**COMANCHE INDIANS**. The Comanches, exceptional horsemen who dominated the Southern Plains, played a prominent role in Texas frontier history throughout much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Anthropological evidence indicates that they were originally a mountain tribe, a branch of the Northern Shoshones, who roamed the Great Basin region of the western United States as crudely equipped hunters and gatherers. Both cultural and linguistic similarities confirm the Comanches' Shoshone origins. The Comanche language is derived from the Uto-Aztecan linguistic family and is virtually identical to the language of the Northern Shoshones. Sometime during the late seventeenth century, the Comanches acquired horses, and that acquisition drastically altered their culture. The life of the pedestrian tribe was revolutionized as they rapidly evolved into a mounted, well-equipped, and powerful people. Their new mobility allowed them to leave their mountain home and their Shoshone neighbors and move onto the plains of eastern Colorado and western Kansas, where game was plentiful. After their arrival on the Great Plains, the Comanches began a southern migration that was encouraged by a combination of factors. By moving south, they had greater access to the [mustangs](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/tcm02) of the Southwest. The warm climate and abundant [buffalo](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/tcb02) were additional incentives for the southern migration. The move also facilitated the acquisition of French trade goods, including firearms, through barter with the Wichita Indians on the Red River. Pressure from more powerful and better-armed tribes to their north and east, principally the Blackfoot and Crow Indians, also encouraged their migration. A vast area of the South Plains, including much of North, Central, and West Texas, soon became Comanche country, or Comanchería. Only after their arrival on the Southern Plains did the tribe come to be known as Comanches, a name derived from the Ute word Komántcia, meaning "enemy," or, literally, "anyone who wants to fight me all the time." The Spaniards in New Mexico, who came into contact with the Comanches in the early eighteenth century, gave the tribe the name by which they were later known to Spaniards and Americans alike. Although the tribe came to be known historically as Comanches, they called themselves Nermernuh, or "the People."

The Comanches did not arrive on the South Plains as a unified body but rather in numerous family groups or bands. The band structure of Comanche society was not rigid, and bands coalesced and broke apart, depending on the needs and goals of their members. As many as thirteen different Comanche bands were identified during the historic period, and most probably there were others that were never identified. However, five major bands played important roles in recorded Comanche history. The southernmost band was called Penateka, or "Honey Eaters." Their range extended from the [Edwards Plateau](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/rxe01) to the headwaters of the Central Texas rivers. Because of their location, the Penatekas played the most prominent role in Texas history. North of Penateka country was the habitat of the band called Nokoni, or "Those Who Turn Back." The Nokonis roamed from the [Cross Timbers](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ryc04)region of North Texas to the mountains of New Mexico. Two smaller bands, the Tanima ("Liver-Eaters") and the Tenawa ("Those Who Stay Downstream"), shared the range of the Nokonis. These three divisions are sometimes referred to collectively as Middle Comanches. Still farther north was the range of the Kotsotekas, or "Buffalo-Eaters." Their territory covered what is now western Oklahoma, where they often camped along the Canadian River. The northernmost band was known as the Yamparikas, or "Yap-Eaters," a name derived from that of an edible root. Their range extended north to the Arkansas River. The fifth major band, known as Quahadis ("Antelopes"), roamed the high plains of the [Llano Estacado](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ryl02).

The Comanches remained a nomadic people throughout their free existence. Buffalo, their lifeblood, provided food, clothing, and shelter. Their predominantly meat diet was supplemented with wild roots, fruits, and nuts, or with produce obtained by trade with neighboring agricultural tribes, principally the Wichita and Caddo groups to the east and the Pueblo tribes to the west. Because of their skills as traders, the Comanches controlled much of the commerce of the Southern Plains. They bartered buffalo products, horses, and captives for manufactured items and foodstuffs. The familiar Plains-type tepee constructed of tanned buffalo hide stretched over sixteen to eighteen lodge poles provided portable shelter for the Comanches. Their clothing, made of bison hide or buckskin, consisted of breechclout, leggings, and moccasins for men, and fringed skirt, poncho-style blouse, leggings, and moccasins for women. Buffalo robes provided protection from cold weather.

But it was the horse that most clearly defined the Comanche way of life. It gave them mobility to follow the buffalo herds and the advantage of hunting and conducting warfare from horseback. Horses also became a measure of Comanche wealth and a valuable trade commodity. In horsemanship the Comanches had no equal. Children learned to ride at an early age, and both men and women developed exceptional equestrian skills.

Democratic principle was strongly implanted in Comanche political organization. Each tribal division had both civil or peace chiefs and war chiefs, but traditionally the head civil chief was most influential. Leaders gained their positions through special abilities or prowess, and retained their power only so long as they maintained the confidence of band members, who chose their leaders by common consent. Tribal decisions were made by a council of chiefs presided over by the head civil chief, but individuals were not bound to accept council decisions. Comanche society permitted great individual freedom, and that autonomy greatly complicated relations with European cultures.

By the early eighteenth century, Comanche bands had migrated into what is now North Texas. In 1706 Spanish officials in New Mexico documented the presence of numerous Comanches on the northeastern frontier of that province. As the Comanches moved south, they came into conflict with tribes already living on the South Plains, particularly the Apaches, who had dominated the region before the arrival of the Comanches. The Apaches were forced south by the Comanche onslaught and became their mortal enemies. The first documented evidence of Comanches in Texas occurred in 1743, when a small band, probably a scouting party, appeared at the Spanish settlement of San Antonio seeking their enemies, the Lipan Apaches. No hostilities occurred, but it was obvious that the Comanches believed that the Spanish and Apaches were allies. However, fifteen years passed before the Spanish learned the true strength of Comanche presence in Texas. In 1758 a force of some 2,000 Comanches and allied tribes attacked a Spanish mission built for the Apaches on the San Saba River near present Menard. Santa Cruz de San Sabá Mission was sacked and burned, and eight of its inhabitants, including two priests, were killed. A year later, a Spanish punitive expedition led by Col. [Diego Ortiz Parrilla](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/for12) also met defeat at the hands of the Comanches and their allies in a daylong battle on the Red River near the site of present Spanish Fort.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the armed and mounted Comanches had become a formidable force in Texas. Spanish officials, lacking the resources to defeat them militarily, decided to pursue peace with the Comanches. A peace policy that utilized trade and gifts to promote friendship and authorized military force only to punish specific acts of aggression was inaugurated and remained in effect, with varying degrees of success, for the remainder of Spanish rule in Texas. The first success of the new Spanish policy came in 1762, when Fray José Calahorra y Saenzqv negotiated a treaty with the Comanches, who agreed not to make war on missionized Apaches. Continued Apache aggression made it impossible for the Comanches to keep their promise, and ultimately led Spanish officials to advocate a Spanish-Comanche alliance aimed at exterminating the Apaches. That policy was officially implemented in 1772, and with the help of [Athanase de Mézières](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fme69), a French trader serving as Spanish diplomat, a second treaty was signed with the Comanches. The Comanche chief Povea signed the treaty in 1772 at San Antonio, thereby committing his band to peace with the Spaniards. Other bands, however, continued to raid Spanish settlements. Comanche attacks escalated in the early 1780s, and Spanish officials feared the province of Texas would be lost. To avoid that possibility, the governor of Texas, [Domingo Cabello y Robles](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fca03), was instructed to negotiate peace with the warring Comanches. He dispatched [Pedro Vial](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fvi01) and Francisco Xavier de Chaves to Comanchería with gifts and proposals for peace. The mission was successful, and the emissaries returned to San Antonio with three principal Comanche chiefs who were authorized by their people to make peace with the Spanish. The result was the Spanish-Comanche Treaty of 1785, a document that Comanches honored, with only minor violations, until the end of the century. As Spanish power waned in the early years of the nineteenth century, officials were unable to supply promised gifts and trade goods, and Comanche aggression once again became commonplace. Comanches raided Spanish settlements for horses to trade to Anglo-American traders entering Texas from the United States. Those Americans furnished the Comanches with trade goods, including arms and ammunition, and provided a thriving market for Comanche horses.

In 1821 Mexico won independence from Spain, but the change of government had little impact in Comanchería. Though Mexican authorities in Texas continued the Spanish policy of pursuing peace with the Comanches, the unstable government in Mexico City failed to provide the resources necessary to accomplish the job with any permanence. Comanches continued to dominate much of Texas, both in trade and warfare. In the late 1820s several principal chiefs, including Paruaquibitse, Yncoroy, and Yzazona, established a tenuous peace with Mexican officials-possibly because of pressure from Osage Indians and other hostile tribes on their north. However, when two of the major peace chiefs died in the early 1830s, Comanche-Mexican relations deteriorated once again, and Mexican officials began encouraging Shawnees, Cherokees, and other tribes to make war on the Comanches. The Mexican Colonization Law of 1824 encouraged foreign immigration to Texas, and settlers from the United States poured into the province. As the Anglo-American population grew, relations between Americans and Comanches began to deteriorate. The amity that had developed through mutually beneficial trade quickly disintegrated when the newly arrived Texans began surveying land that Comanches considered their traditional hunting ground, and the two soon became implacable enemies.

When Texans won their independence from Mexico in 1836 the Comanches and their allies were still in absolute control of the Texas plains. They frequently conducted raids on frontier settlements from San Antonio to northern Mexico. In May 1836 a particularly destructive raid occurred at Fort Parker, a settlement of some thirty-four persons near the Navasota River in the future Limestone County. Comanches and their Kiowa allies attacked the blockhouse, killed several settlers, and took five hostages, including nine-year-old [Cynthia Ann Parker](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fpa18), who lived with the Comanches for twenty-four years. Parker became the wife of Chief [Peta Nocona](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fpefn) and the mother of [Quanah Parker](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fpa28), the last great Comanche chief. In an effort to stop Comanche destruction on the Texas frontier, [Sam Houston](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fho73), first duly elected president of the [Republic of Texas](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/mzr02), instituted a policy aimed at establishing peace and friendship through commerce. Houston's peace efforts were hampered because the Texas Congress refused to agree to the one Comanche requirement for peace-a boundary line between Texas and Comanchería. Peace commissioners did succeed in negotiating a treaty with a band of Penateka Comanches led by Muguara, Muestyah, and Muhy, but the treaty was never ratified by the Texas Senate. When Houston left office in late 1838, Texan-Comanche relations were rapidly deteriorating and depredations were being committed by both sides.

[Mirabeau B. Lamar](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fla15), who succeeded Houston as president, abandoned the peace policy, which he considered a failure, in favor of waging war on the Comanche nation. Lamar's policy culminated in the[Council House Fight](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/btc01), a tragic incident that occurred in San Antonio in the spring of 1840 when Texas officials attempted to arrest a Comanche peace delegation. Fighting broke out, and thirty-five Comanches, including twelve chiefs, were killed. The remaining thirty Comanches, primarily women and children, were imprisoned by the Texans. Seven Texans were also killed in the melee, and eight were wounded. But the violence was not over. In late summer Comanches launched a retaliatory raid. More than 500 warriors led by [Buffalo Hump](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fbu12) made a sweep through south Texas, devastating the towns of Victoria and Linnville and killing twenty-five Texans. After the [Linnville raid of 1840](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/btl01), as the Comanches made their escape to the north, they were intercepted at Plum Creek near the site of present Lockhart and routed by Texan forces. Though some fifty Comanches were killed in the [battle of Plum Creek](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/btp04), the Texans continued to seek retribution. In October an expedition under the command of Col. [John H. Moore](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fmo30) traveled 300 miles up the Colorado River and destroyed a Comanche encampment near the site of present Colorado City. Having suffered a tremendous loss of leadership and manpower, the Penatekas moved beyond the Red River and out of the range of Texas forces. Lamar's policy had succeeded in removing the Comanches from the borders of Texas, but at a terrible cost to both sides.

In 1841 Sam Houston again became president of the republic and almost immediately reinstated his peace policy. Emissaries were sent to inform the various Indian groups that Texans wanted to end hostilities. As a result of their previous experience with the Texas government, the Comanches were suspicious of the peace overtures. They continued to raid in Mexico but generally avoided the Texas settlements. In 1844 Comanches finally agreed to attend a peace council at Tehuacana Creek. The treaty resulting from the [Tehuacana Creek councils](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/mgt01), signed by Buffalo Hump and other chiefs, called for peace and trade between Texans and Comanches, but once again no agreement was reached on a boundary to separate the two nations. Conflict was inevitable, and by 1845 relations between Texans and Comanches were again strained.

Texas was annexed to the Union in 1845, and the United States government took over the administration of Texas Indian affairs. Federal agents and Comanche leaders attempted to preserve peace despite frequent outbreaks of hostilities, as white settlement continued to encroach on Comanche hunting grounds. In 1849 the army established a line of forts to protect the frontier, but settlers rapidly pushed beyond the established cordon and became vulnerable to attacks by Comanches who were attempting to defend their traditional range. In an attempt to protect both settlers and Indians, two reservations were established in Texas in 1854. A 23,000-acre reservation on the Clear Fork of the Brazos, in what is now Throckmorton County, became home to some 350 Penateka Comanches whose band had been weakened by warfare with Texans, epidemic diseases, and depletion of the buffalo herds. Other Comanche bands, farther removed from white settlement, still freely roamed the plains. The establishment of reservations did not stop Indian raids, however. Frontier Texans, who coveted the Indians' land, blamed the reservation Indians for the continued depredations and demanded the removal of the reservations. In 1859, in response to complaints, the reservation Comanches were moved to Indian Territory, where they were given a tract of land near Anadarko and assigned to the Wichita Agency. However, since the reservation Indians had not been the perpetrators of the raids, removal of the reservations did little to solve the Texas Indian problem. Raids increased as the [Civil War](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qdc02) left the frontier virtually unprotected, and the country west of a line from Gainesville to Fredericksburg was abandoned by settlers.

When the war ended, the federal government reestablished frontier defenses and resumed its treaty-making with the Plains tribes. The treaties were designed to open the region to white travelers and settlers by locating the nomadic tribesmen on reservations. The 1867 Treaty of Medicine Lodge Creek, the last treaty made with the Comanches, established a reservation for the Comanches, Kiowas, and Kiowa Apaches in southwestern Indian Territory between the Washita and Red rivers. The treaty did not greatly improve conditions in Texas, however, because the Comanches would not stay on the lands allotted them and continued to conduct destructive raids in Texas.

The Comanches, who saw their way of life rapidly vanishing, turned to a young Quahadi medicine man for leadership. [Isa-tai](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fis05) (later known as White Eagle) called his people together for a Sun Dance in the spring of 1874 and promised victory over the whites. Inspired by the visionary leader, agitated warriors attacked buffalo hunters at Adobe Walls in Hutchinson County. The unsuccessful attack not only destroyed the Indians' faith in Isatai, but it also brought retribution from the United States government. In 1874 the army began a relentless campaign that became known as the [Red River War](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qdr02). A concerted five-pronged attack was launched in the [Panhandle](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ryp01) for the purpose of driving all Indians to the reservation. Forces under the command of Col. [Ranald S. Mackenzie](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fma07) surprised a Comanche camp in Palo Duro Canyon and destroyed their horse herd. Very few Indians were killed in the engagements, but their mounts and supplies were so depleted that they could not survive the winter on the plains and were forced to enter the reservation.

Once estimated to number in the thousands, the Comanche population, according to an 1875 reservation census, had been reduced to 1,597. Reservation life necessitated a complete restructuring of Comanche society as the government attempted to transform the hunters and warriors into farmers and stockmen. Their cultural values and beliefs were under constant attack as they were encouraged to take up the white man's ways. Unable to subsist themselves, and only begrudgingly supported by the government, Comanches suffered terribly. Many turned to [peyote](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/tsp01)religion to foster tribal unity during that difficult time.

The reservation period came to an end in 1901, when the Comanche reservation was broken up into allotments in severalty. According to provisions of the Jerome Agreement, each man, woman, and child would receive 160 acres of land, with additional acreage set aside for church, agency, and school use. Comanche leaders protested the allotment on multiple grounds, but the federal government upheld the agreement. Lands not allotted to the Indians were thrown open to the public, and whites soon outnumbered Indians on the former reservation. The post-allotment period was a difficult time for Comanches, who continued to lose their land as a result of financial reverses or fraudulent schemes. Many were forced to leave the vicinity of the old reservation to seek employment, and those who remained were divided by factionalism. [World War II](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/npwnj) accelerated the breakup of Comanche society as members of the tribe left to find jobs in the defense industry or join the military service. In the postwar years, the Comanche population continued to disperse in search of economic opportunity.

In the 1960s the Comanches, encouraged by a resurgence of Indian nationalism, began to work together to rebuild their society. They underwent important political changes as a result of that initiative. They seceded from the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache Intertribal Business Committee, which had served as their government since passage of the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act of 1936. Although they maintained ties with the Kiowas and Apaches, the Comanches established their own tribal government, which operates in a bustling complex near Lawton, Oklahoma. In 1995 the Comanches had an enrolled tribal population of 9,722 scattered across the United States. For them the pow-wow, or dance gathering, had become an important method of maintaining Comanche kinship. The People are also united by pride in their rich Comanche heritage, an element that has remained constant through years of tumultuous change.

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