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VALERIE SHIRER MATHES

As we all know, not until recently has extensive research been done on the history of women in the United States. And, as would obviously be expected, a number of the overall findings from this research are still tentative. The same two statements can be made about the subject of Indian women in United States history — research on this subject has just begun in earnest and to date the findings are, in many instances, tenuous. However, scholarly effort has now advanced sufficiently to permit several fundamental conclusions about the actual rather than the presumed role of Indian women in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

For convenience, three conclusions will be separately discussed: first, the women in Indian societies, not unexpectedly, were generally viewed as inferior to men; second, that their daily routines were really not much different from those of white women; and, third, that because of the heterogeneous nature of the Indian cultures in the present geographic area of the United States (excluding Alaska and Hawaii), a number of Indian women were provided economic, social, and political opportunities that white women could not, in most instances, perceive or even entertain.

The inferiority of women within the Indian tribes was widely noted by contemporary observers. For example, George Catlin, an artist who visited and studied more Indian tribes than any other white man in the first half of the nineteenth century, noted that "Women in a savage state, I believe are always held in a rank inferior to that of the men . . . ."[1] Lewis Henry Morgan, an ethnologist who carefully studied the Iroquois in the 1840s wrote: "The Indian regarded woman as the inferior, the dependent, and the servant of man, and from nature and habit, she actually considered herself

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to be so. . . ."[2] Edwin Thompson Denig, commander of Fort Union on the North Dakota-Montana border during the 1850s, noted that Crow women ". . . have their own sphere of action in their domestic department, from which they are never allowed to depart, being considered by their husbands more as a part of their property than as companions."[3]

And Frederick W. Hodge, a twentieth century ethnologist, noted that in the past among the tribes of the Northwest Coast the penalty for killing a woman was only half of that for killing a man.[4]

But just how inferior, in reality, was the status of Indian women? Contemporary observers often indicated that Indian women were seemingly little better than slaves because of the type of tasks they had to perform. George Catlin noted in 1832 that Crow and Blackfeet women were ". . . like all other Indian women, the slaves of their husbands; being obliged to perform all the domestic duties and drudgeries of the tribe . . . ."[5] He further observed that among the Mandan of the Upper Missouri the women in respect to men "stand rather in the light of menials and slaves . . . ."[6]

Cadwallader Colden, an eighteenth century observer of the Iroquois, implied such an ignoble status when he noted that women of these tribes

> Alone . . . perform all the Drudgery about their Houses, they plant their Corn, and labour it, in every respect, till it is brought to the Table; They likewise cut all their Fire-wood, and bring it Home on their Backs, and in their Marches bear the Burden.[7]

This view of the subservient nature of the status of Indian women is also apparently substantiated by comments from some of the Indian women themselves. For example, in the 1830s after painstakingly enumerating the tasks she daily performed for her husband, a Blackfoot woman complained: ". . . and what was my reward? . . . I was his dog and not his wife."[8] Pretty Shield, a Crow woman of the plains who lived during the second half of the nineteenth century, stated:

> War, killing meat, and bringing it into camp, horse-stealing, and taking care of horses, gave our men plenty of hard work, and they had to be in shape to fight at any time, day or night. We women had our children to care for, meat to cook, and to dry, robes to dress, skins to tan, clothes, lodges and moccasins to make. Besides these things we not only pitched the lodges, but took them down and packed the horses and the travois, when we moved camp, yes, and we gathered

the wood for our fires too. We were busy, especially when we were going to move.[9]

Yet, Mary Jemison, a white woman captured in 1758 by a French and Indian raiding party and subsequently adopted into the Seneca tribe commented that "Notwithstanding the Indian women have all the fuel and bread to procure, and the cooking to perform, their task is probably not harder than that of white women. . . ."[10] Her statement is most likely a more accurate assessment of the day-to-day life of an Indian woman than the widely held view of their presumed inferiority to contemporary white women. The daily routine of Indian and white women would obviously be very similar in many ways given the universality of many features of family life no matter what the culture. There would be food to procure, meals to be cooked, clothing to be made and continuously mended, cleaning to be done, tender loving care to be given to husbands, and, of course, most importantly, the rearing of children with all of the attendant demands.[11] As Mary Chestnut, an antebellum white southerner, commented: "There is no slave, after all, like a wife . . . . You know how women sell themselves and are sold in marriage, from queens downward . . . . Poor women, poor slaves."[12]

But, interestingly enough, there were, of course, some differences in status between white and Indian women. The Indian women were, in many instances, actually somewhat better off.[13] Indian women, for example, often had a greater degree of control over their bodies. This situation was particularly apparent because of the often noticed fact that Indian families had only two or three children whereas white families had thirteen or fourteen.[14] Indian women could, under certain circumstances, prevent sexual intercourse. A Chippewa woman, if she wanted to avoid sex with her husband, simply left the tent and moved to the menstrual hut.[15] Furthermore, in almost all tribes a woman did not have to have intercourse during menstruation. At this time she was usually viewed as being impure. A Papago woman in the nineteenth century noted that if a menstruating woman touched a bow, it would not shoot; if she drank from a man's bowl, he would sicken; and, if she touched him, he might die.[16]

An Indian woman also could often utilize various birth control methods. She might have a voluntary abortion because she did not want to undertake additional child rearing responsibilities,

because her health might be endangered, or because the resources of the tribe and her immediate family were limited.[17] She also frequently could force abstention on her husband. Among a number of tribes, for example, intercourse between husband and wife was prohibited until a baby crawled or until a child had finished nursing.[18] Among the Cheyenne it was customary for a woman not to have sexual intercourse again until the first child was at least ten years of age.[19]

Indian women, unlike their white contemporaries, usually had the right to own and to control property effectively, whether their status was single, married, or widowed. They could, depending on the tribe and the kinship system, own such items as horses, land, livestock, household goods, planting and harvesting utensils, clothing, and art objects. And, because of the heterogeneous nature of the Indian cultures in the present geographic area of the United States, a number of Indian women had other economic, social, and political opportunities that white women could not, in most instances, either perceive or entertain.

Extended opportunities of this type occurred generally in the matrilineal tribes, where descent was traced through the mother. Approximately one-quarter of the American Indian tribes were matrilineal.[20] Indian women in such tribes had a high degree of personal security. They owned all the houses, the household furnishings, the fields and gardens, the work tools, and the livestock, if any. And all of this property was passed on to their female heirs. The bride did not leave her mother's home after marriage; instead the husband was expected to move in with his wife. The woman had total control of the children produced by such a union. If serious marital difficulties did subsequently develop, it was the husband who had to leave the home,[21] it was his personal goods that were tossed outside the door, and it was he who usually cried over the divorce.[22]

Indian women in matrilineal tribes, futhermore, had the opportunity to be more than just wives and mother. They could aspire, for example, to become medicine women, or shamans, the Indian equivalents of doctors. An occupation of this nature could not, however, be held until they had reached menopause. Tribes that provided such a role for women were the Shasta and Yurok of California, the Walapai of Arizona, the Chippewa of the Old Northwest, the Comanche of Texas, and the Crow of Montana.[23]

Women could also aspire to exercising effective political power.

The Iroquois, of course, represented the most highly developed example of such power; the eldest women in each local unit (*ohwachira*) had extensive political, social, and economic powers and, in turn, they made up the powerful Council of Clan Mothers which, when in session, frequently played a dominant intertribal role. The matrons appointed and deposed clan or tribal chiefs; selected the men who would sit on the Great Council of the League; established the questions to be discussed at clan or tribal councils; strongly recommended courses of action; and lobbied and caucused behind the scenes on crucial matters in order to determine the final vote.[24] While other matrilineal tribes usually allowed women lesser political involvement than the Iroquois, Indian women still had powers far exceeding those of their white female counterparts.

In some instances, women could also aspire to military roles. Some Indian women had the power to initiate or veto a war. Among the Iroquois, for example, although the men generally declared war, the women had the power to stop it; a mother could forbid her sons to go on the warpath, and wives and mothers could stop a war party by refusing to supply the necessary food for the journey.[25] On the other hand, they could initiate a war party, for an Iroquoian woman was entitled to demand that any murdered member of her clan be replaced by a captive. Her male relatives were obligated to form a war party upon her demand and to go in search of non-Iroquoian captives. Whether the male captives of such raids were killed or adopted into the tribe depended upon whether or not they could survive the tortuous ordeal imposed by the women.[26]

Other Indian women actually became warriors. There are a number of examples of this type of role occurring among matrilineal tribes and in some instances among patrilineal tribes as well. George Bird Grinnell, a noted Cheyenne authority, spoke of Yellowhead Woman, a Cheyenne maiden, who in 1868 counted coup on one Shoshoni and killed another during a battle.[27] (The counting of coup on an enemy, touching or striking such a person, was an important part of Plains Indian warfare and each coup was graded according to the danger involved).

Pretty Shield spoke of two women warriors among the Crow, one of whom fought with General George Crook at the Battle of the Rosebud in 1876, a week before Custer's famous defeat at the Little Bighorn. This Crow woman, The-Other-Magpie, rode against the Sioux armed only with her coup stick and returned victoriously to her people having counted coup and taken an enemy scalp.[28] Another

Crow warrior was Pine Leaf, who, as a young woman, swore she would not marry until she had avenged the death of her twin brother by killing one hundred enemy warriors. She kept her vow, rode in war parties, counted coup, and killed many enemies. Jim Beckworth, a mountain man who lived for many years among the Crow, wrote of her:

> There was none bolder than herself, and she knew it; there were others of greater strength, but her deficiency is muscular power was more than indemnified by her cat-like agility, and she would kill her man while others were preparing to attack.[29]

Another famous woman warrior, who also eventually achieved the rank of chief, was Woman Chief, a Gros Ventre woman who had been taken captive and then raised by the Crow. During the 1820s she organized her own war parties against the Blackfeet. She soon became such an important warrior and hunter that she could not bring herself to do woman's work any longer. As a consequence, she finally obtained "ceremonial wives" to dress hides and do the multitude of other housekeeping tasks of a Plains Indian wife.[30]

It should also be noted that, among the Plains tribes in the period prior to the 1880s, women sometimes accompanied their warrior husbands on horse stealing raids. While these women performed normal camp activities, they also participated in the early morning attacks on enemy camps, helped to drive away the stolen horses, and often had to defend themselves when pursued by the enemy.[31]

And, finally, some women actually became chiefs. This situation, as would be expected, was usually in matrilineal tribes. Some gained this rank because of their achievements on the battle field. Woman Chief, as you will recall, achieved this status because of her exploits. Others gained this position when their husbands died. Hernando de Soto, in his exploration of the Savannah River region in the summer of 1540, came across an Indian tribe, the Cutifachiqui (probably a member of the Creek Confederacy) who were governed by a *cacica,* the widow of a chief.[32] Wetamoo, a chief of Pocasset, a Wampanoag village in Massachusetts, led her deceased husband's warriors in allegiance with her brother-in-law, Philip, during King Philip's War in 1675.[33] And during the same time period in the South, the Pamunkey of Virginia were governed by Queen Anne, also the widow of a chief.[34]

Chiefs, warriors, politicians, physicians, property owners, wives and mothers—only the last two are roles which Indian women generally shared with their white contemporaries. What better way to indicate that the historical surface has been barely scratched on the subject of Indian women. Many new avenues of exploration obviously still need to be carefully examined: a tribe-by-tribe analysis would be of great benefit; a detailed comparison of women in matrilineal and patrilineal tribes would clearly be of value; the impact of acculturation on Indian women would also be a great help, and finally, a careful comparison between Indian women and their white contemporaries would be quite revealing.

NOTES

[1] George Catlin. *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indian: Written During Eight Years Travel (1832-1839) Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America.* (New York, 1973) I, p. 118.

[2] Lewis Henry Morgan. *League of the Iroquois.* (New York, 1962), p. 324.

[3] Washington Irving. *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville.* (New York, Anthropological Paper, No. 33, Smithsonian Institution, *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 151.* (Washington, D.C.,: the United States Government Printing Office, 1953), 64. See also Edwin Thompson Denig. *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri.* (Norman, 1961), 195. Denig was more than just a casual observe. Besides having two Indian wives, he had been a trader among the Upper Missouri tribes for almost 23 years (1833 to 1855) and was well acquainted with most cultural aspects of Indian life.

[4] Frederick W. Hodge. *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico.* (New York, 1965), II, p. 971.

[5] Catlin, I, p. 51.

[6] Catlin, I, p. 118. See also Hodge, II, pp. 969-973.

[7] Cadwallader Colden. *The History of the Five Indian Nations of Canada.* (New York, 1904), I, p. xxxii.

[8] Washington Irving. *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville.* (New York, 1868), p. 504.

[9] Frank B. Linderman. *Pretty Shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows.* (Lincoln, 1972), pp. 128-129. Although Pretty Shield's account covers the 19th century, the life of a Plains woman had not changed much since the 17th and 18th centuries.

[10] James Everett Seaver. *A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison: The White Woman of the Genesee.* (New York, 1918), p. 47. Mary was well treated by the Indians and chose to remain among them permanently. Two years after her capture she married an Indian and settled down as his wife, raising his children.

[11] For additional information on the daily tasks performed by Indian women see Walter O'Meara. *Daughters of the Country: The Women of the Fur Traders and Mountain Men.* (New York, 1968), p. 49. See also Hodge, II, pp. 969-973. The tribes of North American were not homogeneous in any respect. Some were gathering cultures, requiring a continual search for roots and berries; others were hunting cultures, always on the move in search of game, and yet others were sedentary agriculturalists, depending upon corn, beans and squash. Therefore the tasks of each Indian woman varied, depending upon which subsistance pattern her people followed.

[12] Anne Firor Scott. *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930.* (Chicago, 1970), pp. 50-51.

[13] For additional information see Nancy O. Lurie. "Indian Women: A Legacy of Freedom," *Look to the Mountain Top.* ed. Robert Iacopi. (San Jose, 1972), p. 32.

[14] Catlin, II, 228 states that Indian women were content with two or three children. John P. Brown. *Old Frontiers: The Story of the Cherokee Indians from Earliest Times to the Date of Their Removal to the West, 1838.* (Kingsport, 1938), p. 19, points out that Cherokee women usually had no more than two children.

Julia Cherry Spruill in *Women's Life & Work in the Southern Colonies.* (New York, 1972), pp. 46, 48, points out that in 1708 most of the 250 families in Charleston had between ten and twelve children, while in western North Carolina in 1789, thirteen to fourteen children per family were not uncommon.

[15] Wendall Oswalt. *This Land Was Theirs: A Study of the North American Indian.* (New York, 1973), p. 51. Recent work has shown that some Southern women prolonged trips away from home in order to have fewer pregnancies. See Anne Firor Scott. "Women's Perspective on the Patriarchy in the 1850's," *Journal of American History,* LXI (June, 1974), 57.

[16] Ruth Underhill, "The Autobiography of a Papago Woman," *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association,* No. 46 (Manasha, Wisconsin, 1936), 131. See also Delfina Cuero. *The Autobiography of Delfina Cuero: A Diegueno Indian* as told to Florence C. Shipek. (Los Angeles, 1968), pp. 37-38. A perusal of the published narratives and autobiographies of Indian women show similar references to menstruating women.

[17] Harold E. Driver. *Indians of North America.* (Chicago, 1961), p. 434.

[18] In Truman Michelson, "Narrative of an Arapaho Woman," *American Anthropologist, New Series,* Vol. 35, No. 4 (October-December, 1933), 606, the informant stated: "My mother used to tell me to keep my husband from having sexual intercourse with me while I was nursing my children; but to tell him to go to some other woman, for it would make my milk unhealthy for my nursing baby."

[19] George Bird Grinnell. *The Cheyenne Indians: Their History and Ways of Life.* (Lincoln, 1972), I, p. 149.

[20] Matrilineally oriented tribes included the Creek, Choctaw, Cherokee, Natchez, Navajo, Western Pueblos (Zuni, Hopi, Acoma, Laguna), Western Apache, Mandan, Hidatsa, Crow and Iroquois.

[21] See Elsie Clews Parsons, "Waiyautitsa of Zuni, New Mexico," *American Indian Life,* ed. Elsie Clews Parson. (Lincoln, 1967), p. 164. Among the Zuni, for example, if the husband was lazy or failed to contribute to his bride's household, he was expected to leave and rejoin the household of his mother and sisters.

[22] Driver, p. 524.

[23] (Some of the tribes listed are patrilineal). For further information on medicine men and shamans in general see Ruth Underhill. *Red Man's Religion: Beliefs and Practices of the Indians North of Mexico.* (Chicago, 1965), pp. 82-94. For information on nineteenth and twentieth century Indian medicine women see Linderman, *Pretty Shield,* and David Jones, *Sanapia: Comanche Medicine Woman.* (New York, 1972). As a medicine woman, Sanapia held a status in her society equal to that of a man; see p. 27.

[24] Anthony F. C. Wallace. *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca.* (New York, 1972), p. 29. See also Hodge, I, 304 who states that all married women of child bearing age, not just the matrons, elected chiefs and subchiefs as well as deposed them. For additional information see Barbara Graymont. *The Iroquois in the American Revolution.* (Syracuse, 1972), 13; and Martha Champion Randle. "Iroquois Women, Then and Now," *Symposium on Local Diversity in Iroquois Culture,* ed. William N. Fenton. Smithsonian Institu-

tion, *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 149.* (Washington, D.C., 1951), pp. 169-180.

[25] Graymont, p. 21; See also Hodge, II, p. 971.

[26] Graymont, pp. 17, 19; Wallace, p. 29. For more information on the ordeal that the prisoners were put through see Morgan, p. 342.

[27] Grinnell, II, 44. For further information on women warriors see John Ewers, "Deadlier than the Male," *American Heritage* XVI, 4 (June, 1965), 10-13.

[28] Linderman, pp. 227-230.

[29] T. D. Bonner. *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, Mountaineer, Scout, and Pioneer, and Chief of the Crow Nation of Indians.* (New York, 1856), p. 225. For more information on Pine Leaf see Bonner, pp. 202-225; 398-399. See also *Mountain Man, Indian Chief: The Life and Adventures of Jim Beckwourth,* written, from his own dictation, by T. D. Bonner, ed. Betty Shepard. (New York, 1968), pp. 91-175; and Gorden Speck. *Breeds and Half-Breeds.* (New York, 1969), pp. 291-294. Beckwourth was a great braggart and there is a possibility that he also exaggerated Pine Leaf's exploits.

[30] For information on Woman Chief see Denig, "Of the Crow Nation," 64-68 and Denig, *Five Indian Tribes . . .*, pp. 195-200.

[31] Ewers, "Deadlier than the Male," p. 10.

[32] "The Narrative of the Expedition of Hernando De Soto by the Gentleman of Elvas." ed, Theodore H. Lewis. *Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States, 1528-1543.* (New York, 1907), pp. 172-177.

[33] Samuel Drake. *The Aboriginal Races of North America: Comprising Biographical Sketches of Eminent Individuals, an Historical Account of the Different Tribes from the First Discovery of the Continent to the Present Period . . . .* (New York, 1880), pp. 187-190. See also Marion E. Gridley. *American Indian Women.* (New York, 1974), 13-21; Hodge, II, p. 936; and B. B. Thatcher. *Indian Biography; or an Historical Account of these Individuals who have been Distinguished among the North American Natives.* (New York, 1836), I, p. 305.

[34] Hodge, II, 339; and Richard L. Morton. *Colonial Virginia. Volume I: The Tidewater Period, 1607-1710.* (Chapel Hill, 1960), p. 251.