Fall 2009


William C. Meadows
Missouri State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/1048

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

This work presents a body of edited ethnographic field notes on the Comanches, the majority of it from the field notes of the 1933 Santa Fe Laboratory of Anthropology “Field Training Course in Anthropological Field Methods,” popularly known as the “Field Party.” This party consisted of five male graduate students (Waldo R. Wedel, E. Adamson Hoebel, Gustav G. Carlson, James Nixon Hadley, and Henry C. Lockett) and two female graduate students (F. Gore Hoebel and Martha Chapman), under Dr. Ralph Linton who conducted six weeks of ethnographic fieldwork with eighteen Comanche elders in June and July of 1933. The surviving sets of these notes (Wedel’s, Hoebel’s, Carlson’s) were compiled and edited by Thomas Kavanagh. Robert Lowie’s brief Comanche field notes collected in 1912 are also included.

Kavanagh offers background on the field school and its methods, biographical sketches and photos of the students and Comanche consultants, and an account of transcription methods. The latter task included photocopying typescripts of portions of the material, passing them through an optical character reader and comparing them with the original manuscripts, transcribing other sections by hand, and standardizing the various sets of notes through painstaking editing, with attention to linguistic aspects and context.

The notes themselves cover a wide range of topics in Comanche culture, but vary tremendously in quantity and quality. While subjects such as material culture, oral traditions, recreations, and bison were given great attention with multiple entries, others, such as food preparation, trade, kinship terminology, family structure, and political gifts, received less emphasis. Of particular significance are notes on several areas of traditional Comanche culture that are less well known, such as their men’s societies, religious ceremonies like the Sun Dance and Beaver Ceremony, and sociopolitical statuses.

Although only two of the Comanche consultants were of age before the reservation period began in 1875, the others were raised by those who had been. For 19th-century reservation Comanches, this is probably the most comprehensive set of data on such a wide range of topics that we will probably ever have. Its quality and depth simply cannot be obtained for this temporal period today.
Kavanagh provided me with a copy of these field notes for use in my own research on Comanche military and dance societies in the 1990s, so I have been familiar with them for a number of years. One of the goals of ethnohistorians is to publish primary documents to make them more accessible to scholars, the Native community they describe, and the public. As someone who uses multiple sets of unpublished ethnographic field notes that involve transcription, I regard *Comanche Ethnography* as a work that reflects the fruition of this goal while providing a model for future publications of edited ethnographic field notes. Moreover, these data offer potential future contributions to Comanche cultural retention and to studies on a wide range of topics. Thomas Kavanagh deserves commendation for making these notes available to others in such a well-organized, contextualized, and useful format.

**William C. Meadows**, *Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology, Missouri State University.*