

## Aboriginal Women in the Canadian West

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In 1953, the Indian Association of Alberta held its annual meeting at the Saddle Lake Reserve community hall. That year, Indian women from across Alberta spoke on a variety of social issues. "Education must continue. Much could be done through the Home and School movement," said Mrs. Daisy Crowchild; Mrs. Bob Crow Eagle called for better qualified teachers for her reserve school at Brocket; Mrs. English, in turn, also fearlessly declared, "Mr. President, I am here for the first time and I am surprised and pleased to see so many women here as delegates. I am glad to see the officials from departments here, willing to discuss our problems with us. That is cooperation for our benefit."<sup>1</sup> Later, at that same meeting, Mrs. Clarence McHugh was voted treasurer of this political organization (plate 1).

While these Alberta women struggled to establish better social conditions and a future for their children through political means, elsewhere other Aboriginal women worked tirelessly and collectively to improve their communities through church groups and post-secondary education. Voluntary associations were one way Aboriginal women acted together within their societies. On the Blackfoot (Siksika) Reserve, for example, the Red Cross operated volunteer groups. Nurses of the local Blackfoot Indian Hospital helped organize regular volunteer blood donor clinics for the Red Cross, much like their counterparts in the cities (plate 2). On the File Hills Reserve in Saskatchewan, as on many other prairie reserves, the Women's Missionary Society became a focal point for group work; quilting parties were not only regular and popular social occasions, they also provided community support and valuable products for the home (plate 3). Lena Bear recalls the Women's Auxilliary on the Muskoday Reserve: "All women were asked to wash their flour bags to make blankets. At that time these were washed by hand. Mrs. Gentleman [local teacher's wife] supplied the patches for the patchwork quilts. . . . They sure turn out some beautiful quilts and other things."<sup>2</sup> Women's groups also maintained the spiritual life of their communities. Through traditional societies, such as the Motoki or Old Women's Society on the Blood (Kainai) Reserve in southern Alberta, and by having their daughters attend summer church camps, women passed

spiritual values to the younger generations (plates 4 and 5). Political groups, the church, traditional societies and other voluntary associations gave women powerful means and opportunities to shape their world.

These photographs also reveal family life as a foundation for women's collective "work." From Poplar River on Lake Winnipeg to the plains of southern Saskatchewan and Alberta, women relied on each other to mind children and maintain family ties (plates 6 and 7). Interestingly, though families gathered throughout the year, for many treaty Indian women a notable and important family occasion was Treaty Day (plate 8): "All families got caught up in the excitement. . . . Treaty Day was an all day event. All reserve residents and visitors gathered for a day of fun, games and a big picnic. This was the time to see who married whom and to see what names were given to the new babies."<sup>3</sup> On Treaty Day, families gathered dressed in their best new clothes, everyone mingled and social ties were reaffirmed.<sup>4</sup>

Formal education also influenced the daily activities of Aboriginal women as a group. Most women were educated by their families, many in residential and day schools, and some continued on to post-secondary educations outside their own communities.<sup>5</sup> In colleges and schools, Aboriginal women of the post-war generation were generally encouraged to educate themselves collectively and formally along lines similar to non-Aboriginal women: as secretaries, as clerks and in the domestic arts (plates 9 and 10). Using this education, women sought wage employment in cities or on their reserves, and so brought additional income to their families and communities.

The photographs presented here are interesting because they show the important collective aspect of women's lives. In addition, they support the idea that "visual portrayals of Indian women, while generally less prevalent than those of men, exhibit much greater variation in their content and themes."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this small group of photographs illustrate some of those numerous, diverse and significant roles Aboriginal women played in their communities throughout the twentieth century.

These historic photographs raise many questions. How did formal education affect the role of women in their communities? What was the role of Aboriginal women in politics? What kinds of voluntary associations appealed to women in Aboriginal communities? How were family life and wage labour balanced? From these photos it is clear that as mothers, sisters, students, daughters, holy women, nurses, typists, cooks, politicians and even Indian princesses, Aboriginal women's works and lives have strongly influenced their communities. These are significant issues the academic literature has yet to consider.

**All photographs are reprinted with permission of the Glenbow Archives, Calgary.**

## Notes

- 1 Indian Association of Alberta, minutes of meeting, 1953 (file 11, John Laurie Fonds, Glenbow Archives, pp. 11-14).
- 2 Lena Bear, "W.A. Anglican Church," in *And They Told us Their Stories*, edited by J. Funk and G. Lobe (Saskatoon: Saskatoon District Tribal Council, 1991), p. 101. See also Eleanor Brass, *I Walk in Two Worlds* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1987), p. 27; and Freda Ahenakew, *Our Grandmothers' Lives as Told in Their Own Words* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1992), p. 159, where Irene Calliou mentions sewing as an important "household chore."
- 3 Mabel Smokeyday, "Annual Treaty Day Gathering," in Funk and Lobe (eds.), p. 86.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See Diane Meilli, *Those Who Know* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1991). Her interviews with women elders reveal the nature of women's education in the mid-twentieth century, the challenges faced by Aboriginal women in their daily lives, as well as their accomplishments as Aboriginal women.
- 6 Patricia Albers and William R. James, "Illusion and Illumination: Visual Images of American Indian Women in the West," in *The Women's West*, edited by Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p. 37.



Plate 1: Executive of Indian Association of Alberta, 24 June 1960. (NA-2557-18)  
Left to right—Howard Beebe; Mrs. Daisy Crowchild; Chief Walking Buffalo; Peter Burnstick; David Crowchild.



Plate 2: Blood donor clinic at Blackfoot Indian hospital, Gleichen, Alberta, 1956 (NA-3087-34).



Plate 3: Quilting party, File Hills Reserve, Saskatchewan, 1940 (NA-3454-50). Front row, left to right—Mrs. Ed Sanderson; Mrs. Jim Stonechild; Mrs. Lorna Stonechild; Mrs. Nola Thomas; Mrs. Fred Dieter; Mrs. Roy Keewatin. Back row, left to right—Mrs. Tom anderson; Mrs. J.B. Pinay.



Plate 4: Members of Blood Old Women's Society, seated, 1893 (NA-668-28).



Plate 5: Blackfoot girls at Anglican summer camp, Banff, ca. 1911 (NA-999-2). Back left to right—??; Millie Maguire; ??; Rosie Yellowfly; Maggie Spotted Eagle; ??; Kate Bluebird; ??. Front—Miss Studhorse; Miss Water Chief; Naomi Little Walker; ??; ??; Ellen Mayfield; Nora Studhorse.





Plate 6: Mrs. A. Yellow Sun, Blackfoot Indian, 1922 (NA-3664-6)



Plate 7: Indian mothers and babies at Poplar River, ca. 1905 (United Church Archives 654-20114, courtesy Western Canada Pictorial Index).



Plate 8: Cree Indian women attending fair or treaty payment, File Hills, Saskatchewan, 1907 (NA-3454-33). Ladies, seated, left to right—??; Mrs. Frank Gordon; Mrs. Fred Dieter; Eleanor Dieter (child); Mrs. John Thomas.



Plate 9: Three Indian girls attending business college, Calgary, 26 November 1964 (NA-2557-29). Left to right—Emily Gallant, Peigan Indian; Gloria and Emily Starlight, Sarcee Indians (daughters of Chief James Starlight); and instructor, Martin Brodhead.



Plate 10: Cooking class at School of Agriculture, Olds, Alberta, 1956 (NA-2557-8)