

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1987

Plains Indian Cultures: An Introduction

Frances W. Kaye

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, fkaye1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Kaye, Frances W., "Plains Indian Cultures: An Introduction" (1987). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 322.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/322>

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 Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

PLAINS INDIAN CULTURES

AN INTRODUCTION

In March 1986 more than 200 scholars and other participants came to a symposium entitled "Plains Indian Cultures: Past and Present Meanings." The six articles that follow represent a cross section of the conference. Two separate volumes of conference papers, on international perspectives and on policy issues, are to be published later. We thank Vernon Snow and the Snow Foundation for supporting all of these publications.

Timothy J. Klobardanz's engaging study "In the Land of *Inyan Woslata*" shows how the German Russians who settled on Standing Rock Reservation came to identify with the Sioux. Anglo-American merchants in the area directed their jokes at both the "Long Hairs" among the Indians and the "dumb Rooshun" immigrants, making it easier for the German Russians and Indians to accept each other. This alliance included joint church services conducted in German, Lakota, and English; German-Russian use of Lakota words; merged foodways and other material culture; and joint holidays and holy days. Even traditional Germanic patriarchy softened as the immigrants absorbed the loving, respectful manners the Sioux showed toward their children. Indeed the German Russians on Standing

Rock became assimilated into American ways—but they were American Indian ways.

If Klobardanz questions our usual assumptions about contact and assimilation, Russel Lawrence Barsh in "Plains Indian Agrarianism and Class Conflict" questions the usual historical judgment "that the Indian New Deal was good because it stopped allotment." Instead, he argues, allotment had enabled some Indians to build their own, autonomous economic base as ranchers. The Indian New Deal virtually halted this development and guaranteed that positions in the Indian Affairs bureaucracy would become the Indians' only route to middle class status. Barsh concludes, "When we hear it said today the Indians do not believe in property or in private enterprise, we are still hearing the echoes of the struggle against Indian agrarian entrepreneurs in the 1930s—a struggle waged in the name of liberating landless Indians from poverty, but which in reality returned reservation economics to government dependence."

Carroll Van West takes a different tack in "Acculturation by Design." Instead of questioning our assumptions, he fleshes out a truism. Every casual reader knows that the permanent, right-angled architecture of the

dominant American culture seemed strange and oppressive to Plains Indians used to living in round and movable tipis. But West considers the specific structures built for two Indian groups and ponders their meaning. Both forms of architecture were strange to the Indians, but the ornate Second Empire style edifices built for the Blackfeet at Holy Family and St. Peter's missions represented their builders' intention to "uplift" and "inspire" the people they regarded as savages. The plain log cabins built for the Northern Cheyennes at Birney Village a quarter century later were expected by their builders to "tame" Indians into accepting the status of docile, lower class workers.

In their study of leadership selection processes on two Canadian Indian reserves, J. Anthony Long and Menno Boldt flesh out a suspicion political scientists have harbored—that imposed, western-style elective leadership selection processes have proved neither effective nor democratic for reserve communities. By comparing band council elections on the Blood and Peigan reserves with municipal council elections in three adjacent non-Indian towns, Long and Boldt can pinpoint the economic and cultural reasons why the two processes are not equivalent. The authors conclude that band government would improve if it were more accountable to band members and less to the Department of Indian Affairs, and if it could call on the traditional strength of the culture by constituting a Council of Elders to advise the elected council.

While most of the authors of these articles write from a position outside the community that they analyze, R. D. Theisz writes "Song Texts and their Performers" from the vantage point of his membership in a traditional Lakota singing group. Theisz points to the centrality of the music complex in contemporary Lakota life and analyzes the changes in song texts and performance over the past twenty years. The texts have become simpler

to accommodate a new younger generation of Lakota singers who may not have facility in the old language. The texts have also come to reflect the importance of song for preserving and transmitting Lakota culture. Far from being homogenized festivals pandering to stereotypical tourist views of "colorful-dancing-feathered Natives," contemporary Indian song and dance performances are, Theisz asserts, crucial to both participants and to the culture itself in affirming a positive Indian identity against the pressures of the dominant society.

In the concluding article of this issue, Richmond L. Clow sounds again the recurrent theme that the past has not always functioned in the ways that we have assumed. While the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act was intended to bring self-government to the Indians, Clow points out that many Indian groups had achieved self-government long before 1934. His examples, the people of the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations, had already constructed, between them, seven different written constitutions. This volume of activity and this willingness to adopt and change forms of internal government without the help or advice of the Indian Office show, Clow argues, that Indians were knowledgeably engaged in constitutional self-government before 1934. Indeed, ironically, the early constitutions on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations actually furnished the Sioux with more autonomy than did the post-1934 constitutions with their requirement that tribes submit most of their decisions to Washington for approval or review.

The following six articles, then, show some of the most provocative and challenging trends in contemporary scholarship dealing with the Plains Indians of North America. We wish you good reading.

FRANCES W. KAYE
Editor