

The Story of Apache May

In movies and books depicting the “Wild West,” captives are often white women and children who have been seized by Indians. In reality, Indian and Mexican women and children were likewise taken captive by white settlers. One of the best documented stories involves “Apache May.”

On May 6, 1896, Cochise County sheriff and rancher John Slaughter led a manhunt into the Guadalupe Mountains of Sonora, Mexico, in search of a group of Chiricahua Apache raiders who had killed H.H. Merrill and his daughter Elizabeth in December and Alfred Hand in late March.

Slaughter and his men found a deserted camp, whose smoldering fire alerted them that the Apaches were nearby. The posse followed the trail to a second camp. As they surrounded it, the Indians scattered, leaving all their possessions behind. The posse opened fire, possibly killing one of the retreating Apaches. The Indians returned fire from behind a nearby hill before making good their escape.

As Slaughter and his men walked through the abandoned camp after the gunfight, Slaughter noticed something unusual on the ground—a fourteen- to eighteen-month-old girl covered with a blanket. Whether she was deliberately hidden, to be rescued later, or accidentally left behind is unknown.

The girl was wearing an unusual dress: the skirt was made from a muslin election poster stolen from Alfred Hand’s home and the bodice had likely belonged to Elizabeth Merrill. Slaughter took the girl home to his wife, Viola. The couple named her Apache May, for the month in which she was found.

This story appeared in the *Tombstone Prospector* and the *Tombstone Epitaph*, both of which reported Viola’s and Apache May’s visit to C.S. Fly’s photography studio. Although Apache May, nicknamed ‘Pache (Patchy), had a hard time adjusting, she eventually learned English and adopted American customs.

‘Pache was one of three children the Slaughters fostered. She became close with her stepsister, Lola Robles, and her stepbrother, Arthur. John Slaughter and ‘Pache adored each other, and she often followed him around or sat on his lap. A photo of Apache May taken a couple years after her adoption shows her happy and smiling.

Sadly, Apache May did not live a long life. In February 1900, less than four years after her arrival on the Slaughter ranch, ‘Pache’s dress caught fire. She panicked and ran. By the time the fire was put out, she had sustained serious burns. Too fragile to travel to the nearest hospital, she died the following morning.