Clarion Review

Social Sciences

Nish'Ki
Kay Schweinfurth
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Five Stars (out of Five)

The history of Native American peoples is often a tragic mix of broken treaties and repeated clashes with the forces of manifest destiny that marched across the North American frontier. The story of the Southern Cheyenne, a tribe originally of the northern Plains but resettled to a particularly parched bit of western Oklahoma, is no exception. Author Kay Schweinfurth looks at Cheyenne families from the town of Hammon, Oklahoma, over a period of thirty years, from the graduate research she performed in the 1970s through the present. Schweinfurth's doctoral dissertation was accepted, but portions of it were not published, in honor of agreements she made with some of the subjects she interviewed. These grandmothers believed that vengeful ghosts might haunt them if their candid words were made public before their deaths.

This book contains some of these formerly unpublished family histories, as well as updated analysis of the role that grandmothers play in sustaining their large networks and tribal traditions. History buffs and other readers will be interested to learn how Native American societies have changed in response to shifting government policies. The Cheyenne were hunter-gatherers and warriors originally from the Dakotas and Montana. After their relocation in the 1870s, they were directed by US government policies to become farmers and assimilate into white culture.

Schweinfurth writes clearly and with evident sympathy toward the families she studied. Her style is journalistic and clear, and though derived from her scholarly research, is devoid of technical jargon. She writes about problems of discrimination, alcoholism, escalating diabetes rates, and unemployment. She also discusses the ways that matriarchs in this small society help their families deal with these issues by taking in adult children and grandchildren and sharing money and food. Unfortunately, when this generation dies off, the succeeding generations often do not have replacements to fill their leadership void.

The story of Anna Otterby Hawk (1900-1977), illustrates this pattern. The elderly widow

struggled to pay her utility bills on her small monthly income. Despite her limited resources, Anna housed a shifting population of her adult sons and various grandchildren. Upon her death, none of her seven children took on her role as head of the family and the grandchildren were dispersed among the community. Most of her children died prematurely and by 2007, none of her descendants were living in Hammon.

Schweinfurth notes that the Hawk Family story is not unusual. “It is quite usual to find an older woman providing for the total care and education of grandchildren and forming ties with them that are stronger than ties to her own children and their mothers,” she writes. The author further notes that these Cheyenne women are “preserving the kin’s livelihood and well being in an unfriendly white world” by keeping children within the family when their parents spiral into alcoholism or other disease and by cooperating and sharing economic resources.

Many photographs, both vintage and modern, of the Cheyenne families under study are presented, but it is sometimes unclear which family is being illustrated. Greater care in integrating the photos with the text would provide more clarity about which families were being discussed.

Schweinfurth’s book is a window into this small group of Southern Cheyenne that effectively straddles the genres of detailed anthropology study and general interest history. It should be of particular value to students of Plains Indians history and culture and would be a welcome addition to any larger collection of Western Americana.

Rachel Jagareski