MONENEHEO AND NAHEVERIEN CHEYENNE AND MENNONITE SEWING CIRCLES, CONVERGENCES AND CONFLICTS, 1890-1970

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Marie Gerber Petter was skeptical. Born in the Swiss Jura Mountains, she knew that one does not find water in high places. It was 1893 when Marie and her husband, Rodolphe Petter, came to North America for the express purpose of bringing Christianity to Native Americans. After studying English and visiting Mennonite churches in Indiana, Ohio, and Kansas to garner monetary support for their work among the Southern Cheyenne, they made the forty-mile journey from Darlington, Oklahoma Territory, to an area near present-day Hammon by covered wagon. She was in need of water. When she asked, the local Cheyenne chief, Red Moon, pointed to the top of a nearby hill. To Marie's great surprise an abundant spring gushed forth. Chief Red Moon's men brought deer to the camp, fresh venison for the evening meal. The women gathered wood for Marie’s fire. Firewood and water were scarce on the territory’s semiarid plains. These were acts of Cheyenne hospitality from a group that was said to be particularly hostile to whites. So it was that Swiss émigrés and Mennonite missionaries Marie and Rodolphe Petter were welcomed into Chief Red Moon’s band on the far edges of their allotment land. Away from the interference of other whites, they decided to live like their new neighbors and pitched a tipi before building a more substantial structure. There they continued their studies of the Cheyenne language and became familiar with the ways of the Cheyenne. Marie served the Mennonite mission in Oklahoma for close to twenty years. She gave birth to a daughter, Olga, and a son, Valdo, before succumbing to tuberculosis in 1910 (see Fig. 1). Years later, in 1927, her husband still felt his loss of her when he wrote, “In morning [sic] for her the Indians said, ‘It is our mother who has left us.’ And that is what she was to them: A Christian mother. For she spoke to them simply of Jesus as she did to her own children.” Rodolphe’s words can easily be construed as patronizing: the Indians are like
“children,” Marie, “a Christian mother” who spoke to them in “simple” terms. In spite of the problematic language, the familial terms used by Petter raise a few questions. Were the female relationships between whites and Natives hierarchical, and possibly oppressive, or did the use of “mother” and “sister” signal affection and a recognition that some missionary women were integrated into Cheyenne families, circles, and tribal patterns? Perhaps Marie Petter was, as historian Clyde Ellis has argued in the case of missionary women to the Kiowa, a well-loved mother figure among the Cheyenne. Marie rests in Darlington, Oklahoma, in a simply marked grave. Her husband’s lifework, including an ethnographic dictionary of the Cheyenne language first published in 1915, stands to this day as a reference for scholars and students of Cheyenne culture and language. Less well known is the story of the sewing circle begun by Marie shortly after she arrived.

Women’s sewing circles, begun in the late nineteenth century and continuing through contemporary times, have generally been overlooked by scholars, even though these women’s traditions have been some of the longest-lived expressions of community culture and religious belief. Mennonite women’s missionary work among Cheyenne women, especially the sewing circle, endured from 1893 through the 1970s, supporting the churches, outlasting missionary schools, and building relationships between Mennonites and Cheyenne. The convergence of Cheyenne needlecraft traditions with Mennonite women’s sewing circles was unanticipated by the missionaries and until now has not been examined by scholars. This article focuses on Mennonite and Cheyenne sewing groups begun in the late nineteenth century and examines the convergence of cultural traditions that allowed the women to share in the development of a craft in addition to sharing belief systems and providing a site to address social divides. At times, the sewing circles seamlessly converged, bringing Mennonite and Cheyenne cultures together.

in mutually beneficial exchanges that spanned seventy-plus years. At other times sewing circle practices and rituals were manipulated by missionaries, thus forcing Native dependence on whites and damming these natural convergences. What follows is an examination of the interweaving streams of sewing traditions that brought diverse cultures together. We will also see how missionary zeal and cultural insensitivity served to unravel the relationships, so tentatively woven.

CIRCLES OF SKILL, CIRCLES OF AUTONOMY

One convergence is found in the term “circle,” a many-layered term. “Circle” connotes women’s work, done in a circle, around a table or quilting frame, or seated in a circle on the ground (see Fig. 2). In many Native American religious and civic ceremonies, circles signify the universe. When Cheyenne gather for rites and powwows, they do so around a ceremonial circle (see Fig. 3). The circle is integrated into their religious views and symbols, most prominently the medicine wheel. Beyond the actual physical reality of a working circle, the sewing circles inscribed cultural convergences between Cheyenne and Mennonite women.

Sewing circles have a long tradition in North America, reaching back to the colonial era. However, it wasn't until the nineteenth century that one finds a significant development of quilting sewing circles, a result of the mass manufacturing of inexpensive cloth. Mennonite women's sewing circles, begun in the late nineteenth century, grew out of their desire to support mission work. Mennonite sewing circles were organized along peer group and family lines. Like other Christian churches, Mennonite women’s sewing circles collected offerings, which were used to support missions. Mennonite men do not have “circles.” It is, in Mennonite culture, a distinctly feminine term. However, the circles taught more than craft. As gathering places for women, they were empowering.

Scholars of women have used concepts of “autonomy” to illuminate Native women's power and status. Anthropologist Nancy Lurie has argued that Native women were less constrained than their white female counterparts. As I show, Native women's sewing guilds promoted autonomy through control of the means of production in the tribe. Only selected women were taught the sewing crafts and religious symbols, thus ensuring tribal and economic status for the woman and her family. The sewing circles, so readily adopted by Native women, continued a sewing tradition. In contrast to the Mennonite missionary women, Cheyenne women held their own property, a tradition that survived the reservation, or in the case of Oklahoma, the allotment era. Rodolphe Petter's second wife, Bertha Kinsinger Petter, noted in her biography of Vxzeta how she liked to explore the countryside on her “favorite ponies, kept in the family as Vxzeta's own private property” (author’s emphasis). During the late nineteenth century, horses were a source of wealth in the Plains. Owning horses secured a woman’s economic standing. Bertha Petter most likely made her observation in the 1930s. It seems that the tradition of women owning “private property” remained among the Cheyenne enough to cause comment from Bertha.9
Although Mennonite women missionaries did not have control over any private property, they did have more autonomy and public responsibilities than their Mennonite sisters who remained on the farm and silent in the church. Because of their strong identification with and religious preferences for farm life, Mennonites remained a predominately rural people until after World War II. Scholars of Mennonite women have documented how “Quiet in the Land” proscriptions, that is, community practices that allowed Mennonites to stay within their own communities and out of “worldly” affairs, were applied more stringently to women than to men. However, in contrast to these proscriptions, Mennonite women missionaries were encouraged to speak, preach, and especially to write and otherwise engage in the public affairs of the mission. Since the quilting circles linked Mennonite missionaries to Native people, the circles may have enhanced Mennonite women’s status. Both Mennonite missionary women and Cheyenne women exercised new forms of autonomy in the quilting circles.

Failed “Christianizing”

Initially, there was much to divide Cheyenne from Mennonites. A few in Chief Red Moon’s band had survived two brutal massacres: Sand Creek in 1864 and Washita in 1868, in addition to years of harassment, displacement, and genocide by the U.S. Army. The hated enemy of the Cheyenne, the U.S. Army assisted Mennonites in their missionary efforts, inviting them to take over failed government schools and even offering abandoned military buildings, which the Mennonites eagerly if naively accepted. Missionaries sought to reach parents through the children, who were required by the federal government to attend boarding schools, as can be seen in Mennonite missionary Anna Linscheid’s description: “The idea then [1880] was to get the [Cheyenne and Arapaho] children into the mission schools to educate, civilize and if possible Christianize them and thru them to reach the parents in the homes.” Missionary records contain numerous photographs of well-scrubbed, uniformed Cheyenne and...
Arapahoe children standing in straight lines in front of the former army buildings (see Fig. 4). These photographs were used as promotional materials, sent to Mennonite “home” churches in the United States to raise funds for the mission. In spite of the appearance projected by the photographs, schools encountered resistance, as found in stories documented by missionary H. J. Kliwer. Kliwer noted how young boys ran away from the boarding schools and eluded their befuddled pursuers by hiding in trees and slipping off the backs of horses to return home. One senses in Kliwer’s accounts that he was sympathetic to the boys and delighted in their resourcefulness.

Missionaries, even those who were sympathetic storytellers, did not escape identification with government entities. When Mennonite missionaries moved into vacated U.S. Army buildings they also inherited failed strategies or approaches to pacify and Christianize the Cheyenne. Working to promote government objectives led to identification not with the runaway boys but with the policemen who pursued them. Historian James C. Juhnke asks, “How could Mennonites operate from a place which had served the devastating purposes of the United States Army? Would not such identification frustrate the very purposes of the mission?” Indeed, as Juhnke records,
Cheyenne chief Red Moon explained the problem to Rodolphe Petter:

I love the good white people, but the Washington people are wolves, they tore our people apart, they tear our land, they change their paths [contracts] with us every year, they oil themselves like serpents . . . and whoso goeth with the wolves is a wolf himself, so says the great Medicine Chief in Heaven, does he not?20

It is hard to comprehend how Mennonites, avowed pacifists in the historic peace church tradition,21 could succumb so easily to army patronage. But the early missionaries did, and their attempts to work with the Cheyenne were often met with abject, and perhaps deserved, failure.22 Where the mission schools struggled, the sewing circles fabricated by both Marie and the Cheyenne women succeeded. The circles were sites of a natural cultural convergence. Longstanding Cheyenne traditions of sewing guilds and familiarity with needlework, beading, quilling, tent making, and dressmaking fitted neatly with Mennonite needlecraft and church-based sewing societies or sewing circles.23

CHEYENNE GUILDWOMEN

Beading, tent making, quilling, and dressmaking were highly regarded skills in Cheyenne society. As scholars and early observers have noted, skilled craftswomen enjoyed tribal status and prestige and brought honor and income to their families. Art historian Winfield Coleman has researched Cheyenne women’s sewing societies wherein young women sought admittance by offering gifts to older female teachers. He relates that the guilds, called Moneneheo, the “Selected Ones,” “defined aspects of wealth and status” and were economically important both to the tribe and to individual female members.24 Coleman writes that by limiting their membership, the Moneneheo controlled the means of women’s sewing production, thereby keeping much-coveted skills and wealth in the hands of the members. Rodolphe Petter’s early observations of Cheyenne practices supports Coleman’s assertion:

The women have also their own organizations for dancing, healing, and certain work requiring special women’s skill, as in tanning, beading, ornamental work and tent making. These industrial “guilds” are called Chosen-women, and the members are specialists in Indian women’s [sic] work. The leader of each guild [sic] is an expert in her art and admission to the society is gained by expensive presents and feasts.25

The Moneneheo controlled access to wealth by teaching only a selected few the skills and art of the society and also through the gift-giving and feasting rituals. Anthropologist John C. Moore has argued that the Cheyenne nation was built to a large extent on the society structure. These powerful “societies,” “clubs,” or “guilds” were religious but also the most powerful expressions of political life.26 Women, like men, defined their place in tribal life not only by family, clan, and band but also by one’s participation in the guilds or societies, which according to Coleman, Petter, and Moore, conferred status and wealth on the individuals and also shaped Cheyenne tribal life and national identity.

As with other Native plainswomen, Cheyenne women’s productivity, virtue, and status were linked. According to Mary Jan Schneider in her examination of Sioux women, it was important for a young woman to stay busy. “The girl who tended to her quilling was too busy to get into trouble with men and would make a good marriage.”27 Noted Native American scholar Royal B. Hasrick, also writing about the Sioux, explained that

Girls who could quill and bead, who knew how to prepare hides, and who were good cooks were recognized as potentially good wives. . . . Such a girl would attract fine young men of the best families, who would bring many gifts and horses as her bride-price; she would bestow honor on her family.28
Admission into a society such as the Selected Ones or Chosen Women offered young Cheyenne women many forms of autonomy, not only by bestowing honor on their families but also by giving them the chance to learn a skill that was highly valued and could be used to create items for trade. As Schneider has noted, “Excellence in craftwork brought prestige and wealth to the woman and her family.”

One early observer, editor Elliot Coues, found that at the turn of the nineteenth century, Cheyenne women “produced distinctive, high quality buffalo robes embroidered in narrow stripes of porcupine quill work, which were coveted and traded for by all their neighbors.” Coues’s further observations point to Cheyenne women’s highly prized craftwork and also to their involvement in trade networks and economic exchanges with other tribes and with Europeans. That buffalo robes were counted as valuable property can be ascertained from George Custer’s account of property destroyed during the Battle of the Washita. After the massacre, he enumerated “573 tanned buffalo robes, many decorated” as part of a list of property destroyed. Another close observer of Cheyenne life estimated that each plain or undecorated robe represented at least seventy woman hours of work. A decorated robe could take up to a year to finish.

With the growing trade in buffalo robes, Cheyenne women’s skills at robe making were valuable indeed. Buffalo robes were mass marketed for use as lap robes in carriages. They quickly became a symbol of wealth for privileged whites. Turning buffalo hides into robes was a time-consuming task, and women worked in large groups, some scraping the hides, others tanning, and still others doing the finish work and decorating the robes. Tanners were highly valued. Among Cheyenne only a postmenopausal woman, highly trained in the religious ceremonies and known as an excellent tanner, could tan the white buffalo robes used for ceremonies. The work of turning hide into robe was arduous and lengthy and recognized as potentially sacred work, and if not sacred, at least very good for trade and economic gain.

Even after the decline in the buffalo robe trade, Cheyenne women’s sewing skills remained in high demand. G. A. Linscheid, a Mennonite missionary to the Cheyenne starting in 1920, wrote that Cheyenne women’s needlecraft handiwork made for brisk trade:

Some women are very adept in making beadwork of various kinds, buckskin dresses, beaded vests, beaded leggings, beaded saddleblankets . . . beaded pouches and purses . . . [M]any Indian women of this and other tribes [benefit from] gainful occupation in their own handicraft.

These few sources point to an established craft tradition in which Cheyenne women produced goods for family and tribal use and for sale. As autonomous craftswomen, their skills were highly prized and widely acknowledged.

**DEPENDENT MENNONITE QUILTERS**

In contrast to Cheyenne women, whose skills endowed status or prestige to the artist and whose needlework could be traded for horses, cash, or easily measured commodities, Mennonite quilting, though now recognized as a distinctive American art form, did not bestow the same level of prestige or wealth on the craftswoman. Mennonites, who prescribed humility, were not likely to lavish praise on a quilt maker. This is not to say that Mennonite women’s domesticity was unappreciated or that they did not earn money from their skills. In cities near Mennonite communities in Kansas and Manitoba, Canada Mennonite domestic servants were in high demand. Some farmwomen, such as Ella Klassen Schmidt, who baked wedding cakes to supplement farm income during the Depression and World War II, were known in the community for their homemaking skills. Indeed, women working in sewing circle groups, similar to the Cheyenne model of group labor, took in sewing for profit. However, in most cases the profit was donated to mission stations and was not for personal gain. It has only been since the
mid-twentieth century that Mennonite women have parlayed their reputations as quilters into economic gain.

Valerie S. Rake found that Mennonite women's sewing circles, referred to as Naheverien, which began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, did not initially sew quilts but focused on clothing for mission stations. Rake and Sharon Klingelsmith asserted that early women's sewing societies were not supported by men in their congregations or by their church conferences, especially when women's sewing and dues raised more money for the missions than the men's efforts. Women countered male resistance by putting wives of preachers in positions of authority, such as the presidency of the sewing circle. It was assumed by the men, if not by the women, that ministers' wives would be more complacent and follow male instruction regarding the distribution of funds.  

With the rise of Mennonite Central Committee relief sales, which were fundraisers for overseas mission work, quilts sold at auction became not only the main draw to the sales but also an opportunity for enterprising women. By the 1960s sewing circles were sewing almost exclusively for relief sales, and some Mennonite women became known for their skills with needle and thread and for their artistic use of color and shape. Quilts sold at auction promoted the growth of quilt making as a cottage industry, and encouraged an expressive and functional art form acceptable to Mennonites.

Activities were accompanied by homemade refreshments and a short program including a hymn, prayer, and the passing of the offering plate for dues collection.

BRIDGING THE GAP

When Mennonite women became missionaries they brought with them to the mission station needles, thread, and Naheverien organization and culture. Rodolphe and Marie Petter worked as one of the earliest General Conference Mennonite missionary couples among the Southern Cheyenne. Other missionaries preceded the Petters on the mission field in Oklahoma. It is with Marie, though, that we find the earliest evidence of a Native American sewing circle that met regularly. The written record of Marie Petter's sewing circles among the Southern Cheyenne is sparse. From Rodolphe Petter's Reminiscences comes this description from 1894: “During an afternoon each week my dear wife had a sewing class for the Indian women who were anxious to make quilts and also little girls' dresses, like the ones sent to their children by the sewing circles of our churches in the States.” In addition to this meager record there is at least one picture of Marie’s sewing circles from Oklahoma (see Fig. 2). We also know that sewing circles were considered important to the work of the missionaries. Before reaching Oklahoma, Rodolphe and Marie made a few stops in Mennonite communities in Ohio, Indiana, and Kansas. The purpose of these visits was to learn English and
build support for the mission work. In 1890, Rodolphe's diary records Marie preaching at a home church sewing circle amid visits and general community involvement: "November 6 and 7, 1890. These days were tranquil. . . . My dear angel spoke at the Sweing [sic] Circle on the dry bones, Ezekiel 37, with its application for Israel, the heathen world, then for the Christians." It should come as no surprise that before the turn of the twentieth century we find Marie Petter preaching, ninety to one hundred years before women were accepted into preaching positions in the broader Mennonite church. It has been well documented that Mennonite women exercised leadership gifts on the mission field that were denied to them in their home churches. Marie Petter was not the only missionary woman to find value in starting sewing circles with Cheyenne women. In 1927 Anna (Mrs. G. A.) Linscheid reviewed the history of the Mennonite mission in Oklahoma. In a short historical sketch she commented on the centrality of sewing circles to the work of the mission, stating that sewing circles were considered the best means to "bridge over this gap" between missionary and Indian.

When we came here in 1920 and got the feeling and sentiment of the Indians here, we studied and planned what we might do to "Bridge over this gap." . . . We finally decided to start sewing classes, not so much to teach them how to sew, as they knew how to do that, but . . . to get in closer touch with them, especially the Christian women.

Linscheid's description of sewing classes during the 1920s highlights the fact that Cheyenne women already had sewing skills—there was no need to teach Cheyenne women how to sew. The missionaries attempted to use sewing classes as a way to connect with the Cheyenne. The strategy worked. By 1927, Linscheid, a prolific writer to Missionary News and Notes, the publication arm of the Mennonite Women's Missionary Society, aptly described the popularity of the circles. Women and girls attended two monthly all-day meetings held in the churches at Clinton and Fonda. Around fifty women regularly attended, and she reported that "interest has been increasing every year." The Native sewing circles were organized much like those of the Mennonite women in the home churches. Women met midmorning to piece quilt tops and make comforters for use in their homes. Girls worked on "fancy" sewing and crocheting. After sewing for a few hours in the morning, they ate a simple lunch together, sewed throughout the afternoon, then listened to a short service before returning home at the end of the day. Anna Linscheid's writing lays out the reasons why missionary women invested considerable time and effort in the Native sewing circles. In addition to trying to "bridge over this gap" with the Cheyenne, she offers these objectives:

to teach younger ones who were willing to learn, knitting, crocheting, fancywork and the like . . . to make at least a limited number of articles during the year to be given at Christmas time, and last, but not least, to bring a Gospel message, spiritual food to them, at each meeting.

Her final two points, making items for Christmas gifts and bringing the Gospel message to the women during the sewing classes, augurs tensions and cultural differences that were soon apparent in the church setting. Sewing classes may have bridged gaps, but missionary shortsightedness often snapped the delicate threads meant to bind together the distinctive cultural shadings of Cheyenne and Mennonite.

"Kicking" Cultural Practices

Rodolphe Petter noted how the society of the Moneneheo, the Chosen Women, carefully guarded knowledge and symbols important to craft and guild life, at times answering his questions indirectly, at other times deliberately thwarting him.

The initiate [to the Chosen Women] is taught technical terms with all the hidden
symbolism of designs. This system is however becoming extinct and the few women who know the symbolism of all designs in beadwork and ornamental art will not divulge them, but usually give an evasive answer or misleading explanation.\textsuperscript{53}

Evidently, there were a few areas of tribal life to which even Rodolphe Petter did not have access. The Cheyenne did not provide explanations regarding their religious symbolism, as was their right and prerogative. One cannot be as generous with the missionaries as they deliberately undermined Cheyenne ceremonial gift giving with materials and goods sent from the home church sewing circles.

Gift giving or giveaways were and are central to many Native American religious and community rituals. From 1920 comes a missionary’s description of a Northern Cheyenne giveaway, demonstrating the extravagance of the giving ceremonies: “Horses, expensive shawls, dress goods, moccasins, war-bonnets, skins and other highly treasured things would be given.”\textsuperscript{54}

Scholars have shown how giveaways encouraged community cohesion, bonds between friends and family, and a redistribution of the wealth from rich to poor.\textsuperscript{55} Gifts in the form of quilt blocks, dresses, toys for children, and money, sent from home church sewing societies to the Cheyenne sewing circles and mission stations, were potentially loaded with meaning. When missionaries intervened and controlled access to much-needed gifts and money, instead of bridging cultures, the gifts became a way for missionaries to dominate and manipulate Cheyenne spiritual choices. Interactions between Cheyenne and white sewing circles were not always pathways to goodwill and cultural understanding. Over time the missionaries developed practices that limited access to economic resources and material goods based on a perceived lack of Christian commitment. They also used the gifts as bribes to lure Cheyenne to church services.

Across the decades and in the Mennonite missions to the Cheyenne in both Oklahoma Territory and Montana there exists a consistent record of missionaries participating in what could easily be construed as bribery. Gustave and Anna Linscheid arrived in Montana in 1904 and served until leaving for Oklahoma in 1920. One of the early tasks in Montana was to start the “first sewing class with Indian women,” which Anna Linscheid did in June 1905.\textsuperscript{56} However, before arriving in Montana, the Linscheids made it clear that only those Cheyenne who attended church services would receive economic assistance in the form of material goods sent from the home church sewing societies:

In our contact with them during the summer we had already informed them of the reason for our coming. . . . The gifts of clothing that had already been sent to Montana by the mission societies, which we could distribute at the occasion of our first Christmas meeting there, helped to open up the hearts and doors.\textsuperscript{57}

Anna Linscheid noted how missionaries took advantage of Cheyenne poverty: “Winters were long and cold and the Indians at that time destitute and poor. Soon requests came from other places on the reservation to have missionaries and mission stations in their vicinity also.”\textsuperscript{58}

Later in Oklahoma the Linscheids continued this practice and experienced considerable success when distributing Christmas gifts also known as bundles (see Fig. 5). An excerpt in Missionary News and Notes depicts how the Christmas bundles were distributed to those who regularly attended church services: “Beside the usual bag of treats there were presents of more lasting value given to those who were more faithful in attending the services during the year. All these gifts were purchased with money sent by sewing circles in the churches supporting the work.”\textsuperscript{59}

The Linscheids were not alone in this practice of limiting assistance to church attendees. Missionary Alfred Wiebe in a 1921 letter from the Northern Cheyenne reservation in Birney, Montana, also deliberately and very publicly tied church attendance to gift giving.
When all the [Christmas] boxes have arrived a day is set aside to sorting . . . according to kind, size etc. Then the roll book is produced in which a record has been kept of the attendance at the church services of all the Indians in the district. We begin with the one having the best attendance. The best things are chose for such a one. 60

Wiebe was not comfortable with this practice, as he goes on to note that “it may seem queer if not improper that we should take into account the church attendance in making the presents, but then the Indians are more or less like children and need some such help to induce them to come to hear God’s word.” 61 The Petters also used Christmas bundles to bribe the Cheyenne to the church services. Bertha K. Petter deliberately planned to have the Christian ceremonies and gift distribution conflict with Cheyenne religious ceremonies: “For Christmas we had planned a short series of meetings from the 23rd to the 25th of Dec. It was made plain that we wanted to have this at the same time the other celebration was going on.” 62 In a 1931 article in Missionary News and Notes she disparagingly writes of non-Christian Natives: “I was also impressed again over the holiday season to note that our church people are much cleaner than the rabble that appears on the
scene only at Christmas time in the eager hope of getting some of your coveted gifts."

How did the Cheyenne respond to missionary manipulation of material resources sent from the home churches to the sewing circles? Perhaps they were unforthcoming about the details of their spiritual practices, as noted above by Petter, given the distribution of material rewards for Christian faith. Other responses are found in the sources and are explicit. This lengthy excerpt from a letter penned by Alfred Habegger, who worked with the Northern Cheyenne in Busby, Montana, from 1918 until his death in 1956, details one Cheyenne response:

The giving of the Christmas gifts made by the loving hands of faithful Christian women in the home churches would take place on Christmas day. All present would receive gifts, but there would be nothing for such who attended the Heathen doings and did not come to our meeting on Christmas day. One faithless Christian said, "That's kicking, you are going to cause bad feelings." Others said, "You could have the giving after we get back just as well, we want to come to your Christmas, but we are invited to the other doings." (author's emphasis)

Clearly, Cheyenne responses varied to Habegger's requirement of church attendance. Habegger cites a "faithless Christian" (author's emphasis) who challenged missionary practice. The term "faithless Christian" raises a question of definition. Perhaps this was a person who attended church but did not profess Jesus as his Lord and Savior, which would have been a requirement of a faithful Christian. Perhaps the person was one who came to church when the Christmas gifts were distributed but declined to come at other times. Habegger also noted how a number of Cheyenne returned from the "heathen doings" to participate in the Christmas services but upon their return were denied gifts and "were feeling bad that they were not given anything." When one considers how important gift giving or "giveaways" were in tribal cultural, the practice of denying gifts was culturally insensitive and "kicking" indeed. Habegger's tone is harsher than that of an earlier missionary, H. J. Kliewer, who in 1901 wrote in a eulogy for Chief Red Moon: "He had frequently heard the word of God, but we are not able to tell whether or not he found salvation through Christ and we leave it to Him whose judgment is true and who will judge every one according to the light and the opportunity he had in life." This eulogy and other writings in the Cheyenne & Arapaho Sword, an early publication of the Mennonite missionaries, contrasts with writings from a later era in which the language and tone are more judgmental. By the time the Habeggers started working with the Cheyenne, references to the Cheyenne as "heathens" were commonplace.

The Cheyenne soon assessed the manipulation by the missionaries and responded in a number of ways. Instead of choosing between "heathen doings" and the missionary Christmas Day celebrations, they simply changed the times of their religious ceremonies and dances so that there would not be a conflict with the Christmas services: "Christmas day found the church too small to hold the crowd as the Heathen doings were suspended during the day, so they could come and get of the gifts at the big giving." It appears the Cheyenne outwitted the missionaries, delaying their dances until after the "big giving" occurred earlier in the day, leaving only "a small set" in attendance at the evening church services when the majority of Cheyenne returned to their traditional rituals.

There were other forms of resistance. Cheyenne, including Christians, questioned missionary interpretations of the Bible, asking, "What is this you have read . . . Is that written in the Bible, or have the missionaries written this now to suit the occasion?" In the following account, a high-status wife of an Arrow Keeper, the most sacred of the chiefs, challenged missionary authority, as related by Rodolphe Petter:
One Sunday, in the beginning of service, while I was reading the ten commandments, a woman stood up in anger and shouted to me, “Who told you all this against us?” . . . The woman not wanting to hear any more . . . rushed out of the chapel to be seen there no more. She remained unfriendly.69

Resistance was also found in the form of peer pressure exerted through tribal societies, as Rodolphe Petter noted:

Many of the . . . organizations, societies or bands have felt “crowded” and the majority of them resent bitterly the growing influence of Christianity and civilization. This state of affairs is the main hindrance to mission work among these people.70

By 1928 Mrs. Alfred Habegger reported a disappointing Christmas program attendance: “We had hoped the Christians would attend regularly, but some had gone to camp near the Indian celebration and took part in the dances and giving.”71 Ultimately, missionary attempts to control Cheyenne spirituality failed. One missionary blamed new “liberal” governmental policies that allowed Cheyenne to “return to their former tribal customs and to become ‘good old Indians’ again.” The missionary went on to comment that new governmental policy “seriously interferes with the educational and religious work which has been done by the missionaries.”72 Perhaps the new liberalism of the federal government did undermine missionary attempts to “civilize and Christianize” the Cheyenne. In addition it seems that the practice of rewarding church attendance with material gifts backfired. In an ironic decision (given the history just elicited), the Mennonite Women’s Missionary Society tired of sewing circles and deemed it important to stop sending supplies to the missions since missionaries “have come to the conclusion that too much giving makes ‘nice Christians,’” dependents who feel that they have a right to expect some material reward for becoming Christians.73 Missionary sources suggest, however, that manipulating cherished cultural practices such as giveaways with materials from the sending societies produced resentment and resistance.

MODERN MONENEHEO: THE STAR MISSION CLUB

Despite the manipulations and bribes, by 1930 Cheyenne women’s sewing circles were well established, as this reference attests: “The men at Hammon will have to do some more organizing to keep up with the women. The women not only have a sewing society but also a Chicken Club and a Garden Club.”74 The main source we have for Southern Cheyenne women’s sewing societies comes to us in the form of a small booklet, the “Star Mission Club Minutes book” of the Mennonite church in Clinton, Oklahoma.75 The mission club formally met for eight years, from August 1939 to December 1947. During those years, between five and fifteen women met at least once a month and as often as twice a week to sew quilt tops, dresses for girls, tea towels, and lunch cloths. One learns from the Cheyenne and Arapaho Messenger, a newsletter published by the Workers Conference of the General Conference missionaries in Oklahoma, that by the late 1930s a number of sewing circles were established.76

As with women’s work making buffalo robes, women worked in large groups. Pictures from these years in both Southern and Northern Cheyenne tribes show large groups of women either inside or outside the church, attending to their sewing (see Fig. 6). Women brought their babies and taught their daughters to sew. Women were in control of their production and used the proceeds from quilt sales, lotteries, auctions, and offerings as they saw fit. According to the Star Mission Club minutes book, during the first few months, missionary J. B. Ediger gave the devotions, but after March 1940 he did not attend and let the women run their own services. The work of the Star Mission Club was woman-centered and woman-directed. In one of the
first scholarly articles to examine women’s place in the Mennonite church, Sharon Klingelsmith found that the Mennonite Women’s Missionary Society was forced to disband after they raised more money than the all-male Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities. Before disbanding, the society was taken over by the husbands of the female leaders in the hopes that the men could control female decision making.77 The Star Mission Club did not have to worry about male takeover. They differed from the women portrayed in Klingelsmith’s article, in that women ran the show, free from male interference in decision making or budgetary choices.

Another key difference was that Cheyenne women were not making layettes, quilts, or Christmas bundles to send overseas. Instead, Star Mission Club members were deeply concerned about the welfare of local Cheyenne people and others in the community. In an e-mail message, Cheyenne peace chief Lawrence Hart explained:

The Star Mission Club helped all Cheyenne, or Arapaho, irregardless of whether they were Mennonite. We saw this still practiced when we got here [in 1963]. One of the activities that was a good ministry was the making of layettes, given to new
mothers at the Clinton Indian hospital, as an example.\textsuperscript{78}

The Star Mission Club provided a way for women to assert themselves in the community. They had a legitimate place in the community, one that was approved of by the patriarchal Mennonite church but also drew upon the much older Moneneheo or Chosen Women tradition.

The group provided a venue for women who wished to serve. Much of what the mission club did during these years can be described as benevolent or charitable work. For example, at their second meeting they seemingly made spontaneous plans to visit a sick friend:

We immediately made plans to go and visit and cheer Bear Woman and found her to be a very sick woman. Held a short service at her home and found in need of medical attention. Held a special collection for her. Mrs. Ediger, Mrs. Burns and Mrs. Sarah Yellow Bull each gave .20 and we gave what dues we collected and also our Love offering. We found her without groceries and Mary Heap of Birds and Alice Heap of Birds each were to bring her something a day or so later.\textsuperscript{79}

Two months later, the Star Mission Club held an offering to retire Bear Woman's medical expenses.\textsuperscript{80} It was not unusual for the mission club to pay for groceries or to take prepared food to the elderly or sick. Their visits often started with a short program that could include singing, prayer, and scripture verses.

Like the Moneneheo societies, women from the best families participated in the club. The roster and pictorial evidence is replete with high-status family names such as Hart, Heap of Birds, and Whiteshield.\textsuperscript{81} Additional cultural continuities can be found in giveaways, fundraisers for church and local camps, and hospitality sponsored by the mission club. They sponsored the Cheyenne custom of "giveaways" by giving quilts to those who were recognized as being in need. Sewing raised money for the group and they determined how to spend it. Blanche Hart Whiteshield remembered selling quilts as a way to sustain families during World War II: "We used to milk during the war. We'd sell chickens and eggs and we raised cattle. I worked over here at this church. We used to sew, make quilts and sell them."\textsuperscript{82}

Can one argue that the Star Mission Club allowed women a modicum of autonomy? Of course the prestige and status associated with the club was not on the scale of the nineteenth-century Moneneheo. Young women did not vie to gain admission to the society, nor did the quilts made by the club produce wealth for their families. However, Star Mission Club women were able to make decisions autonomously from male control and their charitable work brought them visibility and was valued highly in the community.

It is interesting to note that Christmas bundles and offerings to the Indian missions in Oklahoma and Montana continued, but according to published records the contributions diminished every year. In spite of limited support from the home churches, it is clear from pictorial evidence and oral histories that Cheyenne mission clubs lasted until the 1970s.\textsuperscript{83}

CONVERGING WOMEN'S CIRCLES

Scholars C. Kurt Dewhurst and Marsha L. MacDowell argue that "despite their relatively recent introduction into the Native community, quilts are as quintessentially Native as any other object that supports a Native belief system, worldview, or sense of identity."\textsuperscript{84} They explain that missionaries introduced quilting, and that in some areas Native churches are still receiving patches for quilt making.\textsuperscript{85} Folklorist Jill Hemming, in a study of Waccamaw-Siouan quilters, questions how long quilting needs to be practiced in a Native community before being "culturally owned" and argues that the prominence of quilting in a North Carolina Native community contradicts the "claim that quilting is 'not an Indian thing.'"\textsuperscript{86} A recent article in Smithsonian promoted the National
Museum of the American Indian’s recent acquisition of “Indian quilts,” referring to quilt making as a “tribal craft.” Clearly, quilting taught by missionaries has over time become thoroughly integrated into tribal life. However, interpretations of quilting circles, and specifically their purpose and place within the Cheyenne community, are easily muddied. The strategies missionaries used to lure Cheyenne to the church and the Natives’ responses illuminate cultural divergences.

In this study, I examined approximately seventy years of interaction between Cheyenne women and Mennonite missionaries. I documented Mennonite attempts to use material goods as bribes to lure Cheyenne to mission churches. I also examined Cheyenne responses. The Cheyenne and Mennonite women did not fight for control over the quilting process or the proceeds from the sale of the quilts. Yet the study of how women’s work was defined and organized and how gifts were distributed from home Mennonite churches in the United States reveals not only the benefits of the circles to Cheyenne but also the cultural chasms between these two groups.

Abandoned white clapboard churches are all that remain of decades of Mennonite missionary outreach in western Oklahoma. Leaves accumulate in the portals and sanctuaries of the abandoned buildings. The church in Clinton, Oklahoma, though still active, has few members and only a handful of regular attendees on Sunday mornings. The sewing circles that started and restarted during the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century are no longer in existence as many of the stalwart members have passed away or are too old to participate. The circles remain only in the memories of the children of the quilters. At the historical conference “Cheyenne, Arapaho, Mennonite: Journey from Darlington,” held in Clinton, Oklahoma, in 2006, two men mentioned the importance of the sewing circle during their childhoods in the 1970s. They spoke fondly of being brought by their mothers to the circle, playing with the other children and being gently encouraged and disciplined by women who were not their mothers. Pictorial evidence from the 1960s (such as Fig. 6) shows that the sewing circle was a place where women gathered. Taught by missionary women like Marie Petter and Anna Linscheid, quilting was passed down to daughters and helped to sustain Cheyenne customs and community. Today, quilting is not taught in the Clinton area. Younger women prefer to learn beading, a reemerging tradition.

Sewing circles, begun in the late nineteenth century and lasting for almost a century, have generally been overlooked by scholars of Mennonites even though this women’s work was one of the longest-lived expressions of Mennonite and Cheyenne cooperation. The examination of sewing circles provides scholars with a case of multilayered meanings, of cultural convergences and conflicts, and through it all, the remarkable endurance of Cheyenne women’s needlecraft traditions.

NOTES


2. “Allotment” refers to the pattern of land distribution under the Dawes Act of 1887, which, as applied to the Southern Cheyenne, carved reservation land into individual plots of 160 acres then given to every adult male and female in the tribe. The remaining acreage was sold to land-hungry whites. See Donald J. Berthrong, The Cheyenne and Arapaho Ordeal: Reservation and Agency Life in the Indian Territory, 1875–1907 (1976; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 118–19.


4. Rodolphe Petter, Reminiscences of Past Years in Mission Service among the Cheyenne (Lame Deer,

5. Clyde Ellis found that some missionary women to the Kiowa were called “mother” and treated with great affection. See “The Christian Faith and Indian Cultural Survival,” keynote address presented at “Cheyenne, Arapaho, Mennonite: Journey from Darlington” conference, April 2006, Clinton, OK; Cathy Ann Trotta found that in their domestic roles as wives and mothers, women were welcomed into the matrilineal Hopi culture in the Mennonite mission in Oraibi, AZ. See “Mennonite Missionary Martha Moster Voth in the Hopi Pueblos, 1893–1910” in Strangers at Home: Women of Anabaptist Traditions in Historical Perspective, ed. Kimberly D. Schmidt, Dianne Zimmerman Umble, and Steven D. Reschly (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). Finally, Luke Eric Lassiter, Clyde Ellis, and Ralph Kotay speculate that because missionary women were not associated with the U.S. Army or present in official government capacity, they were more easily integrated into the tribal life. See The Jesus Road: Kiowas, Christianity, and Indian Hymns (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 58–59.


9. Petter, Reminiscences; Mrs. Bertha K. Petter, Two Life Sketches of Vxzeta and Vohokass (Lame Deer, MT: n.p., n.d., likely privately published by Petter, possibly 1936), 57. Reminiscences and Two Life Sketches were published in conjunction with one another. The book can be found at the Mennonite Library and Archives in North Newton, KS.

10. For articles on how Mennonite women experienced silencing, see Schmidt, Umble, and Reschly, Strangers at Home, especially chapters by Kimberly D. Schmidt, Linda Huebert Hecht, and Julia Kasdorf.


14. James C. Juhnke expresses astonishment that the Mennonites would so hastily and naively accept assistance from the very entity that had so viciously persecuted the Cheyenne. See A People of Mission: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Overseas Missions (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1979), 12.

15. Mrs. G. A. Linscheid, “Cantonment,” 1, MLA-MS-13, Folder 1, 1892–1940, Mennonite Library and Archives (hereafter referred to as MLA), North Newton, KS.

16. Previous to 1907, when Oklahoma was received into statehood, the Mennonite mission in Oklahoma Territory was considered a “foreign mission.”

17. H. J. Kliwer’s delightful stories are found in “Information,” MLA-MS-13, Folder 1, Correspondence and Articles, 1892–1940.

18. These stories are about Arapaho, not Cheyenne, children. However, as George Bird Grinnell points out, “Among the tribes of the plains the Cheyenne have had one ally on whose fidelity they could always depend. These are the Arapahoes, who for many generations have been associated with the Cheyenne on terms of closest friendship, camping with them for long periods.” See The Fighting Cheyenne (1915; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 5.
21. The historic peace churches consist of Quakers, Mennonite, and Brethren in Christ. All three traditions teach peace, pacifism, or nonresistance as part of their Christian belief system.
23. The exhibit “Identity by Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Woman’s Dresses” at the National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC, displayed exquisite examples of Plains Indian needlecraft. Among this exhibit were numerous examples of Cheyenne craftsmanship. See the book by the same title (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2007).
31. In this paper, the usage of the term “massacre” versus “battle” is deliberate. Black Kettle’s peaceful band of Cheyenne was destroyed by Custer’s Seventh Calvary. For an assessment of Black Kettle’s attempts at peace, see Thom Hatch, “Black Kettle: The Cheyenne Chief Who Sought Peace But Found War” (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2004); and Stan Hoig, The Peace Chiefs of the Cheyenne (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980).
33. Mike Cowdry, Arrow’s Elk Society Ledger: A Southern Cheyenne Record of the 1870s. (Santa Fe: Morning Star Gallery, 1999): 47.
34. G. A. Linscheid, “Southern-Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians,” MLA-MS-13, Folder 3, “Cheyenne Membership Records,” p. 3. As an aside, the Mohawk Lodge, now located in Clinton, Oklahoma, is still in operation and still offers a wide variety of Indian handicraft items for sale. The proprietors have accumulated many artifacts and photographs over time and the business also serves as a kind of ad hoc museum.
36. For a discussion of Mennonite domestic servants as urban pioneers, see Marlene Epp, Mennonite Women in Canada: A History (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 200–231. David A. Haury includes a short note from two Mennonite domestic servants who helped to found the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church in Wichita, KS. See A People of the City (1982, published for the 50th anniversary of the Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church), 2.
37. Ella Klassen Schmidt bought implements for the farm’s tractor with her wedding cake and egg money. Her earnings are recorded in aledger book, “Cakes I Baked,” in the author’s collection.
38. Rake, “A Thread of Continuity,” 53, found occasional instances of sewing circles contracting with a well-known quilter to do the fancy work on a quilt, especially antique quilts.
41. For a treatment of Mennonite women’s quilting as artistic expression, see Epp, Mennonite Women in Canada, 225–37.
43. Annual Report, Willing Helpers, Alexanderwol Mennonite Church, 1947–1948, no page numbers. My appreciation to Laura Flaming for finding this information in the Alexanderwol Mennonite Church archives. Laura is my aunt, and the above-referenced Ella Klassen Schmidt, her mother.
44. Annual Report, Willing Helpers.
47. Please note that in this article the term “home church” refers to Mennonite churches in the United States who sent money and material goods to the “Native churches” in what was then Oklahoma Territory.
48. Petter diary, MLA-MS-31, 1-5.
51. Linscheid, “Cantonment Mission.”
52. Linscheid, “Cantonment Mission.”
57. Mrs. G. A. Linscheid, Mission Talk, #5, MLA-MS-13, Folder 1, Correspondence and Articles, 1892–1940.
58. Linscheid, Mission Talk.
59. No author, Missionary News and Notes 5, no. 6 (February 1931): 4.
64. A. Habegger, “Christmas with the Cheyenne at Busby, Montana,” no specific date given, MLA-MS-13, Folder 1, a&a, 1892–1940. This letter was filed with other memos dating from the 1920s and most likely comes from that era.
65. Habegger, “Christmas with the Cheyenne.”
69. Petter, Reminiscences, 32–33.
73. Missionary News and Notes 8, no. 2 (October 1933): 1–2.
74. Cheyenne and Arapaho Messenger 3 (March 1930): 4.
75. Star Mission Club minutes book, opening page. The book is in the collection of the Cheyenne Cultural Center, Clinton, OK.
76. Cheyenne and Arapaho Messenger 3 (March 1930): 4.
77. Klingelsmith, “Women in the Mennonite Church.”
78. Lawrence Hart, e-mail message to author, March 8, 2006.
82. Blanche Hart Whiteshield, interview by author, Hammon, OK, May 9, 2005.