

TRACKING NANA

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I'm not a historian. A long time ago I used to be a newspaper reporter, and one of the habits I've carried over from that career is that I'm always on the lookout for a good story. Back in the day I had a professor who used to say that everybody has a story, and it's a reporter's job to help them tell it.

Over the years I've spent a fair amount of time exploring New Mexico, especially the Gila country in southwestern New Mexico.



It was in the mountains down there that I first heard this man's story. Most folks call him Nana, because that's the way it's come to be spelled. But it was probably closer to Nanay or possibly Nanyae or NanEH, with a heavy accent on the last syllable. You'll notice my own pronunciation wanders as I talk, and I don't believe anybody really knows for sure any more how it was pronounced.

His name is just one of the little puzzles about him.

For example: He's sometimes described as short and fat, probably because here in his best-known photo he's seated leaning forward and glaring into the camera, and he had kind of a large, square head compared to his frame.



Actually he was tall and thin. Here he is in the center, flanked by Geronimo and Chihuahua on his right, Loco and Ulzana to his left.

His name may be a contraction of “Nantana,” the Apache word for leader, although he was never a chief like Cochise or Victorio. He was a war leader who spent his life raiding and fighting first the Mexicans and then the Americans. He had a great name for stealing ammunition, which the Apaches were always short of, and he was known for his Power over rattlesnakes, which the Apache country still has an abundance of.

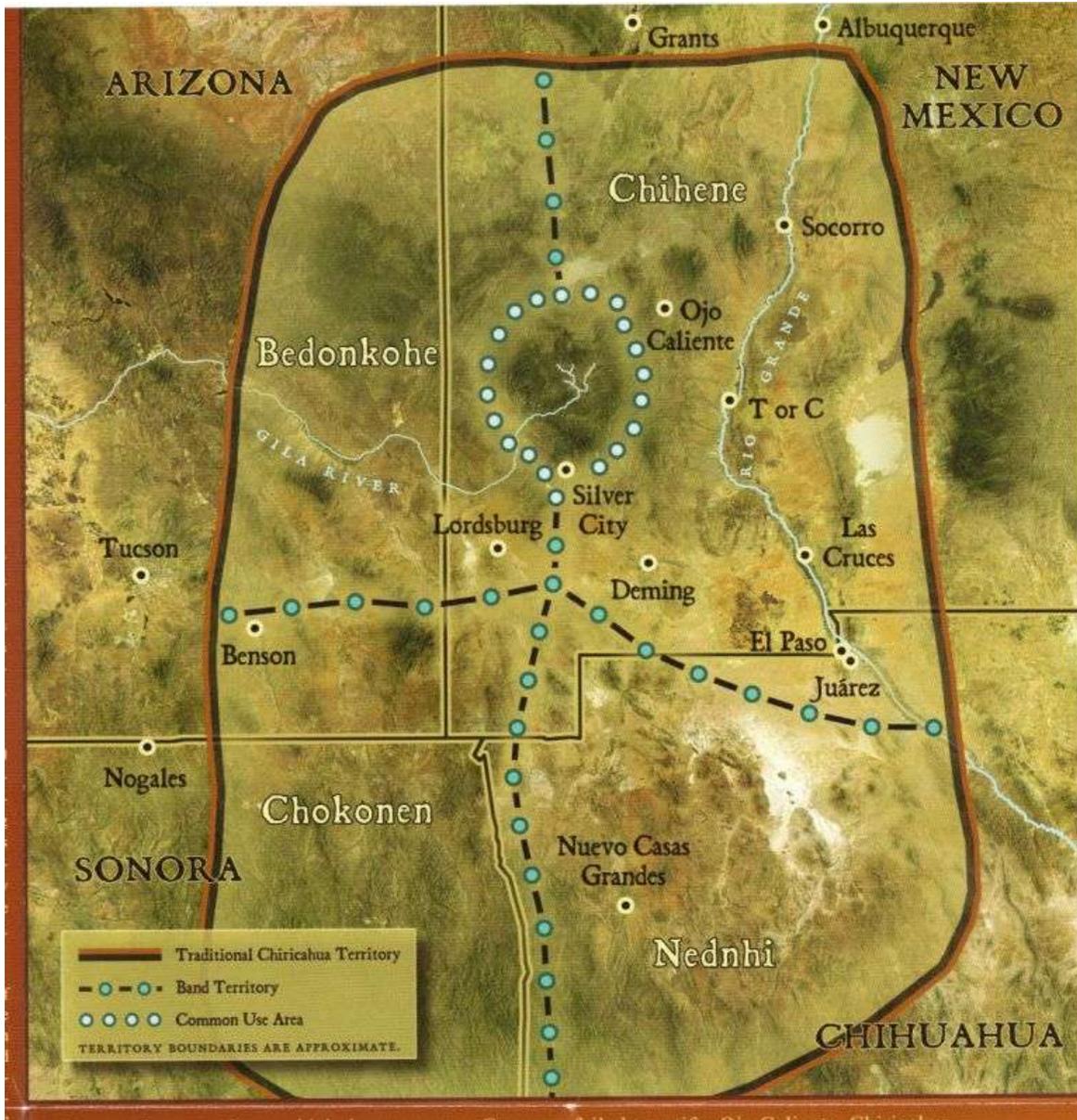
As he grew older, he became what we might call a *compadre* or *consigliere*, a respected older man whose years of experience made him a trusted adviser to the leader.

By 1880 he was about seventy years old and walked with a limp due to an old injury. I think because of that and because he didn't talk much in conferences with the white people, they tended to underestimate his influence in the tribe.



Here he is seated in the background just behind Geronimo's shoulder, in a famous photograph taken with General Crook when the general was trying to persuade Geronimo to surrender.

Geronimo would later say that if he had listened to the old man he never would have given up.



Nana was a Chihenne, also commonly known as the Ojo Caliente or Warm Springs Apaches, one of the four principal bands that made up what white people considered the Chiricahua Apache.



They roamed over much of southwestern New Mexico, southeastern Arizona and northern Mexico, but the heart of their country was here in the mountains around the headwaters of the Gila River in the Mogollons and in the San Mateos, where their sacred warm spring is located.

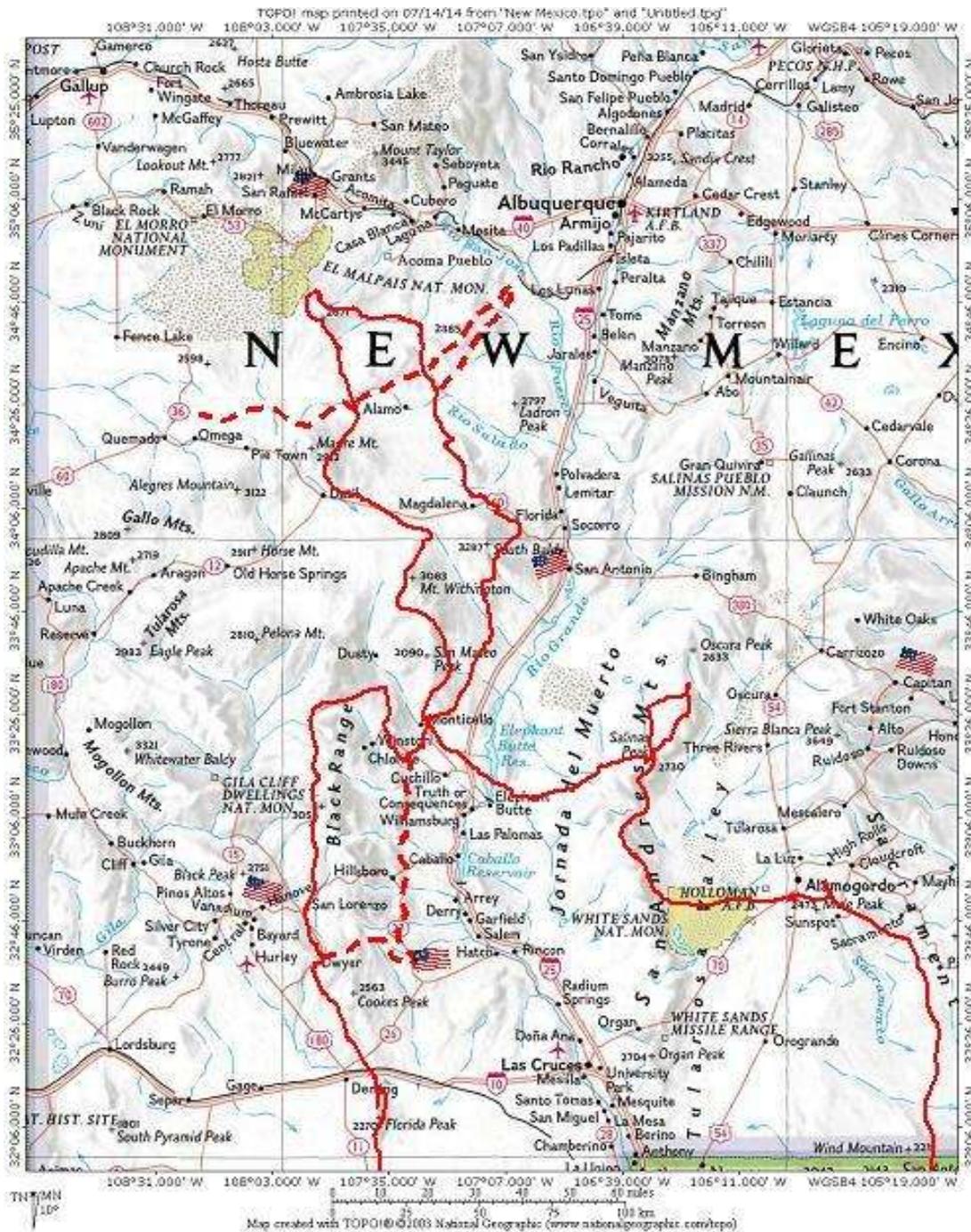


Their chief was Victorio – this is probably not him here, although it's commonly accepted as his picture – and Nana was Victorio's uncle and right-hand man.

I'm sure most everybody here knows enough of Victorio's story that I don't need to go into it in any detail. The one thing he and his people wanted was to continue to live in their home mountains as they always had, and that the white people would not allow. Eventually he was driven over the border, and he was killed by the Mexicans in October 1880.

Almost all his men were killed with him, the surviving women and children herded off to Ciudad Chihuahua, but Nana and a handful of warriors escaped the trap. After it was all over, all the old man could do was gather up the handful of survivors and lead them to safety.

Once that was done, he had an obligation to avenge his chief's death.



The next summer, in July 1881, Nana crossed the Rio Grande south of old Fort Quitman with just 13 or 14 warriors, both men and boys. The red line here traces his path through New Mexico over the next five and a half weeks. The war party covered 1,000 miles or more over some of the roughest country in New Mexico, and killed, wounded or captured close to 100 people.

By comparison, Pancho Villa's far better remembered raid barely crossed the border, lasted only a few hours, and claimed fewer than a dozen American lives. Years later, the old Apaches who knew his story credited Nana with killing more men than Geronimo.

His raid is mentioned in most standard histories of the Apache Wars, although it sometimes rates no more than a couple of paragraphs. There's been one excellent book published and several magazine and newspaper pieces as well.

I noticed some discrepancies and sometimes contradictions in reading these various accounts, and about five years ago it occurred to me it might be both challenging and informative to try to retrace the path of the raid.



Over the next five years, I saw some pretty country



And I met some interesting characters along the way. This is Frank Bennett, the white scout who calculated he chased Nana for 1,247 miles before the old man finally gave him the slip.

Bennett was a good man who came to a bad end. Years later, he committed suicide in a Honolulu hotel room in a sex scandal.



Frank P. Bennett (Photo courtesy A. Frank Randall Photographs of Apache Indians. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California)



Chihuahua

Chihuahua was first sergeant of the Apache scouts who led the pursuit. A chief in his own right. He was an upright and brave but deeply troubled man who would switch sides at least three times over the next few years.



Kaytenna

The young Kaytenna was Nana's segundo, who the old man was training up as successor to Victorio. Kaytenna would switch sides too, after a stretch in Alcatraz convinced him resistance was futile.



Col. Edward Hatch

And then there was Col. Edward Hatch, luckless commander of the 9th Cavalry, who put 750 men in the field chasing Nana and failed to catch him in the end. The raid cost the colonel his chance at a general's star



And there were the officers and men of the 9th Cavalry, the buffalo soldiers who fought Nana. They and their colonel were never popular in New Mexico – at one point the citizens of Silver City hanged Hatch in effigy at a bonfire rally.

But they were good soldiers. Eight were killed, ten wounded, and four, plus one of their white officers, were later awarded the Medal of Honor for bravery.

There were others I met as well. George Daly was a mining promoter who thought he was running a stock scam in the Mimbres Mountains. Instead, his workers discovered the famous Bridal Chamber silver lode the same day Daly was killed by the Apaches. Lt. George Washington Smith died in the same ambush; he was serving without pay that day because of some bureaucratic confusion over his accounts, and he left a wife and a little girl behind at Fort Bayard.

So each of these men had his own story, and I've sometimes been tempted into following those.



I also learned a lot about 19th Century Indian warfare by following the course of the raid.

Nana knew how to use the Apaches' strengths to confuse and divide his opponents , and his tactical skill allowed him to beat or at least evade his pursuers in every encounter. On two occasions he came close to wiping out a half-company of cavalry, and although he probably had some casualties, he apparently escaped to Mexico without losing a single man.

I believe I've also made some progress in untangling the details of the raid as well, although some of my conclusions are frankly speculative or thinly based on the surviving evidence.

In the end, I think, it's not really so important to determine exactly which canyon the fight occurred in, or how many men were involved in the engagement. I guess I'm with Hillary on this: "What difference, at this point, does it make?"

I know that's not a good attitude for a historian. But as I said at the beginning of this, I'm not a historian. I'm a story teller.



And following this story has left me with more questions than I began with. Most historians of the period tend to dismiss Nana's exploit simply as a revenge raid, an irrational explosion of violence expressing the grief and anger the Apaches felt on the death of Victorio.

I'm not sure that's entirely true. Certainly the Apache was an honor culture and revenge a sacred duty not just for the dead man's immediate relatives but for the whole band. So there's no question Nana came to New Mexico to pass on some of the pain he had felt at Tres Castillos.

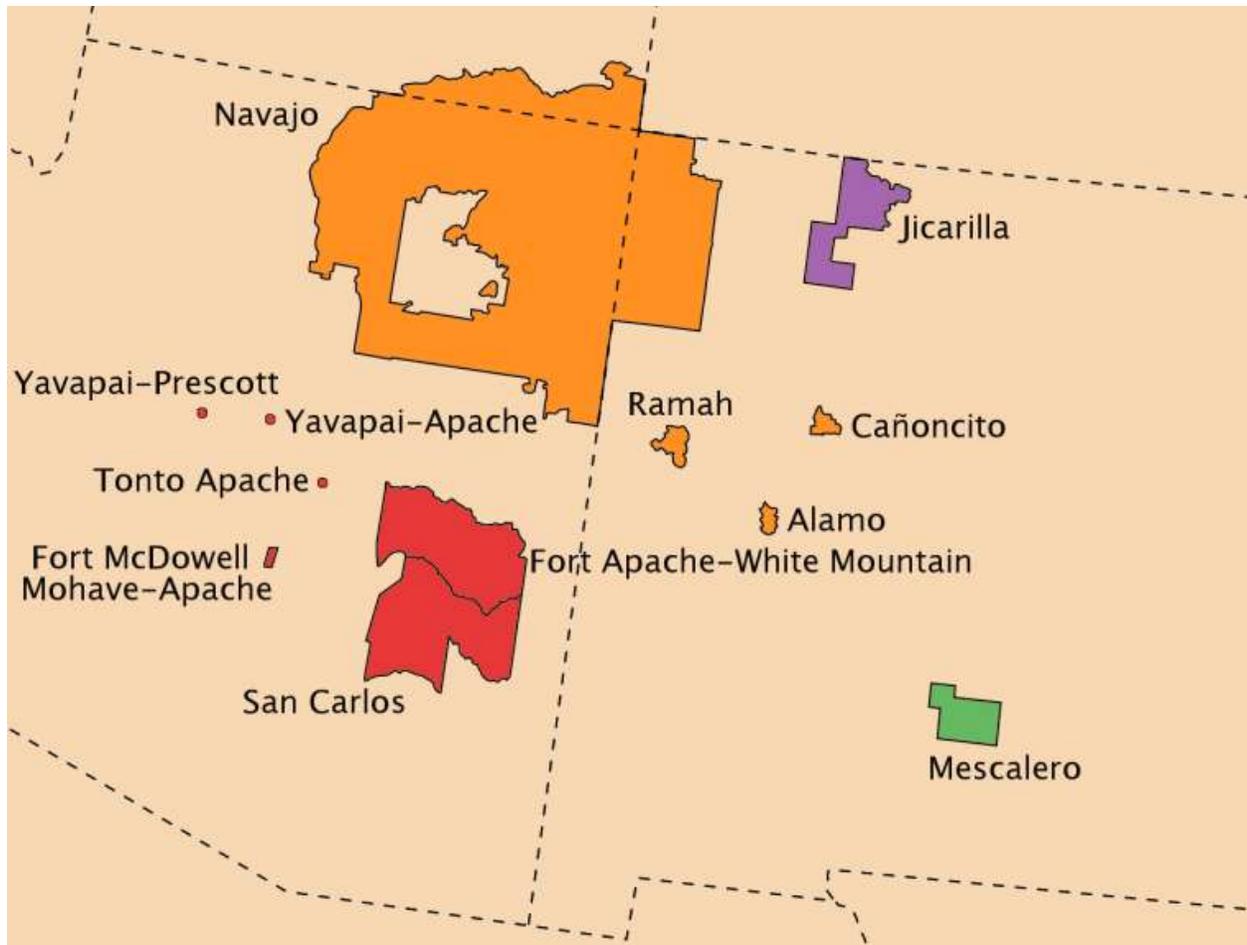
But I ask myself why he traveled north to accomplish that. It was the Americans who pushed Victorio and his people *otra de lado*, but it was the Mexicans who finally killed them. Why not raid the villages and ranches of Chihuahua or Sonora?



I believe the raid was at least in part a kind of religious pilgrimage for Nana. He went first to the sacred mountain, Salinas Peak in the San Andres, which was a great source of spiritual power for the Chihenne, and he made three attempts to reach Ojo Caliente, the spring on the shoulder of the San Mateos that was literally the center of their universe.

At first I thought of this element of the raid as a kind of farewell tour, an old man's final visit to places he loved before he died. Now I believe there was nothing fatalistic or resigned about it. He was gathering his strength to continue the fight.

As he told Kaytenna after Victorio's death, "As long as there's one Apache still alive, it's not over."



Why did Nana travel so far beyond his home country, first to the Mescalero and then almost to the Navajo Reservation? Obviously he went there to pick up recruits for his own war party. But could he also have been trying to stir up wider trouble? Both the Mescalero and Navajo were restless and unhappy that year – some Mescalero were already off the reservation when Nana’s raiding party arrived there, and the Army was seriously worried about an outbreak among the Navajo.

I find it interesting that, according to at least one source, before he embarked on his raid Nana slipped across the border to the Apache Reservation in Arizona. He went there to check out a new prophet who had appeared among the western White Mountain Apaches, who were cousins but not friends of the Warm Springs people.

This prophet, who the whites called “The Dreamer,” was holding ceremonies very similar to the Ghost Dance rituals that re-appeared among the Sioux a few years later.

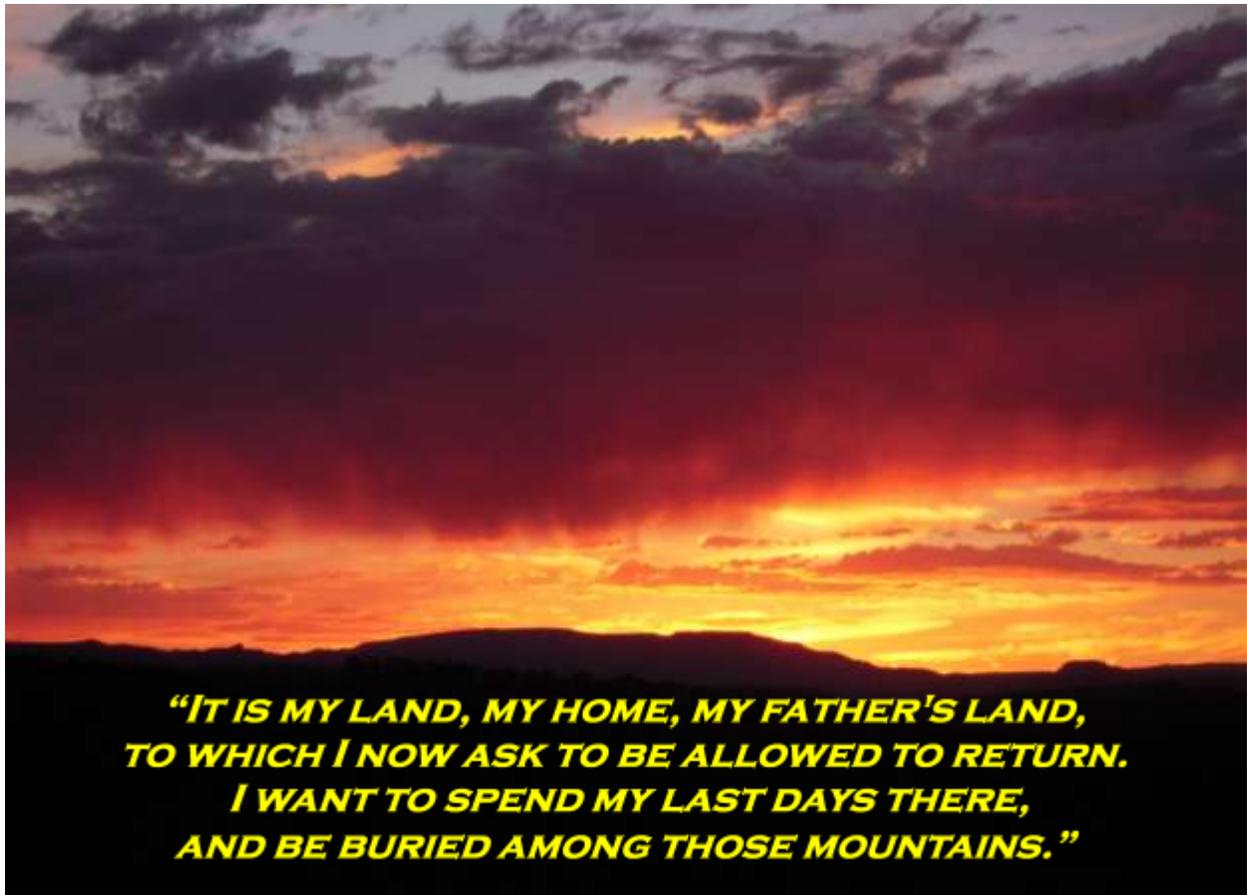
According to the Dreamer’s vision, all the white people were going to disappear, Victorio, Cochise and other dead chiefs would rise again, and the Apache world would be restored. He promised all this would happen when the corn was ripe that summer.



Nana was apparently persuaded of the Dreamer's Power, but Instead of joining the cult he returned to the Sierra Madre. He had his own plans for making white people disappear.

Less than two weeks after his raid ended that August there was an uprising at Fort Apache when the Army tried to arrest the Dreamer. An Apache scout company mutinied, the prophet was killed by his guards, and the insurgents even launched an attack on the fort before it was over.

Some people at the time believed the outbreak was part of a widespread conspiracy, although authorities later discounted any Chiricahua involvement, and historians since have accepted that conclusion. But Nana may have seen the movement as an opportunity for his own purposes. Simultaneous trouble with the White Mountain, the Navajo and the Mescalero would certainly have further stretched the Army's thin resources, and might have even forced Washington to reconsider Indian policy in the Southwest.



***“IT IS MY LAND, MY HOME, MY FATHER’S LAND,
TO WHICH I NOW ASK TO BE ALLOWED TO RETURN.
I WANT TO SPEND MY LAST DAYS THERE,
AND BE BURIED AMONG THOSE MOUNTAINS.”***

If there was such a bold plan it failed from the outset. With the Dreamer dead the White Mountain uprising collapsed almost immediately. In New Mexico, other than the handful of warriors who joined Nana’s raid, the majority of Mescalero and Navajo refused to be drawn into his fight. In the end the raid only strengthened the hand of the men who wanted the Chiricahua removed from the Southwest altogether and so led to their final exile to Florida five years later.

These words were written on behalf of Geronimo a year or two after Nana’s death in Oklahoma, but they might stand for the old man’s last words as well. His descendants, now known as the Fort Sill Apache, are still struggling to return to their mountains. I’d like to do what I can to make that happen. After all these years, I feel I owe it to the old man.