In "Geronimo," author searches for the real deal

BY GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Tulsa World
Sunday, December 16, 2012
12/16/2012 3:22:27 AM

"I have killed many Mexicans," Geronimo, the Apache warrior, recalled in his autobiography, "I do not know how many, for frequently I did not count them. Some of them were not worth counting."

Apparently, Geronimo (whose Chiricahua name was Goyahkla) felt much the same way about the white citizens of Arizona and New Mexico. Exacting a heavy toll of destruction and death on farmers, ranchers, townsfolk and travelers in the 1870s and '80s, he earned the title of "the worst Indian who ever lived."

In his 17th book, Robert Utley, the former chief historian of the National Park Service, brings a lifetime of knowledge about the Indians of the American Southwest to a search for the "real" Geronimo.

The Apache leader, he concludes, was a complex and contradictory man, by turns defiant and submissive, performing "feats of brilliance followed by flawed leadership," often drunk, neither likeable nor a thug.

More controversially, and contrary to the "more congenial image" promoted by pro-American Indian revisionists Dee Brown ("Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee") and Vine DeLoria Jr. ("Custer Died for Your Sins"), Utley claims that it is "demonstrably untrue" that Geronimo, who passed most of his adult life in Mexico, far from his ancestral hunting grounds, was "fighting to save his homeland from takeover by the westward moving white people."

Perhaps he is right. Given the lack of contemporaneous sources generated by Indians, however, it is almost as hard for Utley to pin down Geronimo in the 21st century as it was for the U.S. Cavalry to do in the 1880s.

Geronimo's motives, Utley acknowledges, are "rarely understandable." Surprisingly, moreover, because he indicates that Mexicans murdered Geronimo's wife and children and that generals of the U.S. Army, Indian agents, and government bureaucrats repeatedly lied about allowing Apache warriors to stay on their lands and re-unite with their families, Utley labels Geronimo "gullible" for believing rumors that "bad people were about to do bad things to him."

When all is said and done, Utley even backs off a bit from his critique of the "'Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee' syndrome." Whether he conducted raids in Mexico or the American Southwest or on a reservation, he writes, Geronimo "did fight for his values and life-way, which perhaps contained an element of homeland."

At the end of his life, in an interview with a reporter, Geronimo gave voice to feelings that may well explain his alternating bouts of defiance, despair, deference and docility.

"For years I fought the white man," he said, "thinking that with my few braves I could kill them all and that we would again have the land that our Great Father gave us and which he covered with game."

After he lost and spent decades as a prisoner of war in Florida, Alabama and Oklahoma, making walking sticks, inscribing them with his name, and selling them to tourists for a dollar, his "heart was ready to burst. I knew that the race of the Indian was run."
In 'Geronimo,' author searches for the real deal | Tulsa World

Famed warrior Geronimo poses with a rifle in this 1887 photo. Author Robert Utley's new book paints the Apache leader as a complex and contradictory man. Associated Press file