

Pretty-Shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows. An Introduction

In the late 1920s or very early 1930s, a Montana writer named Frank Linderman interviewed Pretty Shield, a Crow elder and medicine woman, who was then in her mid-seventies. The "life history" genre became popular among folklorists and ethnographers during this period. (At around the same time, folklorists collected life histories of Diné men such as Left-Handed, also known as Son of Old Man Hat, and more recently anthropologists have recorded the life histories of Diné women, like Tall Woman.)

Linderman asked Pretty Shield for "women's stories," so she told him about her experiences, her own powers as a healer, and women she had known in her life. They "conversed" using sign language (in the text, she therefore refers to Linderman as "Signtalker"), and a woman friend of hers translated so that the amateur folklorist could record her stories. Paula Gunn Allen, the Native American literary critic and writer, has observed that the collaboration between Linderman and Pretty Shield "is itself an intriguing metaphor for Indian-white relations during the dreadful Reservation Era when their conversations took place."

The section of her story that follows comes from Chapter 10 of Linderman's book, *Pretty-shield: Medicine Woman of the Crows* (University of Nebraska Press, 1932). Here she describes the gendered work of men and women, the importance of clans, and the old ways of living. In addition to stimulating discussion about gender, the chapter can be a springboard to comparison of cultural differences and similarities between the Crows (Apsáalooke) and the Diné.

For in-depth information on how to interpret Pretty Shield's story, please read Christine Colasurdo's article, "'Tell Me a Woman's Story': The Question of Gender in the Construction of Waheenee, Pretty Shield, and Papago Woman," published in the American Indian Quarterly (1997). This is available on my webpage, marshaweisiger.net. Click the "teaching" tab, then click on "Four Corners Project."



PRETTY-SHIELD

Medicine Woman of the Crows

(originally published as *Red Mother*)

by FRANK B. LINDERMAN

Illustrated by Herbert Morton Stoops

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TEN

"TELL me of your marriage, about your man," I suggested.

Her face lighted. "Ahhh, I was sixteen when my man, Goes-ahead, took me. I have already told you that my father had promised me to Goes-ahead, when I was thirteen. When I became sixteen years old my father kept his promise."

"Did you fall in love with him before he took you?" I asked.

"No, no," she smiled. "I had not often spoken to him until he took me. Then I fell in love with him, because he loved me and was always kind. Young women did not then fall in love, and get married to please themselves, as they now do. They listened to their fathers, married the men selected for them, and this, I believe, is the best way. There were no deformed children born in those days," she said, thoughtfully. "And men and women were happier, too, I feel sure," she added, with a challenge in her words. "A man could not take a woman from his own clan, no matter how much he might wish to have her.

He had to marry a woman belonging to another clan, and then all their children belonged to their mother's clan. This law kept our blood strong."

"Did your man, Goes-ahead, have another woman when he took you?" I asked, knowing their custom.

"Yes, my oldest sister, Standing-medicine-rock, was his first woman; then he took me, and finally, when my youngest sister, Two-scalps, became sixteen years old, she was also taken by my man, Goes-ahead, so that there were three lodges, all sisters, and all belonging to Goes-ahead.

"But I was the only one who gave him children," she added, eagerly. "It was *my* face that he painted when he had gained that right by saving a Crow warrior's life in battle. And it was I who rode his war-horse and carried his shield. Ahh, I felt proud when my man painted my face," she said, softly, her eyes lighted by her thoughts. "After this I had the right to paint my face whenever there was a big feast or a big dance; and I did it because it was only showing respect for my man, Goes-ahead."

"Did you always get along well together, you three sisters, who were wives of Goes-ahead?" I asked.

"I will hide nothing from you, Sign-talker. Standing-medicine-rock, my oldest sister, was not a very good woman. I mean that she liked other men, and

that she sometimes forgot she belonged to Goes-ahead. I knew about this, and talked to her. But I did not tell on her. It was my brother's duty to do this, according to our tribal custom, and not mine, so that I only talked to her. But my talking did no good. And yet Standing-medicine-rock, my oldest sister, was a good worker. There was nothing lazy about her. There were few women who could dress a robe better than she could, none who kept a neater lodge, and not many who looked nicer; and yet she was not a very good woman. My youngest sister, Two-scalps, was different. We got along well together. I helped her all I could, and she helped me; and we both helped our mother, who was growing old.

"My father was already an old man. He needed a young hunter to help him kill meat, so that I felt happy with my man, Goes-ahead, who was always a lucky hunter. Our lodges all had plenty of fat meat, even my father's, because my man, Goes-ahead, was generous when my father grew old.

"And now when the young will not listen, when my own grandchildren pay no attention to what I tell them I think of my man, Goes-ahead, and do my best to save. I am willing to go without food, to be hungry, that they may have plenty to eat, and yet, now-a-days, this is not enough. There are too many new

things, too few who follow old customs. I, myself, get lost when I look and listen, and my grandchildren are all eyes and ears. Looking and listening to these new things, many of them bad, my grandchildren are like the dry earth when rain falls upon it."

"Tell me about your man, Goes-ahead," I said, to turn her thoughts away from her grandchildren.

"I like to think of him," she said, brightening. "I will talk to you about him, even though we Crows do not often speak of the dead. I am willing to tell you anything I know."

"Was he a large man?" I asked, because she did not go on.

"No. He was a small man. And he was brave, and kindly. He never counted coup in battle," she said, a little regretfully, I thought, "and yet the council gave him the right to paint my face, because he saved a Crow's life in a fight with the Nez Percé."

"Could a woman's uncle, who had counted coup, paint her face if her own man did not possess this right?" I asked, wishing to lead her to talk of tribal customs.

"Yes," she said. "If a man who had not counted coup married after reaching the age of twenty-five, as he had a right to do, his woman might get her uncle to paint her face, if the uncle had counted coup in

battle. But her man had first to ask permission to have his woman's face painted by her uncle, so that everybody knew about it. Not many women liked to have their faces painted by anybody besides their own men, because it made talk. Besides it was like a borrowed thing."

Then as though she had guessed why I had asked the question, she went on. "When I was young a woman whose man had never stolen an enemy's horse was not permitted to ride a horse at any tribal ceremony. I have seen women pulled from horses by the men because they had forgotten this law."

"Tell me more about your life in the villages."

"War, killing meat, and bringing it into camp, horse-stealing, and taking care of horses, gave our men plenty of hard work; and they had to be in shape to fight at any time, day or night. We women had our children to care for, meat to cook, and to dry, robes to dress, skins to tan, clothes, lodges, and moccasins to make. Besides these things we not only pitched the lodges, but took them down and packed the horses and the travois, when we moved camp; yes, and we gathered the wood for our fires, too. We were busy, especially when we were going to move. I loved to move, even after I was a married woman with children to take care of. Moving made me happy."

"Tell me how you made pemmican, how you made paint hold its color, about your work as a married woman," I suggested.

"Pemmican! Ahh, when I think of pemmican I grow hungry," she smiled, good-naturedly. "We cut good, lean meat into strips and dried it a little; then roasted it until it looked brown. After this was done we pounded the dry meat with stone hammers that are found nearly everywhere. They were made by The-ones-who-lived-without-fire. Next we soaked ripe chokeberries in water, and then used this water to boil crushed bones. When the kettle of boiled bones was cool we skimmed off the grease from the bone-marrow, mixed it with the pounded meat, poured this into buffalo heart-skins, and let it get solid. When it was taken out to eat— Ah, I have made myself hungry. Where is the sun, Sign-talker?" she asked, looking at the window.

"Eleven," I signed, looking at my watch.

"I must not forget my grandchildren; but there is yet time to talk a little. Paint," she went on, remembering my questions, "we made hold its color with the gum, the water-colored gum, that one sees on the chokecherry trees; and we used buffalo-hoofs, too. We boiled them until they trembled [jellied], mixed this with our paint, let it dry, and then cut it

into squares. Water or grease made the color come again from these squares, any time, after this was done."

"And the *ab-stab-dab*, the skin-lodges; how many buffalo skins did a lodge require, and how many poles?" I asked because she did not go on.

"From twelve to twenty skins, and from fourteen to twenty-four poles, according to the size of the lodge. We Crows had big lodges and little lodges, just as white men have big houses and small ones."

"And how did you tan your robes and skins? What did you use?"

"The liver and brains of the animals, and sometimes the cotton from the cottonwoods was added, when it was handy. We dressed many robes to trade for things we wanted."

"Where was the woman's place in the lodge?" I asked.

"On either side of the door," she said, arranging her blanket.

"What roots did you dig?" I persisted.

"Turnips, carrots, stinking-turnips, bitter-roots, and potatoes. They are nearly always plentiful in the Crow country. And besides, there was the bear's food. I will go now, Sign-talker. My mind is sleepy."

"This summer I am going to make myself a good

tepee, Sign-talker," Pretty-shield said upon her return. "I am tired of living in my place. A good tepee is nicer."

"Are you a lodge-cutter?" I asked, knowing that not many Crow women are called "lodge-cutters."

"Yes," she replied; "and so was my mother. Did you ever know of a woman having a painted lodge, Sign-talker?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Well, I once knew a woman who had a painted lodge. Her name was Good-otter. My mother cut the lodge for her, and a Lacota slave-man, who had lived with us nearly all his life, painted it. This slave's name was Tricky-wolf. I have never seen a prettier lodge than Good-otter's. It fitted its poles like a leaf-tepee, and was well painted. On each side of the skewers there was a red strip reaching all the way to the ground. On its back was a mountain lion, and an otter breathing red fire from its open mouth. I believe that some of Good-otter's relatives may yet have that painted lodge, because it was big medicine, even though it was a woman's lodge."

Women did not paint lodges, and only wise-ones (medicine-men) possessed them, the characters that had appeared in their medicine-dreams being depicted on their lodge-skins. Few women were "lodge-cut-

ters," the right to cut them being distinctive, a mark of both character and ability. Sewing the lodge-skins was done by all women. They feasted and visited as they worked, much as our mothers did at "quilting bees." Little girls at play frequently made lodges of leaves, often of a single leaf, that were marvels of form, so that whenever a newly made lodge-skin covered its poles perfectly it was said to "fit like a leaf-tepee."

"Where was a visitor's place in a lodge?" I asked.

"On either side of the head [center, at back], where the man of the lodge sat," she answered. "And when a man wished to visit another man in his lodge he stopped by the door and called out, 'Are you there?' If the friend wanted company he asked the visitor to come in and set fat meat before him, and they smoked and talked together. A woman wishing to visit always lifted up the lodge-door and peeped inside. But unless asked to come in all visitors went about their own business, without getting mad over not being invited into lodges.

"When old people were the visitors they were given dried tenderloin from which all sinew had been stripped. This fine meat was first dried, and then pounded up and mixed with bone-marrow. It was served to old men in bowls made of box-elder wood,

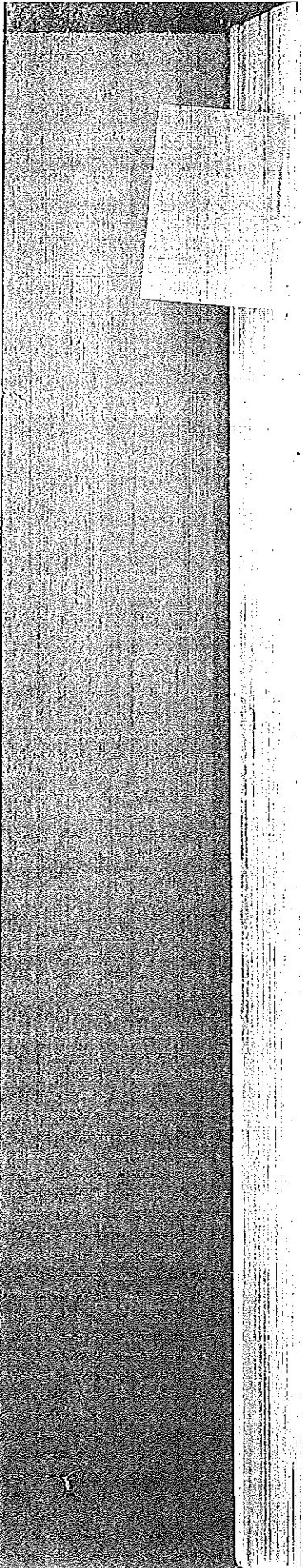
about so large [about six inches in diameter]. Old women got theirs on squares of rawhide. We pounded our meat on stones held together with rawhide, using the long stones that were made by Those-who-lived-without-fire [stone pestles]. I wonder what my grandmother would have thought about having to eat white men's cows," she mused, wonderingly; adding, "Their meat smells so different."

"Did you have regular meals, regular times to eat?" I asked.

This pleased her. "Not as white people do," she laughed. "We ate in the morning before the hunters went out, and again in the evening after they had returned, and any other time when we were hungry. And yet," she added, quite seriously, "I can remember but four fat women in all the Crow tribe of those days. I can name them. They were Alkali, Otter-that-comes-up, Fire, and Young-turtle. They were all fat women, and yet they were lively enough for anybody. They had to be lively to get along in those days."

"You have told me how you made pemmican. Tell me how you dried meat," I said.

"We first cut up the meat, taking it off the animal in the sections that naturally divide it. Then we split these sections, and spread the meat on racks in the sun, turning it often. At night we took the meat off the



racks, piled it on the ground, covered the pile with a buffalo robe, and then trampled upon it to squeeze out all the blood that might yet be in the meat. When morning came again we respread the meat in the sunshine, being careful not to let the meat touch the racks in the same places as before. If a woman were careless about this she might lose her meat, because the spots that had touched the racks would spoil unless changed every day until the meat was dry. I wish I had some of that good buffalo meat right now to take to my place," she said, getting up to move her chair away from the stove.

"Did you ever make fire with flint and steel?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, many times; and before the horse came our people made fire with two hard stones, and even with sticks. I have heard my grandmother tell of this, but never tried it myself. Last summer," she said, leaning toward me, confidentially, "two old men had a race to see which could first start a fire with two hard stones. I was standing very near the old man who won this fire-race, and saw that he held the head of a match so that the stones would strike it, and make a fire," she confided, her eyes twinkling. "I didn't tell on him," she added hastily. "No, I kept still, because the old man showed smartness."

"Did you women often butcher buffalo on the plains and bring them into camp?" I asked.

"No. The men killed the meat, butchered it, and packed it into camp, unless there was some special reason for the women having to do it. I will tell you what happened to a friend of mine when she was butchering a buffalo on the plains.

"A small band of us had camped on the ground now covered by the white man's city of Terry. We were afraid of attack by the Lacota, and because there were but few warriors with us most of them were kept in camp. Two men went out to kill buffalo. To save time, one of them took his woman along to do the butchering. This man, knowing that if he had to leave his woman to butcher one buffalo while he killed another the Lacota might come upon her, gave her his fastest horse to ride.

"When a buffalo is struck with arrows it sometimes runs far before it falls. On this day the first buffalo fell down a long way out on the plains from our camp. The woman stopped beside it, tying her horse to the dead buffalo's horns, and began at once to butcher it. Her man had told her that if the Lacota came she must not try to untie the rope that held her horse, but that she must cut it with her knife, and ride fast. Buffalo were all around her; and just where the dead

one was lying there were many deeply worn trails that herds of buffalo had made. One of these trails, the one nearest to the dead buffalo, had been washed out by the waters of melting snows, so that it was deeper than any of the others.

"The woman, working rapidly, was bending over the dead buffalo, when she heard her horse snort and move, pulling on his rope. Turning her head she saw a bull, a mad one, coming on the run.

"She sprang toward her horse; but he shied! She missed him! Ho! The bull was upon her. She ran around the dead buffalo; and so did the horse, with the mad bull after them both. Three times she jumped across the deeply cut trail, with the frightened horse ahead of her, and the mad bull behind. When she came to it the fourth time she threw herself into it, face downward.

"The mad bull did not miss her," said Pretty-shield, breathing heavily. "He kept after the horse that could not get away. Round and round he went, with the mad bull after him, both jumping the deep trail where the woman was lying; right over her back each time, until the horse's rope was so tightly wound around the dead buffalo that the horse had to stop.

"The mad bull ripped him to pieces, tossing his hot flesh and blood upon the woman's back. Then he tore

the dead buffalo to bits. When his fierce snorting stopped the deep trail was filled with pieces of both the horse and the buffalo. The woman's clothes were soaked with blood, and yet she waited a long time before she lifted her head to look around. When she did look she saw the mad bull walking slowly away, as though he had worn himself out. She waited until he disappeared over a hill, and then got up and ran. The man said that the place where this happened was bad to look at," she finished, tired by her recital.

"There were queer buffalo, just as there are queer people," she went on, after a minute. "Once, after I was married and had a baby, my brother, Other-gun, brought me a buffalo calf, and this calf was a queer one. I saddled it and put my little baby girl, Pine-fire, on its back, leading the calf about the village with the laughing child riding it. My brother objected to this. 'If you intend to eat that calf you'd better not play with it,' he told me. And my father said, 'Let it go back to the herd.' But I wished to keep the calf, because Pine-fire looked so pretty on its back.

"That evening when my father asked me if I had let the calf go free I was going to tell him that I had, when the little buffalo trotted up to me as though he wanted to stay. He saved me from telling a lie. But my father did not like to have the calf in the village.

He said that he was afraid something might happen to my own child if I kept the calf from its mother. 'Either kill it and eat it, or let it go free,' he said. And then he took the calf back to the herd.

"The next morning the calf was standing by my lodge-door when I wakened. He had come back in the night. 'There is something strange about this,' my man, Goes-ahead, said, going after my father. And then my man and my father took the calf again to the herd, and let it go. My father said that this time, when he set it free, the calf kicked up its heels, rolled, as though glad to be back with his people, and that when it went away with the herd it seemed to him to have grown up, to be as large as any of the others. There was something queer about that calf."

She turned here to talk to Goes-together, taking the latter's sewing in her hands for inspection. The merry mood that I had particularly noticed upon her arrival at the school building had departed, and now she appeared to have lost interest in her story telling.