Our Hearts Fell to the Ground
Plains Indian Views of How the West Was Lost

Edited with an Introduction by
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the reservation. I accepted the appointment. I was paid ten dollars each month for going to the agency and attending to the court business one or two times each month. Not long after I had been serving as judge, Eddy called me into his office. He said:

"A letter from Washington tells me that Indians having two or more wives must send away all but one. You, as judge, must do your part toward seeing that the Cheyennes do this."

My heart jumped around in my breast when he told me this. He went on talking further about the matter, but I could not pay close attention to him. My thoughts were racing and whirling. When I could get them steady enough for speech, I said to him:

"I have two wives. You must get some other man to serve as judge."

He sat there and looked straight at me, saying nothing for a little while. Then he began talking again:

"Somebody else as judge would make you send away one of your wives. It would be better if you yourself managed it. All of the Indians in the United States are going to be compelled to put aside their extra wives. Washington has sent the order."

I decided to keep the office of judge. It appeared there was no getting around the order, so I made up my mind to be the first one to send away my extra wife, then I should talk to the other Cheyennes about the matter. I took plenty of time to think about how I should let my wives know about what was coming. Then I allowed the released one some further time to make arrangements as to where she should go. The first wife, the older one, had two daughters. The younger wife had no children. It seemed this younger one ought to leave me. I was in very low spirits. When a wagon came to get her and her personal packs I went out and sat on a knoll about a hundred yards away. I could not speak to her. It seemed I could not move. All I could do was just sit there and look down at the ground. She went back to her own people, on another reservation. A few years later I heard that she was married to a good husband. Oh, how glad it made my heart to hear that!

I sent a policeman to tell all Cheyennes having more than one wife to come and see me. One of them came that same afternoon. After we had smoked together, I said:

"The agent tells me that I as the judge must order all Cheyennes to have only one wife. You must send away one of yours."

"I shall not obey that order," he answered me.
"Yes, it will have to be that way," I insisted.
"But who will be the father to the children?" he asked.
"I do not know, but I suppose that will be arranged."

"Wooden Leg, you are crazy. Eddy is crazy."
"No. If anybody is crazy, it is somebody in Washington. All of the Indians in the United States have this order. If we resist it, our policemen will put us into jail. If much trouble is made about it, soldiers may come to fight us. Whatever man does not put aside his extra wife may be the cause of the whole tribe being killed."

Many of our men were angered by the order. My heart sympathized with them, so I never became offended at the strong words they sometimes used. Finally, though, all of them sent away their extra wives. Afterward, from time to time, somebody would tell me about some man living a part of the time at one place with one wife and a part of the time at another place with another wife. I just listened, said nothing, and did nothing. These were old men, and I considered it enough of change for them that they be prevented from having two wives at the same place.

On the southern plains, Quanah Parker also successfully evaded this aspect of the government's assault on his way of life. Formerly a prominent warrior, Quanah Parker emerged as the tribal leader on the Comanche reservation in Oklahoma. He assured the government he intended to follow the white man's path "so far as I was able." He visited Washington, D.C., as a judge on the Court of Indian Offenses, became a supporter of the government's program of education for his children, accumulated considerable wealth, usually wore the white man's clothes, and lived in an impressive ranch house. But he kept his hair long and, in defiance of government policy, he practiced polygamy and the peyote religion. When the government learned he had five or six wives it applied pressure to make him give them up. In 1894 Quanah swore "to give up and relinquish all claims to To-pay, as my wife," but To-pay stayed with him and bore him two children. Quanah's "much married condition" eventually cost him his judgeship, but he refused to give in on this issue, "stating that he had children by all of his wives, he loved them equally and loved his children and cared for them equally." He still had two wives when he died in 1911. 

LEARNING TO LIKE WOHAW

Unlike many people, Arapaho artist Carl Sweezy was able to look back on the painful period of transition from "the buffalo road" to "the corn road"
without bitterness. He remembered competent, honest, and humane agents like Brinton Darlington and John Miles, and he recalled how his people found humor and pleasure even as they had to learn to live in a difficult new world and had to develop a taste for **wohaw** (beef) rather than buffalo meat.

**CARL SWEZY**

**Learning the White Man's Ways**

We had everything to learn about the white man's road. We had come to a country that was new to us, where wind and rain and rivers and heat and cold and even some of the plants and animals were different from what we had always known. We had to learn to live by farming instead of by hunting and trading; we had to learn from people who did not speak our language or try to learn it, except for a few words, though they expected us to learn theirs. We had to learn to cut our hair short, and to wear close-fitting clothes made of dull-colored cloth, and to live in houses, though we knew that our long braids of hair and embroidered robes and moccasins and tall, round lodges were more beautiful... 

We had never made brick or sawed lumber or had a wooden door to open and shut. Although some of us had visited the forts and the trading posts before we came to the Reservation, and a few of us had seen the white man's towns and cities, hardly any of us had ever been in houses where families lived. We thought windows were put in the walls so that we might look in to see how white people did their work and ate their meals and visited with each other. We pulled up some of the first little trees that were planted at Darlington, to see why the white people had put sticks in the ground in rows. There is a story that one of our men, given a little pig to raise so that when it grew up he could have pork and bacon, returned it to the Agency to be kept for him until it grew too big to get through the holes in his fence. He did not realize that he could repair the fence to suit the size of his pig. 

We knew nothing about how to harness a work horse or turn a furrow in a field or cut and store hay; and today I suppose there are men living in cities who know no more about these things than we did. Our women did not know how to build a fire in a cook-stove or wash clothes in a tub of water. It was a long time before we knew what the figures on the face of a clock meant, or why people looked at them before they ate their meals or started off to church. We had to learn that clocks had something to do with the hours and minutes that the white people mentioned so often. Hours, minutes, and seconds were such small divisions of time that we had never thought of them. When the sun rose, when it was high in the sky, and when it set were all the divisions of the day that we had ever found necessary when we followed the old Arapaho road. When we went on a hunting trip or to a sun dance, we counted time by sleep.

My people had everything to learn about the white man's road, but they had a good time learning it. How they laughed when a war pony, not understanding what it was supposed to do when it was hitched to a plough or a wagon, lunged and jumped away and threw them flat on the ground, with the plough or the wagon riding high in the air.

How puzzled they were when they found that old men and women, among the white people, had teeth they could take out of their mouths and put back in again. They gave Brinton Darlington the name "Tosimea," "He Who Takes Out His Teeth," when he showed them that he could do this, and they wondered how he had come by that strange power. But when Mr. Miles came, he could do the same thing. It must be, they thought, something all Agents had the power to do; so the movement of taking out and putting back a set of teeth became the word for Agent in our sign language... 

We Arapaho had always been a sociable people. In our old way of life it had been necessary for us to live in bands, or villages of tipis, and to carry on all our important undertakings together; so we found it hard, in the early days on the Reservation, to learn to work and plan as individuals. Every occasion that brought us together gave us pleasure. We gathered for it early and wore the best we had and made the most of the chance to visit and feast and celebrate. So grass payments and annuity issues meant big times in our lives.

The grass money was rental for lands on our Reservation that we leased to white men for cattle grazing. Since nobody owned the land individually and there was far more of it than we could cultivate and farm, it was leased in large tracts in the name of the Cheyenne and the Arapaho tribes, through the Agent, and the money for the leases was paid to us once a year. Every man, woman, and child received an equal share. Often...
many of us had spent most of our money in advance, before it was paid to us, but all of us went to the Agency anyhow at the time of the grass payments. Sometimes we had spent our money wisely, for farm implements or household goods; sometimes we hardly knew where it had gone, for one thing or another at the commissary or at the store, where we had been given credit. But we made a good thing of the gathering. Even though the Agents tried to persuade us to come to the pay table wearing no paint and dressed in what they called civilized clothing, and even though many of us had little or no cash to take home with us when the traders had deducted what we owed them, we were all there and in a good mood. There was trading at the stores and feasting in the tipis and visiting everywhere, and everybody went away happy.

By the terms of the treaty at Medicine Lodge, the United States Government was to furnish us what we needed to live on, after we sat down on the Reservation, until we had time to learn to provide for ourselves. It was also to give us schools and teachers, and farm implements and blacksmiths and Agency farmers, to start us on the corn road. All this was paid for out of the fund credited to us for our claim to lands that we surrendered when we moved to the Reservation. Each winter, under this plan, we received an issue of what was called annuity goods. What we were given varied from year to year, but usually there were blankets, strouding for lodge covers, calico and denim for the women to use in making clothing, coats and trousers and shoes and stockings, axes and knives, and needles and thread and kettles and frying pans. Often the goods, which were supposed to reach us at the beginning of winter for use during the cold months ahead, were delayed a long time in the shipping; often, too, they had been carelessly packed and handled, so that the cloth was stained and mildewed and the knives and pans were rusty. And although the Agent and his men were good at figures, there was always some mistake in the count and not enough of any one thing for everyone. Sometimes there was a new lodge covering for only one family in three, or one pair of shoes for every two men. We laughed at some of these shortages and made the best of them. If a man’s share of shoes was only one instead of a pair, that was reason enough for the men to sell their shoes and wear moccasins. And if only part of the men got trousers, that was a good excuse to cut them up and wear them as leggings, as the older men usually wore them anyhow.

Each Agent distributed the goods according to his own system, but usually he portioned out whatever we were to get among the village chiefs, to be divided as they thought best. They were responsible men and knew the needs of each family, and they almost never failed to make a fair distribution as far as the goods went. Often we were disappointed over what Washington sent us, but I never heard of any quarrels between Indians over the issue, even when there was far too little to go around and the need was great.

Sometimes the Agents threatened to withhold the annuity goods, to compel us to send our children to school or to give up our medicine dances or to break sod and plant crops. They even threatened to withhold the goods from families of men who refused to cut their hair and to wear trousers. But there was nothing in the terms of the Medicine Lodge treaty to permit this kind of withholding, and the Agents learned not to try it. It made us sullen and uncooperative, and turned us back toward the old road rather than forward to the new.

Wherever we lived on the Reservation — and as the years went on, some of our villages were as much as sixty-five miles away — everyone that could make the trip was on hand at the Agency for the annuity issue. Many of the people, coming from a distance, brought their tipis and camping equipment with them and settled down at Darlington to visit and enjoy life together until the distribution was over. They walked or rode on ponjes with a travois dragging behind or came in wagons, and a few of them rode in carriages. The Agents and the teachers argued against an Indian’s buying a carriage when he needed, they said, to buy a stove and beds and chairs and farm equipment, but the Indian who managed to get together enough money to buy a carriage argued that he had been told to try to do as the white people did, and white people rode in carriages. We couldn’t do everything at once; so we did first what pleased us most.

All of us wore our best to the Agency for the annuity issue. The women came dressed in their buckskin jackets and leggings, or in calico dresses with bright shawls or blankets over them; they carried their babies on cradle boards and led along small children wearing beaded buckskin or calico or denim, with small shawls and blankets of their own. The men with long hair oiled their braids and bound them with otter skin or with colored string, and wore hats on top of these, if they had hats. There was every color and every kind of clothing to be seen, and everyone was in good spirits. Annuity meant a happy, sociable time for everyone. The children played such Indian games as the hoop-and-stick and the mudball game, or prisoner’s base and drop-the-handkerchief that they had learned from white children; the young men raced their ponies up and down the Agency streets, showing off; the older people, who hadn’t seen one another in a long time, sat together for hours in the lodges, visiting and telling stories of the old days. Hunting stories, war stories, stories of
brave marches and hard winters and perfect summers when the buffalo grew fat and the bushes were loaded with wild fruit, were told over by those who remembered them. All around the Agency, for two or three miles up and down the river, the tipis glowed at night from the center fires inside.

When the goods were distributed, everyone put on something new—a blanket or a hat or a coat or a shirt or a shawl. If a man got a pair of shoes or trousers that he did not want, he sold them or traded them off for something he fancied for himself or his family. There was trading going on everywhere, and those who came out of a deal with something to sell or with some money to spend now went to the traders' stores to see what they could get. We were always glad to have coffee and sugar and flour, and maybe some canned goods, to take home with us. By the time the gathering broke up, everyone had something new and everyone was happy.

Food was issued on a different plan. At first when we raised no crops and had no knowledge of how to do any kind of work that would give us employment at the Agency, nearly all of our food had to be issued to us. Beef was issued only after we no longer had buffalo meat when smaller game was not to be had. Every two weeks other items of food that white people considered necessary to live on were distributed to us: bacon and salt pork, flour, sugar, salt, coffee, and lard. Some of these things, especially the bacon and the salt pork, we had to learn to eat, because they were too salty for our taste. Later, when the buffalo were all gone and even small game was less plentiful, but when many of us began to have foodstuffs from our farms and some money to buy part of our supplies, only beef and flour were issued. These rations were supposed to be enough to last each family for two weeks, but it was hard for any Indian to learn to divide what he had on hand and make it last fourteen days. It had always been our custom to feast when food was plenty and to share all we had when there were visitors. We had our own laws of hospitality and our own faith that the powers we prayed to would provide for us. The advice our Agents gave us to cut wood in summer when it was hot to use in winter when it would be cold, to stack hay before frost, to dry corn and beans and save sugar and flour for the future was hard for us to follow. The Agents thought we were wasteful and blind to everything but the present, but they had never grown up in a village that used and enjoyed whatever food and fuel and pasture was at hand and then moved on to where there was sure to be more.

Among the Arapaho, and many other Indians, the word for beef was "wohaw." This was not an Indian word, in the old sense. We had never seen cattle until we saw white men driving their ox teams across the country. The driver had a good deal of whacking and yelling to do to keep them going, and "Wol!" and "Haw!" were what he yelled at them. So, having no word for the oxen in our language, we called them wohaw. When we slaughtered a beef and ate it, we called that wohaw too.

Our older people had to learn to like wohaw. Meat had always been their principal food, and whatever else they had they were always hungry without it. But beef had a different smell and a different taste from buffalo; it was stronger and not so sweet. And since the contractors who supplied the beef bought range cattle, often thin and of poor grade, for the commissary, the meat was likely to be tough. It took long cooking to make a range steer tender, and we had always eaten our buffalo meat rare. But we children who had been born on the Reservation liked the white man's meats, beef and bacon and salt pork, from the beginning.

Mondays were beef-issue days, wohaw days. At first the beeves were all issued by the Government clerk from one station, the big corral across the river from the Agency, southeast of Fort Reno. This meant that every two weeks some member of a family had to be on hand to get his beef, and for those families living at a distance from the Agency this meant a long trip, breaking into whatever work was being done at home. So ten stations were set up at different points on the Reservation, with a blacksmith's shop there for repairing farm tools and shoeing horses, a white farmer whose work was to teach the Indians around him how to farm and to care for livestock, and a corral for the beef cattle that were to be issued. After that, nobody had more than a few miles to go.

Issue days were big times for all of us. The men who were to do the killing painted their faces and rode their fastest horses and brought along their best bows and arrows, or their guns. The women followed along, usually with a pony travois to carry the smallest children and to bring home the beef. People all put on some of their finery, and braided some colored cloth into the manes and tails of their horses, and made a holiday out of the work they had to do. All across the prairies, on Monday mornings, people in bright colors and high spirits came riding to the issue station. There were visiting and excitement and work and feasting ahead for everyone. One by one, as the clerk stamped the ration tickets of the heads of families, the men in the corral drove a beef from the pen and sent it down the chute. Yelling and racing his pony and with his family coming along behind as close as they could manage to do, the man rode after his wohaw as it bellowed and plunged and tore across the prairie, trying to escape. Wohaw could run almost as fast and bellow and turn almost as wildly as the buffalo once did. For a few hours, the Arapaho
knew once more some of the excitement of the old buffalo hunt. And when at last the beef was shot down, the women moved in with their knives and kettles, skinning the hide off and cutting up the meat to take back to their lodges. Everybody had a piece of the raw liver, fresh and warm, before the families set out for home. Then, in the tipis or outside, fires were kindled; some of the beef was cooked, and the feasting began. Lodge walls were lifted at the sides if the weather was good, and the skins at the entrance were propped up overhead, so that several lodges could be thrown together during the feast. It was a time of plenty and of hospitality for everyone.

Next day the women were busy outside the tipi, cutting into strips whatever meat was left and hanging it from poles to dry. We had never heard of refrigerators in those days, but the sun and the wind soon cured the meat so that it did not spoil. The cattlemen who leased pastures on our Reservation called this jerked meat, or jerky. But usually there was little left of our wowah for drying. When there was anything to feast on in our villages, we feasted well.

After 1896, the method of issuing beef was changed. To shorten the time required for the issue, and to do away with the celebrating that went with it, live beevs were no longer given out. Instead the cattle were slaughtered, and issued from the block. At first all the men objected to the change, and the chiefs protested to the Agent. Many a Cheyenne family went hungry until the proud chiefs of that tribe decided they must bow to authority and accept slaughtered beef. The sport that had been as important as the feasting on issue days was ended with that change from beef on the hoof to beef on the block. Progress was catching up with us.

NOTES

1 Red Cloud to anthropologist Warren Moorehead, quoted in James C. Olson, Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 336–37.
3 Frank B. Linderman, Plenty Coups, Chief of the Crows (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 311.

7 Quoted in Olson, Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem, 266.
8 Red Cloud probably refers to the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie.
9 Eastman, From the Deep Woods to Civilization, 185.