

Clint E. Chambers, Paul Howard Carlson. *Comanche Jack Stilwell: Army Scout and Plainsman*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019. 298 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8061-6278-2.

Reviewed by Jennifer Andrella (Michigan State University)

Published on H-CivWar (August, 2019)

Commissioned by G. David Schieffler (Crowder College)

Simpson Everett “Jack” Stilwell is an unlikely character to come to mind when reflecting on the American West’s many quasi-mythical historical figures. Clint E. Chambers and Paul H. Carlson’s biographical study of Stilwell (1850-1903) recounts Stilwell’s life and diverse career on the southern Great Plains. Although Stilwell is perhaps best remembered for his successful efforts to slip through the allied Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Lakota lines while under siege at the Battle of Beecher Island in 1868, he transitioned into many roles throughout his relatively short life while encountering new geographies and diverse communities. After running away from home at the age of thirteen, Stilwell shifted between many positions—a freight teamster along the Santa Fe Trail, a scout for the US Army, a ranch cowhand, a deputy federal marshal, a US commissioner, a lawyer, a judge, and late in his life, a commercial strawberry farmer. Piecing together a readable, episodic biography, Chambers and Carlson reconstruct the fragmentary archival evidence surrounding Stilwell to assert that “his life is a part of the fabric that holds the western frontier together” (p. 201).

In each of his roles, Stilwell’s most distinguishing feature was his ability to act as an arbitrator between different people, places, and cultures. As a scout, Stilwell required a working knowledge of the land, cultural mediation, and languages. These

qualities make such historical actors valuable given their diverse experiences and profiles. In one instance, the district court at Fort Smith hired Stilwell to serve as an interpreter for a case charging one William Alden with larceny for stealing two saddle horses in Indian Territory. As the authors ascertain, Stilwell’s knowledge of Comanche customs and language proved pivotal in successfully representing the Native counterparts of the case through the translation of eyewitness testimonies. In another example, the Word-Bugbee Cattle Company hired Stilwell as an assistant foreman on a ranch within the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation. However, despite the attempt to “stabilize and perhaps improve the economic conditions for the Cheyenne and Arapaho people,” property entitlement and livestock grazing issues ensued between Native and non-Native factions (p. 139). Go-between actors like Stilwell offer promising future research in the area of social, economic, and cultural mediation in US history, and should equally inspire additional exploration of the agents of colonialism in the West.

One wishes that the book’s Native American historical actors received greater attention and context throughout. With the exception of chapter 7, which accurately interprets the corruption of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and its agencies throughout the 1860s and 1870s, this work lacks important

engagement and critique of the military's execution of Indian policy in the West. Furthermore, while the authors occasionally note the Native American communities Stilwell encountered during his life on the southern plains, consistent specificity would have been useful to avoid homogenizing terms and generalizations about military-Native relations. For example, in regard to Sheridan's 1868-69 winter campaign, which included the Washita River Massacre, the authors summarize the period as a "punishing endeavor—for both Indians and soldiers" (p. 55). Ethnohistorical developments in Native American studies champion culturally centered approaches and methods that reconsider topics like military engagement in the West, alliance building among Native communities, inter- and intra-tribal politics, and the participation and resistance of Native peoples in westward expansion.[1] Given that the majority of historical evidence found in this book comes from military and governmental correspondence, census records, court testimonies, and newspaper reports, few voices from Native American individuals and communities are represented with equal examination. Consequently, the authors' depiction of the Plains Indian Wars heavily centers on the military's perspective and could have benefited from critical historical interpretation and an incorporation of Native American sources and perspectives. One such instance in chapter 6 exhibited Stilwell's role as a guide for recreational bison hunters during summer expeditions. Historical context around hunting bison for sport would position this episode in the broader issues of Native American hunting accessibility, the restrictive confines of reservations, and the subsequent mass starvation across Native communities on the Great Plains.

Although the authors describe the purpose of *Comanche Jack Stilwell* to be purely biographical, the motivation for the work also began as a personal endeavor; Chambers's grandfather was Stilwell's nephew. At times, this familial connection between author and subject manifests correla-

tions between Stilwell and the mythicized western frontier without critical inspection of westward expansion. Since the authors describe their collaboration as "drawn together by their mutual interest in Native American studies and western history," one expects stronger interpretive qualities that place Stilwell in a more critical historical context (p. xii). As a result, topics like settler colonialism, the agency of Native American communities, and the economic, social, and environmental ramifications of territorial conquest are left unscathed. Regardless of the historical pursuit, including biography, there is a responsibility to inspire critical discussions about difficult subjects. This is especially important when addressing the history of the West, which has been long romanticized and reduced into a narrative of heroes and foes in a disappearing frontier. Although the authors acknowledge that Stilwell was not without flaws, it is more difficult, albeit historically responsible, to examine the significance between Stilwell's career and his place in westward expansion as a settler-colonial national project.

Despite these interpretive shortcomings, Chambers and Carlson's *Comanche Jack Stilwell* is designed to appeal to general audiences rather than to purport a scholarly intervention in ethnohistory, Native American studies, or the history of the American West. It is a lively and captivating biography of a man whose unique experiences and larger-than-life character asserts his place in popular western memory. Treated as such, this biography upholds its objective to place Jack Stilwell among other legendary figures in western lore.

Note

[1]. See, for example, David Bernstein, *How the West Was Drawn: Mapping, Indians, and the Construction of the Trans-Mississippi West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018); Pekka Hämäläinen, "Reconstructing the Great Plains: The Long Struggle for Sovereignty and Dominance in the Heart of the Continent," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 6, no. 4 (December 2016): 481-509; and

Christina G. Hill, *Webs of Kinship: Family in Northern Cheyenne Nationhood* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017).

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Citation: Jennifer Andrella. Review of Chambers, Clint E.; Carlson, Paul Howard. *Comanche Jack Stilwell: Army Scout and Plainsman*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. August, 2019.

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