 1865 he commanded the Military Railroad Construction Corps as a volunteer colonel. William T. Sherman, *Memoirs*, 2d ed., 2 vols. in 1 (orig. publ. 1886; New York: Library of America, 1990) p. 626. Georgetown Univ., Washington DC, special collections <www.library.georgetown.edu>

<sup>iv</sup> Walter Hinchman, *Sketches & Poems*. (Philadelphia: Privately Published, 1920) p. 24. Miller is mentioned in William B. Wilson, *From the Hudson to the Ohio* (Philadelphia: Kensington Press, 1902), p. 180.

<sup>v</sup> William A. Bell, *New Tracks in North America: A Journal of Travel and Adventure Whilst Engaged in the Survey for a Southern Railroad to the Pacific Ocean During 1867-8* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1870) pp 1-153, James E. Babbitt, "Albuquerque to Tucson," *Journal of Arizona History*, Autumn, 1998, p. 290-99.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, Muster Roll of Company L of the Third Regiment of Cavalry, Army of the United States, December, 1867. Washington: National Archives, Record Group 94.

<sup>vii</sup> *Prescott Arizona Miner*, Nov. 16, most of p. 1; and Nov. 23, p. 2, col. 1. Palmer doesn't specify his route from the future site of Flagstaff to Prescott in his *Report of Surveys*, but he had access to the wagon road laid out in 1858 by Edward F. Beale. Well marked by travel, the Beale Road would take him to Partridge

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Creek, thence down the Chino Valley and Granite Creek to Prescott.

<sup>viii</sup> In 1866 Gregg became colonel of the new 8th U.S. Cavalry that was sent next year to Arizona. He commanded the District of Prescott on his brevet rank of general but was so contentious and ineffective that Gen. Henry W. Halleck, commander of the army's Pacific Division, relieved him in November 1867. Gregg retired from active service on April 2, 1879. Constance W. Altshuler, *Cavalry Yellow & Infantry Blue* (Tucson: Arizona Historical Society, 1991), pp. 145-46.

<sup>ix</sup> Bell, quoting Palmer, *New Tracks in North America*, p. 410-11. Yavapai in the autumn were accustomed to roam lands above the Mogollon Rim. Palmer's mention of wickiups and mescal cooking pits were as much signs of Yavapai people as Apaches. Timothy Braatz, *Surviving Conquest: A History of the Yavapai Peoples* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003) 43-44.

<sup>x</sup> Bell, *New Tracks*, p. 411.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid*. p. 412.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid*. pp. 414-15, 419. The Spencer carbine was a shoulder firearm designed by Christopher Spencer. Its lever action fed seven metallic cartridges from a tubular magazine. Indians called it "heap-firing" because it could be fired as fast as the soldier worked the lever and cocked the hammer. Sherman, *Memoirs*, pp. 664, 886.

<sup>xiii</sup> Bell, quoting Palmer, *New Tracks*, pp. 416-18.

<sup>xiv</sup> Handwritten notes in the margins of Hinchman's drawing: Bottom, "An Apache attack on General Wm. J. Palmer's exploring party in Sycamore Canon (branch of Rio Verde), Arizona, Nov. 1867." Left margin, "Survey for a Pacific R.R. on the thirty-fifth parallel. Canon of the Verde, San Francisco Mtns., Arizona." Right margin, names of five members of the scaling party, of which only two are legible, "Leary" and "Col. Willis." Sketch from Hinchman, *Recollections*.

<sup>xv</sup> Philadelphia, *The Press*, Jan. 13, 1868, p. 2, col. 2. Fort Whipple was established in 1863 at Del Rio Springs, 21 miles north of Prescott, but was moved on May 18, 1864, to Prescott. Ray Brandes, *Frontier Military Posts of Arizona* (Globe, AZ: Dale Stuart King, 1960), pp. 75-77.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Prescott Arizona Miner*, Dec. 14, 1867, p. 2, col. 5. *Philadelphia Press*, February 8, 1868, p. 2, col. 1.

<sup>xvii</sup> James E. Babbitt, "Surveyors Along the Thirty-fifth Parallel: Alexander Gardner's Photographs of Northern Arizona, 1867-1868," *Journal of Arizona History*, Autumn 1981, p. 327.