According to Comanche tradition, each person should return to his birthplace at least once before he dies. So, in 1907, at the age of sixty-two, Quanah Parker prepared to make a pilgrimage to the land where he was born: a flower-filled valley in West Texas that had inspired his name. In the Comanche language, kwaina meant “fragrant” or “sweet-smelling.” The aging chief would find that, even after all these years, the valley still fit the description.

Quanah’s journey exemplified the clash of cultures that had shaped his life. With several of his friends, he left his reservation in what is now Oklahoma and traveled south in one of the new horseless carriages. When he reached the valley known as Laguna Sabinas, he donned traditional buckskin and moccasins. Carrying a rolled buffalo robe, a blanket, a long ceremonial pipe, and some tobacco, he retreated alone to a grove of oaks and maples on a hill overlooking a small salt lake.

For three days Quanah alternately sat and smoked or roamed the hillside, praying and reminiscing. Wistfully, he thought of his youth,
when he and his people had ruled the Texas plains. He remembered hunting buffalo and stealing his enemies' horses. Then white settlers had overrun the land, and the Comanche way of life had changed forever. Fortunately for his people, Quanah had helped to ease them through the tough transition. One day he would be remembered as the last chief of the Comanches.

Quanah was born in 1845 to Peta Nocona, a Comanche chief, and Cynthia Ann Parker, the daughter of a white Texas settler. Nocona had raided the Parkers' settlement in 1836 and had taken nine-year-old Cynthia captive. The Comanches adopted the girl, and she adjusted to their way of life and grew up happily among them. Eventually she married her captor and became the mother of his three children. The only visible signs of Quanah's white heritage were his steel-blue eyes.

By the time of Quanah's birth, the Comanches had become one of the largest Indian tribes on the continent—about twenty thousand strong. They reigned over an enormous domain that covered much of Texas and parts of Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. But white settlers had begun migrating to Texas in the 1820s, and it wasn't long before the two cultures clashed.

In 1860 a group of cavalymen and Texas Rangers attacked Nocona's band while it was camped on the Pease River. Most of the men, including Quanah, were away hunting buffalo. The soldiers recaptured Cynthia and her baby daughter, Prairie Flower, and returned them to the Parkers despite Cynthia's resistance. She no longer could speak English and had forgotten white ways. Later, Quanah would learn that she made several attempts to escape and return to her adopted people. When Prairie Flower died of disease, Cynthia was overcome with grief and died, according to some accounts, of a broken heart.

By the time Quanah was fifteen, he was a strong and fearless youth. He was also alone. His father had died of an infected wound,
his younger brother of a fever. So, with no family ties to bind him, Quanah left his father's band and joined the Quahadis, the fiercest of the Comanche tribes.

It wasn't long before Quanah was considered one of the fiercest of the fierce. Determined to drive the white men from their ancestral home, the Quahadis raided homesteads with a vengeance. Quanah fought with fanatic zeal, and he also displayed good sense. When a war party of Quahadis was ambushed by U.S. soldiers, resulting in the death of their chief, the band's elders appointed Quanah to take his place.

Cavalry Captain Robert Carter, a veteran Indian fighter, faced Quanah's ferocity firsthand one day when he and his troops barely fought off a Quahadi war party. He later described the young chief in his memoirs:

A large and powerfully built chief led the bunch on a coal-black racing pony. His heels nervously working in the animal's side, with six-shooter poised in the air, he seemed the incarnation of savage brutal joy. His face was smeared with black war paint, which gave his features a satanic look. A large cruel mouth added to his ferocious appearance. Bells jingled as he rode at head-long speed, followed by the leading warriors, all eager to outstrip him in the race.

Carter blamed Quanah for "some of the foulest deeds ever recorded in the annals of Indian warfare."

In 1867 the U.S. government called a treaty council at Medicine Lodge Creek in Kansas, hoping to move the Southern Plains Indians onto a reservation and end the confrontations between white men
and red. Under the treaty each Indian family was to receive a tract of
land, which they would own as long as they cultivated it. The gov-
ernment also promised to provide schooling for the children and reg-
ular rations for the next thirty years.

A cholera epidemic had recently devastated the Comanches, so
ten of their chiefs signed the treaty, hoping to sustain their weakened
bands. But the proud Quahadis boycotted the council meeting. They
continued to fight for their homeland, massacring settlers and burning
homesteads.

In 1870 the U.S. government assigned Colonel Ranald S.
Mackenzie to put an end to the Quahadi raids once and for all. In
September 1871, he led his troops onto the Texas plains and dis-
covered one of the Quahadi villages. Before the cavalry could attack,
Quanah led a war party past the sentries and into Mackenzie's camp.
The Comanches cut loose the soldiers' horses, and, ringing cowbells
and flapping buffalo robes, stampeded the frightened steeds.

By 1874 the Comanches faced another threat to their existence.
Buffalo hunters had swarmed into the Panhandle and begun slaugh-
tering the Indians' basic food supply. Quanah could foresee the impact
this would have on his people. So on June 26, he and seven hundred
of his warriors attacked a hide hunter's base camp at Adobe Walls.

They hoped to surprise the men in their sleep, but a loud noise
alerted the hunters. Armed with new heavy-caliber Sharps rifles, they
fought off the warriors, inflicting many casualties.

The attack on Adobe Walls brought an ultimatum from the
U.S. government: All Indians who did not move to the reservation
by August 3 would be exterminated. Once again Mackenzie took
the field, this time with six hundred troops. In September he
attacked a large Indian encampment in Palo Duro Canyon, burn-
ing tipis and supplies and capturing more than a thousand horses.
The colonel ordered his men to slaughter the mounts in order to
deprive the Indians of the means to hunt buffalo. He wanted to give them no choice but to live on the reservation.

Merciless as it was, Mackenzie's strategy worked. Small bands of starving Comanches began to surrender to the army. Quanah held out for another year, but on June 2, 1875, he, too, rode onto the reservation at the head of his people. He was the last Comanche and the last Southern Plains Indian to admit defeat and give up.

Ironically, Quanah proved to be as great a leader in peace as he was in war. He recognized that cooperation and compromise were now the only way for the Comanches to survive, so he set aside his hatred and counseled his people to learn the white man's ways. With the help of a tutor, he learned to speak English, and he sometimes met with the Indian agent wearing a three-piece suit and derby hat. Eventually the government appointed him to the Court of Indian Offenses, a position he would hold for a decade. He also traveled to Washington, D.C., several times to lobby for Indian rights, and he even rode in Teddy Roosevelt's inaugural parade.

Quanah looked for opportunities to improve the lot of his people. When he noticed that Texas ranchers had to herd their longhorns to market along trails that led through the reservation, he got the Indian agent's permission to charge a dollar a head for the privilege of crossing. Later he leased pasturage to wealthy Texas stockmen, an arrangement that brought in thirty to fifty dollars a year for each of his people. Some said he was one of the wealthiest Indians in America. He was definitely the most powerful and respected Indian on the reservation, and the government recognized him as the principal chief of the Comanches.

Four years after Quanah made his pilgrimage to the land of his birth, he died of pneumonia on the reservation, but not before he could call his medicine man to speak Comanche words for his departing spirit. He was buried wearing traditional Indian dress.
In 1930 Congress approved a tall, granite tombstone for his grave site. It reads:

RESTING HERE UNTIL DAY BREAKS
AND SHADOWS FALL AND DARKNESS
DISAPPEARS IS
QUANAH PARKER
LAST CHIEF OF THE COMANCHE