The Comanche Empire

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The Empire of the Plains

The first half of the nineteenth century was the era of American imperial expansion in the Southwest. Powered by burgeoning industrial, technological, and demographic growth and roused by the chauvinistic nationalism of Manifest Destiny, the United States purchased, fought, and annexed its way from the Mississippi valley to the Río Grande, infringing Spain's imperial claims, sweeping aside the Mexican Republic, and dispossessing dozens of indigenous societies. This expansion was set in motion in 1803 by the Louisiana Purchase, which roughly doubled the size of the nation, and was followed, in rapid succession, by the founding of the Anglo-dominated Republic of Texas in 1836, the annexation of that republic nine years later, and the market incorporation of Mexican New Mexico. The expansion culminated in the Mexican-American War in 1846–48, in the aftermath of which the United States bought New Mexico and California for fifteen million dollars and extended its territory to the Río Grande by assuming responsibility for the three million dollars its citizens claimed against Mexico. Finally, in 1853, the United States purchased a strip of land south of the Gila River from Mexico, thereby stretching its border to what today are southern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico.

But growing American power alone does not define this era, for it also saw Comanches resuming their expansionist thrust. Intensifying and elaborating the foreign political strategies that had fueled their expansion before the hiatus of the mid-1780s, Comanches built in the early nineteenth century a loose but imposing empire on the southern plains and in the Southwest, in conjunction with the emerging American empire. In the late 1840s, just as the United States prepared to oust Mexico from the Southwest by war, Comanches reached the

zenith of their power. They had revived their defunct trade and alliance network and expanded it into a vast commercial empire, which allowed them to integrate foreign economies into their market circuits and control the flow of crucial commodities on the lower midcontinent. They had halted the expansionist Texas in its tracks and carved out a vast raiding domain in northern Mexico. They held several nearby peoples in a state of virtual servitude and their market-oriented and slavery-driven economy was booming. Comanchería itself had transformed into a dynamic, multiethnic imperial core that absorbed large numbers of voluntary immigrants from the weaker societies and radiated cultural influences across the midcontinent. Like the imperial Americans, Comanches were powerful actors who had the capacity to remake societies and reshape histories.

That may sound implausible. How could one region, even one as broad as the Southwest, accommodate two simultaneous and successful imperial projects? Would not the expansion of one power inevitably impinge upon, and eventually cancel out, the expansion of the other? But such traditional zero-sum logic does not necessarily apply to the early nineteenth-century Southwest, because the Comanche and U.S. expansions stemmed from disparate impulses and advanced on divergent levels. Comanche power politics were aimed at expanding the nation's access to hunting grounds, trading outlets, tributary gifts, and slaves, whereas U.S. expansion, shaped by a bitter sectional dispute over slavery, focused on securing formal territorial claims and extending the nation's boundary to the Pacific. Comanches desired the resources of the land, Americans wanted legal titles to it. Distinct in their objectives and strategies, Comanche and U.S. expansions posed a fatal threat to neither. In fact, as I argue in the next two chapters, the parallel expansions did not so much clash as *co-evolve*, feeding on one another's successes.

In this and the following chapter I flesh out the form and function of the Comanche empire, here examining Comanches' political, economic, and cultural power on the Great Plains, and in chapter 5 exploring their foreign policies in the Southwest. The chapters are based on the notion that U.S. expansion into the Southwest was built on a Comanche antecedent. Comanches are at the center of the story and the westward-pushing Americans remain in the sidelines, stepping in, often unknowingly, to seize territories that had already been subjugated and weakened by Comanches. The narrative does not ignore the vast imperial ambitions and resources of the United States, but it shows that the stunning success of American imperialism in the Southwest can be understood only if placed in the context of the indigenous imperialism that preceded it.

But in the beginning, at the turn of the eighteenth century, it seemed that the Southwest's imperial future belonged to neither the Comanches nor the

United States. New Spain, revitalized by the Bourbon Reforms and bolstered by a dynamic Indian policy, was determined to control the region and its peoples. Spanish officials envisioned a great imperial extension to the interior, and they pinned their hopes on the Comanche nation. Like the Iroquois to the British, the Comanches were to Bourbon Spain the Indian proxy through which a vast continental empire could be claimed and commanded.

In 1800 Spanish authorities in New Mexico and Texas thought they had a firm hold over the Comanche nation. Border fairs thrived across the frontier from Taos to Natchitoches, and Comanche delegations often stayed for weeks in Santa Fe and San Antonio, interacting freely with the Hispanic and Indian residents. As they collected the annual treaty presents, Comanche chiefs routinely renewed their allegiance to New Spain, projecting the image of devoted allies. "In this tribe," New Mexico Governor Fernando de la Concha wrote in 1794, "one finds faith in the treaties that it acknowledges, true constancy, and hospitality, and modest customs. . . . The need for which we make them liberal grants of arms and ammunition makes them dependent upon us." Deplored as "inconstant and mistrustful" savages only a few years earlier, the Comanches were recast by early nineteenth-century Spanish officials into ideal allies, almost archetypal noble savages. Pedro Bautista Pino, New Mexico's representative in the Spanish Cortes, wrote a brief treatise on the "idea of the Comanche" in which he marveled at the "magnificent size," "graceful appearance," and "frank martial air" of a typical Comanche. After condemning the cruelty and obnoxiousness of the Apaches—the necessary dialectic counterpoint—Pino confidently declared that "the Comanche nation . . . would, with little effort on our part, unite with the Spaniards."[1]

For Spanish Texas, such a union was quite literally a matter of life and death, for it shielded the colony against Comanche raids, which had wreaked unimaginable havoc in the 1770s and early 1780s and nearly destroyed the all-important ranching industry. Ranching began to revive in the late eighteenth century under the Comanche peace, but the colonists lived in constant fear of renewed attacks. At a broader geostrategic level, the alliance with the Comanches shielded entire northern New Spain against a possible invasion from the young and expanding United States. In theory, the role of a buffer territory belonged to Louisiana, but that overextended, disjointed colony was utterly incapable of meeting the challenge. In fact, Louisiana had become more a magnet than a barrier for footloose Americans in the late eighteenth century when Spanish officials, after having failed to people the province with immigrants from other Spanish colonies, opened its borders to American settlers. By 1795 Madrid had concluded that at-

tempts to defend Louisiana from American takeover were futile and started the preparations for selling the money-draining colony to France. While Bourbon officials played the imperial board game with Louisiana, the role of buffer fell once again to Texas. To fulfill its lofty mission, the relatively sparsely populated colony needed to keep a critical mass of Indians under its influence in order to create a barrier of pro-Spanish Natives that would help offset growing American power. The alliance with the eastern Comanches, by far the most powerful Native group on the Texas borderlands, was the focal point of that barrier.[2]

But the Comanche alliance was more precarious than Spanish officials believed. Eastern Comanches—like their relatives in western Comanchería—had never given Spain the kind of loyalty Bourbon administrators expected from them. They offered the Spaniards their amity but not their compliance. They traded with the Spaniards and accepted their treaty presents, but they jealously guarded their political autonomy. This had begun to dawn on Spanish officials almost immediately after the 1785–86 treaties. Comanches refused to return Hispanic captives without ransom, turned down requests to participate in joint military campaigns that did not advance their interests, and made unauthorized raids into Apache reservations, jeopardizing the delicate peace process between Apaches and Spaniards. Such actions tested the consistency and limits of the alliance, but Spanish officials, careful not to alienate their vital allies, routinely ignored or forgave the transgressions. Indeed, Jacobo Ugarte, the commanding general of the Interior Provinces, had specifically advised the governor of New Mexico that "a case can occur in which it may be convenient to use clemency even when the crime has been committed against ourselves . . . when inflexibility on the part of your lordship could cause some important altercation. Prudence requires then that indulgence be preferred to satisfaction for the injury."[3]

A more subtle but ultimately more serious challenge to the Comanche-Spanish alliance emerged in the late 1790s, when American merchants and agents operating out of Spanish Louisiana began to push into the southern plains. Evading Louisiana's Spanish officials—and sometimes cooperating with them—itinerant American traders infiltrated the contested borderland space between Spanish Texas and the United States and then proceeded toward eastern Comanchería. Americans' arrival constituted a litmus test for the pact between eastern Comanches and Texas, for the treaty of 1785 had anticipated the United States' westward thrust and explicitly prohibited Comanches from dealing with American agents. Spanish officials expected eastern Comanches to honor the treaty, remain loyal to Texas, and banish the intruders. They expected that not only because Comanches had signed a political contract but also because Spanish gifts and generosity obliged them to do so.

The Americans, however, did not come as conquerors carrying guns and banners but as merchants carrying goods and gifts, and eastern Comanches eagerly embraced them as potential trading partners. Comanches simply viewed the linkage between presents and politics differently from Spaniards. Gifts, Bourbon administrators insisted, were contractual objects that created a political bond, an exclusive bilateral union, whereas for Comanches the meaning of gifts was primarily of a social nature. Bourbon officials insisted that Spanish gifts should forbid Comanches from trading with foreign nations, but this was a narrow interpretation of loyalty and friendship that did not easily translate into the Comanche worldview. If foreigners—American, French, or any other kind—who entered Comanchería were willing to adhere to Comanche customs and expectations, Comanches had no reason to reject them. Indeed, as the pages that follow will show, by demanding eastern Comanches to choose between devotion to Spain and hospitality to Americans, Texas officials eventually wrecked their alliance with the Comanche nation.

And so, by simply letting American newcomers in, eastern Comanches began to turn away from their fledgling, uneasy alliance with Spain and toward American markets and wealth. It was a momentous shift that changed the history of the Southwest. By establishing exchange ties with Americans, and by linking their pastoral horse-bison economy to the emerging capitalist economy of the United States, eastern Comanches set off a sustained commercial expansion that eventually swept across Comanchería. Spanish officials were slow to recognize this change and even slower to react to it. When José Cortés applauded Comanches' loyalty to Spain in 1799, eastern Comanches were already engaged in an active trade with the westering Americans, and when Pino echoed Cortés's praise thirteen years later, eastern Comanches had already turned their rancherías into a thriving gateway between the Southwest and the U.S. markets. By the time the Spanish colonial era came to an end in 1821, the entire Comanche nation had moved out of the Spanish orbit. They commanded a vast commercial empire that encompassed the Great Plains from the Río Grande valley to the Mississippi and Missouri river valleys, and they looked to the north and east for markets, wealth, allies, and power.

The first known American to test Comanchería's commercial waters was Philip Nolan, an aspiring Kentucky entrepreneur who had immigrated to New Orleans in the late 1780s, only to realize that greater economic opportunities loomed on the Great Pains to the west. He secured in 1791 a passport from Louisiana's governor to catch wild horses in Texas and during the next ten years led five major forays to the west, often setting out from Nacogdoches, a Texas-

Louisiana border town that developed into a major hub of contraband trade soon after its founding in 1779. Nolan carried large numbers of horses to Louisiana's markets and militia troops, but he also traded extensively with the Indians of the southern plains. In 1799 he returned with twelve hundred wild and Indian horses, infecting Natchez and other frontier settlements with a trading fever that sent large numbers of American merchants to the plains. But Nolan's activities also had political underpinnings. He was the protégé of General James Wilkinson, onetime Spanish spy and from 1798 on the commander of the U.S. Army's Southern Department. Although still conspiring with Spanish agents, Wilkinson keenly promoted U.S. exploration and filibustering in the Southwest under the sponsorship of Vice President Thomas Jefferson.[4]

Realizing the mistake they had made by admitting Nolan, Spanish officials stopped issuing passports by 1799, but neither that nor Nolan's death at the hands of Spanish troops in 1801 deterred the westward-pushing Americans who received strong support from Wilkinson and Washington, D.C. This support only intensified after the Louisiana Purchase, which left the boundary between Spanish Texas and U.S. Louisiana undetermined and, as Americans saw it, up for grabs. The 1806 Neutral Ground Agreement, in which Wilkinson and Lieutenant Colonel Simón de Herrera declared a demilitarized neutral zone between the Sabine River and the Arroyo Hondo near Natchitoches, only added to the confusion and contestation. Quietly urged on by Wilkinson—from 1805 the governor of the newly organized Louisiana Territory—and other U.S. agents, several American trading parties and individual merchants pushed into the disputed Red and Brazos river countries in the early years of the nineteenth century.[5]

Viewed from the Mississippi valley, the westward thrust of American traders gave rise to the "Texas Trading Frontier," a zone of bustling commercial activity stretching from the Arkansas River to the Gulf Coast. For eastern Comanches, however, the U.S. commercial expansion did not constitute anything as dramatic as a new frontier. Rather, it caused their old rivalry with the Wichitas over trading privileges to flare up. Earlier, in the late 1770s, eastern Comanches had been on the verge of replacing the Wichita confederacy as trade gateway to the Texas plains, but they had eased their pressure in the 1780s when smallpox devastated their rancherías and when the revolutionary convulsions in the East disrupted westbound trade from the Mississippi valley. By the late 1780s, Comanches were again interacting and trading peacefully with the Wichitas. The cessation of Comanche aggression allowed Wichitas to regain their former strength, and when American traders arrived, they were once more in the position to dominate the east-west commerce. From the late 1790s on, U.S. traders visited the Wichita villages along the Red River on an annual basis, bringing in

guns, metal weapons, and clothing; exchanging gifts; and creating strong political and kinship bonds.[6]

As in the 1770s, Wichitas locked the Comanches out of eastern markets, and as before, they demanded what Comanches considered excessive prices for serving as middleman traders. Unlike in the 1770s, however, Comanches were reluctant to rely on force, largely because an ominous military situation had developed on their northeastern border: the Osages had embarked on yet another expansionist round. This time, however, Osages' aggression in the west was triggered by their dispossession in the east. In the 1790s the expansion of Anglo-American settler frontiers in the Southeast exiled large numbers of Choctaws, Cherokees, Delawares, and Shawnees west of the Mississippi, where they clashed violently with Osages, forcing several villages to relocate closer to Comanchería. At the same time, Spain's liberal immigration policy in Louisiana lured thousands of Kentuckians and Tennesseans to the lower Missouri valley, where they established farmsteads on traditional Osage hunting grounds, compelling many Osages to withdraw toward Comanche and Wichita lands. Restraining these Osage encroachments remained a strategic priority for eastern Comanches through the 1830s and they needed Wichitas' military and material assistance to manage the task.[7]

Rather than trying to break the Wichita trade barrier with force, therefore, Comanches attempted to circumvent it through diplomacy. They rebuilt their alliance with the Wichitas during the 1790s and peacefully visited their villages for trade. Then, in 1807, they dispatched a large delegation to Natchitoches, the westernmost U.S. settlement within the Louisiana Purchase, hoping to persuade the agents to send traders among them. The delegation was enthusiastically welcomed by Doctor John Sibley, the Indian agent of "Orleans Territory and the region South of the Arkansas River," who had been commissioned by Congress to sweep the southern plains Indians from the Spanish orbit into the American one. Armed with a lavish budget of three thousand dollars to win over the Natives, Sibley staged a series of ritual performances to display the wealth, munificence, and attentiveness of the Americans. He gratified the Comanche visitors with guns, powder, lead, vermilion, blankets, metal gear, and officers' uniforms. Then, in the presence of Comanche, Wichita, Caddo, and Tonkawa headmen and with the "Calumet & Council fire lighted," he delivered a remarkable speech in which, through expedient historical amnesia, he claimed nativeness for Americans. "It is now so long since our Ancestors came from beyond the great Water that we have no remembrance of it," he asserted. "We ourselves are Natives of the Same land that you are, in other words white Indians, we therefore Should feel & live together like brothers & Good Neighbours." He also ad-

dressed the larger geopolitical context: "we are not at war with Spain, we therefore do not wish, or Ask you to be less their friends for being Ours, the World is wide enough for us all, and we Ought all of us to live in it like brothers."[8]

By proclaiming his readiness to treat Comanches as kin, by refraining from interfering with the relations between Comanches and Spaniards, and by exhibiting exceptional largesse, Sibley demonstrated the Americans' willingness to conform to the Comanche cultural order. One of the Comanche chiefs responded to him, declaring that he was "highly pleas'd" to see the Americans, "our New Neighbours." The practical matter of trade, however, was foremost in the Comanche agenda, and the chief promptly moved to explain how Comanches' desire for European technology created ready markets for American goods: "we are in want of Merchandize and Shall be Always Glad to trade with you on friendly terms. . . . You have every thing we want."[9]

Those wants were stimulated not only by the guns and powder that helped Comanches cordon off the Osages and other enemies. Having used European technology for generations, they had come to rely on its availability and consumption in countless everyday activities; from cutting meat to cooking it, and from keeping their bodies warm to beautifying them, they had grown dependent on imported products. Spanish Texas had failed to meet their expansive and complicated needs, and eastern Comanches now put their trust in the United States. To press the point to Sibley, Comanches let him understand that Spaniards had "imposed" their trade on the Comanches. Two months later, another Comanche party visited Natchitoches, hoping to jumpstart commerce. The head of the delegation (whose name went unrecorded) promised Sibley that American traders would "be well treated" and find the longer journeys to Comanche rancherías well worth the effort, because "Horses & Mules were to them like grass they had them in Such plenty," and because "they had likewise dress'd Buffalo Skins & knew where there was Silver Ore plenty."[10]

Eastern Comanches thus aggressively sought market relations with the United States and appeared to be willing to sacrifice their alliance with Spain to achieve their goal. One of their chiefs, Sibley exulted, had laid a Spanish flag at his feet, declaring that Comanches "were very desirous of having Our Flag and it was the Same to them whether Spain was pleas'd or displeas'd and if I would give him One it Should wave through all the Hietan Nation, and they would all die in defence of it before they would part with it." This, Sibley argued, was no small feat, for the Comanches dominated all lands from the vicinity of San Antonio to the Missouri River and, along the east-west axis, from the Wichita villages far beyond the Rocky Mountains. But Sibley's euphoria over his coup conceals a more somber reality. He had been assigned to persuade the Indians to shift

their loyalties from New Spain to the United States, but it was starting to seem that it was the Comanches who were calling the shots: they were pulling the United States westward into their vast sphere of power, which the Americans could barely comprehend let alone manipulate. Indeed, Wilkinson himself had argued two years earlier that if the United States hoped to win a foothold in the Southwest, it could happen only by forming a treaty with the Comanches, "the most powerfull Nation of Savages on this Continent [who] have in their power to facilitate or impede our march to New Mexico, should such movement ever become Necessary."[11]

In summer 1808, accordingly, Sibley outfitted and licensed Anthony Glass, a prominent Louisiana merchant, to lead an expedition of eleven men to the Red River country. Glass spent two months in the Wichita trading villages on the Red River, but in the late fall he decided to proceed farther west among the Comanches. Clinging to their privileged position, Wichitas first begged Americans not to proceed and then tried to misdirect their reconnaissance party away from Comanche rancherías. Glass and his men pushed forward, however, and had a profitable trading season in Comanchería. Moving from one ranchería to another, the Glass party was transformed into a movable fair that increased steadily in size as more Comanches joined the assembly. In the space of a month, Glass's mobile marketplace hosted several hundred Comanches who purchased all the goods the Americans had to offer. Glass's success lured in other American trader-agents, who were eager to tap into Comanchería's vast commercial potential. In 1810 Americans were reported to be operating a trading settlement on the Colorado River and interacting with several prominent eastern Comanche leaders.[12]

American merchants had thus already begun to bypass Wichita villages and move their operations into Comanchería when, in 1811, the Wichita confederacy suffered a paralyzing blow. Awahakei, longtime principal chief of the confederacy, died in a battle against the Osages. Unable to agree on Awahakei's successor and suffering under Osage pressure from the north, Wichitas abandoned their Red River villages and scattered across the southern prairies. Some moved westward and sought refuge among the Comanches, initiating a process of gradual merger of Comanche and Wichita communities. Other bands congregated into nine small villages along the Brazos, Navasota, and Trinity rivers and encircled themselves with large defensive dugouts and earthworks.[13]

As the Wichita blockade dissolved, Comanche commerce boomed. From the early 1810s on, American trading parties from the newly established state of Louisiana frequented eastern Comanche rancherías along the middle Red and Brazos rivers, now the focal point of U.S. commerce on the southern plains. In 1818, W. A. Trimble, commander of the western section of the 8th District of the

U.S. Army, reported that eastern Comanches "carry on, with traders from Red River, an extensive traffic, in horses and mules, which they catch in the plains or capture from the Spaniards." Another observer noted that eastern Comanches "are becoming quite expert in fire-arms within a few years, having been furnished by traders from the United States, by way of exchange, for horses and mules, which the Indians would, from time to time, plunder the Spanish settlements of." Governor Antonio Martínez of Texas, monitoring the developments from a different angle, reported in helpless frustration that "the traffic between the Comanches and the traders from the interior continues without interruption, and that arms, munitions, and other war supplies are being brought in."[14]

Comanches also established commercial ties with the Spanish-American filibusters and revolutionaries who, after a briefly successful revolt in Texas in 1812 and 1813, took refuge in Natchitoches, turning the frontier outpost into a quasi-autonomous political entity on the Comanche-Texas borderlands. Still determined to fight the Spanish regime, the refugee rebels began operating as middlemen between the Comanches and the American merchants, carrying guns, munitions, and powder to the west and horses and mules to the east. Nemesio Salcedo, commanding general of the Interior Provinces, lamented in 1813 that this contraband trade utterly undermined Spain's "national commerce" in Texas. By 1818, the traffic had created "a well worn road through the unsettled region towards Natchitoches."[15]

Then, in 1821, Spain's American empire collapsed, and the resulting confusion in the Southwest opened the floodgates for Comanche–U.S. commerce. Only a year later Stephen F. Austin reported that eastern Comanche rancherías had become the nexus point of three well-established trade routes that connected them to U.S. markets along the Mississippi valley. The northernmost route linked eastern Comanchería to St. Louis via a chain of Native middlemen traders. Below was the Red River channel, which funneled traders from Vicksburg, Natchez, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans into the heart of eastern Comanchería. The busiest of the trade routes was the southernmost one, leading from eastern Comanchería to Nacogdoches, which had nearly expired during the 1812–13 revolt in Texas and then, like Natchitoches, became a haven for American merchants and filibusters. With close ties to Natchitoches and New Orleans, Nacogdoches grew into a major trading community, boasting an annual trade of ninety thousand dollars in the early 1820s.[16]

The newly established Mexican government tried to keep American peddlers out of the land it considered Mexican soil, but controlling the porous Texas-Louisiana frontier was beyond its capacity. In 1823 two special investigators advised Mexico City to immediately deploy two hundred troops to Nacogdoches

to repel the burgeoning American contraband trade with Indians. The troops never came, and Anglo immigrants and merchants continued to pour into Nacogdoches and Comanchería. So lucrative was this illicit commerce that it attracted a large number of Yamparikas to relocate eastward. By the 1820s, those Comanche immigrants had assumed a new identity as Tenewas (Those Who Stay Downstream) and established a distinct political organization on the middle Red River, where they joined the eastern Kotsotekas in trading with the Americans.[17]

Eastern Comanche rancherías along the Red and Brazos rivers were now the gateway to and from the southern plains, a busy central place where the American homesteader frontier's seemingly inexhaustible demand for livestock met an equally boundless supply, the massive horse herds of the Southwest. Facing east, Comanche rancherías anchored an extensive, triangle-shaped hinterland that stretched across the southern prairies toward St. Louis and New Orleans and into the farms and plantations of Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Facing west, they were the tip of a wide-mouthed trade funnel that moved livestock toward eastern demand and wealth. As gateway traders, Comanches no longer had to travel to trade; they could simply wait in their rancherías for American trade convoys to arrive. This made a strong impression on the French scientist Jean Louis Berlandier, who visited Comanchería in the late 1820s, reporting how American traders "bring their merchandise right into the [Comanche] rancherías and . . . get from them not only the furs they have to sell, but also the mules and horses they have stolen from the townspeople [of Texas]."[18]

The eastern Comanche gateway also drew Native nations into its sphere. One such nation was the Panismahas, a three-thousand-member offshoot of the Pawnees that in the late eighteenth century had escaped Lakota expansion in the lower Missouri valley and fled to the middle Red River. Once relocated to the south, the Panismahas sought an alliance with the Wichitas, their linguistic and cultural relatives, but they soon gravitated toward the more powerful Comanches. They reportedly sent "600 well-armed men" to a peace ceremony in 1822, after which they began conducting regular trade journeys up the Red, Brazos, and Colorado rivers. Panismahas were a crucial addition to the Comanche trade network. While American traders furnished Comanches with guns, powder, shot, and clothing, Panismahas offered maize, squash, and other staple foods. Most important, Panismahas traded high-quality smoothbore British rifles, which they obtained from their Pawnee relatives, who in turn received the guns from British fur traders on the Missouri. Assessing eastern Comanches' commercial arrangements in the late 1820s, one visitor was struck by the complementary

nature of their trade links and the drawing power of their markets: "The Aguaje . . . sell guns made in Great Britain which are preferred by the Comanches. The Anglo-Americans supply the Comanches with ammunition. The Aguaje Indians come all the way to the Brazos River to deal with the Comanches. The latter do not visit the Aguaje settlements." According to another observer, the volume of this gun trade was enough to keep the Comanches "abundantly supplied with firearms" and make them "equally at home with the gun, the bow, and the lance."[19]

The eastern Comanche trade system operated steadily through the 1820s, but the next decade brought dramatic changes. With the passing of the Indian Removal Act in 1830, the United States government began a wholesale relocation of eastern Indians across the Mississippi valley—the proclaimed permanent Indian frontier—into Indian Territory in what today are Oklahoma and Kansas. The removal policy brought thousands of Indians into present-day Oklahoma and Kansas, creating a new and deeply volatile geopolitical entity on Comanchería's borders. The most populous of the transplanted peoples—the Cherokees, Creeks, Chickasaws, and Choctaws—were placed in the southern and western sections of Indian Territory where, around the Wichita Mountains, their lands overlapped with Comanchería's eastern fringe. Hundreds of removed Cherokees, Delawares, Shawnees, and Kickapoos also moved across the Red River into Texas, where Mexican officials offered them legal land grants if they served as border sentinels to protect the province from Comanche raiders and to keep illegal American traders from entering Comanchería.[20]

A clash was immediate and, it seems, inevitable. Dismayed by the agricultural prospects in subhumid Oklahoma, many immigrant groups began to experiment with bison hunting. The westernmost bands of the Delawares, Kickapoos, and Shawnees developed a typical prairie economy of farming and foraging and started making regular hunting excursions to the plains, tapping into Comanchería's bison reserves. Comanches responded to these transgressions by attacking the intruders and by raiding deep into Indian Territory to exact revenge and to plunder maize, cattle, and captives. The death toll climbed on both sides. The fighting also disrupted the Comanche-American trade that had flourished for two decades on the southern plains. Unable to penetrate the wall of immigrant Indians and put off by the escalating violence, American traders gave up their ventures from the Mississippi valley into Comanchería.[21]

In moving across the Mississippi valley, the immigrant nations had encroached upon the Comanche realm but, more important, they had entered an ancient borderland where commercial gravity tended to pull peoples together. Their position between the livestock-rich Comanchería and the livestock-hungry Mis-

souri and Arkansas territories invited the removed Indians to become middlemen who facilitated the movement of goods among the centers of wealth around them. Like the Wichitas, French, and Americans before them, several of the immigrant nations responded. A propitious diplomatic opportunity to attach themselves to the Comanche trade network opened to them in 1834 and 1835 when the U.S. government sponsored two large-scale political meetings among the Comanches, their allies, and the immigrant Indians, hoping to quell the violence that threatened to abort the entire Indian removal policy. In August 1835 some seven thousand Comanches and their Wichita allies gathered at Camp Holmes near the Canadian River, where nineteen Comanche chiefs signed a treaty and agreed to open their lands "west of the Cross Timber" to the immigrant tribes. In return, they expected trade.[22]

The immigrant Indians did not disappoint, and within a few years the border region between Comanchería and Indian Territory had become a site for thriving trade. Although uprooted and dislodged, the removed Indians could still generate impressive surpluses of manufactured and agricultural products, which they were keen to exchange for the plains products they needed to survive in their new homelands.[23] Comanches sponsored massive intertribal gatherings along the Red and Brazos rivers and on the Salt Plains of north-central Oklahoma, often sending messengers to Indian Territory to announce a forthcoming fair. Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole trading convoys frequented Comanche rancherías, bringing in maize, wheat, potatoes, tobacco, vermilion, wampum, beads, powder, lead, and government-issued rifles. In exchange, they received robes, skins, meat, salt, horses, and mules, a part of which they traded again to American settlers in Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Sometimes the seminomadic and more mobile Delawares, Kickapoos, and Shawnees served as intermediaries, moving commodities between Indian Territory and Comanchería. The thriving commerce also pulled more marginal groups to the Comanche orbit. Quapaws, who had found a refuge among the Cherokees, frequently attended the fairs, and in 1843 Omahas sent a trading delegation to eastern Comanchería from their villages in present-day Nebraska. Omahas were reported to have traded all their guns and bullets for Comanche horses, which they needed to defend themselves against the expanding Lakotas.

The dynamics of this exchange mirrored the direct Comanche-American trade it had supplanted, but there was an important new element: slave trade. The removed Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles had brought with them approximately five thousand black slaves, and the bondage institution persisted in Indian Territory as the planter-slaveholder elite set out to rebuild its exchange-oriented cotton and tobacco economy. This created secure

markets for Comanche slavers who now commanded extensive raiding domains in Texas and northern Mexico. More improvised than organized, the slave traffic offered multiple opportunities for its practitioners. Removed Indians purchased kidnapped Mexicans, Anglo-Americans, and black slaves from Comanches either to augment their own labor force or to resell them to American Indian agents, who generally ransomed the offered captives, especially if they had fair skin. At times Comanches bypassed the middlemen and took their captives directly to U.S. officials at Fort Gibson and other frontier posts, and sometimes they relied on comanchero intermediaries who then delivered the captives to American agents. Occasionally, Comanches even kidnapped black slaves from Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Creeks and then sold them to Delawares, Kickapoos, and Shawnees. They also captured black runaway slaves from Indian Territory and incorporated them into their ranks.[24]

Alongside the pacification of Comanche–eastern Indian relations, another critical peace process unfolded: eastern Comanches formed an alliance with the Osages with whom they had been at war since the early eighteenth century. The conciliation stemmed from Osages' suddenly plummeted fortunes. In the 1820s and early 1830s, after years of brutal fighting against the Cherokees, Osages surrendered most of their old homelands in present-day Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma and relocated their villages west, closer to Comanchería. Hemmed between two aggressive and expanding geopolitical entities—Comanchería and Indian Territory—Osages clustered in a narrow belt between the Verdigris and Arkansas rivers in northwestern Oklahoma. According to one observer, their diminished power was such an acute source of "anxiety" for Osages "that very often when they knew the Patoka [Comanches] were in the field around the Arkansas they changed the usual direction of their hunts in order not to cross this river, for on the other side they would be in a continuous state of warfare." Cornered and collapsing, Osages began to seek accommodation with the Comanches and found a diplomatic avenue in the peace talks the United States sponsored between the Comanches and the immigrant Indians. Comanche and Osage representatives met at Fort Gibson in 1834 and concluded a formal peace at Camp Holmes in 1835. "Half of my body belongs to the Osages and half to the Comanches," Comanche Chief Ishacoly declared at the council, evoking a sense of kinship between the long-standing enemies, "and the rest I will hold close to my heart."[25]

With peace came commerce. Eastern Comanches opened their eastern hunting ranges to Osages who in turn kept their access to the bison herds open by supplying their new allies with American goods. Although disease organisms and pressures from removed eastern Indians had eroded Osages' hegemony on

the southern prairies, forcing them to abandon their old homelands near the Arkansas River, they still controlled trade at several American posts in Missouri. Like the immigrant Indians, Osages now became middlemen between U.S. and Comanche markets. In 1838 Victor Tixier, a French traveler, reported a flourishing exchange. Comanches, "no longer able to obtain any of the things manufactured by the whites . . . sought the friendship of the Osage, who had such frequent and easy dealings with the civilized people and obtained without difficulty what the Patoka needed. Trading was started after the war; every year the day of the full moon in July is the meeting time for the two nations. The Osage bring red paint, kitchen utensils, blankets, cloth, iron, and the Patoka give in return horses which they breed, mules stolen from Texans, all kinds of pelts, etc."[26]

Annual rendezvous were held at the junction of the Arkansas and Cimarron rivers and on the Big Salt River, a tributary of the Brazos, where in 1843 "the whole body" of the Comanches was reported to be waiting for Osage traders. The amount of goods exchanged at these meetings could be astounding. In 1845 the *Arkansas Intelligencer* reported that Osages had purchased twenty white captive children from Comanches, a transaction that would earn Osages several thousand dollars' worth of goods if they ransomed the children to American agents. Two years later Osages reportedly purchased fifteen hundred mules from eastern Comanches with a selection of guns, powder, ammunition, blankets, blue cloth, and strouding. The value of the transaction was estimated at sixty thousand dollars, several hundreds of thousands in modern equivalents. And as gateway traders, Comanches had yet another possibility for increasing profit margins; according to a U.S. Indian agent, they could resell Osage guns to their Mexican and Indian trading partners for three times the value. To put these transactions into perspective, the average annual volume of the Santa Fe trade, the largest single economic enterprise in the early nineteenth-century American West, was estimated in the 1840s at approximately two hundred thousand dollars.[27]

The stabilization of relations among Comanches, immigrant tribes, and Osages also made possible a restoration of direct commercial ties between eastern Comanches and Americans. As Comanchería's eastern border transformed from a contested into a commercial zone, American merchants returned. Among them were familiar itinerant traders like Josiah Gregg, but, unlike before, Americans now built permanent trading posts, hoping to tap into the booming commerce that was developing between the Comanches and their Native allies. Holland Coffee, an Anglo-Texan merchant, established a fortified trading house on the Red River just east of Comanchería and by the late 1830s traded regularly with Comanches, Cherokees, Choctaws, Delawares, and Shawnees. He was re-

ported to be handing munitions to Comanches on a daily basis and encouraging them to raid Mexican settlements for horses and mules. Auguste Chouteau, of the eminent St. Louis fur-trading family, built a post on the middle South Canadian River on Comanchería's eastern edge, and Abel Warren erected a trading house on Cache Creek within Comanchería's borders.[28]

The advent of these trading posts along and within Comanchería's borders opened a new chapter in the economic history of Comanches, the beginning of mass-scale market production of bison robes. The posts provided a secure outlet for hides, which found ready markets in Texas and the United States east of the Mississippi and were moved to those locations by regular supply trains. Comanches had traded bison meat and robes for generations, but that exchange had largely been limited to local subsistence bartering. Now Comanchería's bison became an animal of enterprise, slaughtered for its commodified hides and robes for distant industrial markets. It was not long before the herds started to show signs of overexploitation.[29]

If peace and commerce had undesired ecological ramifications, they also had unexpected and far-reaching geopolitical repercussions. Seen from the vantage point of Washington, D.C., the transformation of Comanchería's eastern front from a battlefield into a thriving trading zone meant that the removal of indigenous nations from the east into Indian Territory could continue. And with that, so too could continue the unrelenting westward march of the cotton kingdom and its settlement frontier.

In western Comanchería, meanwhile, a parallel commercial expansion was taking place, and as in eastern Comanchería, it was set off by the westward thrust of American merchants and markets. Trade between western Comanches and Americans probably began as an offshoot of eastern Comanche-American commerce: some of the Louisiana-based American traders who visited eastern Comanchería from the 1790s on continued farther west to open new markets for their products. But the upper western Comanche divisions, the Yamparikas and Jupes in the upper Arkansas basin, also attracted itinerant American traders directly from St. Louis and other settlements along the middle Mississippi and lower Missouri valleys. In 1796 a rumor reached Spanish officials in Natchitoches that a group of American traders had built a blockhouse among the Yamparikas, sparking fear that the United States was about to invade New Spain by way of Comanchería.[30]

The acquisition of Louisiana, which by Washington's sweeping interpretation extended all the way to the Río Grande and the Rockies, stirred up the

incipient American interest in the commercial possibilities of the Southwest. Scores of plains-bound American traders and Rockies-bound American trappers ascended the Arkansas, Canadian, and Red rivers into western Comanchería where their presence and products, especially guns and powder, were eagerly welcomed. Conducted under the watchful eye of Spanish officials, the burgeoning western Comanche–American trade became one of worst-kept secrets in the early nineteenth-century Southwest borderlands. In 1804, for example, Manuel Merino y Moreno, secretary of the Commandancy General of the Interior Provinces, reported that western Comanches bore guns with "markings that leave no doubt that they were manufactured in London"—a revealing sign of their connections to U.S. market circuits.[31]

Such reports alarmed the Spanish officials in Santa Fe who once again found themselves in the familiar quandary: a rival colonial power threatened Spanish interests by extending its commercial operations deep into Comanchería. Although American trade openly violated the 1786 treaty, Bourbon officials were reluctant to pressure the Comanches, fearing that force would push them closer to the United States. Instead, the officials kept the border fairs open and continued to offer favorable exchange rates and abundant gifts, hoping to retain whatever hold they could on the Comanches. Between 1790 and 1815 an average of some one hundred Comanches visited Santa Fe each year, collecting thousands of pesos worth of gifts. Comanche chiefs were provided with special guest quarters, and governors entertained Comanche elite at their table, serving them wine and sharing ritual food with them. The town maintained a general store where Comanches could purchase cloth, vermilion, and other luxuries, and the chiefs even received guns, which remained in short supply in New Mexico, as gifts.[32]

The presents, fairs, and favorable terms of exchange helped preserve diplomatic bonds between New Mexico and Comanchería, but on a more abstract level, they turned Spain's Indian policy into a caricature of its original intention. The gifts now had almost none of the meaning Spanish policymakers attributed to them. Rather than a political adhesive affixing Comanches to Spain as faithful allies, they became payments for loyalty Comanches were not willing to give. Yet, even against the mounting evidence, many Spanish officials refused to relinquish the idea of Comanche obedience. Writing in 1812, Pino insisted that "a continued state of peace and friendship of the greatest importance in checking other tribes has been the result of the small number of presents given them. At first the Comanches thought they had to reciprocate. They brought all the fine pelts they could collect in order to exceed the munificence of our presents.

When they were informed that favors given them in the name of our king should not be returned, they were greatly astonished. Thus they were placed under obligation to us."[33]

Pino's account underlines the unrealistic rationale of Spain's Indian policy, which had created a substantial one-way stream of gifts from New Mexico among the Comanches, who accepted the material goods but rejected their political implications. Two Spanish reports from 1818 reveal just how badly Spain's Comanche policy had fallen short of its objectives. In the first, New Mexico Governor Facundo Melgares complained bitterly how his hosting of a party of one thousand Comanches had required so many gifts that he did not have goods to gratify other Indian nations. But the gifts did little to bring the Comanches to Spain's exclusive embrace, as the second report illustrates. The Indians "who live to the east of the mountains on the waters of the Arkansas," an anonymous observer wrote, undoubtedly referring to Comanches, "have frequent communication with the English [i.e., Canadian traders] and Americans" and "are doing everything possible to allure the traders of these two nations to themselves." Spanish policymakers, he concluded, were caught in a delicate play-off situation and should commit themselves to searching "for means to furnishing" the Comanches: "For there is no doubt that in the hands of the one or the other governments, these savages would become either important means of defense or an important means of attack."[34]

Spanish authorities may have felt pressured to mete out more gifts to Comanchería in order to counterbalance American influence, but it is likely that no amount of presents would have persuaded Comanches to cut off their ties to those Americans who were willing to operate within Comanche cultural parameters and hand out gifts. The experiences of Thomas James, one of the pioneers of the Santa Fe Trail, is an illuminating case in point. James led his first commercial expedition to western Comanchería in 1821, traveling from St. Louis to the Texas Panhandle, where he encountered an assemblage of Comanche rancherías. James, at the request of Comanche chiefs, made several rounds of gift distributions, dispensing thousands of dollars' worth of merchandise. Oblivious to the intricacies of Comanche protocol, however, he tried to save the bulk of his goods for New Mexican markets and disregarded the chiefs' demands for further gifts. When James insisted on continuing to Santa Fe with his remaining goods, Comanches arrested him and his men and threatened to kill them. Yet despite repeated errors of judgment, the gifts had won James the trust of key Comanche leaders. He visited Comanchería again the next year, was ritually adopted by a powerful chief, and purchased more than three hundred high-quality animals, a transaction worth several thousand dollars in St. Louis.

James himself depicted his travels into Comanchería as a high adventure with repeated near brushes with death, but the real story is his submersion into a new cultural logic. Comanche chiefs were not so much extorting or abusing James as keenly—although not always patiently—teaching the newcomer how to negotiate the Comanche ritual forms and cultural etiquette.[35]

Despite Spanish protests, then, the trade between Comanches and Americans continued unabated, but the collapse of the Spanish empire in 1821 turned the trickle of American traders into a stream. Mexican authorities immediately lifted the restrictive trade laws of the Spanish empire and opened New Mexico to U.S. merchants and markets. The result was the Santa Fe trade, a burgeoning commercial enterprise that revolved around regular trading caravans between Missouri and New Mexico. The main artery of the trade, the Santa Fe Trail, ran across western Comanchería, along the Arkansas River to its headwaters before turning southwest toward New Mexico. In the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, tens of thousands of dollars' worth of merchandise traveled through Comanchería each year, but a substantial part of it stayed there. Comanches demanded compensation for granting right-of-ways through their territory, and the overlanders routinely engaged in trade with them. Some, like Thomas James, found the horses and hides of Comanchería more enticing than the mules and furs of New Mexico and traveled to the west to trade specifically with the Comanches. James was back in western Comanchería in 1822 and this time capably maneuvered the Native protocol. The exchange, as he recounted, followed a rigorous structure, which made a clear distinction between gift giving and actual trade:

> I prepared for trading by making presents, according to custom, of knives, tobacco, cloths for breech garments, &c., which, though a large heap when together, made a small appearance when divided among all this band. The trade then began. They claimed twelve articles for a horse. I made four yards of British strouding at $5.50 per yard and two yards of calico at 62½ cents to count three, and a knife, flint, tobacco, looking-glass, and other small articles made up the compliment. They brought to me some horses for which I refused the stipulated price. They then produced others which were really fine animals, worth at least $100 each in St. Louis. I bought seventeen of these, but would not take any more at the same price, the rest being inferior. The refusal enraged the Chief, who said I must buy them, and on my persisting in my course, drove away the Indians from around me and left me alone. After a short time he returned with a request that I should buy some buffalo and beaver skins, to which I acceded. He went away and the women soon returned with the fur and skins, of which I bought a much larger quantity than I wished then to have on my hands.

James spent several days with the Comanches, participating in a series of similar fairs. He smoked the calumet with his hosts, was adopted as brother by one of the chiefs, and eventually returned to St. Louis with more than two thousand dollars' worth of horses, skins, and furs, a feat few, if any, New Mexico-bound American trading convoys could duplicate. James's commercial success was remarkable but not unique in the middle space between Mexican and American markets. In 1838, sixteen years after the opening of the Santa Fe trade, a Texas newspaper reported that several American merchants from Arkansas and Missouri were active in western Comanchería, tapping deeply into the "immense" horse wealth of Comanches. Far more than a thoroughfare, western Comanchería was an integral part of a flourishing multinational commercial institution that linked the economies of the United States, northern Mexico, and Comanchería.[36]

Yet despite the enduring links, New Mexico was becoming increasingly peripheral to Comanches. Just as American trade and markets had drawn the eastern Comanches away from Texas's sphere of influence, so too did American commerce cause western Comanches to turn away from New Mexico. And just as in eastern Comanchería, the political and economic reorientation of the western Comanches was accelerated by the emergence of new trading relations with other Plains Indian nations. In the early nineteenth century, at the same time as they forged ties with U.S. merchants, western Comanches also began restoring trade links with their Native neighbors, links that had become badly frayed during the intertribal wars of the 1780s. The first step to this end was the termination of the Pawnee wars, which had raged on for more than a decade and taken the lives of such prominent Comanche leaders as Ecueracapa and Hachaxas. The peace process began in 1793, when Encanguané, Ecueracapa's successor as western Comanche head chief, persuaded New Mexico Governor Fernando de la Concha to send Pedro Vial to the north to mediate a truce between the Comanches and the Pawnees. An experienced borderland ambassador, Vial traveled to the Pawnee villages on the Kansas River, where, according to Zenon Trudeau, lieutenant governor of Upper Louisiana, he "delivered a medal, a complete suit of clothes and other things to the [Pawnee] Chief." The gesture helped "cover" the deaths inflicted by Comanches and "caused peace to be made as . . . desired." Commerce apparently played a key role in the proceedings, and after the peace talks were concluded, Vial conducted a trade convoy from Pawnee country to Comanchería. Regular Pawnee trade journeys to the south commenced soon after, opening for western Comanches an access to the manufactured goods Pawnees obtained from Spanish and American traders who operated—and competed over Native customers—along the lower Missouri

River. Although often interrupted by bouts of violence that required careful mediation, the Comanche-Pawnee connection endured into the 1840s.[37]

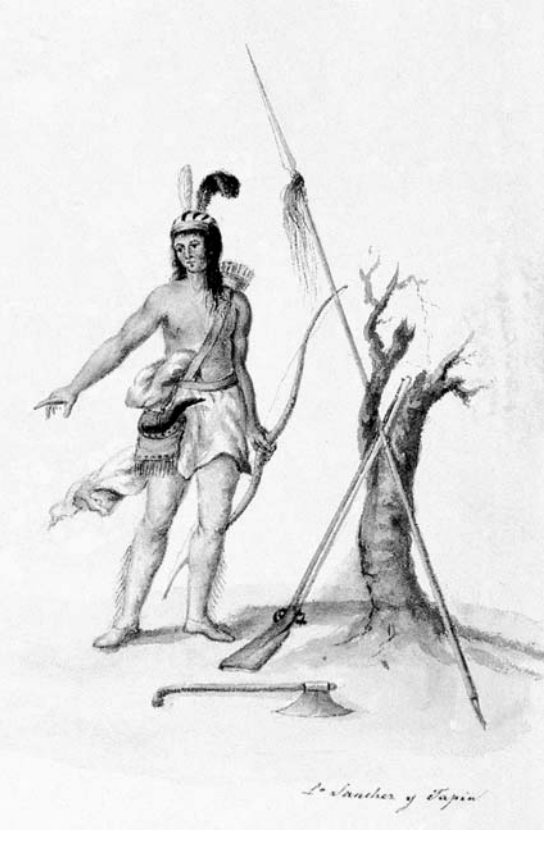
Meanwhile, western Comanches had already initiated peace talks with Kiowas and Naishan Apaches (also known as Kiowa Apaches or Plains Apaches), a small group of Athapascan speakers who, unlike most Apaches of the plains, fled Comanche expansion north to the Missouri valley, where they attached themselves to the Kiowa nation. Comanches and Kiowas had been trading partners in the 1760s and 1770s, but the alliance had unraveled during the tumultuous 1780s. Kiowa traditions relate that the restoration of peaceful relations began in 1790, but a broader peace process did not get under way until 1806, when Yamparika and Kiowa parties unexpectedly met at the New Mexican border town of San Miguel del Vado, where a Spanish settler brokered a meeting. According to Kiowa traditions, Guik'áte (Wolf Lying Down), the second highest ranking Kiowa chief, proclaimed his desire for peace. Päréiyä (Afraid of Water), the Yamparika leader, replied that the matter "would have to be considered by the whole tribe" and invited Guik'áte to visit the main Yamparika village on the Brazos River. Accompanied by a Comanche captive who had been with the Kiowa party, Guik'áte followed Päréiyä to the Yamparika ranchería, where he spent the summer hunting and feasting with his hosts. A Yamparika council guided by the village chief Tutsayatuhovit ratified the treaty. In the fall, a large Kiowa delegation arrived in the Yamparika ranchería, and the two parties made peace, which was sanctioned with elaborate gift exchanges and a three-day feast. Again, kinship secured the peace: Guik'áte married the daughter of Somiquaso, the newly elected Yamparika head chief, and moved his tipi among the Yamparikas. The peace process then shifted among other Comanche and Kiowa bands, each of which ratified the treaty.[38]

The alliance that resulted was the firmest and most durable in Comanche history. After the peace had been consolidated, Kiowas and Naishans moved from the central plains into north-central Comanchería, thereby gaining access to the milder climates and fertile horse pastures of the southern plains. For the Naishans, moreover, the alliance signified a return to the ancestral homelands of the southern plains, which they had abandoned almost a century before in the face of Comanche expansion. For Comanches the alliance offered obvious political advantages. Collaboration with the relatively small Kiowa and Naishan nations—approximately twelve and three hundred people, respectively—augmented their military and political weight without putting excessive pressure on Comanchería's resources. Comanches incorporated both groups in their protective border campaigns against the Utes in the west and the Osages in the east. Commerce, however, was the heart of the union. The three groups embarked on

an active exchange, which involved a distinct division of labor: Kiowas and Naishans acted as middlemen between the upper Arkansas-based Comanches and the Mandan-Hidatsa villages on the middle Missouri valley, carrying horses and mules to the north and metal goods and high-quality short-barreled British muskets back to Comanche rancherías. It was a lucrative arrangement for Comanches, whose livestock was in high demand in the horse-poor northern plains. In the early years of the nineteenth century the standard price of a stolen Spanish horse in the middle Missouri villages was "a gun, a hundred charges of powder and balls, a knife and other trifles."[39]

Western Comanches' northbound exchange channel soon became a main axis of the Plains Indian trade system, a central conduit that siphoned crucial commodities back and forth across the interior. But the thriving commerce also attracted competitors, most notably the allied Cheyennes and Arapahoes from the northern plains. Pushed out from their homelands near the Black Hills by the expanding Lakotas around 1800, several Cheyenne and Arapaho bands moved southward to the central plains, where they gradually ousted the Kiowas and Naishans from the middleman trading niche and entered the Comanches' expanding of alliance network of trade and peace. In 1820 a U.S. exploring expedition led by Stephen H. Long learned about a mixed western Comanche, Kiowa, Naishan, Cheyenne, and Arapaho camp on the upper Arkansas, and a year later, on the Big Timbers of the Arkansas, another American expedition led by Jacob Fowler came across a massive western Comanche-sponsored trade assembly that hosted some five thousand Kiowas, Naishans, Cheyennes, and Arapahoes as well as many Spanish traders from Taos. If anything, the shift in middlemen was favorable for western Comanches. Cheyennes emerged in the early nineteenth century as highly specialized middleman traders who carried Comanche horses not only to the upper Missouri villagers but among the powerful Blackfeet as well.[40]

Already bustling with activity, western Comanches' trade system received a further boost when they established commercial ties with their Shoshone relatives. Once a single people, Shoshones and Comanches had split in the late seventeenth century, when the former left the central plains and headed north and the latter moved toward the south. By 1800, however, Shoshones had pulled back from the northern plains under the pressure from well-armed Blackfeet and Crows and crossed the Continental Divide to the mountain ranges of Montana and Wyoming. Cut off from the Canadian fur trade and the northern plains buffalo country by their enemies, Shoshones turned to the south and sought to restore their ties with the Comanches. Both the Long and Fowler expeditions encountered Shoshones among the many groups who attended western



4. *Yamparika Comanche.* Watercolor by Lino Sánchez y Tapia, ca. 1836. A Comanche man displays his trade gun, gunpowder pouch, metal ax, and metal-tipped lance. Comanches' far-reaching trading empire gave them access to numerous market outlets and varied European manufactures, making them attractive commercial partners for near and distant Native groups. Courtesy of Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Comanche trade fairs in the upper Arkansas valley in the early 1820s. The chief attraction for Shoshones must have been Comanches' gun supply: in 1802 one traveler had found them hiding "in caverns from their enemies," unable to fight back the armed forces of Blackfeet with their small bows and stone war clubs. In exchange for the much-needed weapons, Shoshones were able to offer large

numbers of horses, for they maintained vast herds in the deep, protective valleys of their Rocky Mountain homelands. Shoshones were not the only far northern group drawn into Comanchería's commercial sphere. As the Mandan and Hidatsa trading villages on the middle Missouri River began to decline in the early nineteenth century, Crows, too, began to send trading convoys among the Comanches from their homelands on the northwestern plains.[41]

In the early nineteenth century, then, western Comanches once again ran a flourishing commercial center in the upper Arkansas basin, with exchange links fanning out over a vast area, connecting them to New Mexico, American market entrepôts along the Mississippi valley, the Mandan and Hidatsa trade citadels in the Missouri valley, and the rich horse reservoir of the Rocky Mountains. Pawnee, Kiowa, Naishan, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Shoshone, Crow, American, and New Mexican trading convoys frequented western Comanche rancherías, which seasonally morphed into vibrant cosmopolitan marketplaces where Yamparikas, Jupes, and Kotsotekas could transmute their horses for guns, skins for fabrics, and meat for corn. Winter months, when Plains Indians gravitated to the south and west in search of warmth and the bison, were the main trading season, and in December, January, and February one could find massive trading villages spreading out for miles along the deep protective valley of the Arkansas River. Sites of intensely concentrated commercial activity, those trading villages were also symbols of an increasingly Comanche-centric economic configuration of the Great Plains.

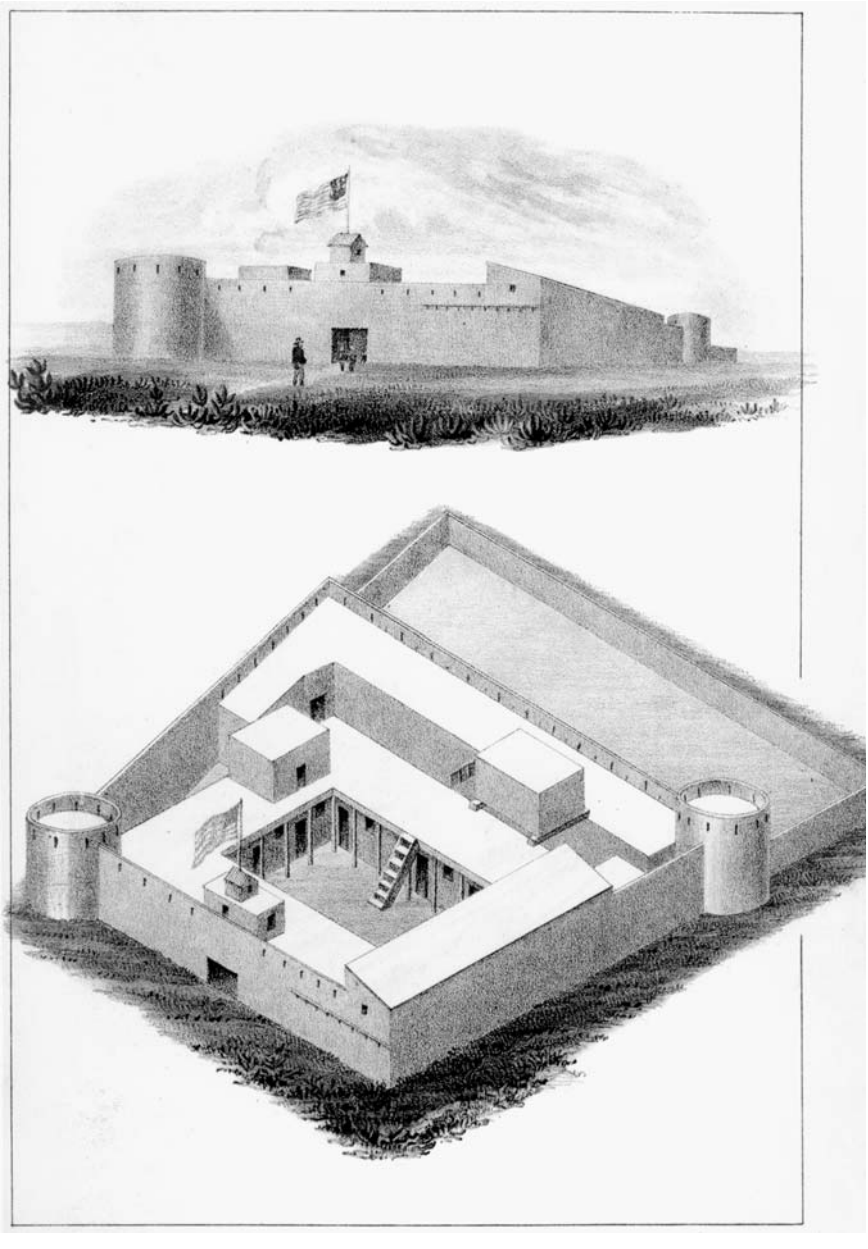
But then, just as eastern Comanches faced an economic crisis in the aftermath of the Indian Removal, western Comanches too faced a sudden reversal of fortunes. In the late 1820s, Cheyennes and Arapahoes abruptly cut off diplomatic and commercial ties with western Comanches and forced their way into the upper Arkansas basin. They did so in part because their existing economic arrangements on the central plains could no longer sustain them. Repeated waves of disease epidemics and Lakota raids had pushed the Mandan and Hidatsa trading villages into a steep decline, which in turn cut into the profits the Cheyennes and Arapahoes could make operating as middlemen between the middle Missouri and Comanchería. Forced to search for new economic strategies, Cheyennes and Arapahoes began to push toward Comanche territory, lured by its powerful economic inducements: hospitable climate, lush horse pastures, and proximity to New Mexico's border markets. Cheyennes and Arapahoes were not alone in this bid to march into Comanchería. In around 1830 they forged an alliance with two prominent St. Louis merchants, Charles and William Bent, who ran a small fur-trading post near Pike's Peak. Yellow Wolf, a Cheyenne chief, approached the Bents and asked them to move their post near the Big Timbers of

the Arkansas River. Fully aware of the region's history as a commercial hub, and persuaded by Yellow Wolf's promises to provide protection, the Bents joined the invasion into Comanchería as gun dealers for the Cheyennes and Arapahoes.[42]

Fighting lasted for several years, during which the Bents built an imposing two-story adobe fort on the north bank of the Arkansas River, a few miles upriver of the Big Timbers, just off the northwestern corner of Comanchería. But as on the Comanchería–Indian Territory border, mutual economic interests gradually steered the rival coalitions toward conciliation. In spring 1839, with death tolls mounting on both sides, the Cheyennes sued for peace, sending messengers among the Comanches and Kiowas, who in turn dispatched a Naishan delegation to establish an armistice. Preliminary talks were held the next year near the mouth of Two Butte Creek on the Arkansas, where the chiefs of the five nations smoked the calumet and buried the war. The final peace was concluded a few months later in a massive council near Bent's Fort. Trade, which before the outbreak of the hostilities had bound the five nations together, was the key discussion point. The negotiations lasted for two days and featured several rounds of elaborate gift giving during which Comanches and Kiowas gave away hundreds of horses and mules. The gifts placated mourners and covered the casualties of the war, but they also framed the future relations among the nations. With the gift exchanges completed, one of the Cheyenne chiefs announced: "Now, we have made peace, and we have finished making presents to one another; tomorrow we will begin to trade with each other. Your people can come here and try to trade for the things that you like, and my people will go to your camp to trade."[43]

The "Great Peace" of 1840 was a momentous diplomatic feat that spawned an enduring alliance among the Comanches, Kiowas, Naishans, Cheyennes, and Arapahoes, reconfiguring the geopolitics of the southern and central Great Plains. As a territorial agreement, the accord established a joint occupancy of the Big Timbers of the Arkansas valley. The Cheyennes and Arapahoes retreated on the northern side of the Arkansas, keeping their home ranges on the central plains, but they retained a right to winter in the Big Timbers. As a political pact, the accord created a loose but lasting political coalition among the five nations, who in the mid and late nineteenth century would often fight together encroaching Texan settlers and the U.S. Army. As an economic agreement, the accord launched a thriving commercial partnership that eventually came to include the Bents as well.[44]

Under the new commercial arrangement, Comanches, Kiowas, and Naishans bartered horses and mules for the manufactured goods that Cheyennes and Arapahoes obtained from Fort Laramie, Fort Lupton, and other American



5. Bent's Fort. From Message from the president of the United States: in compliance with a resolution of the Senate, communicating a report of an expedition led by Lieutenant Abert, on the upper Arkansas and through the country of the Camanche Indians, in the fall of the year 1845, 29th Cong, 1st sess., S. Ex. Doc. 438. Courtesy of Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

trading posts that emerged on the central plains in the 1830 and 1840s after the collapse of the Rocky Mountain–based beaver trade. The peace also made possible direct trade between the Comanches and the Bents. The Bents had begun to shift to livestock trade since the economic panic of 1837 in the United States, and they were eager to expand their supply area into the horse-rich Comanchería. They maintained a moderately successful log post on the south fork of the Canadian River between 1842 and 1845 and a larger post, the "Adobe Walls," just north of the Canadian during the winter of 1845–46. Comanches, however, centered their activities on Bent's Fort, drawn by its abundant wares, standardized exchange rates, and multicultural social milieu. By 1841 the Bents expected fifteen hundred Comanches would visit their post.[45]

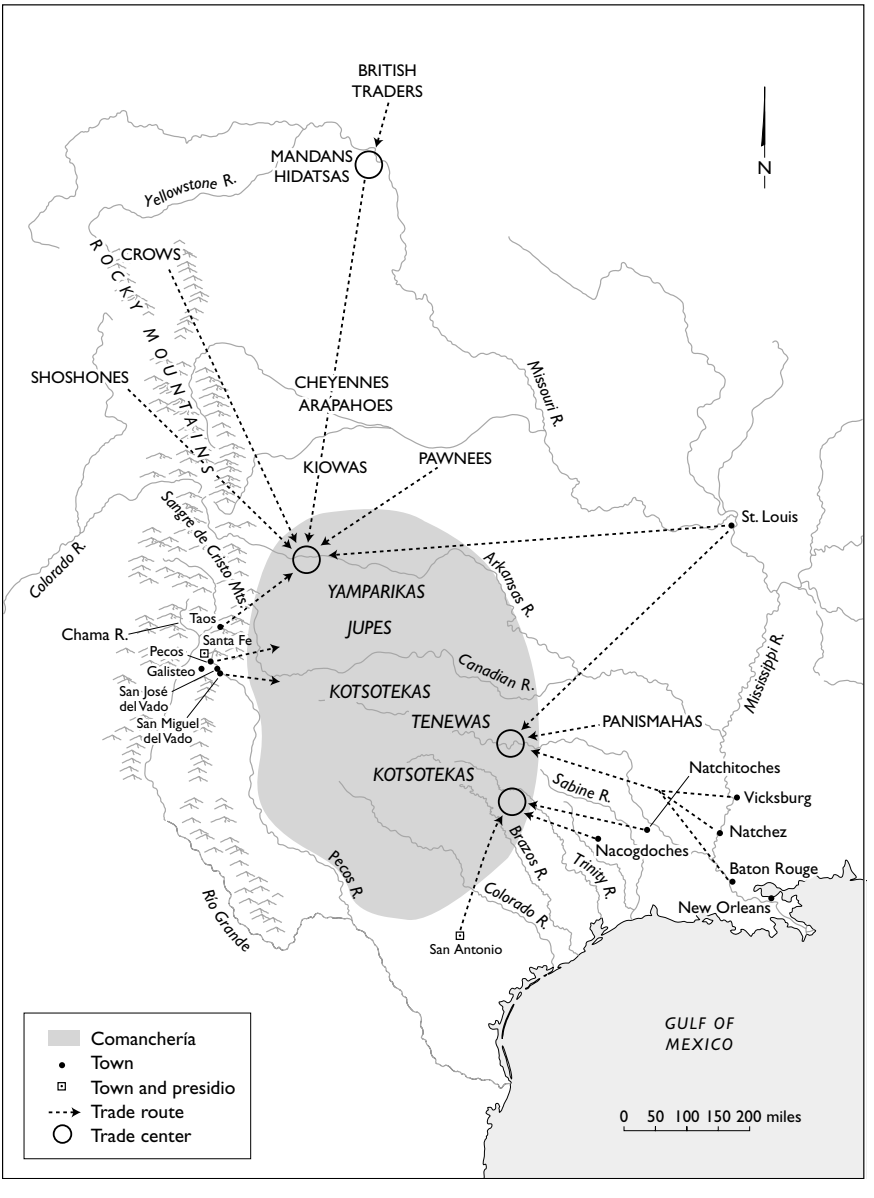
In America's historical memory, Bent's Fort stands as a vanguard of the westward expansion. It was the pioneering frontier post that introduced modern capitalist institutions and ideology to the Plains Indians and into Mexican New Mexico, preparing the ground for the U.S. takeover of the Southwest. For Comanches, however, Bent's Fort represented simply another commercial outlet, a conduit that facilitated the movement of goods between Comanchería and distant markets. Through Bent's Fort, the western Comanches gained a secure access to the vast American markets, and like their relatives in eastern Comanchería, they became the chief suppliers of an extended trade chain that channeled horses and mules to the expanding settler-farmer frontiers in Missouri, Arkansans, Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Comanches also traded Mexican captives, whom the Bents used as herders and laborers at the fort, as well as large volumes of buffalo robes, which found ready markets in eastern urban centers. That outpouring of livestock, robes, and captives was matched by a sizeable inflow of various staple products, craft items, and manufactured goods. Fed by regular supply trains from New Mexico and Missouri, Bent's Fort siphoned into Comanchería commodities from several distinct markets—Pueblo maize and Spanish shawls from New Mexico; blankets from Navajo country; beads from Iroquois villages; molasses from New Orleans; and coffee, flour, knives, kettles, pans, and hoop iron from all across the United States. Most important, Bent's Fort provided quantities of lead, powder, pistols, and high-quality British muskets—enough for Comanches to keep hundreds of warriors well armed and enough for them to extend their military hegemony from the Southwest deep into Mexico.[46]

The twin commercial networks of the eastern and western Comanches—the eastward-facing gateway of the former and the multibranched trade center of the latter—together formed an imposing trading empire. Featuring a thick web

of short, midrange, and long-distance exchange routes that arched across the midcontinent from the upper Río Grande valley toward the northern plains, the Mississippi valley, and Texas, the trading empire connected Comanchería to several different ecosystems, economies, and resource domains. And while the trade network reached outward to affix Comanchería to surrounding regions, it also opened inward, connecting Comanche groups to one another. Rancherías met regularly for exchange and social recreation, and summers saw thousands of Comanches gravitating toward Comanchería's center for massive community-wide political councils, which doubled as trade fairs. As a result, the imports that entered Comanchería at its various exchange points also circulated within Comanchería, ensuring that the tools and sources of power—guns, metal, and corn—were accessible across the realm.[47]

Commercial dominance brought prosperity and, predictably, security. Like other Native trade systems in the Americas, the Comanche trade network was embedded in a social nexus. Comanches feasted, smoked the calumet, and exchanged gifts with foreigners whom they considered more than trading partners: they were fictive kinspeople who were socially obliged to supply for each other's needs through material sharing. Affinity was the medium through which Comanches organized exchange across boundaries, and their trading empire can be seen as a vast kinship circle where ritual exchanges of words, food, gifts, and spouses stabilized intersocial spaces, creating a high threshold for intergroup violence. Comanches fought the removed eastern Indians as well as the Cheyenne-Arapaho coalition in the early 1830s, but the carnage of those years was exceptional: by standards of the age, early nineteenth-century Comanchería was a safe place to live. Like the Iroquois in the Northeast, the Comanches attached on their sphere numerous Native and non-Native groups as exchange partners, political allies, and metaphorical kin, enveloping themselves in a protective human web. This process had its most dramatic manifestation in the massive intergroup gatherings along the upper Arkansas valley, where thousands of Comanches, Kiowas, Naishans, Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Shoshones, Americans, and New Mexican comancheros regularly gathered to trade, socialize, and mediate political issues, creating vast ephemeral multiethnic worlds on Comanchería's northern edge.[48]

Commerce and kinship helped build and maintain peace, but so too did power, coercion, and dependence. Comanches nurtured peace on their borders through active diplomacy, but they maintained stability also through their capacity to influence other societies and govern the relations among them. By dominating the major east-west and south-north trading arteries on the southern plains and in the Southwest, Comanches were able to regulate the flow of cru-



6. Comanche trading empire in the early nineteenth century. Map by Bill Nelson.

cial commodities over vast areas and extend their sphere of influence far beyond their borders. Numerous Native groups around Comanchería—Cheyennes, Pawnees, Mandans, and Hidatsas on the central and northern plains; Wichitas and Caddos on the southern prairies; and the immigrant nations in Indian Territory—needed a constant inflow of domesticated horses and mules for their economic survival, and they all looked toward Comanchería to meet that need. This put the Comanches in an extraordinarily powerful position: by controlling the diffusion of animals from the livestock-rich Southwest to the north and east, they could literally control the technological, economic, and military evolution in the North American interior.

Comanches' privileged position undoubtedly caused resentment among their allies, but it also fostered peaceful relations. In a stark contrast to the northern plains, which collapsed into long and bloody intertribal wars in the late eighteenth century when rival groups attempted to dominate the region's multiple trade chains, the southern plains remained relatively calm: except for the Cheyenne-Arapaho intrusion in the 1830s, Comanchería was not subjected to prolonged trade wars. The difference, it seems, was Comanches' monopolistic grip on horse trade. As much as their trading partners may have detested their dependence on Comanche suppliers, few were willing to jeopardize their access to Comanchería's livestock reserves by starting an uncertain trade war. Just as multipolarity fueled instability on the northern plains, apolarity promoted stability in and around Comanchería.[49]

Commercial hegemony shielded Comanchería against external aggression, and it allowed Comanches to project their influence outward from Comanchería, for hard political and economic power readily translated into softer and more subtle forms of cultural power. At once dependent on and dazzled by Comanchería's wealth, many bordering societies emulated and adopted aspects of Comanche culture. For example, Cheyenne traditions speak of extensive mimicking of the Comanches that ranged from equestrian lore to the basic techniques of nomadic culture. One story relates a meeting between the horse-mounted Comanches and still pedestrian Cheyennes. Cheyennes were at once astonished and hesitant at this singular moment: "We never heard of horses," said one Cheyenne priest. "Perhaps Maheo [All-Father Creator] wouldn't like for us to have them." Comanches, eager to open trade relations, assumed the role of a proponent: "'Why don't you ask him?' a Comanche said. 'We'll trade with you, if you're too afraid to go and get them [from New Mexico].'" Cheyennes did so and received Maheo's blessing for their decision, after which "Comanches stayed with the Cheyennes another four days, and their women showed the Cheyenne women what kind of wood to use for tipi poles, and how to cut and

sew a tipi, and how to tie the poles to their horses, and load them with the tipis and the other things they needed."[50]

Such stories may not always have been literally accurate, but their significance lies elsewhere: more than of conventional facts, they speak of Indians' understanding of defining historical trends. Groups like the Cheyennes or the Poncas probably acquired their first horses from the nomadic middleman traders of the northern plains, but their stories emphasize the example and guidance of Comanches, whose spectacularly successful pastoral culture represented the ideal for the indigenous societies across the Great Plains.[51] Horses spread to the Great Plains from several sources—Texas, New Mexico, the Rocky Mountains, the Mississippi valley, even Canada—but the people tended to look south toward Comanchería for how to best put them in use.

Comanches' cultural influence was not limited to equestrian knowledge but affected things as diverse as religious ceremonies, military societies, clothing accessories, hairstyles, and weaponry. To contemporary Euro-Americans the most illuminating sign of Comanches' cultural power was the spread of their language across the Southwest and the Great Plains. By the turn of the eighteenth century, Comanches were able to conduct most of their business at New Mexico's border fairs in their own language, and many of the comancheros and ciboleros who visited Comanchería to trade and hunt were fluent in the Comanche language. The diffusion of the Comanche language accelerated in the early nineteenth century when Comanches extended their commercial reach across the midcontinent, connecting with a growing number of people. Several Euro-American observers noted matter-of-factly that the Indians of the southern and central Great Plains used the Comanche language in commercial and diplomatic interactions, and Native oral traditions attest that Comanche challenged sign language as the universal language of exchange. Comanche was thus to a large section of the middle North America what the Chinook Jargon was to the Northwest or Mobilian to the Mississippi valley: a trade lingua franca. When people and societies meet and intermingle on frontiers, their choice of language is often an accurate gauge of relative power dynamics between them: economically and politically weaker groups tend to adopt the words, phrases, and even syntaxes of stronger ones. So too does the ascendancy of the Comanche language denote a larger truth: having wielded unparalleled economic, political, and cultural influence, the Comanches were re-creating the midcontinent in their own image.[52]

Encircling Comanchería there thus lay an extensive sphere of cultural penetration that bore an unmistakable imprint of Comanche influence. The people inhabiting that zone were tied to the Comanche nation as allies, dependents,

and exchange partners and more or less willingly embraced elements of Comanche culture. But cultural diffusion was only one facet of a much more inclusive and intensive process of Comanchenization: a large portion of the foreign ethnicities attached to the Comanche orbit would eventually immigrate into Comanchería, seduced by its prosperity and security. The immigrants took many different roads into Comanchería, but all paths merged into a single process. Whether the newcomers blended into the Comanche society, becoming in effect naturalized Comanches, adopted a subordinate status as junior allies, or retained a larger measure of political and cultural autonomy, the net effect of their arrival was Comanchería's transformation from an ethnically homogenous national domain into a multicultural and politically stratified imperial realm.

Large-scale incorporation of foreign ethnicities into Comanchería began with the Kiowas and Naishans. The closely allied Kiowas and Naishans migrated into Comanchería during the first and second decades of the nineteenth century, after having lost their middleman trading niche on the central plains to Cheyennes and Arapahoes. They established residence on the upper Canadian and Red rivers where, at the very heart of Comanchería, they slowly began to blend in with the Comanches. The three groups camped and hunted together, intermarried extensively, and joined their forces in frequent raiding expeditions and defensive military campaigns. According to one observer, some Naishans "settled in Comanche villages" and the Kiowas were often mistaken for Comanches, "since they sometimes share their encampments." The three groups worshipped together and exchanged customs, rituals, and beliefs; Comanches, who apparently did not practice the Sun Dance before 1800, participated in the Kiowa ceremony and in time developed their own version of the Kiowa ritual.

A dearth of sources on the early nineteenth-century Kiowas and Naishans prevents determining how deeply the two nations were incorporated into the Comanche political system, but that dearth is also suggestive: Kiowas and Naishans, even while maintaining a separate political organization with tribal councils and chiefs, largely conformed to Comanches' political designs. While Comanches became increasingly involved in interimperial rivalries and power politics, Kiowas and Naishans remained more local actors who rarely figure in colonial powers' diplomatic considerations, especially during the first third of the nineteenth century. Kiowas sometimes played a central role in Indian-Indian diplomacy—they negotiated the great peace of 1840 side by side with Comanches—but Comanches often represented both the Naishans and Kiowas in high-level political meetings with colonial powers. Some Euro-American sources listed Kiowas and Naishans as simply one of the "tribes" or "peoples" of the Comanche nation or confederacy. As contemporary Euro-Americans

understood it, Kiowas and Naishans resided on the southern plains under the auspices and partial domination of the Comanches. On an outward-extending gradient of privilege and participation, the Kiowas and Naishans were closest to the empire's core.[53]

Sometime after 1800 Comanches also accepted the Chariticas, an Arapaho group from the central plains, into its fold. As with many other groups that gravitated toward Comanchería, the immediate attraction for the Chariticas was the region's horse wealth and hospitable climate for animal husbandry. Before moving to the southern plains, the Chariticas had possessed few horses and used castrated dogs to pull their belongings, but they emerged in Comanchería "as good horsemen as their allies." In the course of the 1810s and 1820s, the Chariticas severed ties to the main Arapaho body, crossed the Arkansas River into Comanchería, and amalgamated into the Comanche nation. In 1828 General Manuel de Mier y Terán, then the leader of a scientific and boundary expedition into Texas, wrote that Chariticas had relocated some fifteen years earlier from the north, and "Comanches have admitted them. Today they are identical and live in mixed camps." Berlandier reported that Chariticas "often live among the Comanches . . . with whom they are very good friends," and that they "resemble the Comanche in their clothing and war ornaments but differ from them in their customs and their language, which is much harsher and without harmony." Ruíz emphasized the hierarchical nature of the relationship. "The Chariticas steal horses habitually; they are, in my opinion, the most barbarian of all people. Even their best friends are in danger when they visit a Charitica encampment if there are no Comanches present at that time. The Comanches exert certain influence over the Chariticas, and the latter do not dare do some things in their presence." By midcentury, the Chariticas were considered part of the Comanche nation.[54]

The Wichitas followed yet another path into Comanchería. Initially close commercial and military allies, Wichitas and Comanches clashed violently in the late eighteenth century over trading rights. But as Wichitas' power faded in the early 1810s, Comanches reversed their policy and sought cooperative relations. The Taovayas, Tawakonis, and Wacos gradually drew closer to Comanchería and entered a partnership that became increasingly unequal. Comanches traded with the three groups, supplying them with horses and bison products in exchange for farming produce, while at the same time curtailing their autonomy. They prevented the Wichitas from trading directly with Americans and represented them in political meetings with Spain, Mexico, and the Republic of Texas. By the 1840s, Wichita foreign policy had become subordinate to Comanche leadership. When Texas officials approached the Tawakonis in 1844 with the intention of negotiating a peace accord, their chief immediately recoiled: "I

can't say that I will make peace . . . until I see the Comanche, else I may tell a lie. My people will do as they do." Comanches also used Taovaya, Tawakoni, and Waco villages as supply depots, replenishing their food storages and recruiting warriors before launching raids into Texas, and some Mexican officials believed that Comanches pressured Tawakonis to raid for them. Taovaya, Tawakoni, and Waco villages also served Comanchería as buffers that cushioned the blows of colonial reprisals. Wichitas were widely deemed as irredeemable thieves and the "worst" Indians in Texas, a notion some Comanche leaders deliberately fostered. "The Wichita are like Dogs," Chief Pahayuko stated in 1845. "They will steal. You may feed a dog well at night and he will steal all your meat before morning. This is the way with the Wichitas." Although not nearly as effective raiders as the Comanches, the Wichitas suffered some of the bloodiest reprisals at the hands of Mexican troops and Anglo-Texas militia.[55]

Over time, Comanches absorbed entire Wichita bands into their realm, which served two immediate purposes: it removed the last remnants of the Wichita trading barrier to eastern markets and allowed Comanches to recruit warriors against the Osages, their principal enemy. In 1811, after the collapse of the great Taovaya-Tawakoni villages on the Red River, John Sibley reported that a portion of Taovaya refugees "joined a wandering band" of Comanches. As the Wichitas' power declined in the ensuing years, nearly all their bands sought protection within Comanchería's expanding borders, conforming to Comanche leadership as junior allies and partially blending into the Comanche body politic. Berlandier listed three of the four Wichita tribes—the Taovayas, Tawakonis, and Wacos—as Comanches' subordinates, "lesser peoples whom poverty or fear has driven to seek their protection," and Mexican officials noted that the Comanche nation "is made very strong by the nine nations that are subordinate to it" (several of those nine nations undoubtedly were Wichita groups). Writing in the 1830s, Josiah Gregg noted that Comanches "generally remain on friendly terms with the petty tribes of the south, whom, indeed, they seem to hold as vassals," and the traveler Thomas J. Farnham reported that Comanches "stand in the relation of conquerors among the tribes in the south." Although Comanches themselves never explicitly called the Taovayas, Tawakonis, and Wacos "subordinates" or "vassals," the three groups had fallen under heavy Comanche influence. With their autonomy curtailed, geopolitical space narrowed, and economic opportunities compromised, they had become dependents of the Comanche empire.[56]

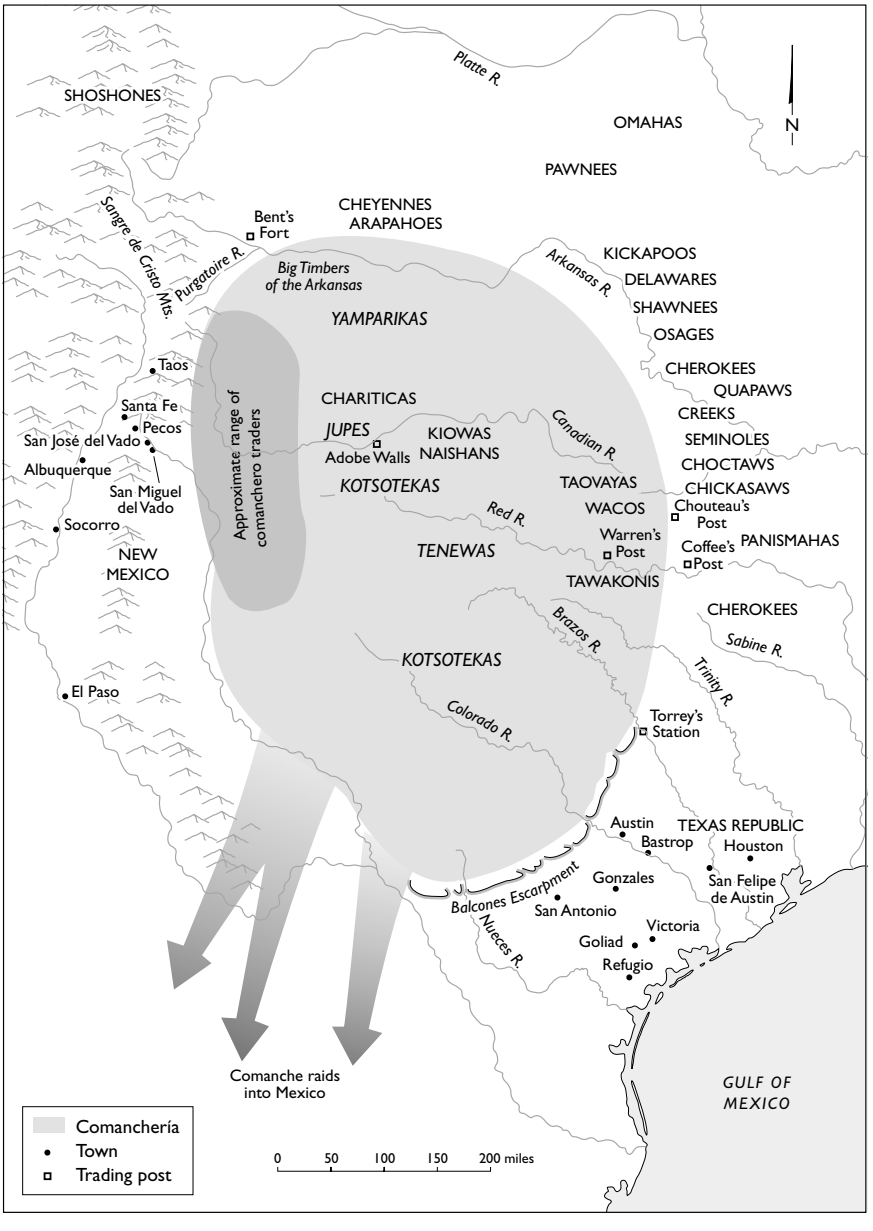
In addition to the wholesale incorporation of ethnic groups, there seems to have been a nearly constant stream of immigrants, refugees, renegades, and exiles from adjoining societies into Comanchería. Untold numbers of Wichitas, Caddos, Apaches, Pawnees, Shoshones, Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws,

Delawares, Shawnees, Seminoles, Quapaws, and black slaves from Indian Territory voluntarily left their communities to join the increasingly multiethnic Comanche nation, evidently lured by its growing prosperity and security. Not even the Spanish colonies were immune to Comanchería's pull. Native subjects and *genízaros* escaped exploitation, harsh conditions, and curtailed opportunities in New Mexico and Texas by fleeing to Comanchería, as did a number of socially marginalized and impoverished Spanish citizens.

Little is known about the actual incorporation processes; unlike captives who sometimes were ransomed back to their relatives, voluntary immigrants tend to vanish from the historical record after entering Comanchería. It seems, however, that most of them married into Comanche families, adopted Comanche customs and language, relinquished outward signs of their former identity, and were eventually Comancheanized. Sometimes only physical traits remained, as Sibley realized in 1807, when he noticed among visiting Comanche rancherías several people of "light Brown or Auburn Hair & Blue or light Grey Eyes." A half century later voluntary immigration and ethnic incorporation had transformed the very fabric of Comanche society, prompting Texas Indian agent Robert S. Neighbors to write that "there are at the present time very few pure-blooded Comanches."[57]

In crudely materialist terms, the flow of immigrants into Comanchería is easy to explain. Whether one was looking in from the central Great Plains in the north, Wichita country or Indian Territory in the east, Spanish or Mexican Texas in the south, or New Mexico in the west, Comanchería appeared safe, dynamic, and prosperous. People from nearby societies, Post Oak Jim told an ethnographer in 1933, "frequently snuck into [Comanche rancherías] to give themselves up—they came from poor tribes where there was not enough food." Spaniards, Mexicans, and Pueblo Indians from New Mexico and Texas variously sought in Comanchería asylum from political persecution, religious oppression, poverty, and enslavement. People, in other words, exchanged themselves—their bodies and their labor—for the protection and wealth that kinship bonds with Comanches made available. But while grounded in material impulses, immigration was also a social and psychological process. That process is largely inaccessible to us for the sources fall silent—Spanish officials, for example, simply brushed off the problem of outward immigration by labeling the renegades who abandoned them to live with *salvajes* as "perverse"—but it is possible to delineate its approximate contours.[58]

A passage to Comanchería was not necessarily a trek to the unknown. Living within Comanchería's seductive cultural sphere, the Wichitas, Charitcas, Mexicans, and others who embarked into Comanchería were often preacclimatized



7. Imperial Comanchería and its alliance network in the 1830s and 1840s. Map by Bill Nelson.

to Comanche way of life, customs, traditions, and language. Nor did a move into Comanchería necessarily involve negotiating racial barriers, for Comanches did not define the world in terms of color lines. Race for early nineteenth-century Comanches was essentially a political conception. They talked about their mistrust and hatred toward the whites (*taiboo?s*), but it was always in a specific geopolitical context and generally directed toward the encroaching Anglo-Texan settlers. Behavior and beliefs, not blood lineages, determined who would be accepted into Comanchería and could become Comanche. If a newcomer of Hispanic, Anglo, Caddoan, or any other ethnic descent was willing and able to adopt the proper code of behavior, he or she would be accepted as a member of the community. Acting like a Comanche—honoring kinship obligations, respecting camp rules, obeying taboos, yielding to consensus rule, adhering to accepted gender roles, and contributing to communal affairs—was more important than looking like one. "When at war with us if Mexicans are in their camps," one Mexican observer wrote in 1828, "the Comanches will not harm them, showing that he who lives with them is their friend, regardless of his nationality."[59]

If Comanche society welcomed newcomers, it also sustained them after their entrance. Naturalized Comanche carried no visible stigma of their background and apparently faced few obstacles for social fulfillment and elevation. They could marry into Comanche families, enter kinship networks, and achieve positions of power. In 1834 the traveling American artist George Catlin visited Comanchería with a U.S. peace commission and painted a portrait of His-oo-san-ches, "one of the leading warriors of the tribe." It was only after finishing the painting that Catlin realized that his model was actually Jesús Sánchez, a progeny of a Comanche-Spanish union.[60] As stories like Jesús Sánchez's show, outsiders embraced Comanche identity precisely because that identity was at once distinctive, accommodating, and negotiable. Comanches may have used language that had nationalistic overtones and felt strong ethnic pride, but they were permissive in determining who could claim membership in their community. Later in the nineteenth century, when the U.S. expansion threatened their very existence, Comanches tried to build an anti-American pan-Indian alliance by appealing to race—a more exclusive concept than tribe or nation—but in the early part of the century they still believed that almost anyone could become Comanche.

Why, then, did Comanches open their borders for such a massive influx of new peoples and foreign practices, beliefs, and languages? Just as the many peoples who crossed the border into Comanchería displayed a multitude of motives for doing so, so too did Comanches accept them for a wide variety of reasons. The newcomers provided Comanches with information about distant

8. *His-oo-san-ches (Commanche Warrior).* Oil on canvas by George Catlin, 1834. Courtesy of Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

lands and markets, defense systems on colonial frontiers, and raiding opportunities within them. They introduced novel ideas about animal husbandry, explained the workings of exotic diseases and perhaps provided new cures, and offered new skills that could repair guns or heal the wounds inflicted by them. Some groups came to operate as middlemen traders, shuffling goods between Comanchería and faraway markets, while others produced maize and other necessities that were not available in Comanchería. Some, by simply moving into Comanchería, afforded Comanches a more direct access to surrounding markets and resources.

In the end, however, large-scale ethnic absorption was a necessity born less of strategic calculations than of shifting demographics. Comanches' far-reaching trading network opened their communities to new markets, but it also opened them to deadly microbes traveling with the traders who flocked in from all directions. After the first devastating outbreak of smallpox in 1780–81, the Comanches were hit by repeated waves of disease. Smallpox erupted into major epidemics

in 1799, 1808, 1816, 1839, 1848, and 1851, and a potent cholera virus washed over Comanchería in 1849. The epidemics claimed thousands of lives, grinding deep dents into Comanchería's demographic base. Comanche population may have peaked around forty thousand in the late 1770s, but most estimates in the 1820s and 1830s put it between twenty and thirty thousand. This drop, moreover, occurred when the communities around Comanchería experienced steady and at times explosive growth. Natural increase and immigration from the United States boosted New Mexico's population from thirty-one thousand in 1790 to forty-two thousand in 1821 and to some sixty-five thousand in 1846. In Texas, a deluge of American immigrants and their slaves swelled the province's population from approximately two thousand in the early 1820s to some forty thousand in 1836. Indian Territory, fed by constant removals, was home to some twenty thousand Indians by 1832.[61]

Under such conditions, incorporation of people, groups, and even entire nations into Comanchería became a matter of preserving political and economic power. On one hand, the newcomers were essential workers who sustained Comanchería's burgeoning pastoral economy as spouses who produced children for the community. Comanches themselves believed, one mid-nineteenth-century observer wrote, that "they have increased greatly in numbers . . . by the connexion with other small prairie bands." On the other hand, the new nations residing within Comanchería acted as allies in wars and buffers when those wars swept back into Comanchería. Wichita villages cushioned Comanchería's eastern border against Osage raids and its southern border against Anglo-Texan soldier-settlers, while the Kiowas bore a disproportionate brunt of the Cheyenne and Arapaho attacks during the struggles over the Arkansas basin. More abstractly, the sheer mass of peoples under their auspices gave Comanches substantial esteem and leverage in their diplomatic dealings with Euro-Americans—a point not lost on colonial agents, Comanches themselves, and the people caught between them. As many Euro-Americans saw it, negotiating with Comanches often meant yielding to their demands or risking a clash with a broad Comanche-led intertribal coalition.[62]

The willingness of other peoples to become Comanche is a striking manifestation of Comanches' international power and prestige. It made a deep impression on American visitors like Josiah Gregg, who claimed that Comanches "acknowledge no boundaries, but call themselves the lords of the entire prairies—all others are but 'tenants at will.'" For the resident Spaniards and Mexicans, however, Comanchería's gravitational pull was a source of fear and envy. In 1828, following the signing of a boundary treaty with the United States earlier

that year, the Mexican government dispatched a Comisión de Límites (Boundary Commission) under General Manuel de Mier y Terán to determine the northern and eastern borders of Texas. The commission was also assigned to survey the attitudes of Texas tribes and explore the possibilities of incorporating the Plains Indians into "the Mexican family" and, if they settled down and embraced Catholicism, as citizens of the republic.

The situation in Texas shocked the commission. American immigrants were flooding in from the east, blurring the boundary line between Texas and Louisiana, and Comanches were incorporating Mexico's prospective Indian allies across the entire province. "The weaker tribes that cause the Comanches no concern are added through alliance," Terán noted. "By allowing them to live independently distributed into camps of two or three hundred persons, the Comanches teach them their own martial habits and help to improve their condition." Lieutenant José María Sánchez found Mexican presence in Texas weak and reported in disbelief how the Comanches systematically absorbed and assimilated other Native societies into their ranks. To him, the Comanches appeared an expanding hegemonic people who imposed their identity on other groups whom they kept under paternalistic rule. The "desire to increase their tribe," he wrote, "makes the Comanches very considerate of the small tribes with which they have friendly relations, protecting them, teaching them their habits and customs, and finally amalgamating them into their nation. For this reason the Comanches are the most numerous of those [indigenous nations] found in Texas."[63]