

HELL CAME WITH HORSES

Plains Indian Women in the Equestrian Era

In recent times the study of the changing roles of women, and the rights and wrongs that have accompanied such changes, have become something of a national obsession. "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" represents the sort of public statement well known to magazine-readers and watchers of tennis matches. And the academic community, including scores of anthropologists, historians, and other scholars, has been busily filling thousands of pages in what seems to be an endless proliferation of debate. It has been fashionable to seek contrasting patterns within different ethnic groups: several books attempting to view American Indian women as a general category have recently appeared.¹

The diversity within Indian cultures is, however, too marked to allow for many valid overall generalizations. Here we will try to trace a long developmental story telling of the historical path trod by Indian women on the classic Indian frontier of the nineteenth century: the Great Plains.

Plains Indian cultures of classic times have been so male-dominated in their general image as to almost totally obscure the women who constituted the other half of the story. Sacajawea stands almost alone in all the literature as a recognized and memorable individual. Because of the dramatic military episodes of the nineteenth century, when history began to be written, one could almost assume that women in the glorious days of the classic equestrian period did not exist. Here we hope to set the story to rights, in the overview perspective of more than 20,000 years—admittedly a staggering reach of time.

Our sources for this period are sketchy at best. Much interpretation depends upon the work of archeologists; much more depends upon ethnographic sketches gathered by male researchers whose scholarly attention to Plains tribal women



Myrtle Pretty Coups at Crow Indian Fair near Lodge Grass, Montana, in 1924

was minimal. There are some general accounts.² But none of these trace what can be described as a story of rapid and drastic change, occasioned by the arrival of horses, to which women of all tribes were forced to adapt.

The American West has been described as a place which is fine for men and cattle, but "hell on horses and women." Books have even been compiled that focus upon (and generally deny) this situation among contemporary ranchers.³ Among the high plains hunting tribes described here, the horses may have made out all right, but the hell they occasioned, for most

by Margot Liberty

women at least, was for real. To understand this picture we must reach back over the almost unimaginable expanse of time that encompasses American Indian occupation of the Great Plains. For tens of thousands of years, in the grass lands and the river valleys, change came as slowly as changes in the climate itself. Then lightning struck in the form of Spanish horses, galloping northward in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Lithic and Archaic Periods: Early Egalitarianism

Modern archeology suggests that the Plains Region of North America may be among the oldest regions of continuous human occupation in the New World. In this region, the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains constituted the earliest and most important route of southward migration for early and late travellers across the present Bering Straits from Asia, who are now believed to have arrived at least 20,000 (possibly 40,000) years ago. From this main trail, numerous branches reached eastward and eventually in all directions carrying migrants to all of present-day North America.

These thousands of years, prior to the introduction of gardening in the Plains at about the time of Christ, are generally divided into two periods. The longer, called the PaleoIndian or Lithic period, extended from first human arrival until 8,000 to 6,000 years ago, and was characterized by big game hunting. Small bands of people, followed by their dogs, roamed through colder and wetter climates than those of the present day, gathering a variety of seasonal wild plant foods and killing with darts and spears such vigorous animals as camels, elephants, and prehistoric horses, all of which were to become extinct.

In such hunting cultures, the distribution of meat by men who had killed it was always a high prestige activity, although women were nonetheless important in hideworking and in gathering plant foods. The small hunting groups in these cultures possessed a simple social structure in which women and men lived in relative equality. Also, toward the end of these PaleoIndian or Lithic millennia, hunting became more sophisticated with the development of game drives or surrounds in which both sexes and all ages

took part. Women who assisted in killing and butchering meat had more to say about its distribution than in earlier times of individualistic hunting by a few strong young men. These developments probably enhanced women's already fairly equitable social position.⁴

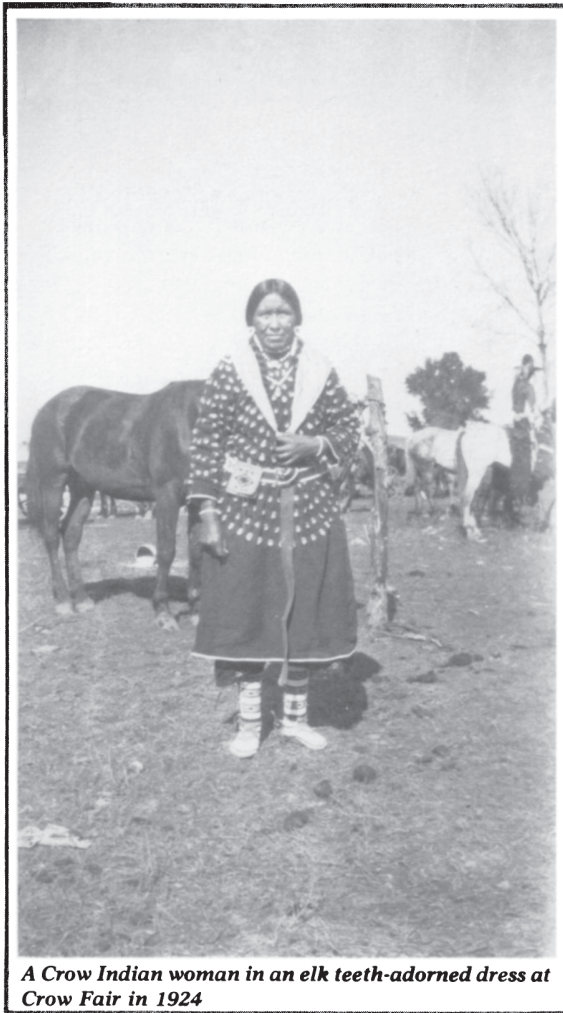
The second, and shorter, period of Plains life, beginning about 6,000 years ago and known as the Archaic, featured warming and drying climates usually referred to as the Altithermal era. Warmer and drier even than the Plains today, the Altithermal saw the extinction of many big game species, including camels, elephants and prehistoric horses and long-horned bison. Indian groups that had depended on the meat of these animals began to use a wider range of food resources. Small bands of pedestrian hunters killed antelope, deer and modern buffalo as well as smaller mammals and birds, and women continued to gather plant foods, adding stone grinding implements to their household inventory. Hunters developed buffalo jumps—dramatic mass slaughtering sites at which everybody participated in killing bison and acquiring meat for the winter. The use of bows and arrows began late—about 200 A.D.—and this was an important change; bows and arrows replaced darts and spears as the most effective weapon. This was to prove important in establishing individualistic, male-dominated hunting in the near future, but overall, the Archaic period, like its Lithic or PaleoIndian forerunner, was one of relative sexual equality. Women as well as men shared in being food providers, and their lives were better than those of their distant granddaughters in the Equestrian Era more than 1,000 years in the future.⁵

The Formative Period: Women's Finest Hour?

About 2,000 years ago, the influences of river-bottom gardening as a major food-getting technique began to penetrate the Plains region. Developed in Mexico thousands of years earlier, the cultivation of corn, beans and squash eventually filtered northward and westward as plant species became adapted to the shorter growing seasons within the present-day United States, and tribe after tribe learned to use them. Garden crops were supplemented by continued use of wild foods, but their addition to the tribal food supply made larger settlements and more settled lifeways possible. Pottery making began. Houses larger than temporary shelters could now be built—first square, then round, these came into the southern Plains influenced by the Adena-Hopewell (Burial

1. Nancy O. Lurie, "Indian Women: A Legacy of Freedom," in Charles Jones, ed., *Look to the Mountain Top!* (San Jose, Calif.: Gousha Publishing Co., 1972); John Upton and Donna M. Terrell, *Indian Women of the Western Morning* (NY: Dial Press, 1974). Carolyn Niethammer, *Daughters of the Earth: The Lives and Legends of American Indian Women* (NY: Collier Books, 1977). An earlier version of this essay appeared as "Plains Indian Women Through Time: A Preliminary Overview," in Leslie B. David, ed., *Lifeways of Intermontane and Plains Montana Indians* (Bozeman, Montana: Museum of the Rockies, Montana State University, 1979), pp. 137-150.

2. Robert Lowie, "A Crow Woman's Tale," in Elsie Clews Parsons, ed., *American Indian Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1922); Frank B. Linderman, *Pretty Shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows* (Lincoln:



A Crow Indian woman in an elk teeth-adorned dress at Crow Fair in 1924

Mound) and Mississippian (Temple Mound) cultures of the Ohio Valley and Southeast. But such gardening settlements in the Great Plains were limited to the river valleys. Thus, a divergence of lifeways had begun by the time of Christ, with some peoples continuing the search for wild foods as they had for thousands of years, and others supplementing the hunting of wild meat with the cultivation of garden crops. The gardening peoples developed a more complex culture that may have given Plains Indian women their finest hour.

The production of food and its distribution has long been a basic status determinant in any human group. Among Plains Indians the inclusion of gardening improved women's status. Unlike hunting, gardening is compatible with the childbearing and child rearing ac-

University of Nebraska Press, 1972); Truman Michelson, "The Narrative of a Southern Cheyenne Woman," *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections* 87 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1932); Michelson, "Narrative of an Arapaho Woman," *American Anthropologist*, 35 (1933), pp. 595-610; Margaret Mead, *The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1932); Oscar Lewis, "Manly-hearted Women Among the North Piegan," *American Anthropologist* 43 (1941), pp. 173-187; David E. Jones, *Sanapia: Comanche Medicine Woman* (NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972).

Born in Big Horn, Wyoming, in 1896, Elsa Spear Byron has been taking photographs and making prints of western scenery and personalities in southeastern Montana and northern Wyoming for over sixty years. She was first introduced to photography as a teenager by her mother, but by 1923 she had entered the world of commercial photography, selling her pictures to national magazines and the promotion departments of the Northern Pacific and Burlington railroads. Although she is best known for her landscape views taken in the Big Horn Mountains, Byron also took many photographs of Indians over the years, especially on the Crow Reservation. The Byron photos in this article are part of a traveling exhibition of her Indian photographs, taken between 1911 and 1936, to be shown this year in Montana and Wyoming.

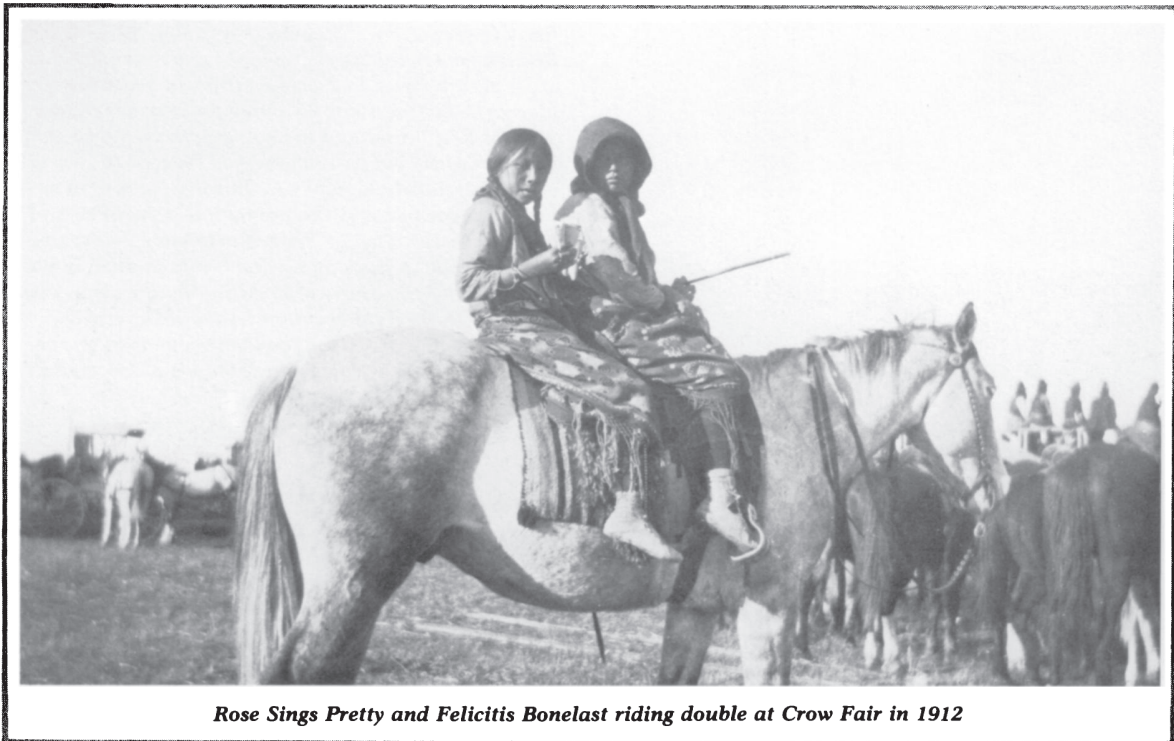
tivities for which women in all human groups are mainly responsible. As gardening developed in the Plains, then, women had the opportunity to engage in even greater food production than their hunting band sisters, who continued in the generally fairly equalitarian life of Archaic times. But the food produced was not meat, always the food item of highest prestige. With this in mind, how did the status of women fare in the gardening cultures before the arrival of horses? The answer is, it depends. Among other things it depends upon the kind of social complexity that developed in the larger populations and more settled way of life in the gardening Plains villages.

Social complexity has much to do with family structure and descent patterns. In the thousands of world cultures on record, just three basic ways of reckoning descent have been identified. In modern American society, as with societies of the simplest hunting and gathering peoples the world over, descent is reckoned bilaterally—one belongs to one's mother's and father's families equally. But at middle ranges of social complexity, including the gardening cultures of the Plains, unilineal descent reckoned primarily through one or the other parent might appear. This kind of system generates the patrilineal or matrilineal lineages and clans that are of tremendous social importance throughout a person's life. These matrilineal or patrilineal clans, which usually specified marriage outside of the clan, set down all manner of rules of social behavior, including the rites and regulations of marriage. How families were organized through these

3. Alice Marriot, *Hell on Horses and Women* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953).

4. Ernestine Friedl, *Women and Men: An Anthropologist's View* (NY: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1975), pp. 12-32; Jesse Jennings, *Prehistory of North America* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1968); Preston Holder, *The Hoe and the Horse on the Plains: A Study of Cultural Development among North American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970).

5. Alan M. Klein, "Functionalism and Critical Theory: The Case of the 19th Century Plains Indian Woman," paper delivered at Plains Conference Symposium "Women's Role and Status in Plains Cultures," Lincoln, Nebraska, November 17, 1977.



Rose Sing Pretty and Felicitis Bonelast riding double at Crow Fair in 1912

descent systems had everything to do with the position of women in Plains Indian tribes.

Some of the Plains gardening tribes followed the patrilineal rule, while others were matrilineal. What we know about these tribes comes from nineteenth-century reports based upon informants' memories from oral tradition of the times before horses but which they had not personally experienced. The Caddoan-speaking Pawnee and Arikara (the Arikara grouped with the Siouan-speaking Mandan and Hidatsa as Upper Missouri village tribes), for example, all had matrilineal descent, but patrilineal descent was found among the Central Siouans, who spoke closely related Chiwere Siouan (Iowa, Oto and Missouri) and Dhehiga Siouan (Omaha, Ponca, Osage and Kansa) languages. Because women in matrilineal groups controlled more property and had more political and ceremonial influences we might expect that the matrilineal Pawnee women and those of the Upper Missouri villages held a generally higher position than the Southern Siouan women, in spite of the fact that their food producing activities were similar.

Although comparative research on this question has not yet been done, there is evidence that Pawnee and Upper Missouri village women had high status in economic and ceremonial matters. There are indications that these village women had control over trade negotiations, and other information explains the important roles these women played through their organiza-

tions, such as the Goose and the White Buffalo Cow groups.⁶ Among the Mandans, women had a major role in tribal ceremonialism as seen in the Okipa ritual, wherein the men "had to deal with a culturally engendered sense of worthlessness and self hatred" while women "had little cause for self doubt." The fifth night of the Okipa ceremony concluded with the theme of "Woman Triumphant." "It was driven home to all Mandans that this was indeed a matrilineal, matrilineal, matrifocal, matridominated society. Men were an integral but subordinate part, while the Female Principle was the locus of power."⁷ Elsewhere in the Plains, women were also important in the transfer of sacred power from one priest to another through the act of sexual intercourse with a female intermediary,⁸ and some controlled the fate of prisoners, as did Iroquois women to the east.⁹

Less is known concerning the patrilineally organized Southern Siouans. The groups in which they lived would have been generally less favorable to women's autonomy, although women did make important subsistence contributions and they had some influence over the movements of the camp.¹⁰ Omaha women had no organizations of their own, nor did they hold any public office, but they owned garden produce and household furnishings. There was no double standard

6. Robert Lowie, *Indians of the Plains* (NY: Natural History Press, 1963. Originally published in 1954), p. 113.

7. E. Adamson Hoebel, "Religion and Myth: Symbolic Ideology," in E.A. Hoebel, ed., *Anthropology the Study of Man*, 4th Edition (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 571.

8. Alice B. Kehoe, "The Function of Ceremonial Sexual Intercourse Among the Northern Plains Indians," *Plains Anthropologist* 15 (1970), pp. 99-103.



Crow women preparing for a parade at Crow Fair near Lodge Grass, Montana, in 1912

of sexual morality; they could compose war songs and sometimes go with war parties, and they held certain ceremonial roles. In the reservation period they also showed remarkable capacities for leadership.¹¹

The gardening culture before horses lasted for about a thousand years, from 700 A.D. to 1700 or so. After this, horses constituted a staggering new force for social change. It would seem that during this thousand years, among the matrilineally organized tribes at least, if anthropologist E. Adamson Hoebel and others are correct, women's lives improved greatly in terms of economic and ceremonial power. After this period of glory, all was to change drastically in the century to come.

The Equestrian Era: Hell on Horses and Women?

By the 18th century, horses multiplying and drifting northward from Spanish settlements in the Southwest had established themselves as replacements for the prehistoric horses hunted for food in PaleoIndian or Lithic times. It was not until the 19th century, however, that the fully developed horse cultures of the Plains tribes, so well known throughout the

world, attained their peak. Since colonial times, shock waves of displaced Indian peoples had been rolling westward. Many divergent peoples were entering the Plains as horses were becoming available and the area became a kind of melting pot as these peoples, and the older hunting and gardening inhabitants we have described for the Formative period, became equestrian.

Much remains unknown about the complex dynamics of this period, surely one of the most flamboyant and fast changing in the history of the world. Within a generation, horses became commonplace among both Formative period Plains cultures as well as the new arrivals, which included such future prototype equestrian tribes as the Lakota and Cheyenne. Both the gardening tribes and the hunting tribes were to meet particularly bitter destruction at the hands of the later white invasion, but they enjoyed a century or so of brilliant cultural climax, which has stamped an indelible image upon national American consciousness, as well as the perception of Frontier America by most of the rest of the world. All of this, however, constituted a man's realm, in which women fared badly in comparison to their fathers, brothers and sons.

For one thing, the herding of horses is a kind of pastoralism, and pastoralism is well known in world cultures as a male-dominated type of economy, as

9. Lowie, *Indians of the Plains*, p. 106.

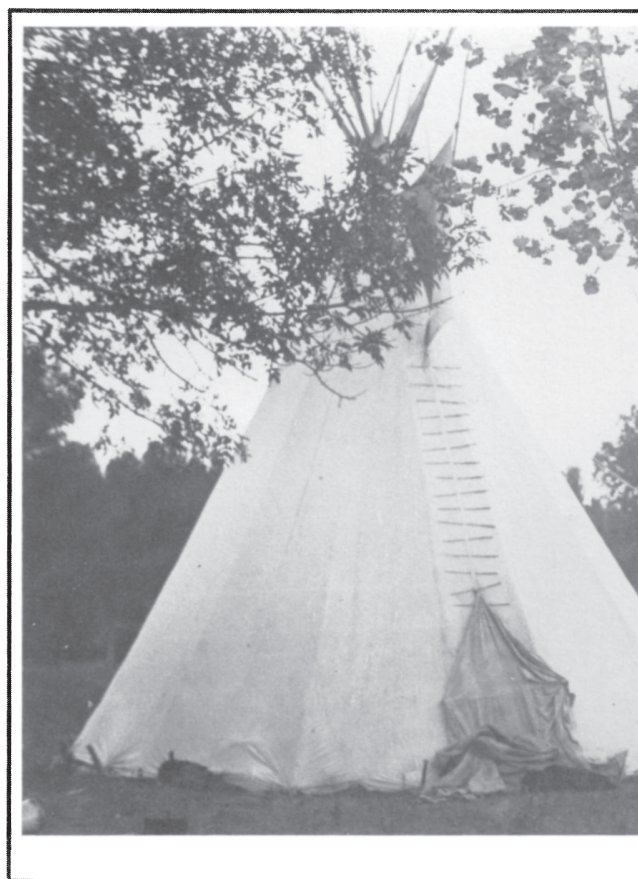
10. Alice C. Fletcher and Francis La Flesche, "The Omaha Tribe," *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1911), p. 277.

11. Margaret Crary, *Susette La Flesche: Voice of the Omaha Indians* (NY: Hawthorne, 1973); Dorothy C. Wilson, *Bright Eyes, the Story of Susette La Flesche, an Omaha Indian* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1974).

seen among the Bedouins and in the Old Testament as well as in "Marlboro Country" advertisements of the present day. But beyond even the usual pastoralist qualities, the new Plains horse cultures favored men. Within a generation most tribes had adopted a radically changed way of life. Hunting became a man's pursuit, with greatly increased amounts of meat available for personal distribution. Such meat, shot from horseback, was marked with a man's own arrows, and he controlled its use. Horse raiding became an all-important obsession, along with other aspects of intertribal warfare. Outside demand for tanned leather goods, especially buffalo robes, increased along with the appetite for trade goods (especially guns and ammunition) offered in exchange for them. The newly rich hunting peoples moved from band-level to tribal organization, with bigger populations and much more complex ceremonial life, including the rapidly spreading Sun Dance. For the first time, they gained ascendancy over the gardening village tribes.¹² The latter, meanwhile, modified their way of life by adding seasonal expeditions for buffalo, using summer tipis in camp circles modeled after those of their fast-moving neighbors. This dual lifeway might have stabilized but for the military threat from these same neighbors, coupled with imminent invasion of whites and devastating onslaughts of epidemic disease.

In both cultural systems, women's work increased in tanning and leather goods production. Guns were essential for warfare, and plentiful leather goods were absolutely necessary for their exchange. Lodges increased greatly in size and in the labor required to produce them, as did their newly rich and elaborate furnishings. Horses made camp moving easier over greatly increased distances, but vastly increased stores of personal possessions must have cancelled out many advantages for the women, whose responsibility for camp moving labor steadily increased.¹³ Wives owned both the tipis that they had created, and their furnishings, at least theoretically—but when an offender was punished by camp police, "his" tipi was often slashed to ribbons along with the killing of his horses, and it's not surprising who had to replace it.

We simply cannot accurately imagine the lives of Plains women of this time, there are so few sources of good information. We know that warriors, trying to increase their domestic labor forces, married more and younger women. Thus polygyny increased, for those men who were fortunate; for those less fortunate, even despite the losses of young men in warfare, the competition and hostility toward all women in consequence may well have increased. The solidarity of men engaged in joint hunting and war activities



led to the formation of masculine social groups—all able-bodied men became members of military societies that attained major punitive as well as warmaking powers. Women became subject to their brothers' wishes and decisions concerning their marriages. Among the generally puritanical Cheyennes a brother's authority over his sister's marriage came to include her punishment by gang rape, conducted by members of his military society, if she resisted his wishes.¹⁴ Among the neighboring Crows, an archeological relic memorializing such an event is on record and this custom, known as "putting a woman on the prairie," prevailed in a number of other tribes.¹⁵

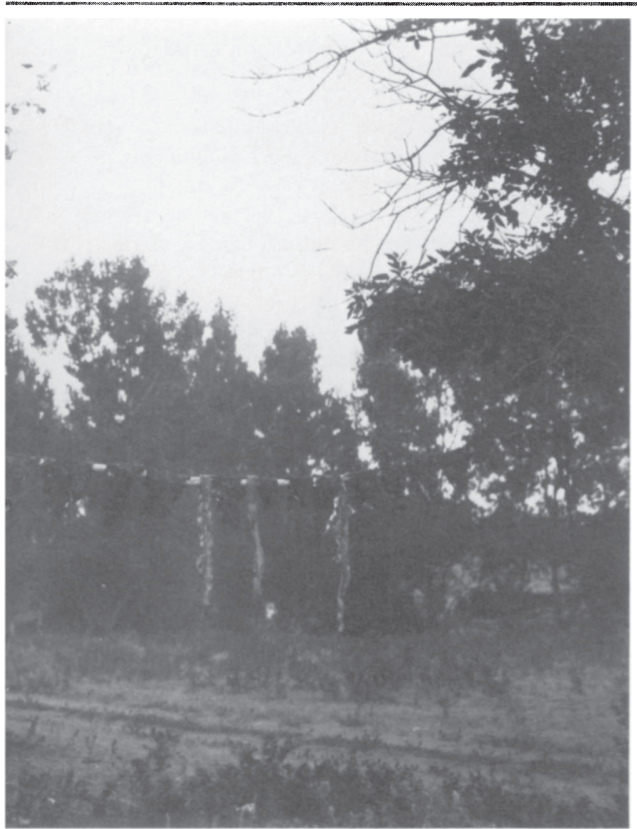
The severe beating of a wife for real or imagined offence was accepted universally as a husband's right: among the Comanches, a husband had the right to kill her. The right to cut off her nose for adulterous behavior was common throughout the Plains, and no one will ever know how many innocent noses were detached along with those of the guilty. Among the Crows, rivalry between the two tribal military socie-

12. Holder, *The Hoe and the Horse*.

13. Clark Wissler, "The Influence of the Horse in the Development of Plains Culture," *American Anthropologist* 16 (1914), pp. 1-25.

14. E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Cheyennes: Indians of the Great Plains* (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960); Karl N. Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel, *Pretty Shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1941), pp. 202-210.

15. S.C. Simms, "A Crow Monument to Shame," *American Anthropologist* 5 (1903), pp. 374-375.



Preparing jerky at a Crow Indian camp in 1936

ties led to annual "wife stealing" or kidnapping sprees in which a man who claimed to be a woman's previous lover could carry her away. Such a "stolen" woman was forever rejected by her former husband despite any slightest proof of her guilt or innocence.¹⁶ The war-related suicide of men was common, but female suicides also increased during this period.¹⁷ Hanging Woman Creek at Birney, Montana, memorializes an event of this kind.

We will see below that in many cases, individual women were able to triumph over the general circumstances outlined here. These are generally true for the hunting peoples: among the gardening tribes less dramatic changes occurred. Gardening as women's work essentially continued, and female control over the trade of food and clothing appears to have continued as well although men were in control of other trade negotiations.¹⁸ Female importance in ceremonial life nonetheless remained, as in the Mandan example given above, and there is little evidence of any loss of personal autonomy parallel to that experienced by women of the newly mounted, newly rich and newly war-obsessed hunting tribes, who

16. Robert Lowie, "A Crow Woman's Tale," pp. 35-43; Lowie, *The Crow Indians* (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1935).

17. Klein, "Functionalism and Critical Theory."

wrote so major a chapter of resistance in the westward expansion of the United States frontier.

Individual Cases, or Exceptions Prove the Rule

We have seen that a general picture of declining status for women of the equestrian Plains tribes probably developed during the 19th century. But there was a good deal of leeway for individual women to defy this new tradition. Five general areas can be considered here: child rearing customs, warfare, religion, arts and crafts, and pure ornery individualism.

In the area of child rearing, the education of children in High Plains societies clearly stressed individualism and daring for boys, and submissiveness to authority among girls. But ideal personality patterns varied considerably from tribe to tribe¹⁹ and a great deal also depended upon particular circumstances. Cheyenne girls often became daring horsewomen.²⁰ Lakota girls could be given the status of "child beloved," and could participate in the subsequent highly honored Buffalo Ceremony and Virgin Fire.²¹ A Blackfeet girl could be named "favored child," and the status of "Manly Hearted Woman" was highly visible among particular Blackfeet women later in life.²² Other distinct roles for Blackfeet women included the "crazy" or promiscuous one, the favorite or "sits-beside him" wife, and the holy woman who held a prominent role in the Sun Dance.²³ If a girl's family was wealthy or otherwise well respected, and if she had several brothers rather than numerous sisters with whom to compete, her position in life could be high. A complex interplay of achieved factors and those dictated by birth can be identified here.

Women were not generally active in warfare, but a great many exceptions to this rule appear in the literature of Plains tribes. The Crow woman Muskrat

18. W. Raymond Wood, "Northern Plains Village Cultures: Internal Stability and External Relationships," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 30 (1974), pp. 1-16; Katherine Weist, "Plains Indian Women: An Assessment" in W.R. Wood and Margot Liberty, eds., *Anthropology on the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).

19. Thomas Gladwyn, "Personality Structure in the Plains," *Anthropological Quarterly* 30 (1967), pp. 111-124.

20. Michelson, "Narrative of a Southern Cheyenne Woman."

21. Jeannette Mirsky, "The Dakota," in Margaret Mead, ed., *Cooperation and Competition Among Primitive Peoples* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961. Originally published in 1937), pp. 412-415.

22. Lewis, "Manly-hearted Women."

23. Beatrice Medicine, "Warrior Women of the Plains," Paper delivered at Plains Conference Symposium "Women's Role and Status in Plains Cultures," Lincoln, Nebraska, November 17, 1977.

told Robert Lowie that she had counted coup upon and scalped a Piegan.²⁴ Other Crow women warriors whose names have come down to us include Strikes Two, Finds Them and Kills Them, and The Other Magpie.²⁵ Strikes Two at sixty years of age rode into battle against the Sioux armed only with her root digger. Finds Them and Kills Them rescued a wounded tribesman in the Rosebud fight and shot a Sioux warrior, upon whom The Other Magpie counted coup to avenge her own slain brother. In the same battle, the Cheyenne woman Buffalo Calf Road rescued her brother Comes In Sight.²⁶ The Blackfeet woman Elk Hollering in the Water told John Ewers of her own war adventures,²⁷ while another Blackfeet woman went on so many horse raids she became the more or less true to life heroine of J.W. Schultz's book, *Running Eagle, The Warrior Girl*.²⁸ Other women served as associates to male military societies in a manner reminding one of contemporary cheerleaders, as among the Cheyennes. More importantly, Cheyenne women composed and sang courage and praise songs for warriors that could be turned into scathing instruments of shame against the weakhearted.²⁹ The Pawnee woman Old Lady Drives the Enemy vigorously defended the Pahuka village against Ponca attack.³⁰ And in many tribes, women might go off with war parties.³¹

In the area of religion, tremendous differences also occurred in women's roles from one tribe to another, and with changing times. A concentrated study is needed of the varying roles of women in the Sun Dance. The sexual transfer of power from one man to another via a female intermediary is an old Plains pattern which continues in some areas today.³² Women as well as men, in many groups, often obtained visions.³³ Again much further information in this area may still be found in the literature despite its general inadequacy on such matters.

Despite the fact that women's subsistence contribution, after horses, diminished in the area of food procurement, much food processing continued. And women's labor in leather working brought important recognition. Craft guilds existed among the Blackfeet,

Dakota, Arapaho, and Cheyenne, and women claimed coups according to the number of robes they had completed.³⁴ Although there is a general stereotyped impression that men's craft work had greater prestige and more ritual importance, as with the production of shields, excellence in a woman's work could bring her both wealth and prestige.³⁵

Finally in any culture there is the occasional woman, as well as man, who flatly refuses to abide by convention. The Cheyenne Big Woman was the wife of Tall White Man, a Cheyenne chief, but she was far from cowed by him: "A female bully, who played havoc with her husband's domestic domain and the peace of the camp at large, she remained intransigent to the end of a long life."³⁶ Big Woman not only quarreled with her co-wives but went so far as to rub human excrement in the hair of one of them, driving her away; she drove her own sister, another junior wife, to suicide; she threatened to beat her husband (whom she outweighed considerably) to death; and when her brother threatened to horsewhip her she outran him, taunting "Go chase a deer! When you catch it, then try yourself on me!"³⁷ All this and more took place among the generally highly disciplined Cheyennes, by whom she was eventually buried "without honor and unmourned." And in many other tribes, instances of equally unconventional women can doubtless be found. In a cultural setting that so powerfully stressed courage, initiative, and achievement as major goals, some girls as well as most boys were bound to get the message.

The Changing Roles of Plains Indian Women

What this essay represents is an attempt to see how the roles of Plains Indian women have changed, sharply, over what is truly an enormous stretch of time. We are not dealing here simply with the time span of America's past, or time since the birth of

24. Lowie, *The Crow Indians*.

25. Linderman, *Pretty Shield*, pp. 202, 228.

26. John Stands In Timber and Margot Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 181-190.

27. John C. Ewers, "Deadlier than the Male," *American Heritage* 16 (1965).

28. Alice B. Kehoe, "Old Woman Had Great Power," *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology*, 6 (1976), pp.68-76.

29. George Bird Grinnell, "Cheyenne Women Customs," *American Anthropologist* n.s. 4 (1904); Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians*, 2 volumes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923); Lowie, *The Crow Indians*, p. 215; Stands in Timber and Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories*, p. 63.

30. Gene Weltfish, *The Lost Universe: Pawnee Life and Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977. Originally published in 1965), pp. 42-43.

31. Llewellyn and Hoebel, *Pretty Shield*, p. 191.

32. Peter J. Powell, *Sweet Medicine: The Continuing Role of the Sacred Arrows, the Sun Dance and the Sacred Buffalo Hat in Northern Cheyenne History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969).

33. Lowie, *The Crow Indians*, pp. 60-62; Mirsky, "The Dakota," p. 415; Kehoe, "Old Woman Had Great Power," pp. 68-76; Weist, "Plains Indian Women."

34. M. J. Schneider, "Plains Indian Art," in W. R. Wood and Margot Liberty, eds., *Anthropology on the Great Plains*.

35. M. J. Schneider, "Women's Work," paper delivered at Plains Conference Symposium "Women's Role and Status in Plains Cultures," Lincoln, Nebraska, November 17, 1977; Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians* I, p. 159; Mirsky, "The Dakota," p. 410; Mable Morrow, *Indian Rawhide: An American Folk Art* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), pp. 76-81.



Polly Grasshopper astride the horse was crying and her grandmother, Sore Where Whipped, was defending her after the child's horse had been bumped by a bucking horse. Elsa Spear Byron took this photo as the grandmother tried to shoo everyone away. At Crow Fair near Lodge Grass, Montana, in 1911.

Christ, or even since the Egyptian pyramids, 5,000-odd years ago. We are considering a developmental story 20,000 years or more, much of which can be guessed at only through the findings of archeology. It is important to realize that much of this developmental story moved slowly through successive millennia in two Plains settings, until it reached a swift and drastic climax for women who were associated with the proudly equestrian tribes of historic times. Even among these, conditions for individuals varied sharply.

Three temporal periods have been suggested here. The first was characterized everywhere for many

thousands of years by small hunting and gathering bands in which relative equality between men and women prevailed. From this baseline the addition of river bottom gardening technology, at about the time of Christ, allowed women in some groups to increase their personal contribution to the basic food supply, and thus to rise in prestige. This was particularly true in groups that organized according to the rules of matrilineal descent—in which, among such tribes as the Mandan, women played powerful and important economic and ceremonial roles.

The hunting and gathering peoples, meanwhile, continued the old traditions, until the introduction of horses created a genuine revolution. There was then geometric expansion of and emphasis upon such male- and warrior-oriented enterprises as horse raiding and mounted warfare, with which individually killed game, claimed by men as personal property, led to a sharp plunge in women's rights and prerogatives. The gardening tribes were badly shattered by invasion and disease during equestrian times, but women's status among them appears to have remained at a relatively high level.

Since the military defeat of all Plains cultures following 1876, a whole new set of circumstances has developed. The reservation world has now existed, incredibly enough, for a century, equalling in length the general high tide period of equestrian climax. Many circumstances that have given men the status of "Warriors Without Weapons"³⁸ have returned an increasing measure of power to women once again. The welfare economy that characterizes many Plains reservation settings tends often to favor women in the distribution of money and food. Female political leaders and spokeswomen are emerging with increasing frequency, and female importance in the highly prestigious public giveaways is widely evident.³⁹ Also, female competitions throughout the Plains for numerous powwow princess honors and the title of Miss Indian America provide another route to honor and visibility, along with organizations now forming to promote the interests of Indian women professionals throughout the United States.

In all of this, despite its early obscurities and its lack of adequate historical documentation, we can discern at least the outlines of a dramatic human story, one that when fully unveiled will place Plains Indian women properly in the context of their times alongside Plains Indian men. ♫

36. Llewellyn and Hoebel, *Pretty Shield*, p. 253 ff.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

38. Gordon MacGregor, *Warriors Without Weapons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

39. Weist, "Giving Away: The Ceremonial Distribution of Goods Among the Northern Cheyenne of Southeastern Montana," *Plains Anthropologist* 18 (1973), pp. 97-103.

MARGOT LIBERTY is Supervisor of Trail End Museum in Sheridan, Wyoming, and the holder of a Ph.D. in anthropology from University of Minnesota. Dr. Liberty is the author of numerous articles on Indian culture and is perhaps best known in Montana as co-author with John Stands In Timber of *Cheyenne Memories* (1967).